



# WILLIAM JAMES STUDIES

Fall 2016 • VOLUME 12 • NUMBER 2



**Mission Statement:** *William James Studies* (ISSN: 1933-8295) is a bi-annual, interdisciplinary peer-reviewed journal dedicated to publishing high quality, scholarly articles related to the life, work and influence of William James. *William James Studies* is an open-access journal so as to ensure that all who have an interest in William James have access to its contents. The journal is published online by the [William James Society](#).

*William James Studies* is indexed and abstracted in The Philosopher's Index and MLA International Bibliography.

#### **Editors**

General Editor: [Linda Simon](#), Skidmore College  
Managing Editor: [Ermine Algaier](#), Harvard Divinity School  
Associate Editor: [Patrick Dooley](#), St. Bonaventure University  
Book Editor: [Loren Goldman](#), University of Pennsylvania  
Periodicals Editor: [Kyle Bromhall](#), Independent Scholar

**Manuscript Submission Information:** The journal accepts only completed manuscripts and only those that are not concurrently under review by another journal or other publication. All submissions must be suitable for an interdisciplinary audience. As such, they must be clear and jargon free while retaining their academic rigor. All submissions must be sent electronically. Papers must be Microsoft Word documents and attached to an email sent to [submissions@williamjamesstudies.org](mailto:submissions@williamjamesstudies.org). Persons unable to submit manuscripts electronically should contact Kevin Decker, Associate Editor, WJS, Eastern Washington University, 229 C Patterson Hall, Cheney, Washington 99004. Manuscripts should be double spaced and no longer than 8,000 words, including references. On questions of style and documentation, each manuscript must be consistent with either *The Chicago Manual of Style* (sixteenth edition). All manuscripts must be accompanied by an abstract (no longer than 150 words). Because unsolicited manuscripts are blind reviewed, each must include a separate title page listing the title of the paper, the author's name, institutional affiliation, word count and current contact information (mailing address, email address, and phone number). There should also be no references in the paper, footnotes or endnotes that compromise the anonymity of the author. Although we try to provide a quick turnaround, authors can expect a decision regarding their submission within four months.

#### **Book Review Submission Information**

WJS will consider unsolicited book reviews of 800-1000 words on topics consistent with the journal's Mission Statement. In addition, we welcome short reviews (400-500 words) that offer a concise, cogent overview and evaluation of the book under consideration. All reviews should be submitted not more than three months after receipt of the book. The Editors welcome suggestions of books for review; prospective reviewers should indicate their interest in being considered for review assignments. For more information, please contact [Loren Goldman](#), Book Review Editor.

**Contact:** All inquiries should be directed to the managing editor, Ermine Algaier, at [editor@williamjamesstudies.org](mailto:editor@williamjamesstudies.org).

WILLIAM JAMES STUDIES  
FALL 2016 • VOLUME 12 • NUMBER 2

CONTENT

**ARTICLES**

- Rorty and James on Irony, Moral Commitment,  
and the Ethics of Belief 1  
*Christopher Voparil*
- Justification and Critique: The Will to Believe  
and the Public Dimension of Religious Belief 28  
*Ulf Zackariasson*
- “A New Sphere of Power”: Religious Experience  
and the Language of Dynamic Gifts in William James 52  
*Tae Sung*

**BOOK REVIEWS & NOTES**

- The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American  
Moral Tradition* by Amy Kittelstrom 80  
Reviewed by Justin Rogers-Cooper
- Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* by Scott Aikin 84  
Reviewed by Jeremy Morris and James Reed
- American Philosophy before Pragmatism* by Russell B. Goodman 90  
Notes by Zachary Tavlin
- The Allure of Things: Process and Object in Contemporary  
Philosophy* Edited by Roland Faber and Andrew Goffey 93  
Notes by Bradford McCall

**PERIODICALS**

- Related Scholarly Publications on James: January – October 2016 97

# RORTY AND JAMES ON IRONY, MORAL COMMITMENT, AND THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

*CHRISTOPHER VOPARIL*



This paper highlights commonalities in the thought of James and Rorty around a melioristic ethics of belief that foregrounds a distinctly pragmatic interrelation of choice, commitment, and responsibility. Its aim is to develop the combination of epistemic modesty and willingness to listen and learn from others with an account of ethical responsiveness as a signal contribution of their pragmatism. Reading them as philosophers of agency and commitment brings into view shared ethical and epistemological assumptions that have received little attention. Despite differences in perspective, the pluralistic, “unfinished” universe heralded by James and the contingent, linguistically-mediated, endlessly redescrivable landscape embraced by Rorty, both authorize a space of freedom that rejects determinism and the philosophically necessary and demands active choice and self-created commitment. Both reject an ethics that appeals to fixed principles; yet they nonetheless combine their fallibilism and pluralism with an account of commitment and responsibility.



In this paper I highlight commonalities in the thought of William James and Richard Rorty around a melioristic ethics of belief that foregrounds a distinctly pragmatic interrelation of choice, commitment, and responsibility. Reading James and Rorty as philosophers of agency and commitment brings into view shared ethical and epistemological assumptions that have received little attention. Despite undeniable differences in perspective, the pluralistic, “unfinished” universe heralded by James and the contingent, linguistically-mediated, endlessly redescrivable landscape embraced by Rorty, both authorize a space of freedom that rejects determinism and the philosophically necessary and demands active choice and self-created commitment. Both reject an ethics that appeals to fixed principles, what James called “an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance.”<sup>1</sup> Yet both nonetheless combine their fallibilism and pluralism with an account of commitment and responsibility.

The aim of this paper is to develop the combination of epistemic modesty and willingness to listen and learn from others with an account of ethical responsiveness as a signal contribution of their pragmatism. Both thinkers sought to shatter the self-confident certainty to which we are all given – philosophers, in particular – through an awareness of pluralism and the fallibilism it inspires, and in turn to cultivate a more acute attentiveness to what James called the “cries of the wounded” and the (contingent) obligations that the claims of others place on us. Specifically, I argue that Rortyan irony is best read as a form of antiauthoritarian fallibilism, an instantiation of the pluralist temperament that James most valued. Against certitude and self-righteousness, irony is an inseparable part of their ethical projects, which are built on a recognition of the need in a contingent, pluralistic world for existential commitment, and for the cultivation of responsive sensibilities as a remedy for moral blindness and insensitivity.

Before turning to the issue of irony and the ethics of belief, in the first section I offer a few preliminary remarks to situate my reading of Rorty and James’s philosophical affinities around pluralism and contingency. In the second section, I take up the

accounts of ethical commitment and responsiveness that comport with their philosophical positions. In a phrase of Rorty's, they take other human beings seriously – that is, they recognize that others hold values, often different values, as dear to them as ours are to us, and that commensuration cannot be attained without damage for which we must take responsibility. As a result, their respective ethical projects entail not only meliorism and inclusion, but cultivation of awareness and attentiveness toward the suffering of others.

### **PLURALISM, CONTINGENCY, AND AGENCY**

Somewhat surprisingly, the relationship of James and Rorty's philosophies remains relatively unexplored. It has received only a fraction of the attention garnered by Rorty's relation to Dewey, perhaps in part because Rorty gave James little sustained engagement until relatively late in his career (i.e., unlike Deweyans, Jamesians had less time to take offense to his readings). Nevertheless, Rorty's Jamesian tendencies have received occasional recognition, with a few enlightening results.<sup>2</sup> But sustained treatments of their shared commitments are hard to find.

The interpretation on offer here highlights how James's "unfinished" universe and Rorty's recognition of contingency evoke a conception of knowledge in which humans are active participants in the construction of what is right and true. In a word, I read them as philosophers of agency. Their attention to agency is the result of a fundamental shift in orientation that James described as "[t]he attitude of looking away from first things, principles, 'categories', supposed necessities; and of looking toward last things, fruits, consequences, facts."<sup>3</sup> Both James and Rorty eschew appeals to rationality and turn instead to emotions, sentiment, and the imagination. Because they turn away from, in James's words, "bad *a priori* reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins,"<sup>4</sup> they also are philosophers of pluralism and irreducible difference, rather than of consensus and commensuration, eschewing any reduction of this heterogeneity to monisms and "The One Right Description" and setting themselves

against dogmatism and authoritarianism, in all their forms. Anything shared names a task, something that must be actively strived for and achieved, rather than posited *a priori* or compelled by ahistorical essences or foundations. In Rorty's parlance, we might call them 'edifying' rather than 'systematic' thinkers.<sup>5</sup>

This shared recognition of a contingent, unfinished universe leads both James and Rorty to a view of truth and knowledge as dynamic. It is standard to recognize James's emphasis on process and flux, on our inability to step out of or transcend the stream of experience, with his pragmatism mediating between old and new resting places. For James, a theory that works must "mediate between all previous truths and certain new experiences." "Truth," he holds, "is *made*, just as health, wealth and strength are made, in the course of experience."<sup>6</sup> Even though he avoided reference to experience, Rorty was no less preoccupied with change, with the growth of knowledge, and with transitioning, if you will.<sup>7</sup> His embrace of the idea that truth is made rather than found is well known. More specifically, what interested Rorty is shifts in linguistic practices or "vocabularies as wholes," moments where heretofore fully functioning vocabularies and assumptions lose their hold on us and we transition from an older, entrenched vocabulary to a new one. Like James, he demonstrated a keen awareness of the pluralism and seemingly endless possibilities of alternative, incommensurable philosophical systems and vocabularies.<sup>8</sup> A central preoccupation of Rorty's pragmatism is these "interesting and important shifts in linguistic behavior" – "changing languages and other social practices" – that result in novel consequences that open up heretofore unglimped possibilities.<sup>9</sup> Like James, Rorty was preoccupied with how we move from the old to the new, and from where we derive normative resources to guide us in these transitions to new beliefs that no existing principles or procedures can settle.

To put it in another idiom, James and Rorty were especially attuned to the "abnormal," in Kuhn's sense. That is, they were sensitive to phases of philosophical discourse when appeal to "a set of rules which will tell us how rational agreement can be reached on what would settle the issue" is not possible.<sup>10</sup> Normal inquiry, as

Rorty explained in an early essay, “requires common problems and methods, professional and institutional discipline, consensus that certain results have been achieved.”<sup>11</sup> What distinguishes abnormal discourse is not only the lack of antecedently agreed upon criteria but, in a Jamesian spirit, the absence of the assumption that philosophy “might some day be *finished*,” with all the problems solved.<sup>12</sup> Abnormal discourse is necessarily experimental, seeking to “send the conversation off in new directions” in ways that “may, perhaps, engender new normal discourses, new sciences, new philosophical research programs, and thus new objective truths.”<sup>13</sup>

The combination of recognizing contingency and the conditions of pluralism and ‘abnormal’ inquiry led them to what perhaps put them most at odds with their philosophical brethren – their shared interest in the terrain of human existence where appeals to logic and rationality are no help. As James famously put it in “The Will to Believe,” we believe “running ahead of scientific evidence.”<sup>14</sup> James’s list of the “factors of belief” that comprise our “willing” or “non-intellectual” nature includes by and large the things Rorty signaled in his claims about ethnocentrism and about socialization going “all the way down”: the historically contingent factors that condition us and our beliefs, both socially and as individuals. For James, this includes “fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set.”<sup>15</sup> In the introduction to *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, Rorty invokes James and notes that “our acculturation is what makes certain options live, or momentous, or forced, while leaving others dead, or trivial, or optional.”<sup>16</sup> For Rorty, “We cannot look back behind the processes of socialization”; “We have to start from where we are.”<sup>17</sup>

The point I wish to emphasize here is that both James and Rorty understood that choice of philosophy and philosophical vocabularies takes place on this same thickly-constituted terrain that admits of no transcendence or even neutral ground. As both thinkers variously attest, the history of philosophy itself is our best evidence that we lack any objective or ahistorical set of principles or universal faculty that would guarantee any singular result.<sup>18</sup> There are no intrinsic properties of ideas capable of settling matters, only

“relations to the individual thinker.”<sup>19</sup> Hilary Putnam has observed that while James’s discussion of choice in “The Will to Believe” is commonly understood as applying to existential decisions, few have appreciated that James meant it to apply to choice of a philosophy as well.<sup>20</sup>

Not unlike James, Rorty too, from his earliest published essays, had an abiding interest in questions that cannot be decided on logical or intellectual grounds that instead are a matter of choice. Rorty’s initial interest in pragmatism centered on its recognition, beginning with Peirce, of how “the appeal to practice transfers the question of the acceptability of a philosophical program out of metaphilosophy and into the realm of moral choice.”<sup>21</sup> This recognition of the ineluctability of choice for Rorty generates the need for an ethics – “not a ‘substantive’ ethics, for it would not tell a man which arguments to propound, but rather a ‘formalist’ ethics which would tell him what his responsibilities were to any arguments which he found himself propounding.”<sup>22</sup> This ethical backdrop and concern with the implications of philosophical vocabulary choice, for both ethics and politics, can be seen running throughout Rorty’s work.

### **THE ETHICS OF BELIEF AND RESPONSIVENESS TO OTHERS**

The upshot of this far too brief sketch for my purposes here is how the fundamental shift in orientation away from the deterministic, monistic, and essentialistic to the contingent, plural, and contextual by James and Rorty opens a space of freedom, choice, and responsibility that demands our own willed or self-chosen commitment. Let me now turn more directly to ethics of belief they outline. In addition to foregrounding choice and commitment, my reading identifies three other key areas of shared emphasis: first, a shift to an attitude more suited to a recognition of pluralism and contingency – namely, the antiauthoritarian epistemic modesty or fallibilism that Rorty calls irony; second, an account of pragmatic conceptions of obligation, commitment, and responsibility; and third, developing responsive sensibilities as a remedy for moral

blindness through cultivating particular virtues, like a willingness to learn from others.

### **Irony as Antiauthoritarian Fallibilism**

There are interesting parallels between Rorty's figure of the 'ironist' in *Contingency* and James's figure of the 'pragmatist' in his *Pragmatism* lectures. Each one constitutes an instance of the pragmatic virtues that comport best with a recognition of pluralism and contingency, and the eschewal of absolutes. Rorty counters his ironist to the 'metaphysician'; James's contrasts the pragmatist with the 'rationalist'. At issue here are of course attitudes of orientation and temperaments. Both thinkers understood that in philosophy, as in politics, temperaments matter. To neglect the role of temperament, as James knew, is to ignore "the potentest of all our premises."<sup>23</sup> Rorty often talked about these dimensions in the idiom of "self-image."<sup>24</sup>

As we know, Rorty defines the 'ironist' as "the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance."<sup>25</sup> Rorty's figure of the liberal ironist defines the kind of self-identity most suited to the conception of liberalism his work advances: a "mature (de-scientized, de-philosophized) Enlightenment liberalism."<sup>26</sup> To be a liberal ironist is to "see one's language, one's conscience, one's morality, and one's highest hopes as contingent products, as literalizations of what once were accidentally produced metaphors."<sup>27</sup>

Yet as several commentators have noted, two distinct, sometimes inconsistent, senses of irony can be discerned in the pages of *Contingency*: a moderate version and a more acute, hyper-version.<sup>28</sup> William Curtis captures the difference nicely: "The first sense is the civic virtue that all liberal citizens should ideally possess because it helps them be tolerant, adaptable, and just. The second sense is the more active and radical mental habit that 'ironist intellectuals' exhibit as they challenge the conventional wisdoms of

the cultural domains in which they work.”<sup>29</sup> Rorty holds that in his liberal utopia, “ironism, in the relevant sense, is universal.”<sup>30</sup> The relevant sense here is the first sense. Citizens would be “commonsense nonmetaphysicians” in the same way that increasing numbers of people are “commonsense nontheists.”<sup>31</sup> They recognize the contingency of their own beliefs and values, but lack the kind of radical and continuing doubts that trouble the ironist intellectual.

Distinguishing these two senses of irony as distinct points on a spectrum makes it possible to reconcile the apparently conflicting statements in *Contingency* about the importance of irony for liberal citizens, on the one hand, and claims that irony is “an inherently private matter,” on the other.<sup>32</sup> It also clarifies that the “radical and continuing doubts” and fear that one is “a copy or replica” beset ironist intellectuals rather than liberal citizens, who merely are “commonsensically nominalist and historicist” and fallibilist.<sup>33</sup> We will see below how the moderate version of irony opens us up to others and is part of the remedy for overcoming the “blindness” that James diagnosed. What I want to underscore here are the forms of dogmatism and undemocratic authority against which both Rorty and James distinguish their ironic and pluralistic temperaments.

In his essay “Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism,” Rorty highlights commonalities between his own views and James’s antirepresentationalism, pluralism, and tolerance. He affirms James’s “realization that the need for choice between competing representations can be replaced by tolerance for a plurality of non-competing descriptions, descriptions which serve different purposes and which are to be evaluated by reference to their utility in fulfilling these purposes rather than by their ‘fit’ with the objects being described.”<sup>34</sup> Yet he doesn’t recognize James’s own antiauthoritarianism; instead, Rorty praises Dewey for his greater attentiveness to this issue. On Rorty’s view of what James should have said – his later position on James is basically thumbs up for “The Will to Believe” and thumbs down for *The Varieties* – he would have followed Dewey in carrying his democratic commitments through to a complete rejection of nonhuman authority.<sup>35</sup>

Here I think Rorty overlooks a key dimension of James's position in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." James evidenced his own version of antiauthoritarianism, decrying moralists who function as "pontiffs armed with the temporal power, and having authority in every concrete case of conflict to order which good shall be butchered and which shall be suffered to survive."<sup>36</sup> As Frank Lentricchia has observed in his reading of James, James was "against the political authority which masks itself in rationalist certitude and self-righteousness." That is, the Roman Catholic church, the army, the aristocracy, and the crown – "James named these institutions as the true enemy of his philosophic method."<sup>37</sup> Also like Rorty, James inveighed against the authoritarianism inherent in philosophers unable to put up with a pluralistic moral universe – those who think there must be, among competing ideals, "some which have the more truth or authority; and to these others *ought* to yield, so that system and subordination may reign."<sup>38</sup>

James and Rorty both preached the epistemic modesty inherent in fallibilist, pluralist, and ironist temperaments, and shared an opposition to dogmatism and fanaticism in all their forms. We see this in their paeans to tolerance and warnings that we resist the impulse to judge alien lives and meanings. Recall here the epigraph that opens *Contingency* from Milan Kundera that extols the "imaginative realm of tolerance" where "no one owns the truth and everyone has a right to be understood." James of course asserted this memorably in numerous places: for instance, "No one has insight into all the ideals. No one should presume to judge them off-hand. The pretension to dogmatize about them in each other is the root of most human injustices and cruelties, and the train in human character most likely to make the angels weep."<sup>39</sup> The temperamental desire to "go straight to the way things are" is what in Rorty's view accounts for the way "religion and philosophy have often served as shields for fanaticism and intolerance."<sup>40</sup>

What is fundamental to both James and Rorty is not only their affirmations of temperaments and virtues more conducive to tolerant, pluralistic democratic life, but their efforts to manifest such

changes in their readers by undermining our contrary, nondemocratic habits and commitments. Too often commentators on both thinkers have failed to appreciate these edifying efforts. For instance, when Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse point to the inability of James's perspective to handle scenarios of diametrically-opposed moral commitments that entail the necessary rejection of other moral commitments.<sup>41</sup> It is not that James overlooks this problem but rather that James's pluralism seeks to undermine the assumptions that lead us to view such conflicts as total in the first place. When James cites the example of "ordinary men" "disputing with one another about questions of good and bad," he locates the problem in the assumption that there exists "an abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides."<sup>42</sup> It is precisely this belief in a pre-existing abstract order to which our own ideas conform that causes one to think, in authoritarian fashion, the other person should submit. James notes that these "imperatives" are "tyrannical demands" that result from belief in an abstract casuistic scale: "It is in the nature of these goods to be cruel to their rivals."<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Rorty held that taking the 'intrinsic nature of reality' and representationalist philosophies less seriously would "change our attitudes toward these practices" and take "away a few more excuses for fanaticism and intolerance."<sup>44</sup> As we shall see, against these authoritarian stances both pragmatists advocate Socratic virtues, including "a willingness to talk, to listen to other people, to weigh the consequences of our actions upon other people."<sup>45</sup>

### **Obligation, Commitment, and Responsibility**

I have been arguing that both James and Rorty's philosophical perspectives recognize the adaptability and agency that adhere in the constitution of belief. If truths are plural, as James held, under conditions of pluralism we must choose among alternatives: "sometimes alternative theoretic formulas are equally compatible with all the truths we know, and then we choose between them for subjective reasons."<sup>46</sup> If, as they held, there is no "abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides,"<sup>47</sup> no "order beyond time and chance" to which we can appeal for "a hierarchy of

responsibilities,”<sup>48</sup> the question arises as to how we choose and how we can account for obligation and responsibility in this nominalist and historicist milieu.

As Rorty once responded to a critic who saw an irreconcilable dualism between irony and commitment, the ultimate objection to “commonsensically nominalist and historicist” perspectives like his, and James’s, typically is, “can an anti-foundationalist have deep moral commitments?”<sup>49</sup> Rorty and James offer a strikingly similar response. Rorty’s is given in the “fundamental premise” of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*: “a belief can still regulate action, can still be thought worth dying for, among people who are quite aware that this belief is caused by nothing deeper than contingent historical circumstance.”<sup>50</sup> For James, a “genuine pragmatist is willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he trusts; willing to pay with his own person, if need be, for the realization of the ideals which he frames.”<sup>51</sup>

Clearly, both James and Rorty saw moral commitment as possible. An important clue as to how resides in the way both thinkers understood the recognition of contingency and pluralism to authorize forms of freedom and agency, and hence responsibility, that were closed off by the determinism and necessity of absolutist and rationalist systems. Rorty gives a good account of this in *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, where he casts traditional, epistemology-centered philosophy as “the attempt to see [patterns of justification] as hooked on to something which *demands* moral commitment—Reality, Truth, Objectivity, Reason.”<sup>52</sup> The problem with this view for Rorty is that if we see truth as a matter of necessity and knowledge as “something as ineluctable as being shoved about [...] then we should no longer have the responsibility for choice among competing ideas and words, theories and vocabularies.”<sup>53</sup> Like James, he calls our attention to questions of choice and responsibility that are “preempted by the tacit and ‘self-confident’ commitment to the search for objective truth on the subject in question.”<sup>54</sup> If we understand knowledge not as the product of agential discursive dealing or coping with contingencies but as “something as ineluctable as being shoved about” it absolves us of

“the responsibility for choice among competing ideas and words, theories and vocabularies.”<sup>55</sup> Rorty’s embrace of continued conversation, rather than commensuration, as the goal of inquiry for him is a way to preserve the possibility of “confront[ing] something alien which makes it necessary for [us] to choose an attitude toward, or a description of, it.”<sup>56</sup>

Like Rorty, James abjures the possibility that some “common essence” could be discovered that would provide a scale capable of ranking all competing goods and guiding our choices.<sup>57</sup> So how are we to choose? James recognizes that philosophers seek “an impartial test” and more or less agrees. But he adds, “That test, however, must be incarnated in the demand of some actually existent person; and how can he pick out the person save by an act in which his own sympathies and prepossessions are implied?”<sup>58</sup> As we know, the cornerstone of James’s position in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” is his grounding of moral valuation and obligation in the living demands of concrete beings. “Nothing can be good or right,” he tells us, “except so far as some consciousness feels it to be good or thinks it to be right.” As a result, “*without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation,*” and “*there is some obligation wherever this a claim.*”<sup>59</sup>

However, if every *de facto* claim creates an obligation, we still lack a basis for choice and commitment. As Sergio Franzese notes, for James “The feeling of obligation is subjective and common to several objects and goods, and it does not contain in itself criteria for determining which of these values and goods are ‘better.’”<sup>60</sup> James’s understanding of obligation stops short of compelling or prescribing a response. None of these claims carries any *a priori* authority over the others; for James, all demands ought to be satisfied by virtue of their having emanated from a concrete person. For James, “*the essence of good is simply to satisfy demand.*” The “guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world),” he concludes, must then be “simply to satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can.*”<sup>61</sup>

It is here that both James and Rorty move outside of philosophy to an existential grounding of our commitments. One of the reasons why James understood that logic or reason or intelligence is beside the point for these choices is because they require an antecedent existential commitment on the part of the individual. As Putnam explains, on James's view I have to decide in ethics "not whether it is good that someone should do that thing, but whether it is good that I, Hilary Putnam, do that thing."<sup>62</sup> James was acutely aware of the importance of aligning our commitments with our best energies. As he put it, "impulses and imperatives run together, and the same act may seem imperative to one man, but not so to another... So far as I feel anything good I make it so. It is so, for me."<sup>63</sup>

In a very early essay cited above, Rorty similarly held that "one does not simply 'find oneself' propounding philosophical arguments; on the contrary, these arguments are part and parcel of what, at the moment of propounding them, one essentially is."<sup>64</sup> The absence of this deeper commitment is exemplified by "sophists" who, because uncommitted to their own arguments in this fundamental way, can simply shrug off all counterarguments. In *Contingency*, Rorty, not unlike James, understands commitment in terms of volitional agency: if "the demands of morality are the demands of a language, and if languages are historical contingencies, rather than attempts to capture the true shape of the world or the self, then to 'stand unflinchingly for one's moral convictions' is a matter of identifying oneself with such a contingency."<sup>65</sup> Citing Nietzsche's powerful "Thus, I willed it," Rorty explains in a rather Jamesian passage:

Anything from the sound of a word through the color of a leaf to the feel of a piece of skin can, as Freud showed us, serve to dramatize and crystallize a human being's sense of self-identity. For any such thing can play the role in an individual life which philosophers have thought could, or at least should, be played only by things which were universal, common to us all [...] Any seemingly random

constellation of such things can set the tone of a life. Any such constellation can set up an unconditional commandment to whose service a life may be devoted – a commandment no less unconditional because it may be intelligible to, at most, only one person.<sup>66</sup>

Here the self-authorized existential commitment that Putnam underscores in James and that Rorty sees in Nietzsche underwrites a conception of contingent ethical responsibility and obligation consistent with their fallibilism and irony, and their ethical pluralism. The measure of the moral philosopher's connection to the moral life resides in the "dumb willingness or unwillingness of their interior characters" to acknowledge, hear, and learn from the "alien demands" subjugated in this moral life to which we turn next.<sup>67</sup>

### **Moral Blindness and Responsive Sensibilities**

We have noted how their respective recognitions of pluralism lead both James and Rorty to advocate tolerance and noninterference with "alien" lives different from our own. This is a common view of James and Rorty – as "hands off," live-and-let-live Millian liberals.<sup>68</sup> At the same time, both go beyond passive tolerance to promote active engagement with others and the cultivation of virtues and habits that facilitate such engagement. Indeed, in this last section I want to make a stronger case for the ethics of attention and responsiveness that is intimately tied to their understanding of a pragmatic orientation than typically is advanced.<sup>69</sup> Here I see their contribution as twofold: not only making us more aware of and responsive to others, but teaching us about the impact of our own (philosophical) self-understandings on others.

Though I don't have room to develop this fully here, by making the suffering of others and what James called "the cries of the wounded" the centerpiece of their ethical projects, James and Rorty offer insights into what recent scholars have called epistemic injustice.<sup>70</sup> In other words, James and Rorty go beyond simply opening us up to the meanings and experiences of others; they grasp

how our own epistemological assumptions and orientations can be responsible for the suffering of others. By shifting our attention away from representationalist views of knowledge and toward our relations to other concrete human beings, they understood that a live interest in the concerns – specifically, the suffering – of others is needed for the self-correction of belief to take place. They advocate not only noticing but taking a sympathetic interest in the lives of others, including in the ways in which our own habits and practices may wrong them.

One of the underappreciated aspects of Rortyan irony is the extent to which the ironist *needs* others. Rorty is quite explicit about this: the ironist “needs as much imaginative acquaintance with alternative final vocabularies as possible, not just for her own edification, but in order to understand the actual and possible humiliation of the people who use alternative final vocabularies.”<sup>71</sup> Or, again: “the ironist [...] desperately needs to *talk* to other people, needs this with the same urgency as people need to make love. He needs to do so because only conversation enables him to handle these doubts, to keep himself together, to keep his web of beliefs and desires coherent enough to enable him to act.”<sup>72</sup> The moral imperative of Rorty’s ironist is “enlarging our acquaintance.”<sup>73</sup> The project of making us more aware of forms of cruelty and suffering we may not have noticed is what authorizes Rorty’s method of “redescription” or “recontextualization.” Alternative perspectives from which to see things are precisely what break the hold of our current, often unquestioned, lenses in order to bring the previously occluded into view.<sup>74</sup>

For James, like Rorty, other-regarding inclinations have both ethical and epistemological significance. As he writes of a pluralistic universe, “Nor can you find any possible ground in such a world for saying that one thinker’s opinion is more correct than the other’s, or that either has the truer moral sense.”<sup>75</sup> As a result, “the question as to which of two conflicting ideals will give the best universe then and there, can be answered by him only through the aid of the experience of other men.”<sup>76</sup> For James, even a glimpse into the inner significance of one of these “alien lives” has an immense power:

“the whole scheme of our customary values gets confounded, then our self is riven and its narrow interests fly to pieces, then a new centre and a new perspective must be found.”<sup>77</sup>

These efforts nevertheless face the obstacle of the “ancestral blindness” toward others that James so perceptively depicts. The only place in *Contingency* where James receives more than passing mention is an affirmation of the irreducible pluralism of meaning James recognizes after his interaction with the settler responsible for one of the “coves” he observed in the North Carolina mountains in “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” Rorty likens the Freud-inspired account of the contingency of self-identity he has been elaborating, the idea that any idiosyncratic constellation of things can “set the tone of a life,” to overcoming “what William James called ‘a certain blindness in human beings.’”<sup>78</sup> Rorty credits James for recognizing that it is possible “to juggle several descriptions of the same event without asking which one was right [...] to see a new vocabulary not as something which was supposed to replace all other vocabularies, something which claimed to represent reality, but simply as one more vocabulary, one more human project, one person’s chosen metaphoric.”<sup>79</sup> For Rorty, as for James, there is no neutral ground, only “different paradigms of humanity” and an “indefinite plurality of standpoints.”<sup>80</sup>

That passage marks the extent of the commentary on James in the book. Nonetheless, Rorty remains preoccupied with the form of blindness exemplified in self-absorbed aesthetes like Nabokov’s characters Humbert Humbert and Charles Kinbote. Indeed, this comes out most clearly in Rorty’s brilliant reading of Nabokov, which can be interpreted as a lesson about James’s “cries of the wounded.” In discussing *Lolita* Rorty asserts, “the moral is not to keep one’s hands off little girls but to notice what one is doing, and in particular to notice what people are saying. For it might turn out, it very often does turn out, that people are trying to tell you that they are suffering.”<sup>81</sup>

For both James and Rorty the remedy for blindness is not just sight but sympathetic interest. Certainly noticing details of others’ lives that previously had been overlooked is necessary. But we must

be ethically oriented toward the other – open to listening and learning from her – in order to hear the “cries of the wounded.” The edifying character of their work is directed toward bring about this shift in our ethical orientation. As we have seen, for James claims made by “concrete” persons create an obligation. Yet he also notes that we will hear the cries of the wounded only “so far as we are just and sympathetic instinctively, and so far as we are open to the voice of complaint.”<sup>82</sup>

This project entails the development of what James called “responsive sensibilities” through the cultivation of sympathy toward an increasingly wide circle of human beings that both thinkers advance.<sup>83</sup> The centerpiece of this project, for both James and Rorty, is not only fostering a willingness to learn from others but the epistemic modesty endemic to irony and fallibilism that makes us willing to be instructed by the other. In his early references to ethics in the context of philosophical conversation, Rorty claimed that “Fruitful philosophical controversy is possible only when both sides have the patience to investigate their opponents’ criteria of relevance” and intimated the notion of “bilateral responsibility” offered by Henry Johnstone wherein “whoever undertakes to correct or supplement what another asserts in the name of knowledge must be willing to be instructed by that other person.”<sup>84</sup>

## CONCLUSION

I have argued that we read both James and Rorty as prompting philosophers to recognize our agency, and hence our responsibility for our choices and for taking other human beings and their suffering seriously. Like James, for Rorty this recognition of meaning’s contingency and pluralism and openness to endless redescription lead to an ethics of cultivating responsive sensibilities toward others and the details of their lives, as well as the need for a willingness to alter one’s own beliefs and to see things from the perspective of others. Their shared eschewal of fixed principles and shift away from rationalism and absolutes can be seen as more than philosophical positions; they are an attempt to foster temperaments and self-images, virtues and habits, that are more conducive to the

pluralistic, fallibilistic, and epistemically-modest practices of a democratic culture and way of life.

Bringing the shared territory occupied by James and Rorty into view has required approaching their writings in a spirit of hermeneutic charity that perhaps risks minimizing points of disagreement. Having hopefully sparked greater appreciation of their philosophical affinities, it now becomes necessary to bring a fresh perspective to areas where their thinking is divergent. Certainly Rorty's impatience with James's mysticism is undeniable; yet they both understand the pragmatic role religion plays in people's lives.<sup>85</sup> There also may be ways that their understandings of truth align more than generally recognized.<sup>86</sup> Against the criticism that Rorty fails where James succeeds in offering "a satisfactory model for both democratic discourse and action,"<sup>87</sup> their ethical and political projects of cultivating democratic dispositions that attune us to others and to the need for action project new avenues for pragmatist political theory. Above all, reorienting ourselves to Rorty and James opens up ways to rethink the most entrenched of recent dualisms: the experience vs. language debate.<sup>88</sup>

In the end, I hope to have demonstrated that their shared preoccupations with the ethics of belief, moral commitment, and responsiveness contain resources that promise to award our own attention. While we may read them both as adhering to what James Campbell has called the "method of inclusion," both James and Rorty understood that this is only possible where an active willingness to listen and to be instructed by the other exists.<sup>89</sup> Few have understood better than James that in pluralistic settings there will always be a "pinch": "The good which we have wounded returns to plague us with interminable crops of consequential damages, compunctions, and regrets."<sup>90</sup> James and Rorty teach us that ethical sensitivity and responsiveness to this damage must be actively cultivated and practiced.

*Union Institute & University*  
[chris.voparil@myunion.edu](mailto:chris.voparil@myunion.edu)

## REFERENCES

- Aiken, Henry D. "William James as Moral and Social Philosopher." *Philosophic Exchange* 12, no. 1 (1981): 55–66.
- Aikin, Scott F. and Robert B. Talisse, "Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics." *William James Studies* 6 (2011): 3–9.
- Campbell, James. "William James and the Ethics of Fulfillment." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 17, no. 3 (1981): 224–240.
- Cormier, Harvey. *The Truth is What Works: William James, Pragmatism, and the Seed of Death*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001.
- Cull, Ryan E. "The Betrayal of Pragmatism?: Rorty's Quarrel with James." *Philosophy and Literature* 24, no. 1 (2000): 83–95.
- Curtis, William M. *Defending Rorty: Liberalism and Pragmatic Virtue*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015.
- Edmonds, Jeff. "Toward an Ethics of the Encounter: William James's Push Beyond Tolerance." *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 25, no. 2 (2011): 133–147.
- Fiala, Andrew G. "Toleration and Pragmatism." *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 16, no. 2 (2002): 103–116.
- Franzese, Sergio. *The Ethics of Energy: William James's Moral Philosophy in Focus*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Books, 2008.
- Fricker, Miranda. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Gavin, William, Stefan Neubert, and Kersten Reich. "Language and its Discontents: William James, Richard Rorty, and Interactive Constructivism," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 7, no. 2 (2010): 105–130.
- James, William. "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." In *The Writings of William James*, edited by John J. McDermott, 610–629. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
- . "The Will to Believe." In *The Writings of William James*, edited by John J. McDermott, 717–735. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.

- . “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings.” In *The Writings of William James*, edited by John J. McDermott, 629–645. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
- . “What Makes a Life Significant.” In *The Writings of William James*, edited by John J. McDermott, 645–660. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977.
- . *Pragmatism*. In *William James: Writings, 1902-1910*, edited by Bruce Kuklick, 479–624. New York: The Library of America, 1987.
- Johnstone, Henry W. *Philosophy and Argument*. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1959.
- Koopman, Colin. “William James’s Politics of Personal Freedom.” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 19, no. 2 (2005): 175–186.
- . “Language is a Form of Experience: Reconciling Classical Pragmatism and Neopragmatism.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43, no. 4 (2007): 694–727.
- . *Pragmatism as Transition: Historicity and Hope in James, Dewey, and Rorty*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Lentricchia, Frank. “On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism, 1890-1910.” In *Reconstructing American Literary History*, edited by Sacvan Bercovitch, 220–249. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986.
- Malachuk, Daniel. “‘Loyal to a Dream Country’: Republicanism and the Pragmatism in William James and Richard Rorty.” *Journal of American Studies* 34, no. 1 (2000): 89–113.
- Mara, Gerald M. and Suzanne L. Dovi. “Mill, Nietzsche, and the Identity of Postmodern Liberalism.” *The Journal of Politics* 57, no. 1 (1995): 1–23.
- Medina, José. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Miller, Joshua. *Democratic Temperament: The Legacy of William James*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1997.
- Pettegrew, John. “Lives of Irony: Randolph Bourne, Richard Rorty, and a New Genealogy of Critical Pragmatism.” In *A Pragmatist’s Progress? Richard Rorty and American*

- Intellectual History*, edited by John Pettegrew, 103–134. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000.
- Putnam, Hilary. “A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy.” In *Pragmatism in Law & Society*, edited by Michael Brint and William Weaver, 217–243. Boulder: Westview Press, 1991.
- Rorty, Richard. “Recent Metaphilosophy.” *Review of Metaphysics* 15, no. 2 (1961): 299–318.
- . “The Limits of Reductionism.” In *Experience, Existence, and the Good*, edited by L.C. Lieb, 100–116. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1961.
- . “Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy.” *The Journal of Philosophy* 74, no. 11 (1977): 673–681.
- . *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979.
- . *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972–1980*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.
- . *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- . *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 1*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- . *Truth and Progress: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 3*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- . *Philosophy and Social Hope*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.
- . “Response to John Horton.” In *Richard Rorty: Critical Dialogues*, edited by Matthew Festenstein and Simon Thompson, 29–32. Malden, MA: Polity, 2001.
- . “Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism.” In *A Companion to Pragmatism*, edited by John R. Shook and Joseph Margolis, 257–266. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006.
- . *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers, Vol. 4*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- . “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre.” In *The Rorty Reader*, edited by Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein, 473–488. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

- . “Redemption from Egotism: James and Proust as Spiritual Exercises.” In *The Rorty Reader*, edited Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein, 389–406. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- . “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration.” In *The Rorty Reader*, edited Christopher J. Voparil and Richard J. Bernstein, 456–462. Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.
- Roth, John K. *Freedom and the Moral Life: The Ethics of William James*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1969).
- Smith, Andrew F. “William James and the Politics of Moral Conflict.” *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 40, no. 1 (2004): 135–151.
- . “Communication and Conviction: A Jamesian Contribution to Deliberative Democracy.” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 21, no. 4 (2007): 259–274.
- Stob, Paul. “Pragmatism, Experience, and William James’s Politics of Blindness.” *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44, no. 3 (2011): 227–249.
- Throntveit, Trygve. “William James’s Ethical Republic.” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 72, no. 2 (2011): 255–277.
- Voparil, Christopher J. *Richard Rorty: Politics and Vision*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2006.
- . “Taking Other Human Beings Seriously: Rorty’s Ethics of Choice and Responsibility.” *Contemporary Pragmatism* 11, no. 1: 83–102.
- Ward, Roger. “Therapy to Apocalypse: Encountering the Abyss of Epistemology in James and Rorty.” In *Rorty and the Religious: Christian Engagements with a Secular Philosopher*, edited by Jacob L. Goodson and Brad Elliot Stone, 14–22. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012.

## NOTES

1. James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” 610.
2. One of the most sustained positive engagements is Gavin, et al., “Language and its Discontents,” who claim “Rorty is closer to James and

classical pragmatism than some of his commentators seem to suppose” (118). Cormier refers to “Jamesians like Rorty” and offers some helpful moments of side by side discussion in *The Truth is What Works*, 145. Other work that one-sidedly contrasts James and Rorty includes: Cull, “The Betrayal of Pragmatism?”; Koopman, “William James’s Politics of Personal Freedom”; Malachuk, ““Loyal to a Dream Country””; Stob, “Pragmatism, Experience, and William James’s Politics of Blindness;” and Ward, “Therapy to Apocalypse.”

3. James, *Pragmatism*, 510.

4. *Ibid.*, 509.

5. See Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, 40. On the distinction between systematic and edifying, see *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

6. See, for instance, Rorty, “Philosophy as a Transitional Genre.” For a broader interpretation of the pragmatist tradition via this motif, see Koopman, *Pragmatism as Transition*.

7. James, *Pragmatism*, 580-1.

8. In *Contingency* Rorty establishes this via the idea that we “substitute Freedom rather than Truth as the goal of thinking and of social progress” (xiii). For Rorty there is no possibility of adopting a “metavocabulary which somehow takes account of *all possible* vocabularies,” no “convergence toward an already existing Truth,” only “an endless process – an endless, proliferating realization of Freedom” (xvi). Truth, in sum, is made rather than discovered, and we are always in the process of making and re-making it, as new beliefs and vocabularies emerge that need to be reconciled with old ones.

9. Rorty, *Contingency*, 47, 7.

10. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 316.

11. Rorty, “Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy,” 679. Kuhn of course is central to the latter third of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* as well.

12. Rorty, “Derrida on Language, Being, and Abnormal Philosophy,” 681.

13. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 378-9.

14. James, “The Will to Believe,” 731.

15. *Ibid.*, 721.

16. Rorty, *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth*, 13. His point here is that “no description of how things are from a God’s-eye point of view, no skyhook provided by some contemporary or yet-to-be-developed science,

is going to free us from the contingency of having been acculturated as we were" (13). This "inescapable condition" is what Rorty refers to as our ethnocentrism. In fact, being "insufficiently ethnocentric" is the criticism he makes of Peirce's notion of an 'ideal end of inquiry' and Habermas's notion of an 'ideally free community' (23n).

17. Rorty, *Contingency*, 198.

18. As James puts it, "the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be truth or no"; "no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp," "The Will to Believe," 726, 734.

19. James, "The Will to Believe," 718.

20. Putnam, "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy," 235.

21. Rorty, "The Limits of Reductionism," 111. For an in-depth discussion of this early work and its sustained influence on Rorty's positions, see Voparil, "Taking Other Human Beings Seriously."

22. Rorty, "Recent Metaphilosophy," 315.

23. James, *Pragmatism*, 489.

24. See, for example, "Ethics Without Principles," in *Philosophy and Social Hope*.

25. Rorty, *Contingency*, xv.

26. *Ibid.*, 57.

27. *Ibid.*, 61.

28. Pettegrew describes these as the "moderate" and "romantic" or "pure" versions of irony, and seeks to "restore 'irony' as a key word in the pragmatist lexicon," "Lives of Irony," 107, 104. He frames Bourne's more sociable conception of irony, which links the person with the political, rather than privatizes it, as a "corrective" to Rorty, though he notes that Rorty's work in the *Achieving Our Country* period serves as its own corrective to the detached romantic solitude of *Contingency*. See also the discussion of irony in Curtis, *Defending Rorty*.

29. Curtis, *Defending Rorty*, 93.

30. Rorty, *Contingency*, xv.

31. *Ibid.*, 87

32. *Ibid.*

33. *Ibid.*, 43, 73, 87.

34. Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-Authoritarianism," 262.

35. See Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 34-38.

36. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 623.

37. Lentricchia, "On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism," 230, 242.

38. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 615-6.
39. James, "What Makes a Life Significant," 645.
40. Rorty, "Redemption from Egotism," 395.
41. Aikin and Talisse, "Three Challenges to Jamesian Ethics," 8.
42. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 616.
43. *Ibid.*, 627.
44. Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, 83.
45. Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 172.
46. James, *Pragmatism*, 581.
47. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 616.
48. Rorty, *Contingency*, xv.
49. Rorty, "Response to John Horton," 31.
50. Rorty, *Contingency*, 189.
51. James, *Pragmatism*, 618.
52. Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, 385. Emphasis added.
53. *Ibid.*, 375-6.
54. *Ibid.*, 382.
55. *Ibid.*, 376.
56. *Ibid.*, 315.
57. James leaves no doubt about this: "No single abstract principle can be so used as to yield to the philosopher anything like a scientifically accurate and genuinely useful casuistic scale," "The Moral Philosopher," 621.
58. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 620.
59. *Ibid.*, 616-7.
60. Franzese, *The Ethics of Energy*, 30.
61. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 621, 623.
62. Putnam, "A Reconsideration," 237. He adds, "The answer to that question cannot be a matter of well-established scientific fact, no matter how generously 'scientific' is defined."
63. James, qtd. in Franzese, *The Ethics of Energy*, 12-13.
64. Rorty, "Recent Metaphilosophy," 315.
65. Rorty, *Contingency*, 60.
66. *Ibid.*, 37.
67. James, "On a Certain Blindness," 629, 623.
68. The basis for this reading of James is likely his "Hands off" admonition at the end of "On a Certain Blindness," 645. Those who read James's ethics as a relative of Mill's include Aiken, "William James as a Moral and Social Philosopher"; Roth, *Freedom and the Moral Life*; and

Fiala, "Toleration and Pragmatism." Edmonds discusses this reading of James as advocating "a passive ethics of tolerance" in order to counter it, "Toward an Ethics of the Encounter," 134; as does Throntveit, "William James's Ethical Republic;" and Smith, "William James and the Politics of Moral Conflict." Somewhere in between is Miller's reading of James as emphasizing mutual respect and "tolerance for the causes of others," *Democratic Temperament*, 5. Cull reads Rorty in this light as permitting conflicting opinions to "be simply ignored," "The Betrayal of Pragmatism?," 93. See also Mara and Dovi, "Mill, Nietzsche, and the Identity of Postmodern Liberalism." Some of Rorty's own formulations lend credence to this view; cf. *Contingency*, 63; and Voparil, *Richard Rorty*, chapter 5. For a broader view of Rorty's stance, see Voparil, "Taking Other Human Beings Seriously;" and Curtis, *Defending Rorty*, chapter 2.

69. Edmonds convincingly argues that the implications of James's stance in "On a Certain Blindness" extend beyond the passive ethics of tolerance the essay endorses to what Edmonds calls an "ethics of the encounter." See Edmonds, "Toward an Ethics of the Encounter." As I intimate here, James's attentiveness to "the cries of the wounded" portends an ethics that goes beyond even mere encounter. For an account of Rorty's move beyond mere tolerance, see Voparil, "Taking Other Human Beings Seriously."

70. See, for example, Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*; and Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*. We can identify in James and Rorty a heightened awareness of what Medina has called the "cognitive-affective functioning" that sustains oppressive normative structures, like the philosophical absolutisms and monistic epistemologies they both critiqued. At the core of the idea of epistemic injustice are the forms of inattentiveness and insensitivity that most preoccupied James and Rorty.

71. Rorty, *Contingency*, 92.

72. *Ibid.*, 186.

73. *Ibid.*, 80. Rorty tends to emphasize this imperative in the context of books – "every book likely to provide candidates for a person's moral vocabulary" – than other people, though Rorty certainly does not leave out the latter: Ironists "reweave their webs of belief and desire in light of whatever new people and books they happen to encounter," *Ibid.*, 80–85.

74. See *ibid.*, 173.

75. James, "The Moral Philosopher," 615.

76. Ibid., 625. Lentricchia highlights this as “a complex Jamesian imperative which urges us to seek and to preserve radical difference,” “On the Ideologies of Poetic Modernism,” 248.

77. James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 634.

78. Rorty, *Contingency*, 37-8.

79. Ibid., 39.

80. Ibid., 51.

81. Ibid., 164.

82. James, “The Moral Philosopher,” 626. Pettegrew describes James’s “sympathetic interest” as a “conflation of individual comprehension of truth with knowledge of and through others,” “Lives of Irony,” 118. See also James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 645.

83. James, “On a Certain Blindness,” 642. James makes a plea “to enlarge his sympathetic insight into fellow-lives,” “What Makes a Life Significant,” 655. See also Rorty’s project of expanding our loyalties in “Justice as a Larger Loyalty,” in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. For an account that highlights the importance of Jamesian responsive sensibilities in the context of deliberation, see Smith, “Communication and Conviction.”

84. Rorty, “Recent Metaphilosophy,” 318; Johnstone, *Philosophy and Argument*, 133–4. Johnstone’s is one of two books Rorty reviews in this essay.

85. See Curtis, *Defending Rorty*, chapter 5; and Malachuk, “Loyal to a Dream Country.” If James was more attentive to the psychological side of religious belief, Rorty came to appreciate the social and political benefits. See Rorty, “Religion in the Public Square.”

86. Cormier makes some suggestive remarks along these lines: see *The Truth is What Works*, 25–6, 76, 145, 158. Cf. Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*, 6–7.

87. Throntveit, “William James’s Ethical Republic,” 276.

88. See Koopman, “Language is a Form of Experience;” and Gavin, et al., “Language and its Discontents.”

89. See Campbell, “William James and the Ethics of Fulfillment,” 228.

90. James, “The Moral Philosopher,” 626-7.

# JUSTIFICATION AND CRITIQUE: THE WILL TO BELIEVE AND THE PUBLIC DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

ULF ZACKARIASSON



“The Will to Believe” remains one of the most intriguing and controversial pragmatic contributions to philosophy of religion. Richard Rorty has offered an interesting analysis of its controversial character and suggests that we should see James as arguing for a privatization of religion: the right to adopt a believing attitude is limited to private projects that in no way affect others. I propose another reading that (1) acknowledges that religious (and other existential) commitments do have public dimensions and (2) uses those dimensions as vehicles for critical reflection. To that end, I make a heuristic distinction between two phases of inquiry that I label *justification* and *critique*, and go on to argue that when understood against the background of a pragmatic philosophical anthropology, a Jamesian approach helps clear the ground for a more comprehensive critical reflection on religion and religious traditions. Whereas Rorty sees any acknowledgement of public dimensions of religious belief as a threat to democracy, I believe that we can rather say that such acknowledgements offer resources for those who seek to develop more democratic forms of religion.



*The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and one another.<sup>1</sup>*

~ The Varieties of Religious Experience ~

James is often praised for his refusal to forget that philosophy addresses the concerns of human beings of flesh and blood.<sup>2</sup> What some epistemic automata or disinterested spectators would choose to believe or do in our situation is not particularly important, since *our* lives are not like theirs anyway. One of the papers where this humane tendency is perhaps most visible is “The Will to Believe,” where James argues, against evidentialist critics such as W. K. Clifford, that in religious matters, we are entitled to let our “passional nature” determine what to believe in cases where the evidence is inconclusive, and there is a choice to be made between live options, a choice that is both forced and momentous (that is, the choice cannot be avoided, and it matters greatly how we choose).<sup>3</sup>

James’s suggestion did provoke a number of positive and negative responses. Bertrand Russell complains – with reference to both James and Dewey – that pragmatists seem to lack the necessary humility that philosophers have traditionally inculcated by stressing the independence and importance of truth, something that leads, in turn, to a form of “cosmic impiety” that Russell describes as one of the “greatest dangers of our time.”<sup>4</sup> And John Hick, perhaps the most respected and influential Anglo-Saxon philosopher of religion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and certainly no hard-boiled evidentialist, nevertheless objects to pragmatic justifications of religious beliefs because they seem to offer people a full-blown license for wishful thinking.<sup>5</sup> More sympathetic readers have suggested that James’s position is actually rather close to Clifford’s, and also draw attention to the fact that James himself points out that the choice to let the fear of falsehood override the desire to find truth is itself a choice based on our “passional nature,” and hence not the disinterested position it often presents itself as.<sup>6</sup>

Can, then, the objections be writ off as due to careless readings of “The Will to Believe,” or is there some genuine worry at stake here? Richard Rorty, who certainly never took charges of ‘cosmic impiety,’ or failure to respect the inherent worth of ‘truth’ very seriously, nevertheless acknowledges the worries of James’s critics. He writes: “A minimal Clifford-like view can be summed up in the claim that, although your emotions are your own business, your beliefs are everybody’s business” – as long, that is, as you uphold the standard pragmatic understanding of ‘belief.’<sup>7</sup> Typically, we seem unable to discuss and argue for or against emotional intentional stances such as needs, hopes, and desires, and this is what makes them problematic whenever our choices attain a public dimension. Schematically put: *If* we read James as saying that human needs, hopes, and desires can entitle us to adopt some religious beliefs, *and* we adopt the pragmatic view of beliefs as habits of action and hence also as “premises for practical reasoning,” *then* James may seem to offer a license for people to bring their private convictions into all kinds of public setting.<sup>8</sup> *That*, Rorty seems to claim, is a worry that pragmatists should take seriously.

Rorty sees only one way to come to terms with this worry: to reemphasize the individualist tenor of James’s approach to religion, and then locate religion firmly in a private sphere via two steps. First, he offers a reinterpretation of religious beliefs as ‘fuzzy’ intentional stances unable to serve ordinary functions of belief, such as prediction and control, and, hence, inaccessible to familiar types of checks and tests.<sup>9</sup> Second, and more importantly, he draws a sharp distinction between public/collective projects of cooperation and private projects of perfection, and he proposes that we take James as saying that in our *private* lives, we are just as entitled to adopt a religious outlook as we are to accept or reject a job proposal without offering any intersubjectively acceptable reasons. A thus privatized religious commitment would not dictate “anybody’s moral choices save one’s own.”<sup>10</sup> In the public sphere, though, where we engage in cooperative projects and hence need some rough consensus on what to consider good arguments, legitimate grounds, and so on, other obligations apply, and here, no similar entitlement to let my passional nature rule the ground exists.<sup>11</sup>

Rorty's reading of James is part of his larger programme of promoting an anticlericalist public political culture, but here, it is worth noticing that the question of what role that religion should play in public deliberation is actually logically distinct from the question of whether religion has other public dimensions that make possible and create a need for critical reflection.<sup>12</sup> It is the latter sense of 'public dimension' that will concern me here, so I will not engage in a critical evaluation of anticlericalism. Nor will I question Rorty's reading of James, which, after all, does not aim at faithful representation as much as it is an attempt to describe what James *should* have said.<sup>13</sup>

The purpose of this paper is, instead, to explore an alternative Jamesian response to the worry that Rorty, along with prominent critics of pragmatism, expresses, a response that – contrary to Rorty's proposal – acknowledges the public dimensions of belief, including religious belief, and uses those dimensions as vehicles for critical reflection on religion.<sup>14</sup> To that end, I will draw on a pragmatic philosophical anthropology to accomplish two purposes. To (1) suggest one possible, and in my view fruitful, understanding of "the will to believe-doctrine" (as I henceforth call it) as enabling us to obtain new resources for critical reflection. To that end, I make a heuristic distinction between two responses to problematic situations, *justification* and *critique*, that, I believe, can both be seen as parts of *inquiry* understood as the process through which we intelligently seek to restore equilibrium with the environment. Then, (2) to develop a pragmatic understanding of religion in terms of life orientations that grow out of the practical need to handle and make sense of life's contingencies.

Next, these undertakings are combined to suggest that a Jamesian approach makes possible critical reflection on religion that is broadened in two directions, compared both to much contemporary philosophy of religion and Rorty's privatization-approach. First, it stresses the importance of evidence that we gather as *participants* (rather than the evidence we gather as spectators), and once we adopt a participant perspective, needs, hopes, and desires are not as inaccessible to critical reflection as Rorty (and James's critics) take for granted. Second, it is broadened in the sense that the Jamesian approach opens for

more heterogeneous, non-hierarchical, and ultimately more genuinely democratic religious traditions.<sup>15</sup> By encouraging the addressees of “The Will to Believe” to actually engage in and take responsibility for their religious impulses (combine “courage and responsibility”), a Jamesian approach creates space for a larger and diversified critical discussion of religion, a development that serves the important purpose of democratizing the religious sphere of human life. A Jamesian emphasis on individual experience as the *primus motor* of living religion is, then, not at all incompatible with the idea of a lively critical public reflection on religion; to the contrary, that may well be the kind of environment where individual religious impulses have a chance of developing in directions that are maximally fruitful both for the individuals themselves and for the communities to which they belong.

The goal of this paper is not to save James from Rorty, but there seems to be significant problems with Rorty’s privatization-proposal, and thus a more fruitful approach forward is, I believe, to explore the way a Jamesian stress on individuals, and their responsibilities, is conducive to – not an obstacle to – a lively critical public reflection on religion. This is primarily because the private/public-distinction seems much more porous than Rorty seems to think. Even to acknowledge that religion affects *my* moral choices is to recognize that what I do and think affect others in a number of ways. Moral choices are, after all, never simply my own business (then, they were hardly *moral* in the first place), and even the views that Rorty consider private can harm or benefit lots of people around me, such as views about child-rearing, gender roles, family relations, and much else, that is often related to our religious identities. Even outside the sphere of public deliberation, there are also lots of associations, NGO’s and so on that my personal convictions can lead me to engage in, and that have consequences that extend well beyond the private sphere. Not least feminists have been attentive to the risks of creating (artificial) boundaries between public and private.<sup>16</sup> Another reason for seeking alternatives to the Rortian approach is that currently, we live in an era that sociologists characterize in terms of a global return and deprivatization of religion.<sup>17</sup> To continue to insist that religion should have no public dimensions seems rather fruitless

compared to noting that such dimensions exist and asking what resources for critique they make available.

**“THE WILL TO BELIEVE” IN THE LIGHT OF  
CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY RELIGION**

In order to situate “The Will to Believe,” it is helpful to remember that philosophy of religion in its Western version is heavily influenced by the Enlightenment view of religion as a problematic phenomenon. While philosophers of art or science, to take a couple of examples, rarely question the entire subject-matter of their discipline, or ask whether mankind would be better off without poetry or physics, contemporary philosophers of religion are accustomed to taking such questions concerning religion quite seriously.<sup>18</sup> The philosophical default stance towards religion (both among critics and defenders) has thus been a kind of comprehensive sceptical attitude to religion, the kind of stance that Clifford expresses and James responds to. It is in view of that understanding of the ‘normal’ state of philosophy of religion that James’s suggestion comes to look provocative, as a kind of short-circuiting of the publicly important question of the *rational acceptability* of religious belief.

Allow me to elaborate. Hick’s negative evaluation of the will to believe-doctrine makes sense, I believe, if we view it against the background of the kind of sceptical stance described above, which naturally stresses a detached perspective that leads to a favouring of the kind of evidence for and against religious belief that we can obtain from the perspective of what I, following John Dewey, would call a *spectator* perspective.<sup>19</sup> The ideal of a spectator perspective is that we should, as far as possible, eliminate the influence of our subjective stances. Needs, hopes, and desires are paradigmatically *subjective* contributions, and, as such, problematic as intersubjectively valid reasons for some belief or standpoint, a point that, Rorty thinks, holds even if we reject extreme subjectivism and traditional metaphysically charged correspondence theories of truth.

This is a view of judgements (and needs, hopes, and desires that help us make them) that pragmatists have often contested. Dewey, for instance, in his critical analysis of meta-ethics,

suggests that although emotivists and value-objectivists certainly disagree about the semantic (and thus often the ontological and epistemological) status of moral judgements, they share a view of moral judgements as something we make as spectators, which leads us to think of them as having an immediate character, and as somehow pressing themselves upon us.<sup>20</sup> If we learned instead, Dewey argues, to see moral judgements as outcomes of processes where we, as *participants*, gradually modify initially unreflective judgements in light of a whole series of considerations of how well they can be adopted as guides for conduct, we may be able to see that these judgements can be treated and tested along the same lines as we treat other judgements in other spheres of human life.

Dewey is concerned, here, with the continuity he traces between different forms of *judgement*, but nothing stands in the way of considering needs, hopes, and desires, too, as open to critique, once we take a participant perspective and see the judgements they, if sincerely adopted, give rise to, as guides for conduct. However, adopting them as guides for conduct suggests that we need to lay the comprehensive sceptical attitude to rest to overcome the paralysis of doubt. I take the Jamesian approach to add, we need to do that in a way that keeps the door open for critical reflection. This is where the heuristic distinction between justification and critique comes into play.

### JUSTIFICATION AND CRITIQUE AS PHASES OF INQUIRY

Justification is, I would propose, a response to the kind of comprehensive sceptical attitude towards religion that dominated the intellectual classes of James's (as well as our) time. For those who find religious ways to describe the human existential situation(s) unattractive, religion is little else than a potentially oppressive and dangerous relict from times long gone. Then, there are religious believers who simply cannot conceive of the thought that they might be mistaken. James addresses the people who are attracted to some religious outlook (i.e. an outlook that is *live* for them) but at the same time feel the pull of the Cliffordian proposal that it is always wrong to believe anything on the basis of insufficient evidence.<sup>21</sup>

Justification is hence a kind of inquiry that is relatively *comprehensive* and relatively *detached*; it seeks a perspective where we step outside some human practice and ask whether we should engage in it or not.<sup>22</sup> This, I take it, is the kind of situation for which the will to believe-doctrine is highly relevant as a way of overcoming the inertia that the experience of being torn between different (religious and evidentialist) impulses may cause.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, critique, which at least in logical terms comes *after* justification, has a more *engaged* and *piecemeal* character that requires that we have *temporarily* laid the comprehensive sceptical worries to rest, and that we hence engage as *participants* in some process. This is the kind of evidence that, James claims, may only become available once we act on some beliefs – but it is important to add here that the same holds for counter-evidence, that is, evidence that indicates that something is wrong: that, too, may only become available via certain commitments.<sup>24</sup>

Critique is typically called for in concrete situations where something is not working according to expectations. Our present habits of action and judgement prove insufficient, and we become genuinely insecure about what to expect and how to act. What we know for sure is that we need to make adjustments somewhere among the immense number of habits of action and judgement that we currently draw on in our transactions with the environment. The alternative to drop “the whole cartload of beliefs” cannot be taken seriously outside science (and perhaps not even there); hence the piecemeal character of critique.<sup>25</sup> The difference between justification and critique as different forms of inquiry concerns, hence, primarily, the *scope* of each, and the situations where they are called for.

With the distinction between justification and critique now in place, I wish to say something more about the ways in which they are intimately related. James presents us with several examples where belief that precedes the evidence is not only appropriate, but even essential for a good outcome. One example is that of friendship, where a sceptical attitude is likely to ruin any chances of ever making a friend.<sup>26</sup> Another particularly striking example (not from “The Will to Believe,” but “The

Sentiment of Rationality”), is that of a mountain-climber who has had “the ill-luck to work [herself] into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap.”<sup>27</sup> If the climber doubts that she is capable of making the leap, she will fail to perform her best, and that, in turn, means certain death.

This is typically the kind of situation where justification is called for. But note that there is no reason to think that a choice made in the absence of firm evidential support is the final word on these matters, or the only relevant factor for success. Rather, it is a precondition for making the best possible attempt to handle, *as participants*, some specific human predicament. This point will become particularly important with regard to religion, but I wish to start with a simpler example by returning to the mountain-climber.

Suppose that the climber is stuck on a small shelf, from which her only escape is a “terrible leap” across a chasm, a leap that is humanly possible, but very far from trivial. Now, it is rather easy to agree that here, the climber is rationally entitled to believe that she can make the leap – at least in any humanly interesting understanding of ‘rationally entitled’. There are, however, a thousand other ways in which the climber can improve or fail to improve her prospects, depending on whether she thinks through or neglects to reflect on questions such as: from where should I jump? Is it possible to pick up speed by taking a few steps before I jump? Is there something I can grab hold of on the other side? Slippery spots to avoid? Should I drop some of my gear, or will I need it to get down once I am over on the other side? If so, can I throw it over before I jump? The more experienced the climber is, the better will she be able to articulate and reflect on these questions. Affirmations *à la* the will to believe cannot supply us with answers to such questions; nor are they supposed to.

A similar point holds in the friendship example. Of course, I have to be open and forthcoming to make friends, but such openness, too, has its limits, if I encounter ‘evidence’ that I am being used or cheated. In budding friendships (and romances, too), there are countless other factors that decide whether a friendship will develop or love will grow, and although the risks here are, most of the time, smaller than in the mountain-climber example, it is still essential for our well-being that we are able to

understand and assess those factors. Sometimes, such critique leads us to end a friendship or romantic affair, so, the examples suggest, critique has various repercussions for justification in such a way that a choice made in the justification-phase is never the final word on these matters.

So far, we have, then, convincing examples of cases where the adoption of a believing attitude and hence engagement is a precondition (albeit no guarantee) for a good outcome. Engagement makes available to us evidence that we can only obtain as participants. The worry that Rorty picked up from James's critics does not, though, concern our behaviour as mountain-climbers or 'befrienders.' The mountain-climber has, sure enough, a stock of previous experience to draw upon and the process will culminate in what Karl Popper called a crucial experiment. Assuming that there are spectators and/or that the climber survives, there are things to learn from this "experiment," teachings that are useful in similar future situations. No similar tests or lessons to learn from past events seem to exist in religion.<sup>28</sup> Are there really ways of finding out that we are on the wrong track in these matters?

Certainly, this objection can always be turned around, and we may legitimately ask whether other philosophical approaches fare better in this respect. I am actually not so sure. I have elsewhere discussed William Alston's attempt to show how religious experience, construed as direct experience of God, can supply guidance for how to make responsible choices in religious matters.<sup>29</sup> The problem with his proposal is that since our *criteria for veridicality* of religious experiences are, to a very large extent, determined by orthodox doctrine's view of God (or the supernatural), there is a quite substantial risk that the epistemological role left for religious experience will be to confirm what orthodox doctrine already teaches, and if it does not, then it is dismissed as unveridical, perhaps even diabolical.<sup>30</sup> The parallel between sense perception and religious experience that would ensure us that we could discover the cases where we are on the wrong track in religious matters seems much weaker than Alston assumes.

However, although it is true that we often assess philosophical approaches by comparing their virtues and vices

with those of alternative approaches, I see two reasons for thinking that a Jamesian philosophy of religion cannot rest content with pointing out that there are companions in the guilt. First, it is rarely enough for relatively marginalized positions in some philosophical discipline to point out that it is actually *no worse off* than the dominant approach, because that implies that the mainstream can go on doing business as usual and only needs to tolerate the marginal positions without actually engaging them. Second, given the fact that many people continue to be attracted to various religious outlooks, one pragmatically important task will be to ask whether we, as pragmatic philosophers, can say something enlightening about how it may be possible to both act upon such attraction and, at the same time, develop resources to reflect critically on the choices we have made. Here, I believe that a pragmatic philosophical anthropology can help us develop an account of life orientations and religious belief capable of meeting this demand.

#### **UNDERSTANDING RELIGION: ONE PRAGMATIC PROPOSAL**

There is, of course, no consensus on how to do philosophical anthropology from a pragmatist perspective, but here, I will sketch an approach that I consider fruitful – at least for present purposes. Pragmatists see human interaction with the environment as regulated by an immense number of habits of action, thought, and judgement based on past experience. Habit is not only the “great fly-wheel of society,” as James put it; it is also the great fly-wheel of each individual as well. Sometimes habit-based actions lead, as we all know, to frustrating results, but our response to that is not to abandon our fundamentally habit-guided ways of acting, but rather to improve them with the help of even more extensive sets of habits that enable us to restore equilibrium with the environment.

Not all problematic situations are of the simple type where adjustments of our habits restore equilibrium with the environment. This is particularly true if we consider *the contingencies of life*. People take all kinds of measures to avoid suffering and death, and yet, we know that ultimately, we will all suffer and die. Life is contingent, and so are the things that people feel make their lives worthwhile: happiness, love, virtue,

friendship, intellectual accomplishments, and so on. Contingency is simply a feature of life that cannot be eliminated, regardless of how well we plan ahead and take measures to realize the goals we set up.

Consequently, tools to resolve practical problems that concretely threaten our own and others' wellbeing are sometimes insufficient, and need to be complemented with tools that give expression to what it is like to live with contingency, tools that help us make some sense of the inevitable experiences of loss, suffering, death, and grief – but also of experiences of happiness, love, and recovery.<sup>31</sup>

I believe that it is here that we can understand the appeal of religion (and secular ideologies). Many people find that religious beliefs, narratives, and pictures enable them to give expression to what it is to be human and live with contingency, while many others find adequate expressions for such experiences elsewhere, and a growing number combine elements from many sources. Following Douglas Davies, we can also say that these ways of giving expression to what it is to live a human life is intimately related to activities that spring from what I would like to call *paradigmatic responses* to situations where life's contingencies manifest themselves.<sup>32</sup> The result is no theoretical construct, but rather a set of habits of action and judgement that together make up what I call our *life orientation*.

A life orientation expresses a more or less unified conception of human flourishing, what life, with its possibilities and limitations, would be like at its best (although we overintellectualize matters if we think that it has to be explicitly formulated to have a guiding function). In a perfect world, actions or judgements would have no point; they would neither improve nor worsen current states of affairs. Our world, however, is far from perfect, and it is the glaring discrepancies between what life is like under present conditions and what we think life could be like at its best which triggers reflection and action that (most of the time) seek to bring us closer to an ideal state.

The degree to which our conceptions of human flourishing are influenced by some religious tradition certainly varies even among religious believers, and it is probably also fair to say that

even among many people who do not consider themselves religious, we find significant influences from religious conceptions of human flourishing – and vice versa for religious believers and non-religious conceptions of human flourishing. Talk of influences should, however, be distinguished from the all too common view of religious traditions as perennial and unchanging “messages” that we passively receive, but understand somewhat differently depending on our hermeneutical horizons. Religious traditions did not develop in a vacuum and have always adjusted to changing circumstances and perceptions among both critics and followers through negotiation processes that lack any single centre of gravity or ultimate arbiter. In such negotiations, claims about a perennial core have a simultaneously rhetorical and regulative function: it is a way to situate oneself firmly within the bounds of the acceptable, but it also makes a demand on participants to show how well their views resonate with outcomes of previous negotiations. Since these are, in turn, multifaceted, such demands set certain limits on the outcomes, but they constitute no absolute obstacle to critique and reconstruction.

Of course, the negotiations going on are rather far from comprising any Habermasian ideal discourse: authorities have a dominant role, and large groups, such as women, are often systematically excluded. Still, at least where religious authorities lack the backup of something like the Spanish Inquisition or the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, the negotiation processes are too complex to be controlled by any single authority, and this means that there are many different voices and types of negotiations going on both within religious traditions, between religious believers and non-believers, and between religious believers of different persuasions.

### **THE ROLES OF MORAL CRITIQUE FOR RELIGION**

If we — against the background of the above account of religious pictures, narratives, and symbols as in different ways and to different degrees weaved into the fabric of people’s life orientations — ask where to seek resources for critique of religion, the pragmatic answer comes rather naturally: in *experience* and *agency*, plus, of course, *communication*. This brings us back to the Jamesian point that we, or some of us, may

need to engage in some religious tradition to determine its' worth, *and* that the relevant material for critical reflection may only become available if we assume the role of *participants* (but we should remember that the notion of life orientations makes possible a more pluralistic view of what it is to be a participant: I need to draw on elements of some tradition to count as a participant, but it is not necessary that that I embrace it lock, stock and barrel). Since we only have one life, and justification requires an initial attraction – that is, that something resonates with our needs and values – it is only natural that people will spend that life engaged with the religious and secular traditions they feel closest to. The Jamesian point is that such engagement is not an obstacle to, but a prerequisite for, critique.

The connection I have made between religion and life orientations furthermore suggests that the most relevant material for critical reflection here are the *moral and existential experiences* that we make throughout life. We draw on religious traditions to make sense of life's contingencies, but to appreciate the role such experiences may play, we need to retain the pragmatic participant perspective and the lesson that although we are no passive recorders in experience, we do not determine – by *fiat*, as it were, or through some decision made in the justification-phase of inquiry – the *contents* of experience. That goes, I take it, for the emotional responses we make as well. Reality offers resistance in various ways (that include existential and moral resistance), and to detect and deal with such resistance, we need both justification and critique. Of course, this is hardly something that we can *prove* to a sceptic, but I can see no stronger proof here than that we know from previous experience – both our own and others' – that this is the way experience works.

Hence, we need to acknowledge that even as our life orientations are heavily influenced by, for instance, religious elements, this in no way rules out that we can come to experience some of the elements of the religious tradition that we draw upon as sanctioning and even encouraging oppression or inequality, exploitation, and other things that we cannot help seeing as obstacles to human flourishing. Such experiences call for critique, and such critique, I would argue, inevitably has a public

dimension, as the tradition that I draw on is never merely *mine*, and the interpretations that others, including outsiders, make set certain limits for which kinds of reinterpretations and renegotiations that are currently available. If we cannot make space for our life orientation within those limits, or manage to expand them in some ways, then we may, in the end, abandon the tradition entirely, as several profiled (formerly) Christian feminists have done, to take just one example.<sup>33</sup>

The Jamesian approach that I have sketched here thus seeks to overcome two positions that actually have a lot in common: the Rortian view that seeks to limit the application of the will to believe-doctrine to a private sphere, and an orthodox religious view that sees religion as a *sui generis* phenomenon that cannot be evaluated by human – sinful and/or incomplete – standards. Both these views make, although for different purposes, much of the *inaccessibility* of religious belief, and hence the impossibility of critique in a religious setting. Note the rather stark contrast between such views and the very matter-of-factly take on moral critique of religion we find in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

Nothing is more striking than the secular alteration that goes on in the moral and religious tone of men, as their insight into nature and their social arrangements progressively develop. After an interval of a few generations the mental climate proves unfavourable to notions of the deity which at an earlier age were perfectly satisfactory: the older gods have fallen below the common secular level and can no longer be believed in. To-day a deity who should require bleeding sacrifices to placate him would be too sanguinary to be taken seriously. Even if powerful historical credentials were put forward in his favour, we would not look at them.<sup>34</sup>

And James concludes that “[w]hen we cease to admire or approve what the definition of a deity implies, we end by deeming that deity incredible.”<sup>35</sup> Note that remarks such as these presuppose one particular kind of religion, namely, that which

involves commitment to a morally outstanding deity (whatever other properties that deity may have). James makes this remark, though, not on the basis of religious doctrine, but rather, as in the above quote, on observations about what we may call the ‘grammar’ of religious language and the psychological observation that “The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and one another.”<sup>36</sup>

### **RORTIAN OBJECTIONS**

Before I close, let us look at some possible objections to the Jamesian stress on critique as playing a central role in religion. From a Rortian, anticlericalist, point of view, you may say that all James has done is to show that critique is *possible* even in religion, but that is no guarantee that critique will *in fact* ever become a natural component of religious traditions. What, you may wonder, about the believers who would brand any forms of critique as a sinful tendency to judge God by human standards? From the side of orthodox religion, a parallel complaint may be that James asks of us to let our fallible moral convictions guide our thinking in religious matters, something that might lead us straight into idolatry. Can the Jamesian approach offer satisfactory responses to these challenges?

I think that the answer here depends, to a significant extent, on what you mean by “satisfactory.” I believe that Jamesians should acknowledge, right away, that there are no metaphysical or other underpinnings that *compel* religious believers – or others – to engage in critique. But, I would add, if we adopt such unrealistic standards of when to consider a response satisfactory, there are very few satisfactory responses around. A more realistic goal, in my view, is to seek for responses that those who have already accepted the idea that critique plays an important role in religion would count as compelling reasons for retaining that idea, even in full view of the above objections to it.<sup>37</sup>

If we begin with the Rortian objection, I would argue, *pace* Rorty, that the will to believe-doctrine performs an important function by “lowering the threshold” for what it is to belong to and be part of different religious traditions in such a way that these traditions are opened up for new and often unexpected

critical considerations. As long as religion remains a domain reserved for those who feel no 'pull' from the critical perspectives presented by Clifford, Russell, Rorty and others, it seems likely, to say the least, that the prospects for critique within religious traditions will continue to look gloomy. The will to believe-doctrine broadens the field of participants to include also those who, already from the outset, take critique to be an integral part, indeed a precondition of, any sound religious engagement.

To fully appreciate that point, we need to challenge Rorty's tendency to equate James's stress on the primacy of the individuals' experiences with his own privatization-proposal.<sup>38</sup> What James primarily does here, I would suggest, is to affirm the individual's perspective over against tendencies to reduce individual believers to miniature replicas of the religious tradition they endorse.<sup>39</sup> That important accomplishment need not, though, prevent us from acknowledging that religion has public dimensions that all believers need to take a degree of responsibility for. Given these public dimensions, I would argue whenever the religious tradition we draw on in our life orientation is also drawn on by others in ways that I find detrimental to human flourishing, then this is a problem *even for me*. This is not to say that Muslims or Christians must constantly condemn all the evils committed in the name of these traditions, but it would be strange to hold that those evils have *nothing* to do with me, and to never stop to think what elements of the tradition that help generate these problematic features.

What, then, of the objection coming from the religious side, that emphasis on critique would somehow be idolatrous? Recall that not only critics of religion are concerned about the standing of critique within religious practices. One of the great religious fears is the fear of idolatry, of putting something other than God in God's place. How can a religious believer be confident that she is not worshipping an idol? The pragmatist can point out that it is surely too simple to say that revelation eliminates the risk of idolatry, since we first need to determine what to consider *genuine* revelation, and then, within that revelation, interpret and rank different commands and sayings. At least this holds once the sphere of participants has been widened in the way that the Jamesian approach suggests that it should be widened. The claim

that revelation is self-authenticating hardly bears examination (at least not for claims going beyond what Gary Gutting calls “a bare theism plus ethical platitudes”).<sup>40</sup> Once the need for selection and interpretation is acknowledged, it is very hard to see how you could eliminate moral considerations from these processes, considerations that, as James shows, change as our moral outlooks evolve – and such evolution affects reflections on the texts and sources some of us consider sacred. Of course, there is no need to assume that moral considerations are *all* that matters; it suffices to note *that* they matter.<sup>41</sup>

As already noted, these responses comprise no knock-down argument against those who think that their religious commitment rules out openness to critique. They show that this is certainly not the *only* available religious response to critique, and hence, they serve another important purpose: to help keeping open a space where different understandings and interpretations of religious traditions can meet and develop. This is, as I see it, one of the really important points of the Jamesian approach, and it requires that we combine a stress on the importance of the individual perspective with acknowledgement of the public dimensions of belief – even religious belief.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

I conclude, *pace* Rorty, that the best way to come to terms with the worry that “The Will to Believe” seems to entitle us to let our needs, hopes, and desires influence the public sphere that we share with others, is to acknowledge and use the public dimensions of religious belief as vehicles for critique — critique that thus takes a paradigmatically moral form. The will to believe-doctrine enables more people to engage as participants in religious traditions, in new and unexpected ways, something that generates new forms of critique and ultimately more democratic understandings of religion.

Here, James’s claims that we should both take the individuals’ experiences and perspectives seriously and learn to take responsibility for our religious convictions (if we have any), are both indispensable elements of an alternative to the Rortian privatization-proposal. The first moves the philosophical focus away from evidence we typically generate as spectators and

towards the needs, hopes, and desires that typically play a substantial role for *participants* as we encounter and deal with life's contingencies, and the second reminds us that even such personal convictions have public dimensions that make critique both possible and necessary.

Upsalla University  
[ulf.zackariasson@teol.uu.se](mailto:ulf.zackariasson@teol.uu.se)

## REFERENCES

- Alston, William P. 1991. *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*. Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Barzun, Jacques. 1983. *A Stroll with William James*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Berger, Peter L. 1999. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Bush, Stephen S. 2015. "Religion against Domination: The Politics of William James's Individualism." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 83: 750–79.
- Casanova, José. 1994. *Public Religions in the Modern World*. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.
- Clifford, W. K. 2001. "The Ethics of Belief." In *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, edited by Michael Peterson et al., 2nd ed., 80–85. New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Davies, Douglas. 2011. *Emotion, Identity, and Religion: Hope, Reciprocity, and Otherness*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Dewey, John. 1984. *The Later Works, 1925-1953. Vol. 4, 1929: [The Quest for Certainty]*, edited by Harriet Furst Simon. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press.
- . 1988. *The Later Works, 1925-1953. Vol. 13, 1938-1939*, edited by Barbara Levine. Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Flanagan, Owen. 1997. "Consciousness as a Pragmatist Views It." In *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, by

- Ruth Anna Putnam, 25–48. Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1998. "Solidarity or Singularity? Richard Rorty Between Romanticism and Technocracy." *Praxis International* 8: 257–71.
- Gutting, Gary. 1982. *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*. Notre Dame, Ind.: Univ. of Notre Dame Press.
- . 1999. *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.
- Hampson, Daphne. 1996. *After Christianity*. London: SCM Press.
- Herrmann, Eberhard. 2004. *Religion, Reality, and a Good Life : A Philosophical Approach to Religion*. Religion in Philosophy and Theology 11. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck.
- Hick, John. 1977. "Eschatological Verification Reconsidered." *Religious Studies* 13: 189–202.
- . 1990. *Philosophy of Religion*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Hollinger, David A. 1997. "James, Clifford and the Scientific Conscience." In *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, edited by Ruth Anna Putnam, 69–83. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- James, William. 1956. *The Will to Believe, Human Immortality*. New York: Dover Publications.
- . 1985. *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. New edition. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Nozick, Robert. 1981. *Philosophical Explanations*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P.
- Peirce, Charles S. 1931. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, edited by Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press.
- Pihlström, Sami. 2013. *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*. New York: Fordham University Press.
- Rorty, Richard. 1989. *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1997. "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance." In *The Cambridge Companion to William James*, edited by Ruth Anna Putnam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- . 1999. "Religion as Conversation-Stopper." In *Philosophy and Social Hope*, by Richard Rorty, 168–74. London: Penguin Books.
- . 2005. "Anticlericalism and Atheism." In *The Future of Religion*, edited by Santiago Zabala. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2007. *Philosophical Papers. Vol. 4, Philosophy as Cultural Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rosenbaum, Stuart. 2009. "Must Religion Be a Conversation-Stopper?" *Harvard Theological Review* 102: 393–409.
- Russell, Bertrand. 2004. *History of Western Philosophy*. Routledge.
- Slater, Michael R. 2009. *William James on Ethics and Faith*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, Charles. 2002. *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Zackariasson, Ulf. 2006. "A Problem with Alston's Indirect Analogy-Argument from Religious Experience." *Religious Studies* 42: 329–41.
- . 2010. "Pragmatism and Moral Critique of Religion." *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 31: 3–13.
- . 2015. "What Is It to Be Religiously Mistaken? A Pragmatist Perspective." *The Pluralist* 10: 292–312.

## NOTES

1. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 264
2. For instance, Barzun, *A Stroll with William James*; Flanagan, "Consciousness as a Pragmatist Views It"; Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God*.
3. James, *The Will to Believe*, 1–11. I will speak of "needs, hopes and desires" as intentional stances that typically comprise our passional nature.
4. Russell, *History of Western Philosophy*, 737.
5. Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*.
6. Hollinger, "James, Clifford and the Scientific Conscience"; Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, 51; James *The Will to Believe*, 28f.

7. Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance", 88.
8. Ibid. 92.
9. Ibid. 84.
10. Ibid. 86.
11. Rorty, "Anticlericalism and Atheism"; "Religion as Conversation-Stopper."
12. Rorty "Contingency, Irony and Solidarity"; *Philosophy as Cultural Politics*.
13. Rorty, "Religious Faith, Intellectual Responsibility, and Romance", 91f.
14. To call this route James-inspired or Jamesian is to say that it resonates with certain important themes in James' writings, but that I avoid making claims about whether this route was James' own. For a very good recent account on James' view of ethics and faith, see Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith*.
15. Bush, "Religion Against Domination."
16. For instance, Fraser, "Solidarity or Singularity?"
17. Berger, *The Desecularization of the World*; Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*.
18. Gutting, *Religious Belief and Religious Skepticism*, 5.
19. The *locus classicus* here is, of course, Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty*, but similar critiques of non-pragmatist philosophy occur in several pragmatists' writings, I would claim.
20. Dewey, *The Later Works* vol 13. The difference being, then, that emotivists construe moral judgements as reports about feelings and value objectivists as reports of perceptive states. They share, though, a character of *immediacy*; of presenting themselves to us in this-and-that fashion. The subject remains passive throughout the process.
21. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"; James, *The Will to Believe*, x, 26.
22. I have a very pragmatic understanding of 'practice' here: for me, human practices are distinguishable spheres of activity and thought we have developed for certain purposes, although we may only be capable of formulating what those purposes were in retrospect, once certain practices and ways of understanding human life are in place.

23. It deserves mention, here, that to stand ‘outside’ is not to take some completely disinterested and neutral perspective: we can only set out from where we stand, and this means that even though it is possible to question more or less anything (should the need arise), such questioning presupposes some stable background which we do *not* doubt – at least not *presently*.

24. James, *The Will to Believe*, 27, cf. 29 footnote 1.

25. Peirce, *Collected Papers Volume V*, § 55.

26. James, *The Will to Believe*, 23.

27. *Ibid.* 96.

28. John Hick suggests that there is a crucial experiment in religion, namely, what happens after we are dead. Such “eschatological verification” is, though, very different from the kind of lessons we can learn from the mountain-climber’s leap. See Hick, “Eschatological Verification Reconsidered”.

29. Alston, *Perceiving God*.

30. Zackariasson, “A Problem with Alston’s Indirect Analogy Argument”, “Pragmatism and Moral Critique of Religion”.

31. Here, I am inspired by Eberhard Herrmann, *Religion, Reality and a Good Life* and Stuart Rosenbaum, “Must Religion Be a Conversation-Stopper?”. Note that to *make sense* of something is different from saying, e.g., that it is unimportant by explaining it away. To take an example: if someone claims that death is insignificant, because life goes on indefinitely somewhere else (in heaven, for instance), this does not make much sense of our concrete experiences of death (or life, for that part). Talk about a need to make sense should thus be distinguished from e.g. a crude need for some guarantee that my life will go on indefinitely. Most religions actually claim that needs of the latter sort are, though understandable, deeply *unreligious*.

32. Davies, *Emotion, Identity, and Religion*.

33. Hampson, *After Christianity*.

34. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 264.

35. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*

37. Cf. Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, 97.

38. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 31; Bush “Religion against Domination.”

39. James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 334f.
40. Gutting, *Pragmatic Liberalism and the Critique of Modernity*, 171.
41. Zackariasson, "What Is It to Be Religiously Mistaken?"

# “A NEW SPHERE OF POWER”: RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND THE LANGUAGE OF DYNAMIC GIFTS IN WILLIAM JAMES

*TAE SUNG*



This article examines what I will call the language of dynamic gifts in the writings of William James as another way to open up an interdisciplinary conversation among scholars of pragmatism, religion, and rhetoric. My argument is that dynamic gifts are closely associated with what James calls the “dynamogenic qualities” of religious experiences, and they open up sources of agency, inspiration, and empowerment that exceed our rational control. Though not generated by us, our ability to have such experiences is nevertheless mediated by modes of language that condition the appearance and direction of dynamic gifts. In addition to highlighting a deep connection between the religious and the rhetorical, this pragmatist notion of dynamic gifts also shifts the theoretical framework of gift-exchange from an economic cycle of debt and obligation to an intersubjective transaction of inspiration and empowerment.



*After all, what accounts do the nethermost bounds of the universe owe to me? By what insatiate conceit and lust of intellectual despotism do I arrogate the right to know their secrets, and from my philosophic throne to play the only airs they shall march to, as if I were the Lord's anointed? Is not my knowing them at all a gift and not a right? And shall it be given before they are given? Data! gifts! something to be to be thankful for! It is a gift that we can approach things at all, and, by means of the time and space of which our minds and they partake, alter our actions so as to meet them.<sup>1</sup>*

~ On Some Hegelisms ~

While working on a larger project on the language of gifts in nineteenth-century American literature, philosophy, and religion, I became fascinated with passages like the one above from William James. First published in 1882 and reprinted in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, “On Some Hegelisms” was meant to be a polemical jab at the kind of monistic idealism that was taking philosophical root in the US. In the preface to the later volume, James expresses some regret “for the superficiality with which [the essay] treats a serious subject,” but he decided to include it anyways, he says, “partly because I believed the dialectical method to be wholly abominable when worked by concepts alone, and partly because the essay casts some positive light on the pluralist-empiricist point of view.”<sup>2</sup> Gifts, as he uses the term here, point to both the contingent limitations of our knowledge of the universe and the secrets that still exceed our grasp. As I began to pay attention to the interesting ways that James employed this particular trope in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *Pragmatism*, I was able to see the possibility of scholars of pragmatism, religion, and rhetoric converging around a rich interdisciplinary discourse about gifts.

Alan Schrift has described the gift as “one of the primary focal points at which contemporary disciplinary and interdisciplinary discourses intersect.”<sup>3</sup> This is the case according to Hildegard Hoeller because “Gift theory from its inception has recognized that it must grapple with this double nature of the gift—its real

manifestations as a cultural and economic practice that governs human relations and communities and its powerful existence as a site of hope, faith, even fantasy.”<sup>4</sup> Given the wide range of recent discourses about gifts, it should not surprise us that studying James’s language of gifts can also be a useful bridge across the many disciplinary boundaries he himself crossed. But to say there is a language of gifts operative in James’s writings ought to mean something more than claiming he used the word often or even in interesting figurative ways.

So I’d like to propose the following thesis which will require some interdisciplinary juggling and a close reading of the text: *examining James’s language of gifts can help reveal the rhetorical and hermeneutical dimensions of pragmatism as a method to track the religious experience of dynamic gifts*. In order to make such an argument, this article will aim at three broad yet interrelated conclusions: (1) the religious experience of what I will call *dynamic gifts* opens up sources of agency, inspiration, and empowerment that exceed our rational control; (2) though not generated by us, their appearance is nevertheless mediated rhetorically and hermeneutically — that is to say, the reception of dynamic gifts is always bound up with modes of language, without which gifts cannot be distinguished from other objects; and (3) a pragmatist conception of dynamic gifts imagines a way to avoid the economic cycles of debt and obligation often associated with gift-exchange in order to open up an intersubjective space for inspiration, creativity, and empowerment. Before I turn to a close reading of the texts, let me briefly explain some of the broader contexts motivating these conclusions.

One of my objectives in emphasizing the language of gifts and what James calls their “dynamogenic” qualities is to build on the work of pragmatist scholars who often work independently from each other. On the one hand, literary and rhetorical pragmatists such as Richard Poirier and Steven Mailloux have emphasized the linguistic implications of Jamesian pragmatism but have largely bracketed out the central role of religion. On the other hand, religious pragmatists such as Wayne Proudfoot and David Lamberth

have done much to bring religion back to the forefront of James studies, but the rhetorical and hermeneutic implications of James's religious writings remain underdeveloped.<sup>5</sup>

This article suggests that focusing on a pragmatist concept of dynamic gifts can help us think again about the deep connection between the religious and the rhetorical. Doing so can also provide important correctives to readings by prominent figures such as Richard Rorty and Charles Taylor who reduce what James calls experience to merely a private and subjective matter.<sup>6</sup> Contrary to such readings, Paul Stob has argued that James believed we ought to throw our interpretations of the world, including religious ones, into a "marketplace of ideas, wherein something like the art of rhetoric — though James never labeled it as such — is required to work through our differences."<sup>7</sup> The religious experience of dynamic gifts may begin in the private and subjective, but when such experiences enter a marketplace of ideas, which is the only way to test their validity, we can see more clearly not only the rhetorical significance of James's pragmatism, but also a crucial distinction between different modes of rhetoric that either open or close more creative energy and dynamic exchange.

Marilee Mifsud's article "Rhetoric as Gift/Giving" may be helpful here in making this distinction between what she calls *rhetoric as a technological process* and *rhetoric as creative communication*. Technological rhetoric operates "in an ethic of abstraction, approaching its situation with a fundamental distance between self and other. In this distance, the other's assent becomes regarded as a commodity to secure, and rhetorical techne the tools for the task."<sup>8</sup> With creative rhetoric, however, "we can imagine it not so much a tool but a gift. We can suppose rhetoric as a gift to be creative, intimate, memorable, luxurious, and liberal. Creativity is the antinomy of technical procedure."<sup>9</sup> This notion of rhetoric as gift becomes a fundamental openness to and cooperation with the other. It is less agonistic and more hospitable.

But Mifsud acknowledges that gifts too can become burdensome in economic cycles of obligation and indebtedness, so she suggests shifting the theoretical framework of the gift away from economic

exchange to release more of the gift's creative possibilities. To do so, we must have an answer to the following questions: "Can the gift be aneconomic? Can we imagine giving, not figured through cycles of obligatory return, i.e., not savings, but squander; not return, but release?"<sup>10</sup> While Mifsud looks to "the demand in writing for excess" that can be found in the works of Jacques Derrida and Helene Cixous, I will look to James to offer an alternative way to think about a rhetoric of gifts in terms not of indebtedness but of empowerment. For James, the gift opens up a dynamic intersubjective transaction or horizon that makes it difficult to locate and calculate who is giving to whom. Yet though not generated by reason, the dynamic power of gifts is nevertheless mediated by modes of rhetoric that condition the gift's reception and effects. And nowhere does James see this rhetoric of dynamic gifts more clearly than in an openness to and cooperation with a religious power that comes to us like a gift from sources beyond ourselves and impossible to determine fully in advance.

Before returning to this question of rhetoric as an aneconomic gift in the conclusion, I need to begin by showing how the pragmatist preoccupation with dynamic power is related to the reception of religious gifts. To account for such experiences, James develops a theory of consciousness that reveals just how fundamental language is in closing or disclosing the dynamic gifts of experience. And by analyzing how language functions in this way, I will argue not only that pragmatism, at least for James, is in an important sense always a *religious* pragmatism, but also that this religious pragmatism has deep rhetorical and hermeneutic implications. Indeed, it gives us another way to think about certain modes of rhetoric as a gift that opens us to dynamic sources of power beyond our rational control.

### RELIGION, POWER, AND DYNAMIC GIFTS

*Religious feeling is thus an absolute addition to the Subject's range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power.*<sup>11</sup>

~ The Varieties of Religious Experience ~

That power is one of James's key terms is unsurprising. It is a term not only relevant to pragmatism's emphasis on effects, but also inextricably tied to what he calls a science of religion. In *Pragmatism*, James defines his philosophy as a method and theory of truth that among other things help to overcome inaction resulting from metaphysical disputes — most notably between religion and science. As a theory of truth, pragmatism rejects a correspondence view for an instrumental one. Truths are formed rather than found. When older truths are modified to incorporate newer ones, the process should be described as not revolutionary, but evolutionary in that the new is grafted onto the old. As a method, pragmatism turns away from “a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers,” namely, the search after an “unlawful magic” of words that rely on “fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins.” Instead, it “turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action,” all of which ultimately reflect pragmatism's turn “towards power.”<sup>12</sup>

While such a theory and method can have wide implications, James more narrowly suggests both in his first lecture and near the end of the second one, that the central aim of pragmatism is to widen “the field of search for God.”<sup>13</sup> What is important to emphasize here is that James does not separate the pragmatic turn towards power from the widening search for religious sources. Rather, pragmatism mediates the reception of power from a wider religious field. It opens up, what he calls in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the “*that by which we live*” that both dogmatic rationalism and materialistic empiricism cut off.<sup>14</sup> This aspect of James's pragmatism, then, becomes more than a method and theory of truth; it offers its own religious beliefs about human agency and history. Thus, what I am suggesting is not simply the application of pragmatism to the topic of religion, but more strongly James's attempt to synthesize religion and pragmatism. In other words, pragmatism for James is in an important sense a religious pragmatism. Before looking at the final chapter of *Pragmatism* where this synthesis takes place, it is necessary first to focus on

*Varieties* to examine more carefully this relationship between pragmatic power and religious experience.

For James there is no contradiction in his concern for both pragmatic power and religious sources. Rather he builds into his definition of religion the very notion of power. In the chapter "Circumscription of the Topic," James begins his definition as, "Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*"<sup>15</sup> However, after some considerations on what might be considered divine, James modifies this first definition several times in what I would describe as a demonstration of pragmatism's evolutionary theory of truth. Religion is next defined as a "total reaction upon life," a reaction he then specifies as solemn and grave, instead of the "vain chatter" of Voltaire and Renan or the "sick shrieking" of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.<sup>16</sup> Then after a further distinction between religion and what he calls the "athletic attitude" of moralism, James finally settles on the key definition of religious feeling as "an absolute addition to the subject's range of life. *It gives him a new sphere of power.* When the outward battle is lost, and the outer world disowns him, it redeems and vivifies an interior world which otherwise would be an empty waste."<sup>17</sup> Power here means personal empowerment. As Wayne Proudfoot notes about this definition of religious power, "The strenuous life, the willingness to take risks and to persevere in the face of opposition, is to be found, James says, in religion if it is to be found anywhere."<sup>18</sup> And in my reading of *Varieties*, all the subsequent lectures on the divided-self, conversion, saintliness, and mysticism are studies on various manifestations of religion as a source of power.<sup>19</sup>

What makes this understanding of power particularly religious is the way James ties it with a theological notion of the gift. In the sentences immediately preceding his key definition of religion, James writes,

Like love, like wrath, like hope, ambition, jealousy, like every other instinctive eagerness and impulse, it [religion] adds to life an enchantment which is not rationally or logically deducible from anything else. This enchantment, coming as a gift when it does come — a gift of our organism, the physiologists will tell us, a gift of God's grace, the theologians say — is either there or not there for us, and there are persons who can no more become possessed by it than they can fall in love with a given woman by mere word of command.<sup>20</sup>

There are two important points from this passage I will examine in more detail later and only highlight briefly now. The first is rhetorical and the second, psychological, or more accurately, phenomenological. James first claims that enchantment or religious power is not something that can be “rationally or logically deducible,” nor will it appear “by mere word of command.” One can only receive this kind of empowering enchantment like the reception of what I have been calling a dynamic gift (e.g., a gift that empowers). Although this might suggest that gifts are independent of rhetoric, we will see more precisely how for James language always mediates, even if it never generates, the reception of dynamic gifts.

The second point about the phenomenal appearance of these gifts is interesting because James equivocates about whether the source of dynamic gifts is in human physiology or in the divine. This ambiguity is, I argue, intentional. Whether the source is supernatural or not, James nevertheless considers dynamic gifts to be religious. In other words, religion to the pragmatist is not deciding conclusively about its source. Rather, it is an openness to the reception and effects of dynamic gifts, whose sources may be physiological or divine, but nevertheless remain for James religious because they are not generated by rational control. The larger implication of this is that every experience, if it results in a dynamic

surge of power, can be called religious whether or not it is determined by a supernatural being.

In order to explain this, James develops a psychological theory that has deep rhetorical and hermeneutic implications to account for the appearance and effects of such phenomena. His argument is that in the end we can know them only by effects that persuade us of their existence. It is, after all, a pragmatist definition of religion as the feelings, acts, and experiences of a new gift of power. If power means personal empowerment, then James, by using the gift as a metaphor for its coming, suggests that the will to power is not self-generated, even if, as we will see, its reception is conditioned by language. Gifts may not appear by mere word of command, but they also cannot appear without a rhetorical structure (e.g. ideas, beliefs, metaphors) that anticipates their appearance. Because pragmatism emphasizes the effects of power so much, it is often easy to miss the fundamental giftedness of power.

In works both before and after *Varieties*, James uses this term gift to describe phenomena that we do not master and control. An early example is James's use of this trope in an 1884 address to Harvard Divinity students called "The Dilemma of Determinism." In this essay, gift means the opposite of philosophical determinism. However much conditioned, the universe is nevertheless contingent and open. Hence, gift is another word for freedom or chance:

Let us not fear to shout it from the house-tops if need be; for we now know that the idea of chance is, at bottom, exactly the same thing as the idea of gift — the one simply being a disparaging, and the other a eulogistic, name for anything on which we have no effective *claim*. And whether the world be the better or the worse for having either chances or gifts in it will depend altogether on *what* these uncertain and unclaimable things turn out to be.<sup>21</sup>

Notice again that in order to determine whether gifts make the world better or worse, we do not seek to know whether their origins

are divine or diabolical. Rather, we can only know what *kind* of gifts they are by how they turn out to be. All that we know about their origins is that we have no effective claim on them. That is, none of our theories or theologies correspond completely to the world: “no part of the world, however big, can claim to control absolutely the destinies of the whole.” This emphasis on parts is a central theme from his earliest work on psychology to his last publication of “A Pluralistic Mystic.” And nowhere does James critique the metonymical reduction more strongly than his theory of truth in *Pragmatism*: “It would be an obvious absurdity if such ways of taking the universe [e.g. Platonic, Lockean, Hegelian, etc.] were actually true.”<sup>22</sup> The world, despite our theories, “stands there indefeasibly: a gift which can’t be taken back.”<sup>23</sup> The gift here points to the unclaimable givenness of our existential being in the world. Truth may be instrumentally formed, says James, but it is always formed in negotiation with the world or the unclaimable gifts already given. Thus, pragmatic truths are never arbitrary even if they are revisable.

This philosophical notion of the world as a gift is for James an extension of one of his principles of psychology, namely, that the conscious, rational self plays only a part, along with the subconscious, in conditioning one’s total being. To some people are given unclaimable gifts from the subconscious that can shift their consciousness and open up possibilities otherwise not there. In *Varieties*, conversion is what James calls the shift from a divided to a unified consciousness:

To be converted, to be regenerated, to receive grace, to experience religion, to gain an assurance, are so many phrases which denote the process, gradual or sudden, by which a self hitherto divided, and consciously wrong inferior and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right superior and happy, in consequence of its firmer hold upon religious realities. This at least is what conversion signifies in general terms, whether or not we believe that a direct

divine operation is needed to bring such a moral change about.<sup>24</sup>

In addition to equivocating again about its sources, this pragmatic definition of conversion moves the emphasis from intellectual or institutional assent to the experience of religion, which is synonymous with the reception of the gift of grace. Thus, the lectures on conversion lay out in a sense a theory of the reception of dynamic gifts.

If consciousness can shift with conversion, it proves consciousness is nothing more than the forming and reforming of associations or habits. When certain mental associations are sustained, these habits constitute what we call character. Aspects of character that feel fixed are only long held habits of association. Within our broader habits of association or character, there are certain “centres of our dynamic energy” that render other associations out to the margins.<sup>25</sup> When certain ideas move to the center, others do not simply disappear. Instead, peripheral ideas are organized along, we might say, a horizon that is nevertheless tinged by the center.

However, the direction of influence moves both ways. Even when, for example, religious ideas remain peripheral, they are not necessarily ineffective. Our general field or horizon of consciousness includes not only the habitual centers of our energy, but also margins, which like a “magnetic field” help “both to guide our behavior and to determine the next movement of our attention.”<sup>26</sup> While the margin itself is not fully determinable, James points to studies suggesting that aside from the usual center and margin, there might be “an addition thereto in the shape of a set of memories, thoughts, and feelings which are *extra-marginal and outside the primary consciousness altogether*, but yet must be classed as conscious facts of some sort, able to reveal their presence by unmistakable signs.”<sup>27</sup> This extra-marginal field is also called the subliminal or the subconscious. The subliminal memories, thoughts, and feelings here do not refer to preexisting ideas in some Platonic world of forms, but for the most part to things accumulated through

sensory experience. Most of what we experience slips from “primary consciousness” (both center and margin) into the subconscious (extra-marginal field). And if experiences can slip into the subconscious, they of course can return. If they do, they do so in often abrupt and spontaneous ways in the form of “uprushes,” “bursts of energy,” and “power,” which he says are akin to theological experiences of redemption, salvation, or peace. Underlying all these terms is, as he calls them, a “dynamogenic quality (to use the slang of the psychologists), that enables them to burst their shell, and make irruption efficaciously into life.”<sup>28</sup> When these dynamogenic irruptions take place, they often shift or convert one’s horizon of consciousness.

According to this model, James hypothesizes that the source of religious power might be in the subconscious. Some have an active and “large subliminal region,” from which incursions more frequently take place.<sup>29</sup> But even if others have a less active subliminal region—that is, “if his conscious fields have a hard rind of a margin that resists incursions from beyond it”—this only means that “his conversion must be gradual if it occur, and must resemble any simple growth into new habits.”<sup>30</sup> This psychological difference between sudden and gradual conversions might be what separates in James’s view a religious experience from an athletic moralism. If so, it highlights again a definition of religion as the incursion, experience, or reception of power.

With this theory of the subconscious, James makes room for the possibility of religious experience without determining the origins of these religious incursions. Tracing the scientific experiments James relied on to develop his understanding of the subliminal, Ann Taves has argued, “James left open the question of where the subconscious ended, whether in the personal self or beyond it, and thus placed *ultimate* questions about origins outside the purview of the science of religions.”<sup>31</sup> But for James this isn’t to say that scientists could not examine the *possibility* of subliminal incursions from non-sensory supernatural sources. Instead, James always positions himself carefully as a psychologist to reflect the pragmatist method that in his view ought to maintain the subjunctive ambiguity

between possibility and doubt. Earlier in his first lecture on “Religion and Neurology,” James already set this up by revising one psychological conclusion that religious experiences are nothing but symptoms of neurosis. Instead, he writes, “If there were such a thing as inspiration from a higher realm, it might well be that the neurotic temperament would furnish *the chief condition* of the requisite receptivity.”<sup>32</sup> James is not saying there exists a higher realm or supernatural agent. Rather, he is applying the pragmatic method of revising absolute conclusions into tentative conditions. Thus, James’s concern is not to determine religious or supernatural sources at all even if he himself admits to believing in them. And when he does make this leap of faith, his only justification is the pragmatist method of judging any phenomena by its “fruits” even when its “roots” are inaccessible.

However, a significant part of James’s argument, one that gets us closer to the rhetorical implications of dynamic gifts, is that for there even to be the possibility of judging religion properly by its fruits, it is necessary to examine critically *a priori* conclusions against supernatural religious sources. The psychological hoops he jumps through to open up even the conditional possibility of religious sources in an extra-marginal field are meant to undermine dogmatic conclusions, scientific or theological, that preemptively close off incursions that can shift or expand our horizons of consciousness. In other words, to be already persuaded there are no religious sources is to harden “the rind of the margin that resists incursions from beyond.”<sup>33</sup>

This is basically what James argues in “The Will to Believe,” the arguments of which influence all his subsequent work on religion and philosophy. This foundational essay can be summed up as a justification of faith or the belief that some things are justified only by faith when there is insufficient evidence to act otherwise. There are times when we should act based on a non-logical faith even in the absence of convincing intellectual grounds because some facts can come about only as a result of an act of faith. One such fact, like love or justice, is the reception of dynamic gifts.

In the conclusion to *Varieties*, James refers back to this earlier essay to make this point about dynamic gifts:

Although the religious question is primarily a question of life, of living or not living in the higher union which opens itself to us as a gift, yet the spiritual excitement in which the gift appears a real one will often fail to be aroused in an individual until certain particular intellectual beliefs or ideas which, as we say, come home to him, are touched. These ideas will thus be essential to that individual's religion; — which is as much as to say that over-beliefs in various directions are absolutely indispensable, and that we should treat them with tenderness and tolerance so long as they are not intolerant themselves. As I have elsewhere written, the most interesting and valuable things about a man are usually his over-beliefs.<sup>34</sup>

This notion that ideas or beliefs condition the appearance of all phenomena including the gift is what I meant earlier by anticipation. Beliefs do not generate the gift; but they provide a kind of subliminal suggestion that conditions its receptivity. A better way perhaps to describe this is to say beliefs provide a hermeneutic center or horizon from which the religious experience of gifts can at least become a possibility. In the passage above, we see how James's philosophy and psychology of gifts are both grounded on a hermeneutic theory. Beliefs can serve as hermeneutic frameworks to interpret, for example, some events as mere chance or acts of providence. Furthermore, beliefs condition not only the appearance, but also more importantly "the various directions" of gifts. Gifts, which are always mediated by language, can have different kinds of rhetorical effects depending on our interpretive frameworks. Beliefs say in greed or generosity, or in Buddhism or Marxism, condition dynamic gifts to empower us in different ways. Thus, while religious experience is *phenomenologically* prior to belief and theory, beliefs

play an important *rhetorical* and *hermeneutical* function by conditioning the possibility and direction of dynamic gifts. Between the phenomenological appearance of gifts and their rhetorical effects are hermeneutic frameworks open to sources beyond the self.

Central to James's argument at this point are two modes of language that relate to experience differently, much like the distinction Mifsud makes between gift rhetoric and technological rhetoric. The former remains open to experience, in that "these intellectual operations presuppose immediate experiences as their subject-matter. They are interpretative and inductive operations, operations after the fact, consequent upon religious feeling, not coordinate with it, not independent of what it ascertains."<sup>35</sup> This mode of language, though contingent, is grounded upon religious feeling. It differs from logical abstractions by acknowledging its "formulas are but approximations," and though interpretation of feeling into words is necessary, it understands that "truth and fact well up into our lives in ways that exceed verbal formulation."<sup>36</sup> Abstract concepts, mathematical proofs, and logical necessities, if they are detached from the truth and fact of experience, are powerless modes of language, rhetorically so, unable to make much pragmatic difference. The example he gives is metaphysical arguments about the existence of God, which fail to persuade anyone: "If you have a God already whom you believe in, these arguments confirm you. If you are atheistic, they fail to set you right."<sup>37</sup>

In contrast to theological formulations detached from experience, James suggests that a more contingent and hermeneutic mode of religious language is prayer, which he broadly defines as "every kind of inward communion or conversation with the power recognized as divine."<sup>38</sup> As "the very soul and essence of religion,"

Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion.  
It is prayer that distinguishes the religious  
phenomenon from such similar or neighboring  
phenomena as purely moral or aesthetic sentiment.  
Religion is nothing if it be not the vital act by which

the entire mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the principle from which it draws its life [...] One sees from this why ‘natural religion,’ so-called, is not properly a religion. It cuts man off from prayer. It leaves him and God in mutual remoteness, with no intimate commerce, no interior dialogue, no interchange, no action of God in man, no return of man to God. At bottom this pretended religion is only a philosophy.<sup>39</sup>

What natural religion essentially lacks is an intersubjective dialogue and commerce, or what he calls on the same page, “a sense that *something is transacting*.” In the concluding lecture, where James outlines the fundamental characteristics of religion, this something is clarified as “spiritual energy [that] flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world” by giving “a new zest which adds itself *like a gift to life*.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, in prayer there is an intersubjective transaction of dynamic gifts that results in pragmatic effects and can be phenomenologically traceable to experience. And this transaction is conditioned both hermeneutically in terms of an interpretive openness to dynamic gifts and rhetorically in terms of the way these gifts are directed.

Again, it must be emphasized that despite the God-talk in the passage above, James is not deciding on whether the divine exists or not, though it is clear where he stands if he had to offer his own over-beliefs or what he admits seems more like a “sorry under-belief.”<sup>41</sup> What this emphasis on prayer signifies for him is the attempt to open up more broadly a dynamic transaction between experience and language, between sensory feelings, intellectual beliefs, and ultimately social action. Like the phenomenon of reading fiction or poetry, what the phenomenon of prayer demonstrates for us is an experience that emerges out of an intersubjective transaction mediated by language.

Thus, a pragmatist who prays, so to speak, is one whose mode of language is open to an experience of the other and to the dynamic

sources of power beyond the self. What matters for James is that certain modes of language either close or disclose an experience of the kind of power that makes action possible. What kind of action we will see in just a moment. But interpretations of religious experience or transactions in prayer should result in real, historical and material changes. Without such evidence, James thinks it is a waste of time to discuss religion or anything else, since from a pragmatist's perspective the only way to judge the existence of any source is to trace the effects of its dynamic gifts. Therefore, when James says that pragmatism widens the field of search for God, we can now better understand that whether divine sources really exist or not, a question whose answer can never be dogmatically certain for the pragmatist, their gifts can make a difference. In this way, pragmatic action results from a dynamic transaction of gifts mediated by language.

If we read *Pragmatism* and *Varieties* closely together as the last paragraph suggests we do, it is possible then to understand James's pragmatism as doing something more than simply mediating metaphysical disputes as he claims in the chapter "What Pragmatism Means." *Pragmatism* begins by being open to opposing philosophical temperaments or habits of thinking, but by the end of his last lecture on "Pragmatism and Religion," his philosophy in fact develops into its own "religious synthesis":

But if you are neither tough nor tender in an extreme and radical sense, but mixed as most of us are, it may seem to you that *the type of pluralistic and moralistic religion that I have offered is as good a religious synthesis as you are likely to find*. Between the two extremes of crude naturalism on the one hand and transcendental absolutism on the other, you may find that what I take the liberty of calling *the pragmatistic or melioristic type of theism* is exactly what you require.<sup>42</sup>

Here James's pragmatism is more than a method and theory. It is a religious synthesis that puts forward a kind of pragmatic theism with substantive claims about the sources of human agency and history. James does not stop simply at the classic Peircean definition of pragmatism that beliefs are rules for action. What James fills in at this point is a particular belief that there are forces or powers, seemingly divine (or, it should always be added, potentially diabolic), that enable individuals to act in heroic ways to bring about historical changes. The kind of action James is ultimately interested in is the attempt to realize our highest ideals about the world and history. He calls these ideals our beliefs about the world's salvation, which also implies the means of grace or dynamic gifts necessary to achieve them. The pragmatist is neither pessimistic nor optimistic, both of which he understands as deterministic views of the future. Instead, James holds to a melioristic view, which "treats salvation as neither inevitable nor impossible. It treats it as a possibility, which becomes more and more a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become."<sup>43</sup> If what James calls salvation becomes more probable, it will be the result of a mixture of complementary conditions and forces, which include for him an individual's ideals, the cooperation of others, and the reception of dynamic gifts: "What now actually *are* the other forces which he trusts to co-operate with him, in a universe of such a [pluralistic] type? They are at least his fellow men, in the stage of being which our actual universe has reached. But are there not superhuman forces also, such as religious men of the pluralistic type we have been considering have always believed in?"<sup>44</sup> His answer is yes, only if we understand these forces or powers, whose sources might be untraceable yet known by their pragmatic effects, as "one helper, *primus inter pares*, in the midst of all the shapers of the great world's fate." No part, not even the gifts of God, absolutely conditions the whole.

But dynamic gifts, whose appearance and direction are nevertheless contingent upon at least a hermeneutical contribution on our part, can have rhetorical effects on individuals and history for better or for worse. The varieties of religious experiences open up

intersubjective chances and gaps, themselves indeterminate gifts that empower partial acts to save (or potentially to destroy) a world anything but guaranteed. This is ultimately James's faith and his religious pragmatism. And whether melioristic possibilities are realized or not depends, we might say, on pragmatists who pray.

### CONCLUDING REMARKS

*As certain objects naturally awaken love, anger, or cupidity, so certain ideas naturally awaken the energies of loyalty, courage, endurance, or devotion. When these ideas are effective in an individual's life, their effect is often very great indeed. They may transfigure it, unlocking innumerable powers which, but for the idea, would never have come into play. 'Fatherland,' 'The Union,' 'Holy Church,' the 'Monroe Doctrine,' 'Truth,' 'Science,' 'Liberty,' Garibaldi's phrase 'Rome or Death,' etc., are so many examples of energy-releasing abstract ideas. The social nature of all such phrases is an essential factor of their dynamic power.<sup>45</sup>*

~ The Energies of Men ~

Part of my objective has been to consider what rhetorical implications can be teased out when we examine the centrality of religion to James's work on pragmatism. What we find is that both reflect his preoccupation with power, effects, and action. James defines religion as the experience of new spheres of power. And pragmatism is defined as a philosophy that turns away from abstract *a priori* reasoning and instead turns toward action and power. One of the central questions that frame James's work is what releases or inhibits various manifestations of power. And the answer to this question is particular modes of rhetoric that can close or disclose the experience of dynamic gifts. Abstract verbal formulations such as metaphysical arguments about the existence of God cut us off from the experience of religious power. But modes of rhetoric such as prayer that is more contingent upon experience can open us up to

intersubjective sources of power beyond our rational control. What this shows is the central role language plays in mediating between experience and action. Ideas and beliefs, each rhetorically structured as a means of persuasion, can be used in what Mifsud calls “a spirit of domination.”<sup>46</sup> Or they can be used more creatively in a dialogical openness to and cooperation with others. Rhetoric then becomes less a tool to win the argument and more a gift that releases creative energy. Rhetoric as a medium of gift-giving becomes an intersubjective transaction between the experience of power and its dynamic effects.

A couple weeks after completing his *Pragmatism* lectures, James gave a talk to the American Philosophical Association titled, “The Energies of Men.” Robert Richardson tells us it was a talk reworked from an earlier address given to the psychology club at Harvard delivered before the lectures. “Thus the work in pragmatism,” according to Richardson, “was bracketed — or contained, so to speak — by James’s inquiry into ‘the *amount of energy available* for running one’s mental and moral operations by.’”<sup>47</sup> In this essay James argues that one “great dynamogenic agent” is “energy-releasing” ideas such as those included in the passage above that begins this section: “Ideas contradict other ideas and keep us from believing them. An idea that thus negates a first idea may itself in turn be negated by a third idea, and the first idea may thus regain its natural influence over our belief and determine our behavior. Our philosophic and religious development proceeds thus by credulities, negations, and the negating of negations.”<sup>48</sup> As in his earlier writings on religion, James calls this process of negating negations a conversion: “*Conversions*, whether they be political, scientific, philosophic, or religious, form another way in which bound energies are let loose. They unify, and put a stop to ancient mental interferences. The result is freedom, and often a great enlargement of power.”<sup>49</sup> What this confirms is the notion that ideas can become means of persuasion that release dynamic sources of power. Most individuals, James claims, operate on levels far below their maximum capacity of energy. If we are able to tap into greater reservoirs of power, both in ourselves and in our audiences, rhetoric

will play a crucial role in negating those ideas that alienate us from an openness to and experience of dynamic gifts.

But if gifts are to release more dynamic power, then negating one idea will be necessary, and that is, as Mifsud asked at the beginning of this article, whether we can imagine rhetoric as a gift figured not in terms of obligation and return, but in terms of squander and release. I think James provides one answer in writing about dynamic gifts that empower us rather than place us under debt. If dynamic gifts come from intersubjective transactions whose sources cannot be precisely determined for the pragmatist, then to whom are we indebted? Thus rhetoric as gift can avoid the burden of obligation if it shifts its interpretive framework to an intersubjective horizon that opens up an infinite multiplicity of experience or what James liked to call the pluriverse. James is not the first to think of such gifts. He is part of an American tradition that goes back at least to Emerson who also writes about a more democratized notion of gifts that give us more fully to ourselves rather than back to the giver.<sup>50</sup> This subject of dynamogenics, according to Richardson, “is the long-standing American interest in awakening to new life and new power, the great theme of Thoreau and Emerson and Whitman, the great theme too of Jonathan Edwards, now carried to the new American century by William James.”<sup>51</sup> What is true of all these figures is that modes of rhetoric (e.g. sermons, lectures, essays, poetry, etc.) play a significant role in whether or not we have access to dynamic sources of power that come to us like gifts. And while figures like Emerson and James draw this language of dynamic gifts in part from theological debates of grace in the nineteenth century, they also attempt to purge the gift from its cycles of obligation, indebtedness, and resentment. Whether it is possible to do so depends on large part on how dynamic gifts are described and how those interpretations affect our behavior. If this is true, then rhetoric does play a central pragmatic role in what kinds of gifts we experience and whether our social transactions can be determined in terms other than debt and obligation.

California Baptist University  
[tsung@calbaptist.edu](mailto:tsung@calbaptist.edu)

## REFERENCES

- Carrette, Jeremy. "Religion, Power, and the Relational Attitude." *William James's Hidden Religious Imagination*. NY: Routledge, 2013.
- Crary, Jonathan. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999.
- Danisch, Robert. *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric*. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2007.
- Eddy, Beth. *Rites of Identity: The Religious Naturalism and Cultural Criticism of Kenneth Burke and Ralph Ellison*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Second Edition. NY: Continuum, 2004.
- Gunn, Giles. *Thinking Across the American Grain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
- Hoeller, Hildegard. *From Gift to Commodity: Capitalism and Sacrifice in Nineteenth-Century American Fiction*. NH: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012.
- Horner, Robyn. *Rethinking God as Gift: Marion, Derrida, and the Limits of Phenomenology*. NY: Fordham University Press, 2001.
- Hyland, Richard. *Gifts: A Study in Comparative Law*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- James, William. *Essays in Religion and Morality. The Works of William James*. Gen. ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982.
- . *Pragmatism. The Works of William James*. Gen. ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.
- . *The Principles of Psychology. The Works of William James*. Gen. ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981.

- . *The Varieties of Religious Experience. The Works of William James*. Gen. ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985.
- . *The Will to Believe. The Works of William James*. Gen. ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Lamberth, David C. *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Mailloux, Steven, editor. *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- . *Rhetorical Power*. Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1989.
- Mifsud, Mari Lee. "On Rhetoric as Gift/Giving." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 40.1 (2007): 89-107.
- Poirier, Richard. *Poetry and Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
- Posnock, Ross. "The Influence of William James on American Culture." *The Cambridge Companion to William James*. Ed. Ruth Anna Putnam. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Proudfoot, Wayne. *Religious Experience*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.
- , editor. *William James and the Science of Religions*. NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Richardson, Robert D.. *William James: In the Maelstrom of American Modernism*. NY: Houghton Mifflin, 2006.
- Rorty, Richard. "Some Inconsistencies in James's *Varieties*." *William James and the Science of Religions*. Ed. Wayne Proudfoot. NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Schrift, Alan D.. *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*. NY: Routledge, 1997.
- Stob, Paul. "Pragmatism, Experience, and William James's Politics of Blindness." *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 44.3 (2011): 227-249.
- Stout, Jeffrey. *Democracy and Tradition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.

- Sung, Tae. "Pragmatism and the Gift: *Toward a Charismology of Dynamic Gifts in Nineteenth-Century American Literature and Religion*. PhD diss., University of California, Irvine, 2014.
- Sykes, Karen. *Arguing with Anthropology: An Introduction to Critical Theories of the Gift*. NY: Routledge, 2005.
- Taves, Ann. "The Fragmentation of Consciousness and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*: William James's Contribution to a Theory of Religion." *William James and the Science of Religions*. Ed. Wayne Proudfoot. NY: Columbia University Press, 2004.
- Taylor, Charles. *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- West, Cornel. *The American Evasion of Philosophy*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

## NOTES

1. James, "On Some Hegelisms," 202.
2. James, preface to *The Will to Believe*, 9.
3. Schrift, *The Logic of the Gift*, 3. For other overviews of recent gift-theories from various disciplinary fields, see Horner, *Rethinking God as Gift*; Hyland, *Gifts: A Study in Comparative Law*; Sykes, *Arguing with Anthropology*.
4. Hoeller, *From Gift to Commodity*, 5.
5. In *William James and the Metaphysics of Experience*, Lamberth acknowledges the importance of literary-critical readings of James's work, but he thinks they downplay James's emphasis on radical empiricism. Proudfoot's *Religious Experience* does include strong emphases on the importance of religious language and hermeneutics, but James is largely absent from these sections. My argument about the rhetoric of religion draws more on Jeffrey Stout's *Democracy and Tradition* and Beth Eddy's *Rites of Identity*, although neither has James as its central subject. For work done by literary and rhetorical pragmatists, see Poirier, *Poetry and Pragmatism* and Mailloux, *Rhetoric, Sophistry, Pragmatism*. While Poirier and Mailloux do not address the significance of religion in

James's pragmatism, their arguments about language and rhetorical hermeneutics have been instrumental to my reading of James. An important exception to the absence of religion among literary scholars of pragmatism is Giles Gunn's *Thinking Across the American Grain*. Nevertheless, religion continues to be left out in recent works by important rhetorical pragmatists like Robert Danisch's *Pragmatism, Democracy, and the Necessity of Rhetoric*.

6. James's work plays an important role for Rorty and Taylor, both of whom read James as trying to hold onto metaphysics while privatizing religion. Despite their similar readings, they fall on opposite sides of their criticism. Rorty accuses James of betraying his own pragmatism by holding onto a "metaphysics of feeling," while Taylor thinks James fails to think through the public dimensions of religious belief. Although not a full response which will need to be addressed elsewhere, this article is an initial response to such criticisms. See Rorty, "Some Inconsistencies in James's *Varieties*"; Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*.

7. Stob, "Terministic Screens," 237. See also James's preface to *The Will to Believe* where he writes, "But it is just on this matter of the market-place that I think the utility of such essays as mine may turn. If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out" (8).

8. Mifsud, "Rhetoric as Gift/Giving," 101.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid., 102.

11. James, *Varieties*, 46.

12. James, *Pragmatism*, 31.

13. Ibid., 44.

14. James, *Varieties*, 156.

15. Ibid., 34.

16. Ibid., 36-39.

17. Ibid., 46 (emphasis added).

18. Proudfoot, *William James and a Science of Religions*, 35.

19. The context makes clear that power as James uses the term does not mean political power-relations. However, even though he avoids in *Varieties* a historical study of religious institutions, traditions, and dogma, what James calls religious power is not entirely irrelevant to what Mailloux has called rhetorical power, which examines “how various discourses—literary, critical, and theoretical—function in producing the specific historical effects they do” (*Rhetorical Power*, xii). Although James is primarily concerned with the ways an individual’s “interior world” is empowered to face contingency and meaninglessness, he is also concerned about their profound historical implications. This point will be developed later, but the misleading opposition between the private and the public has resulted in criticism of James’s politics. For Cornel West, another religious pragmatist, James’s libertarian and cosmopolitan perspective “is one of political impotence, yet it buttresses moral integrity and promotes the exercise of individual conscience” (*American Evasion*, 60). For a similar criticism, see also Ross Posnock, “The Influence of William James on American Culture.” More recently, however, Jeremy Carrette has attempted to connect the dots between James’s emphasis on personal empowerment and power relations without trying “to make James into Foucault.” See Carrette, “Religion, Power, and the Relational Attitude.”

20. James, *Varieties*, 46. Consider also another passage about passions as gifts: “So with fear, with indignation, jealousy, ambition, worship. If they are there, life changes. And whether they shall be there or not depends almost always upon non-logical, often on organic conditions. And as the excited interest which these passions put into the world is our gift to the world, just so are the passions themselves gifts,—gifts to us, from sources sometimes low and sometimes high; but almost always non-logical and beyond our control” (126-127).

21. James, *The Will to Believe*, 123-124. Here James emphasizes that we have no claim on gifts, but in *Varieties* James will qualify the gift’s claim on us by emphasizing our partial *interpretive* claim on the gift’s manifestation. Helpful here is Gadamer’s hermeneutic

reflection on the Kierkegaardian notion of claim: “A claim is something lasting [...] but the concept of a claim also implies that it is not itself a fixed demand, the fulfillment of which is agreed on by both sides, but is rather the ground for such” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 123).

22. James, *Pragmatism*, 25.

23. *Ibid.*, 51.

24. James, *Varieties*, 157.

25. *Ibid.*, 162.

26. *Ibid.*, 189.

27. *Ibid.*, 190 (emphasis added).

28. *Ibid.*, 144. In *Principles of Psychology*, James cites the work of Charles Frere in his discussion of dynamogeny, which referred to experiments that measured physiological responses to stimulation. Using what was called a dynamometer, which measured hand pressure on the device, James writes that Frere was able to demonstrate how the “dynamogenic value of simple *musical notes* seems to be proportional to their loudness and height. Where notes are compounded into sad strains, the muscular strength diminishes. If the strains are gay, it is increased” (1001). James also includes color, taste, and odors as other sensational stimuli that can affect the force of movement. Jonathan Crary’s work offers a detailed discussion of the history of dynamogeny and in it he argues that James’s *Principles* helped popularize the term, which demonstrated “how kinesthetic sensation affected the total creative behavior and emotional state of the individual, rather than being simply a localized physical event” (*Suspensions of Perception*, 170-171). What is significant about this according to Crary is that these dynamogenic effects can bypass conscious thought altogether. “By the late 1880s,” according to Crary, “it [dynamogeny] had already acquired a wider cultural set of meanings associating it with any stimulus or event that produced a generalized surge of life-enhancing feelings” (171). What I am suggesting in this article is that James expands dynamogeny to include what I have been calling the dynamic gifts of religious power.

29. James, *Varieties*, 204.

30. Ibid., 197.
31. See Taves, "The Fragmentation of Consciousness."
32. James, *Varieties*, 29.
33. Ibid., 197.
34. Ibid., 405.
35. Ibid., 342.
36. Ibid., 360.
37. Ibid., 345.
38. Ibid., 365.
39. Ibid.
40. Ibid., 382 (emphasis added).
41. Ibid., 405.
42. James, *Pragmatism*, 144 (emphasis added).
43. Ibid., 137.
44. Ibid., 143.
45. From "The Energies of Men." James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 142.
46. Mifsud, "Rhetoric as Gift/Giving," 100.
47. Richardson, *William James*, 489.
48. James, *Essays in Religion and Morality*, 141.
49. Ibid., 143.
50. See Sung, *Pragmatism and the Gift*.
51. Richardson, *William James*, 489.

Review of *The Religion of Democracy: Seven Liberals and the American Moral Tradition*. By Amy Kittelstrom.  
Penguin Press: New York, 2015. 432pp. \$32.95

Amy Kittelstrom's *The Religion of Democracy* is a persuasive account about the religious tenor of American liberalism over the long nineteenth century, both Christian and post-Christian. Beginning with John Adams, she focuses her chapters on the key liberals whose personal and professional beliefs exemplify a sacred respect for the moral agency and virtuous potential of individual persons. Kittelstrom argues that their belief in individual reasoning and private judgment created the conditions for the rise of secular liberal culture. This faith in progress and politics ultimately blossomed into a "religion of democracy" by the turn of the twentieth century (12).

Despite her ostensible focus on figures like William James, one of Kittelstrom's strengths as an historian comes from her ability to place her chosen subjects in a larger history of ideas. Alert to the ever-present historical tensions between religious liberalism and competing doctrines, whether late eighteenth century Calvinism or late nineteenth century *laissez faire*, Kittelstrom sets James and others in dynamic cultural milieus where contested beliefs drive conflicts rippling out into wider publics. In the first half of the book, such detailed contexts help stage an evolving conversation across generations between liberals like Adams and Mary Moody Emerson, showing how they, and later William Ellery Channing, became leading voices of a Christian liberal tradition, both as public figures and as private counselors within an influential network of New England Christians.

Kittelstrom is particularly adept, for example, at placing Adams' legal and political beliefs in the context of what she calls the American Reformation, a movement of Christian thought that collectively argued for a Christian "liberty of conscience" anchored by "right reasoning" (29). This American Reformation ran parallel

to the rise of evangelical Christianity and its sentimental emphasis on a redemptive salvation founded on Jesus. By contrast, the American Reformation professed the “divine right of private judgment,” and promoted a set of attitudes valorizing humility, moderation, tolerance, and moral actions (8). In a principle that should sound familiar to readers of James, religious liberals contended that “right reasoning directed the Christian to consider the effects of a doctrine as indicative of its degree of validity” (30). Such values flourished among the Emerson family in the early republic, and in Channing’s Unitarian sermons in the 1830s. Much more than Emerson, in fact, Channing emerges as a key figure, particularly in relation to James. Kittelstrom points to scholars who have already noted an “incipient pragmatism” in his thought, and she follows such threads deeper into his writing (111). Her discussion about how a new “liberal media” diffused Channing’s articulation of the American Reformation beyond the church is particularly notable (129).

Readers of this journal will want to pay special attention to her chapter on William James, whom she calls “the most important philosopher in American history,” and who she places in the rough center, in narrative and temporal terms, of the seven liberals she examines (2). Although James marks the transition from Christian to secular liberalism, in Kittelstrom’s description of his thought in such works as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), we clearly hear the echoes of the Reformation Christianity preceding him. More pointedly, she turns to James’ essays like “On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings” (1899) to connect his pluralism, which respected “diverse viewpoints on reality,” with his emerging “religion of democracy” (158-9).

In an argument that becomes important to her discussion of the remaining liberals in her book, including Thomas Davidson, William Mackintire Salter, and Jane Addams, Kittelstrom writes that James’ profound attention to the “hidden chips of the divine” in every individual, regardless of cultural, racial, and gendered difference, bespoke a “crude but pathbreaking” belief that “more social progress is possible” in the search for diverse realities of

human difference (158). This possibility arises because the search for the truth of a multitude of realities, experiences, and perspectives was inextricably bound to a belief in universal equality. In an intellectual culture grappling with Darwin and Spencer, Kittelstrom contends that James now “fulfilled a role once reserved for ministers,” tying the major personal and professional milestones of his life to the fermenting social politics undergirding James’ ultimate belief in such social equality (192). She lingers on his speech on Memorial Day 1897, for example, which he delivered with Booker T. Washington at the dedication of monument to the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Regiment, the most famous deployment of black soldiers during the Civil War. It was in this speech that James perhaps most forcefully articulated what Kittelstrom calls “the practical possibility of lived equality” symbolized by the regiment’s “cooperation across difference” (196). She connects this strain of James’ “Americanism” back to Adams, Emerson, and Channing by underlining his commitment to moral agency.

She also develops this idea forward in her chapter on Davidson, who sparked James’ belief in the religion of democracy through his assertion that liberty and equality be made “articles of faith” (218). The social history Kittelstrom recounts connecting James and Davidson together in upstate New York of the 1890’s could easily be expanded into a book itself. Her fascinating attention to Davidson’s even more direct engagement with the gender and labor injustices of the late nineteenth century is compelling, particularly his experiment with the Breadwinners’ College in the Lower East Side of New York. The increasing attention to issues such as urban poverty by liberals like Davidson drives the rest of the book, particularly the section on Salter’s “industrial ethics,” as well as the one on Addams’ social work with immigrants in Chicago during her years at the Hull House. Indeed, it is instructive that it was Addams’ faith in self-culture that harnessed her idea that “democracy believes that the man at the bottom may realize his aim only through an unfolding of his own being” (335). It was this “unfolding” of being, Kittelstrom contends, that liberals ultimately decided was the state’s

job to safeguard, and which the New Deal, by relieving individuals from the burdens of immediate want, helped to protect.

By asserting the profound role played by liberal intellectual elites like James in forging the tradition leading to the New Deal, Kittelstrom has not told a story meant to please every reader, especially those who claim radical social movements deserve more credit in the fight for equality from below, or those who might flinch at the individual prejudices held by the liberals in her book. Yet Kittelstrom has anticipated such criticism throughout her text, and, in noting any number of ironies along the way, she's succeeded in arguing, at a minimum, that the coalitions that built the New Deal, and even the "rights revolutions of the 1960s all the way to queerness," owe a significant debt to the religion of democracy and especially to those, like William James, who authored it.

Justin Rogers-Cooper  
LaGuardia Community College,  
City University of New York  
[jrogers@lagcc.cuny.edu](mailto:jrogers@lagcc.cuny.edu)

Review of *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe*. By Scott Aikin. Bloomsbury: London, 2014. 240pp. \$120

**I**n *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe*, Scott Aikin appears to be pursuing distinct and perhaps conflicting goals: to offer an internal commentary on the debate between Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" and James' "The Will to Believe," and to advance novel interpretations of the philosophical commitments of each situated in the context of contemporary philosophy. Achieving the former goal is perhaps the book's greatest virtue, but this achievement sometimes comes at the expense of the latter goal.

This tension might best be expressed by a question posed to Aikin, who is so careful in the introduction to stress the methodological point of making one's authorial intentions clear to the audience: For whom is the book intended? It is all at once a generally accessible commentary and a work of original philosophical interpretation but one that frequently stops just short of truly engaging with the arguments so interpreted. If Aikin's intended audience is a general one with no investments in a background epistemology, then digressions on concepts like "epistemic infinitism" and "doxastic efficaciousness" appear inert. If instead the intended audience already has some stake in the game, so to speak, through some historical and philosophical perspective such as analytic epistemology, then the junctures at which Aikin decides to stop his commentary are frustratingly shy of the philosophical depth requisite to make the book of much interest. For that audience, all of the interpretive ingredients remain carefully laid out on the table, uncooked.

As he carefully maps out the eddies of the Clifford/James debate for the reader, Aikin makes clear his role as a table-setter for his favored positions. He parses the claims and supporting premises section by section. In places where some interpretive housekeeping is required (e.g., Aikin's invocation of the twin concepts of "epistemic sloth" and "epistemic insolence" in marking a distinction between Clifford's two cases of the ship owner and the islanders) Aikin delivers on his promise to "lay out a few interpretive options" (3) as a kind of temporary salve for the explicated view in question, while generally keeping in line with the spirit of the position so interpreted.

However, Aikin's defense of Clifford is weakened just where he does not succeed in the overarching interpretative goal. After discussing some objections from skepticism that would be waiting from any philosopher, Aikin nicely sets the stage for an infinitist interpretation of Cliffordian evidentialism. Analytic philosophers, if they've paid attention over the past century, are waiting for that move too. A seminal source for such a view, Peter Klein's "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons", is there in the bibliography, so one might expect Aikin to deliver an interpretation well situated to address the basic objections (e.g., the Achilles paradox and the "finite mind" problem). He does not do this. After setting the stage perfectly for the space of such a view, it is disappointing that Aikin leaves off at just the point that a contemporary philosopher might take great interest in what Cliffordian infinitism would look like.

Nonetheless, Aikin's criticisms of James, and in particular his claim that Jamesian counterexamples to evidentialism are actually instances consistent with and confirmatory of evidentialism, are well-posed against the particular Jamesian cases in question. Aikin argues that the cases James provides, all instances of what Aikin

dubs “doxastically efficacious” beliefs (where having the belief makes it more probable that the belief is true), are such that the belief-holders in question actually do possess evidence for the truth of the belief just in virtue of holding the belief in question. Thus, contrary to James’s intentions, such cases are not so-called ‘lawful exceptions’ to Cliffordian evidentialism, but are rather merely special instances of the universal evidential rule, since belief on their basis is belief on the basis of evidence.

Aikin’s arguments in this vein, however, suffer a bit under closer scrutiny. Focusing on James’s so-called “friendship” and “Alpine Climber” cases, Aikin claims that while such cases are in fact cases where the agent in question fails to have evidence one way or the other regarding the target proposition’s truth, such cases are nevertheless “constrained by evidential considerations” (152). Aikin’s argument against the Alpine Climber case as counting as a legitimate counterexample to Clifford’s evidentialism relies on two considerations. One, that the evidential considerations constraining the case includes facts about things like how far the jump would be, what kind of jumps the climber has made in the past, and so on. Two, that “Only when the distance to jump is on the high end of AC’s jumping track record is AC’s attitude about the jump relevant. Only when it’s a *hard jump* does AC’s confidence matter” (152). Combining these two considerations, Aikin concludes that such confident belief, just in virtue of making a successful leap more probable, itself constitutes evidence for the truth of the content of said belief. This move against James is initially a persuasive one, as it does appear that the doxastically efficacious beliefs are in fact performing the same function in the Jamesian cases that everyday evidence performs in the case of conventional, non-doxastically efficacious beliefs: they give us reason to believe that the likelihood

of some proposition being true is greater than it was prior to the belief, or evidence, in question.

Aikin says that James requires that the cases are sufficient to serve as counterexamples to Cliffordian evidentialism and that such cases, despite the “efficacy of positive thinking”, are themselves “evidentially bounded.” Aikin asks us again to consider the Alpine Climber case: “The climber must make a jump across a crevasse. The confidence that he can make the jump makes his successful jump more likely, pessimism less. The climber, James holds, not only lawfully may but also must have the confident belief. But remember that this is appropriate only when the jump is feasible. If it is a 10-foot jump, this seems right, but not for a 100-foot or 1,000-foot jump. Appropriately using the power of positive thinking itself must be evidentially bounded—you must have evidence that the case is a feasible one in the first place” (158-9). From this he concludes that the subject in question has evidence for the target proposition in question, and that thus such cases fail as counterexamples to Cliffordian evidentialism.

While the feasibility constraint is appropriate enough as far as it goes (who besides a madman would be confident in taking a physically impossible leap?), it is questionable whether or not it is doing the evidentialist-friendly work Aikin interprets it as doing. Even if we grant that an agent’s awareness of the mere feasibility (taken to mean something like its physical, or perhaps more weakly its logical, possibility) of the jump constitutes a piece of evidence for the confidence that the agent has with respect to successfully making the jump, such mere feasibility does not on its own seem to entail anything like sufficient epistemic justification for one’s confidence in succeeding in the jump. The feasibility of some *p*’s being true (in this case, “I will successfully make the leap”) appears more like a necessary condition on *p*’s being true. But merely

having evidence of some necessary condition of some hypothetical p's obtaining is not usually taken to be, on any standard evidentialist reading, sufficient for epistemically justified belief in p's being true. So it appears we can grant that certain instances of evidence for the feasibility of the associated propositions being true are required in cases of doxastically efficacious beliefs. But this is still consistent with such evidence being insufficient for belief in the proposition in question, and as thus still standing as an exception to the Cliffordian rule.

Of course whether such an exception is *lawful* is a separate point, but Aikin's argument here is that such cases aren't even *exceptions* to the Cliffordian rule. Really, what seems needed here is an elaboration on what Aikin means by the climber's belief-formation in the face of evidence-for-feasibility being 'evidentially bounded'. The connection here with pre-existing debates about belief formation, evidence for predictions, and feasibility would again have been welcome and expected by readers familiar with these areas.

But the type of debate most conspicuously left alone, which would be quite familiar and occur to any reader of James with a background in modern philosophy, is that concerning testimony and the debate among analytic and social epistemologists about reductionism. Surely there is a reading in which James' overall case does not rely entirely on examples of "doxastically efficacious" beliefs in the sense potentially vulnerable to Aiken's objections. Taking directions from a stranger or taking the word of a historian about some event in the distant past seem to involve believing on insufficient evidence while having those beliefs does not bear on the probability of their truth, i.e., they are not doxastically efficacious beliefs. Such are the classical examples in epistemological debates over testimony. If only Aiken's detailed discussion of Feldman

would have been matched with an equally inviting discussion of C.A.J. Coady's (1992) *Testimony*, for example, it would have been closer to the sort of commentary promised. Proceeding right from the dispute between Hume and Reid on testimony that Aiken nicely explicates (55-56), Coady's work is the sort of touchstone that would engage a greater range of contemporary epistemologists. Yet, Aiken does not take us into that territory. He stops short of laying the icing on an otherwise well layered cake.

There is great value in the internally cosmopolitan goals of Aiken's interpretation: not quite analytic but firmly outside historicist, post-modern, or other "external" readings of the debate between Clifford and James. This is very important given that evidentialism is one of the main bridges between a range of contemporary philosophical debates and American pragmatism. Aiken helps to build that bridge. However, he falls short just where the sort of reading he promotes is most needed. Unsteady and occasionally unsure of its audience, Aiken's book is nevertheless the best joint commentary of its kind.

Jeremy Morris  
Ohio University  
[morrisj6@ohio.edu](mailto:morrisj6@ohio.edu)

James Reed  
Ohio University  
[jr962414@ohio.edu](mailto:jr962414@ohio.edu)

Notes on *American Philosophy before Pragmatism*. By  
Russell B. Goodman. Oxford: Oxford University Press,  
2015. 281 pp. \$50

Russell B. Goodman's *American Philosophy before Pragmatism* provides an *elementary* survey of its broad subject matter, though it is certainly not in any way facile or insipid, as this term all too often implies. Rather, Goodman's comprehensive project traces the primary *elements* of early American philosophy, the recurring figures, examples, themes, and problems that, while in no way born from the soil of the New World, require a minimum of reckoning on the part of anyone who wishes to comfortably call themselves a scholar of American intellectual history.

The book is structured chronologically, with five of the six individual chapters devoted to titanic figures of American thought. There are no surprises here: Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau each come in for thorough treatment, and an interlude devoted to the "strands of republican thought" in America distills the central principles of — and contradictions within — its ongoing Constitutional enterprise. Goodman ends this survey with an epilogue that traces a few central continuities in the era of American pragmatism, touching briefly on the relation between his representative men and William James, Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, W.E.B. DuBois, and Walt Whitman.

Goodman attempts — quite rightly I believe — to fill in the gaps that render many prior histories of American thought incomplete. Paul Conkin's *Puritans and Pragmatists*, for instance, does not include Jefferson or Thoreau; William Clebsch's *American Religious Thought* neglects all but Edwards, Emerson, and James; and Elizabeth Flower and Murray Murphey's *History of Philosophy in America* does not treat the Transcendentalists in any significant

way. Most timely, however, is Goodman's effort to include in every chapter the significance of race and slavery on the thought of each writer and school of thinkers. While steering clear of polemic, his genealogy attempts to understand and historicize rather than naively praise or angrily condemn, taking as his guiding light James' insight into moral progress — repeated in some form several times throughout — as the overcoming of successive "equilibria of human ideals" (46).

Goodman achieves a careful balance of biographical material and metaphysical, ethical, theological, political, and literary glosses on a massive philosophical archive. His scholarly chops are always on display. Though he sometimes polices the limits of his genealogy by hesitating to go very far in the Continental direction, he nonetheless avoids chauvinism and provincialism by crossing the Atlantic when necessary and moving backwards beyond the cusp of American life (particularly through the English Puritanical tradition, as is certainly required). Though Goodman sometimes expends a bit too much energy defending some of the more maddening aspects of these thinkers' writings — that he takes pains to defend Franklin from D.H. Lawrence's critique of the *Almanack's* role in repressing the vitality of American life, for instance, may be to simply fight a losing battle — the *care* he takes to contextualize both their triumphs and errors is inspiring to anyone who believes that the practice of criticism and scholarship should begin in real affection.

If Goodman often repeats himself, to paraphrase the old gray poet who makes his way into these pages at their very end, he also demonstrates that American philosophy contains — and always has contained — multitudes. Sprinkled within the more obvious touchstones of American intellectual life (for it is not as if Goodman provides startlingly new readings of the Declaration of Independence, Emerson's *Nature*, or *Walden*) are references that prove the eclecticism of that life, from Edwards' troubled links to the British Empiricists, to Jefferson's Epicurean syllabus, to the Greek, Romantic, Idealist, and Eastern influences on the Transcendentalists. If this survey proves anything, though, it's that American philosophy has always been mixed up with existential,

aesthetic, political, and ecological praxis, and that it has been at its strongest when and where it has been most so. If there is continuity in the wildness of American thought, it may be in its emphases on futurity, evolution, and the yoking of creativity and receptivity, which keeps the archive open for endless revision, as well as other books like this with new philosophical nodes to consider.

Zachary Tavlin  
University of Washington  
[ztavlin@uw.edu](mailto:ztavlin@uw.edu)

Notes on *The Allure of Things: Process and Object in Contemporary Philosophy*. Edited by Roland Faber and Andrew Goffey. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.  
ix + 251pp. \$112

**T**he Whitehead Research Project explores current modes of thought in light of Whitehead's vision of a universe in which physical and mental entanglements are not the exception, but the rule. It hosted a conference in December 2010, "Metaphysics and Things. New Forms of Speculative Thought," which constitutes the basis of this edited volume, *The Allure of Things: Process and Object in Contemporary Philosophy*. This title brings together a number of Whiteheadian and process oriented philosophers with key figures from the branch of speculative realist thinking known as object-oriented ontology. It explores some of the congruencies as well as some of the tensions between various attempts to return to speculative thought and to reorient the concept of the thing (i.e., object). It is representative of some key issues in these different directions in contemporary speculative thought, noting that rather than being something to be overcome, metaphysics has in fact acquired renewed respectability in recent years. In what follows, I will more concretely delineate the entailments of this title, before proffering an evaluative conclusion.

In Chapter one, James Bono offers an explicit account of what it might mean to think about science studies with Whitehead, showing how fruitful his approach is in understanding issues that some forms of contemporary science, with their overtones of Aristotelian ideas of substances, cannot understand properly. He convincingly argues that Whitehead reversed the traditional metaphysical understanding of the continuity of becoming. For Bono, Whiteheadian atomicity refers to an understanding of things as events, to the affective involvement, and indeed the mutual immanence of these things in

each other. His application of Whiteheadian thinking to the field of genetics is particularly fruitful. Chapter two, by Graham Harman, argues for an object-oriented ontology that is anti-relational and refuses “smallism” (45), that is, the practice of reducing facts to their lowest ontological level of entities. He focuses on a series of key points of contrast between an ontology of objects that withdraws from all relation, and a thoroughly relational ontology of the Whiteheadian kind. The third chapter, by Roland Faber, one of the editors of the volume, picks up where Harman leaves off, asking just how dissimilar and exclusive the object- and process-oriented positions in recent philosophy really are. In a densely argued essay, he characterizes Harman’s reworking of the theory of occasional causation as a “democratization” of its theological inaccessibility, placed within the interiority of all real objects, and argues for a resonance between Whitehead’s own theorizing and dissociation from any occasion of becoming.

The second section of the book, which delves into conceptual problems associated with the history of metaphysics, begins with Levi Bryant’s contribution in Chapter four, in which the author develops an account of Aristotelian substance that implies an object-oriented position in which every substance necessarily withdraws from both other substances and from itself. Bryant employs concepts from Derrida in arguing his position, which allows him to offer a theorization of processuality from within an object-oriented position. Continuing the engagement with Whitehead in relation to traditional metaphysics, Judith Jones in Chapter five offers a detailed consideration of a Whiteheadian account of individuality, making a pragmatic move to address the challenge of Whitehead’s concrescence in dialogue with Scribner Stearns’s “Reason and Value” (1952). In the essay of Stearns, a picture of the relationship between reason and value is presented in which reason is the creator of value even as it struggles to cognize already-existing natural, aesthetic, moral, and other values. In Chapter six, Beatrice Marovich leads us to question the limits of being “creaturely,” proposing a constructive account of the “inhuman,” and developing Whitehead’s ideas on the complexification of the “creaturely cosmos” (111).

Given the current academic popularity of thinking about the hazy division between human and animal, she uses Whitehead in such a manner that is not open to deconstructive accounts of the human/animal dyad. Michael Halewood, in Chapter seven addresses the problem in accounts of things – that is, that they oscillate between an exploration of the abstracted general properties predicated of them and their specific, individual particularity – their “thingness.” He demonstrates a poignant sensitivity to the differences between talk of objects and talk of things, as well as – here showing his filial relation to Whitehead – “the sociality of things” (129). Halewood leads us to reflect on the “religiosity” of things, that is, the enduring presence of theological concepts within Western thought.

The third section, on “Dramatisations,” comprises the final four chapters of the volume. Chapter eight, by Jeffrey Bell, offers us a considered reading of aspects of the account of philosophy in terms of drama and experiment that one can find in Deleuze, to tell us what it might mean to do metaphysics in the “style of Whitehead.” Drawing on Deleuze’s “method of dramatization,” Bell explores the question of what a hyper-realist Deleuzean metaphysics might be. Melanie Sehgal’s subsequent chapter reads Whitehead’s conceptualization of history in such a manner that allows her to develop a detailed account of the logic of situating metaphysics in relation to its history. The careful negotiation that Sehgal makes, using Whitehead, is between the generic notion of “having a history” and the specificity of every history as a situated form of knowledge. Isabelle Stengers contributes Chapter ten, in which she too draws on Deleuze’s understanding of dramatization in philosophy to help explore the way in which creations in philosophy operate. According to her, a philosophical creation is the act of giving an imperative question the power to claim the concepts it needs in order to obtain its most dramatic, forceful necessity, in order to force thinking in such a manner that the philosopher can no longer say “I think,” that is, that they can no longer be a thinking subject. The concluding Chapter eleven, by Andrew Goffey, the volume’s other editor, also turns to Deleuze’s work, particularly his

neglected concept of experimentation. Experimentation is a term that Deleuze consistently contrasts with interpretation, and it here provides Goffey with a thread to draw together Deleuze's concern with the nature of the philosophical oeuvre, the shifts that he makes in his reading of Spinoza, and the exorbitant style of their first collaboration, entitled *Anti-Oedipus*.

In sum, this edited volume draws together an international range of leading scholars covering the similarities between object oriented ontology and Whiteheadian process philosophy. It is an essential addition to the literature on metaphysics, as it explicates how Whitehead's philosophy traverses the fields of metaphysics, mathematics, logics, philosophy of science, cultural theory, and religion. The title makes manifest how Whitehead's thought furthers the adventure of thought that belongs to the essence of civilization (cf. Whitehead, *Adventure of Ideas*). It also makes apparent the notion that metaphysics has acquired new respectability in recent years. I recommend this volume to scholars — but not the general public — who have interests in metaphysics. It will appeal to graduate students who are working in Whiteheadian metaphysics and who have an awareness that Whiteheadian process philosophy poses challenges to the critical settlement.

Bradford McCall  
Holy Apostles College and Seminary  
[bmccall@holypostles.edu](mailto:bmccall@holypostles.edu)

# RELATED SCHOLARLY PUBLICATIONS ON JAMES

January – October 2016



In recognition of the fact that James scholars are publishing articles in other academic journals, the editors feel that it is important to keep our readers informed of the diversity within Jamesian scholarship by drawing attention to relevant publications outside of *WJS*. The new Periodicals section of the journal aims to provide our readers with information about related scholarly articles that address the life, work, and influence of James's thought. If you have recently published a peer-reviewed article on James or have noticed an omission from this list, please contact our Periodicals Editor, Kyle Bromhall, at [periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org](mailto:periodicals@williamjamesstudies.org) and we will include it at the next opportunity.



*Araujo, Saulo. "...to rely on first and foremost and always': Revisiting the Role of Introspection in William James's Early Psychological Work."* *Theory Psychology* 26, no. 1 (Feb., 2016): 96-111.

In order to legitimate itself as a science, psychology has faced the ongoing problem of establishing its proper method of investigation. In this context, debates on introspection have emerged that have remained intense since the 18th century. However, contemporary debates and historical investigations on this topic have not done justice to the richness and diversity of positions, leading to oversimplifications and hasty generalizations, as if the terms "introspection" and "introspectionism" referred to one and same thing. The central goal of this article is to offer an analysis of William James's position on the introspective method within the intellectual context of his time, covering the period from his early writings until the publication, in 1890, of *The Principles of Psychology*. Our results indicate that James used two different types of introspection. We conclude by discussing divergences in the secondary literature and the implications of our study for historical and theoretical debates in psychology.

*Brunson, Daniel. "Fluency, Satisfaction, Truth: Reassessing James in Light of Some Contemporary Psychology."* *Contemporary Pragmatism* 13, no. 1 (2016): 29-47.

A notable feature of classical American pragmatism is its close association with the birth of experimental psychology. In particular, William James' work as a psychologist influenced, and was influenced by, his pragmatism. This paper seeks to support this reading of the relation between Jamesian psychology and pragmatism, particularly through his "Sentiment of Rationality" and the later contention that the true is the satisfactory. In addition, James' insights are tested and expanded through reference to contemporary

research on processing fluency, as well as concepts of ecological rationality.

*Colapietro, Vincent. "Experiments in Self-Interruption: A Defining Activity of Psychoanalysis, Philosophy, and Other Erotic Practices," The Journal of Speculative Philosophy 30, no. 2 (2016): 128-43.*

In this article I propose to explore psychoanalysis, philosophy, and other erotic practices as inevitably inclusive of experiments in self-interruption. Indeed, these practices are often such experiments more than anything else. I draw here not only upon Adam Phillips but also on Stanley Cavell, Joan Acocella, and James Snead. The function of experiments in self-interruption is, for at least some practitioners, to turn the qualities of experience upon themselves for the sake of intensifying, deepening, extending, and in other respects enhancing these qualities. In the process of doing so, pleasure can be made so intense as to be practically indistinguishable from pain, and pain or, more precisely, its overcoming, so integral to the execution of an activity as to be an integral part of an intrinsically pleasurable pursuit. Good and evil as well as pleasure and pain have their experiential meaning only in reference to the somatic (hence, erotic) practices of social actors, human or otherwise. "The old phrase 'stop and think' is," Dewey insists, "sound psychology." It is also critical for pedagogy, philosophy, politics, friendship, and much else. The art of stopping ourselves is, however, a more subtle and difficult one than we might appreciate.

*Colella, E. Paul. "The Geography of Strenuousness: 'America' in William James' Narrative of Moral Energy." Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society 52, vol. 1 (Winter 2016): 93-113.*

Strenuous effort on behalf of moral ideals was a life-long concern for William James. Growing out of his own well-documented personal struggles as a young man, it was also

a cultural phenomenon in late 19th century America. For many, the cause of the problem of depleted moral energy was environmental. Herbert Spencer's definition of mind as the correspondence of inner relations to outer relations lent intellectual support to this reduction of moral lethargy to environmental factors and writers such as George Beard and Theodore Roosevelt seemed to be in agreement. While many employed America as an environment in this cultural discussion, William James resisted this environmental reductionism and instead employed "America" as a metaphorical trope around which he organized his thoughts on moral energy. This was no mere literary device on James's part, but instead a reflection of his own disagreements with Spencer that led James to articulate his own groundbreaking model of consciousness as reflex action. As the framework for addressing the issue of moral strenuousness.

*Duban, James. "The Generalization of Holocaust Denial: Meyer Levin, William James, and the Broadway Production of The Diary of Anne Frank." Philosophy and Literature 39, no. 1 (2016): 234-48.*

What importance could the radical empiricism of William James have for the ordeal of Meyer Levin? Following the suppression of his staging of *The Diary of Anne Frank*, Levin decried the excision, in the authorized Broadway production, of key references to Anne's budding Judaism and to the Jewish particularism of Holocaust atrocities. Because the Communist-influenced Broadway script emphasizes the wrongs implied by universal, rather than specific, expressions of tyranny, James's philosophy anticipates, and perhaps even helps frame, Levin's still-pertinent charge that generalization abets both Holocaust denial and efforts to disavow Jewish identity, particularism, and nationalism.

Gavin, William. "For Whom the Bell Tolls: Jamesian and Deweyian Reflections on Death and Dying." *The Pluralist* 11, no. 1 (Spring, 2016): 19-38.

In this paper, I describe some current developments in death and dying literature—certainty vs. context; death as process vs. death as event; acceptance vs. denial; and the present moment vs. the long run. I then show how the work of James and Dewey can be beneficially applied to these topics. In this way, I hope to be true to the spirit of James and Dewey, following in their "wake," while extending their insights to a new topic, namely death.

Goodman, Russell B. "Thinking About Animals: James, Wittgenstein, Hearne." *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 5, no. 1 (2016): 9-29.

In this paper I reconsider James and Wittgenstein, not in the quest for what Wittgenstein might have learned from James, or for an answer to the question whether Wittgenstein was a pragmatist, but in an effort to see what these and other related but quite different thinkers can help us to see about animals, including ourselves. I follow Cora Diamond's lead in discussing a late paper by Vicki Hearne entitled "A Taxonomy of Knowing: Animals Captive, Free-Ranging, and at Liberty", which draws on Wittgenstein and offers some insights that accord with pragmatist accounts of knowledge.

Klein, Alexander. "Was James Psychologistic?" *Journal for the History of Analytic Philosophy* 4, no. 5 (2016): 1-22.

As Thomas Uebel has recently argued, some early logical positivists saw American pragmatism as a kindred form of scientific philosophy. They associated pragmatism with William James, whom they rightly saw as allied with Ernst Mach. But what apparently blocked sympathetic positivists from pursuing commonalities with American pragmatism was the concern that James advocated some form of

psychologism, a view they thought could not do justice to the a priori. This paper argues that positivists were wrong to read James as offering a psychologistic account of the a priori. They had encountered James by reading Pragmatism as translated by the unabashedly psychologistic Wilhelm Jerusalem. But in more technical works, James had actually developed a form of conventionalism that anticipated the so-called “relativized” a priori positivists themselves would independently develop. While positivists arrived at conventionalism largely through reflection on the exact sciences, though, James’s account of the a priori grew from his reflections on the biological evolution of cognition, particularly in the context of his Darwin-inspired critique of Herbert Spencer.

*McNally, Thomas. “More than a feeling: Wittgenstein and William James on love and other emotions.” British Journal for the History of Philosophy 24, no. 4 (2016): 720-41.*

One of the most significant features of Wittgenstein's *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (written after he had completed most of the *Philosophical Investigations*) is his reflections on emotions. Wittgenstein's treatment of this topic was developed in direct response to his reading of William James's chapter on emotions in his 1890 masterpiece, *The Principles of Psychology*. This paper examines the competing views of emotions that emerge in these works, both of which attempt to overcome the Cartesian dualist conception in different ways. The main point of disagreement concerns the relation between emotions and their bodily expression (e.g. the relation between grief and weeping). My interpretation focuses on Wittgenstein's remarks on the emotion of love because, I argue, it is a particularly problematic case. To elucidate his largely unexplored view of love, I draw on his remarks on understanding and criteria in the *Philosophical Investigations*. I argue that by examining the examples of

complex emotions like love, we can arrive at a more accurate characterization of Wittgenstein's general view of mental concepts and mental phenomena.

*Meehan, Sean Ross. "Metonymies of Mind: Ralph Waldo Emerson, William James, and the Rhetoric of Liberal Education." Philosophy & Rhetoric 49, no. 3 (2016): 277-99.*

Critics in both philosophy and literary studies have rightly emphasized a "poetics of transition" relating the thought of Ralph Waldo Emerson to that of William James. However, less attention has been given to the ways that Emerson's philosophy of rhetoric correlates with James's rhetorical perspectives on psychology and philosophy. Fundamentally rhetorical interests in the contiguous circumstances and contingent reception of thinking link James to Emerson beyond matters of poetics and style. This article correlates Emerson's understanding of a rhetoric of metonymy as the basis of thinking with the principle of contiguity crucial to James's philosophy of mind. This relation between rhetoric and philosophy reiterates a rhetoric of mind that both Emerson and James associate with the older liberal education of the college just at the point that this curriculum is displaced by the professional, specialized disciplines of the emerging university in late nineteenth-century America.

*Pettigrew, Richard. "Jamesean epistemology formalized: An explication of 'The Will to Believe'." Episteme 13, no. 3 (2016): 253-68.*

Famously, William James held that there are two commandments that govern our epistemic life: Believe truth! Shun error! In this paper, I give a formal account of James' claim using the tools of epistemic utility theory. I begin by giving the account for categorical doxastic states that is, credences. The latter part of the paper thus answers a question left open in Pettigrew (2014).

*Southworth, James. "The Passional Nature and the Will to Believe."* Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society 52, no. 1 (Winter, 2016): 62-78.

A number of philosophers have called into question the wishful thinking reading of "The Will to Believe." According to them, William James is not encouraging us to will what we want to believe; rather, he is making the case that under certain epistemic conditions we have a right to believe. I contend that this right to believe thesis, while an important part of James's essay, fails to capture his full view. First, I inquire into what James means by 'our passional nature.' I distinguish three roles the passional nature plays with respect to belief. I then illustrate how each role of the passional nature informs three related arguments within the "The Will to Believe." Ultimately, I argue that James is not simply advocating the permissibility of religious belief. His primary thesis is that individuals who have a right to believe ought to believe.