William James on the Courage to Believe

Robert J. O'Connell

Published by Fordham University Press

O'Connell, Robert J.
William James on the Courage to Believe.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/63581

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=2262887
Appendix C

James's Voluntarism: Readiness, Willingness, or Will to Believe?

In the two foregoing studies, I have endeavored to show that in his famous lecture on "The Will to Believe," William James was arguing that we humans came to the formation of our weltanschaulich beliefs in a way that has this surprising feature: our passional nature exercises a precursoive influence upon both the experiential process of data-gathering and the intellectual process of understanding and evaluating those data. The notion of conducting a coolly objective because utterly dispassionate survey of the evidence before allowing our "willing" side to exercise any influence on the conclusions we drew from that survey was, James argued, a myth. Not only was this precursoive intervention of the passional a psychological fact (to which the conscientious philosopher of knowledge may feel obliged to reply with a disheartened "alas!") but James argued that this was the way our process of belief-formation legitimately worked.

When I published my William James on the Courage to Believe, I fully expected to hear a strident chorus of "Nays" greeting that precise point. But, to my surprise, only one reviewer protested; even then, his protest took a peculiar form. For he found no difficulty whatever in admitting that "our passional demands tremendously influence both our beliefs and over-beliefs"; indeed, he wondered why I thought that was "news" at all! And yet an instant later he seems to have sensed that my view of "precursoive influence" was not quite the one he was comfortable with: "tremendous influence" he warns, "is
not preemptory influence.” For “James, the voluntarist is also James, the pragmatist” who reminded us that believers, engaged in action as they must be, “are unavoidably presented with experiential evidence which corrects or corroborates their passionately induced beliefs.”¹ It would appear, then, that having depicted prescriptive influence as “preemptory” in force, I have made James out to be so bald a “voluntarist” that he is no longer recognizable as an authentic pragmatist. For the honest pragmatist will always look to experiential evidence to eventually “correct” any passionately induced beliefs which could, presumably, turn out to have a faulty fit with the facts.

There is no question that Dooley has touched here on a neuralgic point. From the perspective of a responsible epistemology, James’s position as I have described it would seem *prima facie* illegitimate: my analysis appears, at least, to make James out to be an unbridled voluntarist, and not to make sufficient allowance for the way his pragmatism should presumably work to tame that voluntarism with the corrective curb of “experiential evidence.”

Yet Dooley is honest enough to admit that our passional side “tremendously” influences the formation of our “over-beliefs,” like theism. Indeed, on five different occasions in his book on the humanism of James’s thought, he goes so far as to characterize that influence with the term “control,” a control which issued from the “structures of human nature” itself; and nowhere does he hint that those structures are amenable to modification.² So Dooley, too, might well have seen the need for facing the difficulty squarely: in the terms he himself uses, how can we truly expect “experiential evidence” to “correct” a “passionately induced” belief, when the same passional inducements still remain in “control” of our cognitive powers as they go about the business of doing the correcting? “Tremendous influence is not preemptory influence,” Dooley decrees—a ringing affirmation, certainly. Furthermore, in his review, that compromising term “control” has been carefully muted. But does this new set of
expressions really direct our understanding toward a way out of the dilemma? I think not.

MADDEN'S VERSION OF THE PROBLEM

But the problem is not peculiar to Dooley; Edward H. Madden, too, on page vi of his introduction to Volume VI of James's *Works*, which contains “The Will to Believe,” candidly admits that the influence of the passional side of our nature is precursive, for “James never retracts his blunt statement that the intellect is *subordinate* to the affections” and “the willing aspect of life . . . dominates both the conceiving and the feeling [i.e., sensory] aspects.” Shortly afterward, however, Madden hastens to assure his readers (p. xviii) that in James's brand of “voluntarism and fideism” terms like “subordinate” and “dominate” must not be taken to mean that “affective and volitional elements determine decisions beyond the capacity of the individual to control” but “rather that affective and volitional elements have a legitimate epistemic rôle to play in reaching certain decisions.”

But if the volitional does not “determine” the belief-decision, does not “control” the individual’s assent, what, precisely, is its “epistemic rôle”? Madden admits (p. xix) that James’s “strongest statement of his volitional view” seems to occur in the essay “Reflex Action and Theism” (1881) where James writes that the willing aspect of the self “dominates” the conceiving and perceiving aspects. Some pages later Madden sums up James’s view as holding that “personal and volitional elements are never wholly absent from anyone's thought” and that “in some cases they play a decisive role, legitimately leading equally honest people in different directions” (p. xxxviii).

Now, I suggest that these statements, taken as an ensemble, leave the reader less than satisfactorily enlightened. Closer consideration of what Madden has written may further sharpen the problems nesting in James’s voluntaristic fideism. Surely, as Madden points out, James
himself must bear some of the onus for creating this confusion—in this connection Madden's story (pp. xv–xx) of James's repeated "vacillations" back and forth from a "strong sense," a genuine "will" to believe, to the weaker sense of a "right" to believe is worth pondering.

But just as surely some measure of the confusion is Madden's as well. How exactly is one to characterize a volitional influence that "dominates," "subordinates," acts "decisively" upon our knowing powers, but stops short of "determining" their operation? The quandary only deepens when we observe that, having underlined the importance of that essay, Madden has nonetheless refrained from quoting from it what is certainly the "strongest expression"—and, I submit, the clearest—that James gives of his position. In "Reflex Action and Theism," speaking of the "demands" that the will has "the power to impose" on our cognitive activities, James affirms that "Our volitional nature must then, until the end of time, exert a constant pressure upon the other departments of the mind to induce them to function to theistic conclusions" (WB 101). Not only does the will have this power of "imposing" its "demands," it "must" do so, in order to guarantee that we become and remain theists.

**WHAT IS IN OUR "CONTROL"**

That statement of James's position, however, compels us to reconsider Madden's assurance that, for James, the "affective and volitional elements" of our nature do not "determine decisions beyond the power of the individual to control." (Otherwise, Madden argues, James would have been advocating either skepticism or some variation of the "sociology of knowledge," conclusions which Madden assumes we will view as unacceptable.)

There is, however, a small puzzle tucked away in using expressions like "control," as both Madden and Dooley have done. Let me illustrate it this way: assume, for the sake of argument, one of the more usual views of our
cognitive activities, and you will think of our minds and senses as, ideally, so utterly receptive as to be "determined" by the "evidence"—incapable of seeing black as white, or two plus two as adding up to anything else than four. These are rudimentary cases, however. Now take a question quite different in scale: is the "individual" (to use Madden's term) who is faced with the cosmic panorama of evidence pro and con the existence of God equally "determined" one way or the other?

The usual view would seem to imply, assuming we may divide the individual's "mind" into James's three "compartments" (WB 91–93), that the conceiving mind and the senses should remain perfectly "objective"—i.e., they should permit themselves to be determined by each item of evidence in turn, then by how those items relate to each other; then, the decision on how the assemblage of evidence "adds up" should be equally determined by the pattern which the "objective evidence" has, of itself, assumed. Meanwhile, the will should stand aside, not interfere, should allow all these determinations to produce their natural effect on the mind and the sensorium.

But if that be the case, the final decision of the "individual" will be as determined as the operations of mind and senses are. In short, the decision, in Madden's terms, turns out to be "beyond the power of the individual to control." But suppose, as James does, that the individual's mind and senses are under the control of his will, then (James himself would expostulate) what could be more in the "power of the individual to control" than his own free will?

To this one might object that the "will" may be one factor in the situation, but what (for example) of the subject's affectivity? One might argue that affective leanings, especially if long-standing and deeply rooted, may impede the freedom of, or otherwise unduly limit, the will's activity, and so place the individual's "decision"—on the theistic hypothesis, say—"beyond" his control. Unless, unless. . . . Assume, as James's language frequently implies, that theism is the sane and healthy hypothesis
every normally constituted individual should ideally embrace, then it seems plausible to infer (what James seems to have inferred) that it should be in the power of the moral agent to will such a crucially moral act. Hence (the inference is as old as Aristotle), the individual by his or her free will should be able to gain such control over affectivity as to “induce” it to collaborate in commanding the cognitive powers to render their judgment in favor of that hypothesis.

Now, James is obviously convinced that such free-will control of our cognitive powers is not only possible, but in certain instances actually appropriate and desirable. Furthermore, in such cases, and only in such cases, would the “decision” in favor of theism be “in,” not “beyond,” the “control of the individual” making it. And only in such cases could one qualify such a decision as “ethically good” or “bad,” “healthy” or “sick”—the decision a moral human being “ought” to make, or the reverse.

“Will” vs. “Willingness”

This topic of control brings up another issue which has frequently been raised in this connection, one dealt with in my essay in a way that several of my reviewers seriously misconstrued. One can speak of the will’s exercising over the cognitive powers a kind of control which is “weaker” or “stronger,” or of a strength (or various intensities of strength) intermediate between the two. One could, accordingly, envisage these differing “strengths” of will-pressure as issuing, *grosso modo*, in a mere “readiness” to believe, or in a more positive “willingness” or in a resolute “will” to believe. Or, working from a slightly different point of view, one could claim (as James did more than once) that his essay was unhappily titled, since he was arguing only for the “weaker claim” that in cases like the theistic hypothesis we have a “right” to believe. On that reading of the matter, James would not be arguing for the “stronger claim”: that there
are circumstances when we have something approaching a "duty," and ought to exercise a positive "will" to believe.

**James's Metaphors of Belief**

Now, the perspective I assumed for handling these distinctions was that of examining the various "metaphors" James employs in arguing for the legitimacy of belief.\(^6\) Those metaphors wove their way in and out of his argument, but they were, I claimed, of different sorts and as such, they presented differing kinds of justification for belief.

Consider two of them now, in the order of their respective "strength," as that term was used just above. First, James alludes several times (WB 22 and 28) to how a measure of belief must enter the process of making friends: we must "believe" that the other's expressions of interest and dawning fondness are sincere and truthful if we are ever to make friends with him or her.

James's next two metaphors may be telescoped into one, for the metaphor of the Alpinist's belief that he can leap across a mountain chasm resembles that of the brave individual steeling himself (and, he hopes, his fellow-passengers) to rise and thwart a band of train-robbers: both these illustrations aim to stress the point that in such risky ventures a robust belief in the prospects of succeeding will ensure—or at least contribute to ensuring—a successful outcome.

Now compare these illustrations. Observe how "strongly" James supposes our "strong" belief will exert its influence in the Alpinist or train-robbery cases. Both predicaments are fraught with danger, fear, and uncertainty; both demand a faith compounded with boldness, manliness, fighting spirit. In both these illustrations, one feels little or no compunction in talking about a "will" and perhaps even a "duty" to believe, especially if a ro-
bust manly belief could (as James thought) truly be counted on to “create the facts” of its own verification.

The belief appropriate to “making friends,” however, is of a markedly different sort, and James gives every indication of acknowledging that difference. Instead of a belief whose very strength might “extort” friendship from the other, he speaks of “trust and expectation,” of “meeting the other half-way,” of showing a “trusting spirit.” There is all the difference in the world between this tentative, hesitant, tactful kind of faith and the Alpinist’s muscular belief which would aspire to “create the facts” of its own verification. Surely, when speaking of making friends, one may talk of a “readiness,” a “willingness,” to believe. But a “will” to believe? Hardly.

In my essay, I had several times called the reader’s attention to Gail Kennedy’s article in which he tried to show that James should be interpreted as arguing for just that modest a claim: we are entitled to a “readiness” or “willingness” but not to so strong an attitude as a “will” to believe. At this point in my treatment of James’s several metaphors, I reminded the reader “once again” of Kennedy’s thesis by saying: “All this [discussion of the friendship metaphor and its implications] would appear to argue, once again, that James was largely correct in eventually repudiating the ‘will’ to believe, and might have been better advised to speak consistently of a ‘willingness’ or ‘readiness’ to believe from the very outset.”

And, indeed, if the metaphor of “making friends” were the only one guiding James’s pen, Kennedy’s contention would be sound. But my prose was shaped to warn the reasonably careful reader that my conclusion was entirely hypothetical: moreover, the entire context alerts that reader that there are other metaphors for belief in play, and that James may have thought that their force entitled him to make the stronger claim: for a “duty” and a corresponding “will” to believe.

Strangely, both Dooley (p. 571) and McDermott refer to the above conclusion, and speak as though they took it as both categorical and final, when it is clearly neither.
McDermott sees that my remarks concerning a "willingness" to believe bear on this friendship metaphor, but he may not have noticed that their bearing is limited to that metaphor. The force of the "Alpinist" and "robber-band" metaphors, I still claim, is robust enough to justify (during the crisis moments of our faith-lives) a genuine "will" to believe. Hence, the title of my study: James, at his most alert, was arguing for the "courage" to believe, or to continue believing, when life's challenges make it hard to do so.

Notice, however, a distinction to which I failed to do justice in my essay: that this same metaphor may acquire stronger force when it is question of "keeping" a friendship. Here, one might readily envisage circumstances where something like a "duty" and a consequent "will to believe" could come into play, i.e., where one ought, out of loyalty, to believe in a friend's truthfulness, say, or innocence, even though the weight of evidence appears prima facie to be against him.\textsuperscript{11}

Let me say it once more: I acknowledge that James was not always perfectly lucid, nor always consistent in making his case, and that he came on several occasions to say that he should have confined himself to maintaining the weaker claim that we had a "right" to believe.\textsuperscript{12} In spite of that, however, I would still argue that his earlier essays, when read in a generous spirit and sifted for the philosophic best they have to offer, provide cogent grounds for this contention: there are certain circumstances when we not only may but ought to sustain the "pressure" (or "control") of our will (or "passional nature") upon our cognitive powers, so that those powers will collaborate in coming to one sort of weltanschaulich conclusion rather than its opposite. For responding to the appeal of a life lived in the "strenuous" moral mood can sometimes require no less than that. And the strenuous mood, James is convinced, is so evidently superior to its "genial-mood" competitor that we both may and should prefer it as a reliable clue to the moral character of our universe.
THE “WILL” TO BELIEVE IN JAMES’S LATER WORKS

So much for my claim about his earlier lectures: what, though, of James’s subsequent works? Does he, even while dealing more focally with the “substance” of belief, remain consistent with what he has earlier prescribed about the correct attitudinal “approach” to belief?\(^{13}\) The question has several facets, all of them interconnected: does James, in the first instance, soften the “pressure” (which, I have claimed) he once described our passional side as precursively exerting, and even prescribed that it ought to exert, on our intellectual processes? Is he, secondly, consistent in characterizing the source of that influence as “will” or, more generally, the “passional” side of our nature? And, finally, is he consistent in the way he accounts for our “preference” or “choice” of one style of world-view against its competitor—and does that account square with the interpretation I have advanced?

Madden correctly points out that the strongest expression of James’s voluntaristic emphasis occurs in the quite early essay on “Reflex Action and Theism” (p. xix), that James never retracted that “blunt statement” of his view (p. xi), but defended “the same core of claims” over a span of some fifteen years (1881–1896), thus showing the “continuity and importance of these themes in [his] thought and life” (p. xix). But, he adds, there is a “development from the earlier to the later pieces,” a softening of his initial voluntarism, that is, in the years from 1881 to 1896. Hence, one might suspect, as Madden and others have also suggested, that there may have been a further development in the works written after 1896. Though not directly a question of interpreting the earlier essays, it could indirectly confirm my interpretation of them if James’s later thought can be shown to run along lines consistent with it.

James’s description of “conversion” in The Varieties of Religious Experience (Works, pp. 170–74) might initially appear to belie any such consistency; there he distinguishes between the “volitional” and the “self-
surrender" types of religious conversion, and goes on to say that he does not see the difference between them as "radical," since "Even in the most voluntarily built-up sort of regeneration there are passages of partial self-surrender interposed." Furthermore, in most cases "when the will has done its uttermost towards bringing one close" to the complete "unification" conversion betokens, it seems that the "very last step" must be one of "self-surrender" to those "other forces" beyond the person's inner resources, whose existence and activity are felt in religious experience: the personal will must actually be "given up" in this terminal phase of "yielding."

Before the process reaches its culmination in self-surrender, however, it would be idle to assure the man painfully conscious of his sinfulness that "all is well" with him; that would sound cold-bloodedly false to him; he cannot be expected to consent to such assurances, for "'The will to believe' cannot be stretched as far as that." Notice that that incriminating expression does not seem to frighten James overmuch.

James later stresses this sense of higher forces at work in the conversion process (Works, p. 197) and the correlated need for "acquiescence" rather than positive volition (Works, p. 201). This would all seem to downplay that energetic streak of voluntarism which justified his speaking earlier of a genuine "will to believe." And yet, as we shall have occasion to see in another connection, that is not his last word on the subject, even in Varieties. 

Pragmatism, however, intimates a different message. Its opening remarks quote Chesterton to the effect that the "most important thing about a man" is his overall "view of the universe," or, using the term in an informal sense, his "philosophy." For it "determines" his entire "perspective" on the universe—a vigorous characterization of its influence, surely, but perhaps with just that trace of rhetorical hyperbole that should warn us to be cautious. In any case, though, it soon becomes clear that James is talking about what he had earlier called a person's "faith."
But what accounts for one man’s having one, while another has another such “view”? James replies with the term “temperament”; this is what gives even the “professional philosopher” a “stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises,” making him, in specie, an empiricist rather than a rationalist, a pluralist rather than a monist, “tough-” rather than “tender-minded”—or, of course, the reverse of all these (Works, pp. 9–13). That key term, temperament, he never defines, nor does he accord it any technical study worth talking about anywhere in his Principles of Psychology. But he cannot have been so innocent of such matters that he failed to realize he was encouraging his readers to trace the root of their personal philosophy to a stratum of the personality which is generally conceived to be inborn, permanent, and scarcely amenable to later alteration. Hence, the scary inference that our temperament “determines” our worldview, which in turn “determines” our perspective on all particular matters in that personal world. This would be strong stuff, indeed.

When he returns to that topic in his final lecture, however, that difference in “temperament” is expressed in more evaluative terms: now it separates “sick-” or “morbid-minded” souls from the “healthy-minded.” These two tendencies are also at war within each one of us; and yet “There is a healthy-minded buoyancy in most of us,” and if we are “normally constituted,” that buoyancy will point us toward choosing to view the universe as a “moralistic and epic kind of universe” from which “the element of ‘seriousness’ is not to be expelled.” Here the “strenuous” moral mood is obviously uppermost in his mind, and it leads him to speak as though the “adoption” of the melioristic view of the universe over its competitors were a question of our choosing, our “will-"ness” to respond to our “author’s” urging.

We must all choose, James goes on to say, between the securities of monism and this risky universe of pluralism, and we can make that choice in either a “healthy-” or a “sick-minded” way. Indeed, “as human beings we can be
healthy minds on one day and sick souls on the next.” But “as philosophers,” i.e., serious philosophers “aiming at cleanness and consistency, and feeling the pragmatistic need for squaring truth with truth,” we must choose cleanly between the two. We must, in other words, settle for either the “tender” monism or the more “robustious” healthy-minded pluralism for which James himself, quite obviously, has opted. But while our commitment to “cleanness and consistency” may compel us to choose one side cleanly enough to preclude all compromise with its antithesis, James abstains from saying that that commitment, of itself, dictates which of the two sides we should choose. On what grounds, then, is that choice to be made?

James answers with a rhetorical question: “Doesn’t the very ‘seriousness’ that we attribute to life mean that ineluctable noes and losses form a part of it, that there are genuine sacrifices somewhere, and that something permanently drastic and bitter always remains at the bottom of its cup?” The language, clearly, is again that of the “strenuous” moral mood; James is implying that while all of us may attribute “seriousness” to life, we may not all choose to “see” our universe in the moralistic, even tragic terms which alone are consistent with that attribution of seriousness.

How, then, is such a choice made? “In the end,” James replies, “it is our faith and not our logic that decides such questions, and I deny the right of any pretended logic to veto my own faith.” That faith he goes on explicitly to characterize as one which views the universe as calling forth the “strenuous” moral mood: a universe which is “really dangerous and adventurous,” in which there can be “real losses and real losers,” an “epic” kind of universe in which one must be “willing to pay with his own person, if need be, for the realization of the ideal which he frames” (Works, 141–43). This is still the James we know from his earlier lectures: not logic, but a passional kind of faith guides our fundamental philosophical decision—faith in a moral universe, which exacts of us a life
lived in the strenuous moral mood. But now a fresh question arises: is it merely “temperament” that decides our primal option for us, or a “choice” we ourselves make between moral “sick-mindedness” or “healthy-mindedness?” This, and not so much the attenuation of his voluntarism, may well be the true direction in which James’s thought is developing.

*A Pluralistic Universe* (Works, pp. 14–15) again speaks of one’s personal “vision” of the world as the great fact about anyone, but again, the context shows that the term “vision” comes down to meaning the same thing as the “faith” James spoke of in *Pragmatism*. But that vision, he now tells us, is the “expression of a man’s most intimate character,” and “all definitions of the universe are but the deliberately adopted reactions of human characters upon” the universe. This is why reading a typical history of philosophy is somewhat like paging through an album of photographs: we find ourselves passing “from one idiosyncratic personal atmosphere into another.” Those various visions, though, really come down to a few types, “just so many visions, modes of feeling the whole push, and seeing the whole drift of life, forced on one by one’s total character and experience, and on the whole preferred—there is no other truthful word—as one’s best working attitude. Cynical characters take one general attitude, sympathetic characters another.” Thus, the cynic’s thinking normally tends toward materialism, while the “sympathetic” mind prefers a spiritualistic view, and so on down the line. “Intimate character,” “deliberately adopted reactions,” “preferred” attitudes—to account for our primal faith, James is reaching more and more boldly for the language of responsible moral choice.

Toward the end of that same work (Works, p. 148), James expresses his hope that the theoretical considerations proposed in his lectures have at least established in his hearers’ minds that pluralism is a “fully coordinate hypothesis with monism” (which, living in the Oxford atmosphere, he knows they are likely to favor over pluralism). But theoretical considerations are one thing: his
hearers will, he admits, undoubtedly choose one or other rival view as their "own sense of rationality moves and inclines" them. For, once again, "one's general vision of the probable usually decides such alternatives. They illustrate what I once wrote of as the 'will to believe.'"

Here, surely, we have witness to that consistency in depth which Perry found marking James's thought from start to finish. But we are also being told how the later James construed his own earlier thought on the "will to believe" which lies at the root of our various primal philosophies. Never once has he suggested that our preference derives from the objective evidence to which we are severally exposed; it arises, on the contrary, from the way in which that evidence is reacted upon by "our own sense of rationality," our own "general vision of the probable," the shape and thrust of our individual "will to believe."

At this point, James presents the "non-logical" sorites to which he refers as his "faith-ladder," and presents it for all the world as though it was the way he envisaged now the mechanism of that earlier "will to believe." "No step in this process is logical," he insists, "yet it is the way in which monists and pluralists alike espouse and hold fast to their visions. It is life exceeding logic, it is practical reason for which the theoretic reason finds arguments after the conclusion is once there."

What can we conclude from all this? And, first, did James, in his later works, soften the rigorous influence on our cognitive powers which his earlier essays seemed to attribute to the "passional" side of our nature? We have seen that in *Varieties of Religious Experience* James subordinates the "volitional" factor in religious conversion to a more passive "surrender" to the "higher powers"; they, it would appear, eventually bring the convert around to accepting the fresh view of the universe which he then embraces. Indeed, if *Varieties* were all we had to go by, we would have to conclude that James considered the "will" to believe, before that moment of "surrender," as strictly limited: it could not "stretch" so far as to bring
the unconverted subject to embrace the religious view of things. Linked with this motif is a kind of passivity in the whole conversion process which would suggest that one speak less of a "will," and more of a "readiness" or "willingness," to believe.

Pragmatism concerns itself, however, with the more "philosophical" aspects of our Weltanschauung formation; in one of his strongest expressions for its influence, James roundly says that our root philosophical attitude "determines" our several "perspectives" on the world. That language suggests as strong an influence as ever he held for in his earlier lectures, but at the same time a certain softening may be entering from another quarter: having first attributed our adoption of one such worldview over another to our "temperament," thus re-opening the possibility that our world-views are imposed on us in quasi-deterministic fashion, he makes a series of remarks further on which bid us to be cautious in drawing any such inference. For the somewhat neutral term "temperament" is replaced by the more value-laden terms "sick" and "healthy," and James would have us observe that all of us have known swings from "sick-" to "healthymindedness" and back again. Indeed, he goes on to imply that we have the power to control those mood-swings.

Perry, we know, once argued that "it is impossible to avoid the inference that a proper spiritual hygiene would bring a man to that better spiritual state in which pluralism is palatable—that the strong man eager for battle and enjoying the risk"—the man who can respond to the challenge of life lived in James's "strenuous mood"—"is the more ideal type." Levinson, for his part, disagrees: Perry, he claims, has underplayed the continuity between James's "moralistic" views (which Perry prefers as the "real" James) and his religious thought. James the student of saintliness was led to conclude that "in many ideal characters, the line between health and sickness blurred, and a sense of quiet assurance complemented the strenuous life." Besides, adds Levinson, "James never firmly stood behind these diagnoses of pluralism and monism."
(as healthy- and sick-minded, respectively), "much less drew the inference" Perry would have us draw.\textsuperscript{14}

Despite Levinson's demurrer, however, I am strongly inclined to view James's religious thinking as presenting a slightly atypical picture when compared with the somewhat later, more philosophical, and "moralistic" Pragmatism. To bolster Perry's suggestion it should be added that Pragmatism once again directly links our choice of the pluralistic "faith" with our preference for a life lived in the "strenuous" moral mood, and it forges that link precisely in the final chapter, entitled "Pragmatism and Religion." That same work clearly intimates that we can "choose" to make that strenuous mood our "preferred working attitude." It remains a possibility of Jamesian thinking, therefore, even if he never actually brought it to expression, that humans can reflect on their own swings from sick- to healthy-mindedness, then consider the appeal of a world demanding a life in the strenuous moral mood, and freely decide to embrace that kind of world despite what their initial "temperament" might formerly have led them to prefer.

It is not always easy to decide how far one may interpret James in full rigor of the terms he employs, but his remarks in A Pluralistic Universe almost seem calculated to encourage the conclusion that what formerly was merely a possibility of his thought has here come to overt expression. The "faith" he spoke of earlier has now become a personal "vision" of the universe: no great alteration there, of course. But now, even while speaking of personal "idiosyncrasy," he roots that personal vision, not in our temperament, merely, but in our "most intimate character," and goes on to speak of "all definitions of the universe" as "but the deliberately adopted reactions of human character upon it." Our individual visions are "forced on" us, but "by [our] total character and experience." Evidently thinking of those mood-swings from morbid- to healthy-mindedness of which he spoke in Pragmatism, he now leaves room for a "preferred" way
of seeing things, and preferred because we have come to acknowledge it as “our best working attitude.”

If James is saying what he means, and really means what he says, he is here placing our commanding vision of the universe far more “in our power” than some of his earlier formulations would have led us to suspect. James does not explicitly refer to the fact that we are each born with a certain temperament, and have no choice in the matter; but the shift from inborn temperament to “total character and experience” cannot have occurred entirely unawares. He has now placed it squarely in our power to reflect upon our own mood swings, and “deliberately adopt” one of our moods as consciously “preferred” over its opposite. The resulting “vision” still commands, we may presume—perhaps (in the expression James used earlier) it still “determines”—how we take account of particular facts in the objective world, but now we have been placed, far more explicitly than formerly, “in command” of choosing that personal vision.

On what grounds do we prefer, deliberately adopt one primal vision of the universe over its competitor—in this instance, the “pluralistic” over the “monistic” view of reality? It is not “objective nature” which accounts for that choice. Inspect the opposing philosophies history presents us with, and you will find that “objective nature has contributed to both sides impartially,” and all “later experience seems rather to have deepened than to have effaced” the “divergences” springing from those competing initial visions (Works, p. 15). Though he is brought to mention it but once (Works, p. 57), and then only in passing, there is every reason to believe that James still considered it preferable to opt for a world where human life is lived in the “strenuous mood.” For he remains convinced that “philosophy is more a matter of passionate vision than of logic . . . logic only finding reasons for the vision afterwards” (Works, p. 81), and James’s own “passionate vision” of the world as pluralistic was always bound up with his belief in that world as risky, adventur-
ous, hence calling forth the full resources of our bravery, even heroism.

James's later works support, therefore, the conclusion indicated, more tentatively perhaps, in his earlier popular lectures: though he is initially tempted to credit our "temperaments"—an innate endowment over which none of us can hope to exercise control—he eventually comes round to situate the radical determinant of our individual "faiths," our affectively charged world-views, in our fully formed "character." And James is clear on this: we do have a significant measure of responsible control over the formation of our character.\(^\text{15}\)

In fact, in James's eyes, our most crucial achievement as free and morally responsible human beings is the building of a character which will become the reliable agency of morally good actions. And everything we have seen suggests that he would hold as primary among those "good actions" the adoption of a *Weltanschauung* which is congruent with good moral activity—the kind of activity, we can safely conjecture, which issues from the "strenuous moral mood." But, to James's mind, what ultimately makes the strenuous mood superior to its easy-going counterpart is its correspondence to the kind of "moral universe" which, he is profoundly convinced, we inhabit. One of his favorite and oft-repeated maxims assures us that persons of the strenuous mood are more closely attuned to the heart-beat of Nature itself: *vim naturae magis sentiunt.*\(^\text{16}\) James felt that his choice of a moral philosophy, and of a corresponding epistemology, was corollary to his choice of an ontology: the ontology of a moral universe.

What accounts, then, for our choosing rightly when it comes to embracing the most fundamental set of options life solicits every human being to make? Those options, James replies, all have to do with whether we are in profound sympathy with our universe as moral; those options are, in consequence, uniformly moral in nature. It follows, then, that the human equipment adapted for making the choice correctly must be equally moral in nature.
To choose rightly in matters as over-arching as these, one must be a person of developed moral character. And while it may not be in our "control" to be intellectually brilliant, it is in our control to become a person of character. So, it is only right that a moral universe should lay down as its conditions for recognizing its true nature, that one choose what that universe places within reach for each of us to choose, if only we will it.

But we must now confront the question which must rightly disturb the conscientious epistemologist: where does the process of pragmatic verification come into all this? To make it slightly more manageable, frame the question this way: once a person has adopted one weltanschaulich "vision" over its competitor, does James ever allow for any real possibility that subsequent experience will "verify"—or falsify—the truth of that vision? Since theism is at the heart of James's "will" to believe discussion, allow me to limit the question even further: does James give us any grounds for thinking that experience will ever provide evidential verification—or counter-verification—for our "belief" that God exists? If so, we have a right to call him a pragmatist; if not, we may have to admit that he is, at bottom, a voluntarist. Which will it be?

One locus which immediately comes to mind is the famous "M + x" argument from "The Sentiment of Rationality." But we have seen that its promise of verification is deceptive, and that James appears to have corrected his initial conclusion to show that he came to realize as much. Another locus that comes to mind is James's adjuration in "Reflex Action and Theism" that our willing compartment should exert constant "pressure" on our cognitive faculties to assure that they come to theistic conclusions: this, clearly, is much more an expression of voluntarism than of pragmatism.

In fact, practically everything we have seen thus far would argue that in the final analysis James's voluntarism wins out over his pragmatism. Pragmatism might at first seem to contradict that conclusion, for there (Works,
p. 99) he aims a “Woe” at “him whose beliefs play fast and loose with the order which realities follow in his experience: they will lead him nowhere or else make false connections.” But inspection of the context shows that James meant by “realities” here only such particulars as “things of common sense . . . or else common-sense relations, such as dates, places, distances, kinds, activities.” This has nothing to do with verifying the kind of overarching view such as theism represents. And our problem, remember, concerns the epistemological conditions for verifying precisely the kind of weltanschaulich vision James was concerned with in his popular lectures.

The fact is that each time James confronts the precise issue of verifying the theistic hypothesis, he winds up admitting that it is, in the last resort, beyond verification in any meaningful sense. He had appealed, in the “second conclusion” of “The Sentiment of Rationality,” to what I have called a “judgment-day” verification; but he was compelled to admit that any such verification could never occur within the lifetime of any individual philosopher—it was not, therefore, a verification which, for us the living, could have any meaning here, now, tomorrow, or forty years from now.

Never, since that early essay, has James been faced squarely with this question of verifying theistic belief and come forth with a statement in any way rivaling the confidence of that earlier view—a view by which, singular and isolated though it is, Dooley sets such store.

But, Dooley argues (p. 572), “believers can and do create the facts (for example when they show care and concern for their fellows thereby making the world a better place) which would verify belief in God.” Apart from his equating “outcome” and what I have called “over-belief” situations, Dooley seems to make belief in God (for the Jamesian) tantamount to believing in a “melioristic” universe. Now, I never meant to question that James insists that genuine belief will flower forth into the kind of practical activity which makes the world a “better place.” But I question once again whether this proof that the world’s
"M," in James’s terms, is indeterminate enough that the "x" of our actions which make it in some measure a "better place" truly amounts to "verifying" that our world is "melioristic" in the full sense that James attributes to that term. But, secondly, I fail to see how the world’s capacity to be made a "better place" can be taken as "verifying" that God does, indeed, exist. What is more to the point, however, I cannot find James himself making that claim anywhere except in the over-hasty "provisional conclusion" to the "M + x" argument which, we have seen, he later chose to express in more chastened terms. Aside from that provisional conclusion, however, I strongly question whether a later instance can be found in James’s writings where he asserts that, precisely in respect of a weltanschaulich hypothesis like theism, "believers are unavoidably presented with experiential evidence which corrects or corroborates their passionately induced beliefs" (Dooley 575; emphasis added). Search James’s works and each time he directly addresses himself to the "pragmatism and religion" issue, he sedulously abstains from making any such "verification" or "falsification" claim.

Follow the argument in Varieties of Religious Experience and James seems to be aching to find grounds for just such a claim. He expatiates on the "convincingness" of religious experiences to the one experiencing them (Works, pp. 66–67), on the "facts" of "mind-cure" which assure its adherents that the world is wider than science normally admits (Works, pp. 102–105); the relatively passive character of the conversion experience persuades the convert that "higher powers" exist and act upon us (Works, pp. 185–86). But then (Works, pp. 263–64) he comes to the crucial question: can we measure the worth of religion’s human fruits "without considering whether the God exists who is supposed to inspire them?" Obviously not, but to settle such questions we would have to be "theologians," and James (precisely qua pragmatist?) is clearly unprepared to make that claim for himself quite yet!
The evidence shows the saint to be a noble human type, he says further on (Works, pp. 297–300), yet the key question in judging whether the saint or the Nietzschean strong man represents the higher human ideal turns on whether the unseen world the saint believes in truly exists. Then, in a pair of admissions which are quite remarkable coming from a pragmatist, he says: “It is [religion’s] truth, not its utility,” which, his hearers will rightly insist, should govern our verdict; “It goes back” once again “to the question of the truth of theology.” In hopes of answering that question, James asks us to turn to the witness of the mystics.

James leads us through a lengthy survey of the testimony of and about the mystics; remarkable human types, again, their mystical experiences also resulted in impressive effects on their lives; they were firmly convinced that the unseen world existed. But once again, instead of settling the question, all of this only compels him to return to the necessity of evaluating the “truth” of their claim (Works, p. 329). But can philosophy come to some reliable settlement of this (quite unpragmatically framed) question of “truth”? James’s conclusion on that question comes on page 359: “In all sad sincerity I think we must conclude that to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless.”

Continuing with his examination of religious phenomena, James probes into those “other characteristics,” chief among them prayer; prayer seems to release and receive vital energy from higher unseen powers (Works, pp. 366–76). But does this unquestionable “vital value” furnish the evidence to verify the actual existence of those unseen, higher powers? Again, the “truth” question has surfaced, and in note 23 to page 401 James makes it clear what he means by it: “The word ‘truth’ is here taken to mean something additional to bare value for life, although the natural propensity of man is to believe that whatever has great value for life is thereby certified as true.” John Smith points to this note as “curious,” for
"on more than one occasion James gave the impression that 'value for life' is indeed his only criterion," whereas here, as in three earlier loci we have seen, he was obviously "looking for the 'something additional' which smacks of the very 'intellectualism' he repeatedly rejected in attacking rationalist opponents." The point is "important," Smith continues, "because it shows, first, that James was not in fact content with an appeal to 'value for life,' and, secondly, that he understood the inescapability of the question of truth or validity if there is to be a philosophy of religion in addition to the descriptive enterprise of phenomenology."

That this question of "truth" as "something additional" to value for life was in fact James's preoccupation in Varieties is clear, furthermore, not simply from this particular note, but also from the way he repeatedly postpones deciding on the question from page 263 to page 401; there, his phenomenological survey completed, he must face, at long last, the genuinely philosophical question. Granted, that a gamut of experiences persuades religious believers that an unseen world of higher powers has made contact with their higher selves, is this sufficient warrant for our holding it "true" that such a world of higher powers exists?

James answers by offering to furnish a "reconciling hypothesis" that may commend itself to both scientists and religionists. But "Who says 'hypothesis' renounces the ambition to be coercive in his arguments." The most he can do is "offer something that may fit the facts so easily that your scientific logic will find no plausible pretext for vetoing your impulse to welcome it as true" (Works, p. 402). A modest truth-claim, surely, and James expresses it candidly enough. But that closing phrase, referring to our not "vetoing [our] impulse to welcome it as true," turns out, on examination, to be simply one more variant expression for his "will to believe," and one more implicit admission that genuine verification of the theistic hypothesis is beyond our human reach.

In Pragmatism James remains entirely consistent with
that carefully limited stand. Referring to *Varieties of Religious Experience*, he assures his hearers that his “book on man’s religious experience” has, “on the whole been regarded as making for the reality of God”: “making for,” but not quite verifying. But this may be due to the limits of our experience: and James expresses his firm belief that our human experience is not “the highest form of experience in the universe”; our relation to the “whole universe,” he is convinced, is much the same as our household pets’ relation to the “whole of human life.” And so “we may well believe, on the proofs that religious experience affords, that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world. . . .”

But will the religious hypothesis which pragmatic philosophy offers prove to “work better in the long run”? The question of pragmatic verification of theism has been squarely posed, and, significantly, James refuses to give any “dogmatic answer” to it; “The various over-beliefs of men, their several faith-ventures, are in fact what are needed to bring the evidence in.” And James has once again fallen back, it would appear, on his familiar “judgment day” verification—but now, with the implication that that answer is no real answer, after all.

*A Pluralistic Universe* conveys essentially the same message: the “drift of all the evidence” he has surveyed in his earlier lectures seems to him to “sweep us very strongly towards the belief in some form of superhuman life with which we may, unknown to ourselves, be co-conscious.” This observation again recalls his familiar analogy comparing us humans to the dogs and cats in our libraries, observing all the phenomena of our human lives, yet “having no inkling of the meaning of it all.” The facts of psychology, pathology, psychical research, and religious experience “establish, when taken together, a decidedly formidable probability in favor of” the view he has been arguing for, even if some details must remain vague and problematic (*Works*, p. 141). And this final lecture ends (*Works*, p. 148), as we have already seen, on a note consistent with all that has gone before: by present-
ing the “faith-ladder” which James has already encouraged us to equate with his earlier “will to believe.”

James’s “Appendix” in *Some Problems of Philosophy*, on “Faith and the Right to Believe” (*Works*, pp. 111–17), features that same “faith-ladder” once again. He has already told us (*Works*, p. 112) that the “evidence” for the kind of universe he is arguing for requires a certain (pre-cursive) “good-will for its reception,” and added, in words strongly reminiscent of “The Will to Believe,” that there are instances where we “cannot wait” upon further evidence, but “must act, somehow; so we act on the most probable hypothesis, trusting that the event may prove us wise.” Once again he reminds his adversaries—whom now he calls the “intellectualists”—that “not to act on one belief, is often equivalent to acting as if the opposite belief were true,” so inaction would not always be as “passive” as the intellectualists assume. It is one attitude of will, or, in his older coinage, one “passional” decision competing against the passional decision he is commending; it “is itself an act of faith of the most arbitrary kind” (*Works*, p. 113). The character of the world’s results, he concludes, “may” depend in part upon our acts, which “may” depend in turn on our “religion.” So “faith . . . remains as one of the inalienable birth-rights of our mind” and “may be regarded as a formative factor in the universe, if we be integral parts thereof, and co-determinants, by our behavior, of what its total character may be.” The once-confident “M + x” argument has, alas, here died the death of a million qualifications.

In the closing part of that Appendix, on the “pluralistic or melioristic” universe, James seems to be straining toward a more positive affirmation. But he begins cautiously, in a hypothetical vein: “if the ‘melioristic’ universe were really here, it would require the active good-will of all of us . . . to bring it to a prosperous issue.” The very next sentence shifts abruptly into the indicative, but the reader is clearly meant to understand those indicatives as still qualified by the “if” he began with: “It will succeed just in proportion as more of these
[independent powers which constitute it] work for its success. . . . If each does its best, it will not fail.” James now shifts back into the hypothetical mood: the destiny of this melioristic world “hangs on an if, or on a lot of ifs—which amounts to saying . . . that, the world being unfinished, its total character can be expressed only by hypothetical and not by categorical propositions.”

But here the neuralgic question once again arises: if a sufficient number of us act on our belief, can we make the world so much a better place as to provide verification for our theistic and melioristic faith? It would seem not, for “we must recognize that even though we do our best, the other factors also will have a voice in the result. If they refuse to conspire, our good-will and labor may be thrown away.” Nothing can “save us from the risks we run in being part of such a world.” “If we do our best, and the other powers do their best, the world will be perfected. . . .” “[T]his proposition,” he concludes, “expresses no actual fact, but only the complexion of a fact thought of as eventually possible” (emphasis added).

But now comes a surprising affirmation: “We can create the conclusion,” by which James means the “perfected world” toward which his meliorist theory points. Again, though, that sudden indicative should be understood in consistency with what immediately follows: we “can and may, as it were, jump with both feet off the ground into or towards a world of which we trust the other parts to meet our jump” (emphasis added). “Only so can the making of a perfected world of the pluralistic pattern ever take place.”

Clearly, then, James meant all the indicatives that dot this summary to be qualified by the “if” contained in his very first sentence. Religious conviction remains what it was in *A Pluralistic Universe* and in the works that preceded it: the best hypothesis James can propose. Its standing may have improved, its credibility been enhanced in the meantime, but it remains an hypothesis nonetheless. Faith, as in his earlier formulation, still
“runs before evidence” and requires that we bring to our survey of the evidence a precursive “good-will, our ‘will to believe.’” Despite its more cautious title, the thought and expression of this Appendix on the “right” to believe turns out to be remarkably continuous with that of “The Will to Believe.” Or, in slightly different terms, even when defending our “right to believe,” James is brought round, at the crucial step in his argument, to validate the “will” to believe.

And however much one might wish that the contrary were true, the mature William James never assured his readers that their theistic faith could be pragmatically verified by their experience within the span of their lifetimes.

Notes

1. See Patrick K. Dooley’s review in *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 21 (1985), 569–76; having first reduced the claim of precursive influence to an affirmation that “passional demands tremendously influence our beliefs and over-beliefs,” he then dismisses it: “this is surely no news.” But a survey of recent defenses of James’s essay will show that if this be truly old news, the word has not quite gotten around—indeed, Dooley himself does not seem to be fully aware of its implications. See, for example, Saul Smilansky’s summary of the scholarly situation in “Did James Deceive Himself About Free Will,” in ibid., 28 (1992).

2. See his *Pragmatism as Humanism: The Philosophy of William James* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1974), pp. 62, 68, 87, 107, 113; that this control is rooted in the “structures of human nature,” see pp. 48, 68.

3. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), pp. xi–xxxviii. All citations of James’s works are from this series, and citations from his “popular lectures,” including “The Will to Believe,” are from this volume (abbreviated to WB). For evidence that these vacillations did not alternate between a “will” and a “right” to believe, as one prevailing view would have it, see James C. S. Wernham, *James’s Will-to-Believe Doctrine: A Heretical View* (Montreal: McGill-Queens University Press,
Since Wernham does not take the precursive influence of the passional explicitly into account, I have serious difficulties about his more positive disposition of this whole question.

4. See the examples of this language below.

5. I refer to the well-known adage that no one is held to do the impossible, hence if a course of action is morally obligatory, it must also be naturally within the powers of the agent so obliged.


7. For these repeated allusions to Kennedy’s suggestion, see above, p. 20 and note 1 to that page, where I warn the reader that I will later have some refinements to make on his proposal; then pp. 67, 69n4, and finally 84 where I make it clear that I had grave difficulties with Kennedy’s proposal as a blanket solution to the problems raised by James’s essay. Dooley’s truncated quotation from my page 116 excises precisely those qualifying terms which specify that if one considers the “friendship” metaphor as the only normative metaphor James gives to illustrate the process of belief, Kennedy would appear to be right.


10. McDermott approvingly quotes my argument claiming that “no one can ‘will’ a friendship, but ‘no friendship was ever joined without some willingness to believe.’” But he infers that I thereby “acknowledge[d] that James later changed the ‘will’ to believe to the ‘right’ or ‘readiness’ to believe.” First off, I “acknowledged” no such thing about James; but, second, I would now distinguish between “making friends” and “keeping a friendship”: see my remarks below.

11. This attitude of belief would have something provisional about it, granted; humans being what they are, we must never trust even our finest friends as though they were perfect.

12. See note 3, above.

13. In his review in Theological Studies, 46 (1985), 755, Terrence W. Tilley observes that the “courage” to believe I conclude to be James’s essential message cannot alone “indicate which of the many strenuous ways we should walk in our pluralistic universe,” and that I should “draw this out more clearly.” Tilley is asking me to take on a task which James
himself postponed, and I think wisely. To borrow a distinction from John Smith, “The Will to Believe” and its companion pieces lay down the lines of “approach,” whereas only in his later works, like *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, does James address himself to a second, and quite distinct task, that of identifying more specifically the “substance” of religious belief. Unless we get clear on the fundamental attitude required for any and all forms of personal theism (the precise form of “religious belief” to which James’s thesis applies: WB 31–32), whatever be the closer specifics of its object—unless we are prepared to accept that religious belief as such requires that we embrace the “strenuous mood”—it would be idle to move on to the more specific question of “which of the many strenuous ways we should walk.” In his earlier essays, James is keenly aware that he has his hands full just persuading his scientific-minded hearers to take seriously their human obligation to shake off their agnostic inertia and walk. Later, he feels he may shoulder the onus of indicating which way they should do their walking. But that “second step” would be entirely futile unless the need, indeed the obligation, for taking the first step were firmly assured.


15. See especially the classic chapter on “Habit” in *The Principles of Psychology*.

16. James quotes the Latin and attributes this tag to Cicero at WB 77. In his 1875 review of Wundt, printed in *Works XVII*, p. 297, he unpacks the expression as applying to that “generous divination, and that superiority in virtue which was thought by Cicero to give a man the best insight into nature . . .” This, I am convinced, implies a more carefully discriminated view than the Darwinian “pre-established harmony” Gerald E. Myers attributes to him in *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986), p. 280.

17. See above, Appendix B.

18. See above, p. 192.