

James, Brown and “The Will to Believe”

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First of all, I just want to say that in my opinion this is an interesting and thought-provoking book, and a badly needed corrective to certain mistaken assumptions about James. I find myself very much in sympathy with many of its main points. Some of the things I have to say in the following may—or perhaps may not—be thought to disagree with some of what Professor Brown has argued in his book. If that is so, it should be taken only as an indication of the degree to which *William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion* stimulates philosophical thought. Similarly, the essay I found myself preparing for this occasion seems in the end to have a lot more to do with what *I* think about James than, on the surface, it does with Professor Brown’s book: again, I would wish this to be seen as a compliment to the high quality of his work (which is certainly the way I see it), since everything I might have come up with here is in response to my reading of his book.

One of Hunter Brown’s theses about William James’ epistemology, especially as it found its expression in James’ essay “The Will to Believe,” is that—far from being an apologist for subjectivism or fideism—James was actually an exponent of his own brand of quite rigorous evidentialism. It is this claim that I primarily wish to examine in this essay.

Here is, perhaps, one way of framing the issue that motivates “The Will to Believe.” First, let us agree that our primary epistemic duty is to hold beliefs that are in accord, or as consonant as possible, with all the evidence that is available to us. This requirement, when we are being properly epistemically virtuous, overrides all our other doxastic inclinations, such as wishful thinking, careless prejudgement, emotional attachment, or other forms of what we would normally call bias. With all of this, James would emphatically agree. As Professor Brown quite correctly insists, James was “deeply committed to the importance in principle of restraining belief, or to the importance of evidence in the responsible conduct of the life of reason” (Brown 2000, 4). In this sense at least, then, James was no subjectivist. Though he had a particularly rich and nuanced view of what constitutes *evidence* (and this is a point to which we shall return), he in no sense held that belief-inducing factors *other* than evidence could ever rationally overrule its dictates. It is one thing to identify cases, which we shall describe in a moment, where evidence fails to *compel* belief in either *p* or its denial. It is quite another to assert that in such cases “we set aside our usual allegiances to evidence, and allow personal influences to justify the adoption of a particular position” (Brown 2000, 6).

The crucial issue for “The Will to Believe,” however, might be put, initially, in the following way:

what are we to do when belief *outruns* evidence? The evidentialists to whom James was responding, such as W. K. Clifford, held that responsible intellectual inquiry must be rigorously sensitive to possible reasons for doubt. As Professor Brown notes, James insisted not only on this but *also* on the view that empirical inquiry must be appropriately critical of reasons for *disbelief* as well. Imposing this symmetry on epistemic practice gives a particular shape to the issue, and reconfigures it in a way that was not considered by contemporary evidentialist empiricists. Suppose, on some particular issue p , that responsible inquiry falls short of providing full support for believing p . In that case, evidentialists such as Clifford suggest, it is our epistemic duty to withhold belief from p . But what if there is not sufficient empirical evidence to *disbelieve* p either? That is, what if there are insufficient grounds to believe not- p ? Then, as one might put it, consistent application of the evidentialists' own precept requires that belief be withheld from not- p . So far, this is not a particular problem for the evidentialist, though it does emphasise a consequence of the evidentialist position that may not have been fully appreciated by Clifford and his fellows.

But now, suppose that we add a further element to our epistemic situation: suppose this is an issue on which we *cannot* withhold belief from *both* p and not- p —suppose it is a case where we must believe one or the other. Furthermore, suppose it *matters* which option we take: that is, suppose one choice might be thought to be better than the other, so that we cannot legitimately simply shrug our shoulders and toss a coin to decide. The traditional evidentialist is now in a bind: according to the evidentialist principle, we lack sufficient evidence for either belief; yet we must commit ourselves to one of the two, and we should do so thoughtfully and responsibly. What is to be done now? *This*, I think, is the problem to which James' essay "The Will to Believe" is addressed.

This characterization of the central problem of the "Essay" has certain virtues as a reading of James. It involves a case where belief-formation or belief-retention must occur in the absence of purely evidential constraints, and thus a case where factors other than appeal to the evidence must be allowed to play a legitimate role. Furthermore, the cases thus characterized are nevertheless within the normative domain of the *epistemic*—they are cases where we are concerned to make the *right* decision, to adopt the *right* belief. Thus, they are cases where factors other than evidence legitimately *play the role of evidence*, and this does indeed seem to be the topic of James' essay. They are cases where we do and should believe things on the say-so of our "non-intellectual" or "passional" nature.

It also provides a plausible construal of James' notion of a "genuine option," the stated subject of his essay—that is, a *genuine* option is one where there is really a choice (and hence

underdetermination by the available evidence: otherwise we should simply be rationally compelled to believe the option which is supported by the evidence) and where we really must *make* a choice, rather than simply remaining agnostic. They are options that, as James puts it, are living (rather than dead), forced (rather than avoidable), and momentous (rather than trivial).

So is James a subjectivist or fideist in *these* special cases? I think he is not (and this is, perhaps, where things get especially interesting). Although these are, by definition, options which are not decided by the available evidence—and thus, our belief simply cannot be determined by evidence—they are nevertheless cases where we can, it seems, have *good reasons* for the belief we adopt, and beliefs that are good not merely prudentially or egoistically, but in some sense *epistemically*. That is, James does not merely mean to claim that, at these crucial junctures, we *do* believe one thing rather than another, or that we *must* believe one thing rather than another for psychological or sociological reasons, or even that we might have merely irrational *subjective* reasons for believing one thing rather than the other. No: James wants to say that we can have reasons for believing one thing rather than the other that are *good* in the epistemic sense that they tend to track the truth; that, though they go beyond the “merely logical” or “pure reason,” are nevertheless in some sense quasi-rational. They are reasons by which we are rationally entitled to be persuaded; more than this—according to James, to *refuse* to be persuaded by these reasons may in fact be *irrational*. This—at the moment—is my view of what James is trying to do in “The Will to Believe,” and I think that something like it is Professor Brown’s as well. On the other hand, I am far from sure that James is successful in his attempt to defend “the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith” (James 1986/1979, ?), while Professor Brown endorses it; it is in this arena that my mullings today shall take place.

In light of all this, let us now consider two versions of the frequently-heard complaint that James was a proponent of subjectivism or ‘wishful thinking.’ The first is the view, perhaps best expressed by James’ close friend Oliver Wendell Holmes, that he was attempting “to turn down the lights so as to give miracle a chance,” shielding religion from the harsh glare of careful, scientific inquiry. This, I think, is simply an unjust accusation: as I have suggested, James did not intend that “our non-intellectual nature” should ever *prevail over* our intellectual nature, but simply that it must sometimes *supplement* it. If rigorous empirical inquiry *were* ever, in fact, to show that religion were false, then I take it that James would be among the first to say that religious beliefs should be abandoned, on pain of irrationality (or at least epistemic unreasonableness). Nor do I think that James would be one of those who insist that religion is in some sense specially unfalsifiable, or beyond the reach of scientific inquiry—in fact, quite the reverse, James would deny any such claim.

The issue here is made somewhat more complicated, however, by the very radicalness of James' radical empiricism. Though it is clearly not true that James wanted "to turn down the lights" to allow religious belief to populate the intellectual shadows, it is very probably the case that James did not think that science could ever be taken as having simply 'falsified' religion. The religious question thus might remain a genuine option for some people *whatever* the science of the future might reveal. This, however, would not be, for James, because of any special mysteriousness or metaphysical inaccessibility of religious matters (as opposed to, say, economic forecasting or biological taxonomy). It would be because *no* such sweeping, absolute, general claims can be made on the basis of a properly rigorous, non-selective consideration of the empirical evidence. As Professor Brown puts it, there is an "ever-not-quite-complete character" to inquiry and reflection (Brown 2000, 3) that James insisted on, on the basis of his radical empiricism. James believed that careful attention to the facts always, or almost always, reveals tensions with any general theoretical principles one might formulate: "after all that reason can do has been done, there still remains the opacity of the finite facts as merely given, with most of their peculiarities mutually unmediated and unexplained" (James 1986/1979, 6). But this was the case, I take, it for all scientific pronouncements of an overly general kind, according to James, and thus can hardly be counted a special defence of religion, nor—since James was emphatically in touch with his 'scientific conscience'—can it be considered a species of anti-scientific subjectivism. James was, after all, a radical *empiricist*.

Despite all this, it seems to me there may be a deeper problem lurking for James here. James describes cases—genuine options—that outstrip the available evidence and yet which require that a choice be made. It is in these cases that our "passional natures" can legitimately play a decisive role in belief adoption or retention. However, it is an essential element of James' specification of such cases that they be *live* options: that is, as he puts it, that they appeal "as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed" (James 1986/1979, ?). But, as James appears to admit, this is an almost entirely *sociological* matter.

If I say to you: "Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan," it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: "Be an agnostic or be a Christian," it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief. (James 1986/1979, ?)

So, suppose that for the present we concede to James the claim that our non-intellectual natures can legitimately act to decide between genuine options. Nevertheless, there will remain the prior question: *which* of the various possible choices of belief that might face us, which remain

undetermined by the empirical evidence, constitute *genuine* options for us? Given James' insistence on the ever-not-quitiness of empirical inquiry, and given his emphasis on the need for genuine options to be live (both aspects that, perhaps ironically, Professor Brown emphasises in his defence of James) it seems to follow that there will be many options underdetermined by the empirical evidence, perhaps many which are forced and momentous, which happen not to be live for us, given our particular personal background and upbringing. Perhaps, for someone with a particular background, Christianity is a live option but theosophy not even to be thought of; perhaps even the choice between varieties of Protestantism is live but Catholicism not at all. And it is hard to see how *this* difference can plausibly be thought of as epistemically appropriate, as non-distorting or non-subjectivist. It seems a matter of the merest historical circumstance—unavoidable, perhaps, but surely not epistemically *legitimate* or “lawful” in anything approaching the way the constraints of evidence are.

This is one species of a family of problems which, I think, James' ‘Will to Believe’ doctrine faces: what the members of this family have in common—and we shall encounter more in due course—is that at several crucial points James, at least on the face of it, appeals to merely descriptive, psychological or sociological, notions when he should be appealing to normative epistemic ones. This is a case in point (though I think, at this stage, still a *fairly* innocuous one). It might be that, for James, *if* an option is a genuine one for you, then you can “lawfully” retain or adopt one of the two beliefs at issue; but whether an option *is* genuine for you is not even quasi-rational or partially normatively epistemic—it is just a fact of sociology. One might put it this way: a lot of the things that I fail to believe, or that I believe to be false, I do so not because I have any kind of epistemic entitlement to that position but because of the historical circumstances of my birth: for example, James' audience happened not to believe in the coming of the Mahdi. Similarly, a lot of the things that I positively *do* believe may be underdetermined by reason and empirical evidence—James would have held that many of them are—and yet they may never, for me, form one half of a genuine option. Thus, even if I *would* be justified in believing them if I had had to choose them over their denials in a live, forced, momentous option, I am never—as a matter of sociological fact—so called to choose, and thus these beliefs (in, say, the continuing uniformity of nature) continue to go unjustified.

Now, it seems to me that James would have been well aware that all this was the case. How then can they be objections to his view? After all, if his ‘will to believe’ doctrine merely states that *if* an option is genuine than we can lawfully adopt or retain belief, it is no objection to the doctrine to

complain—as I in effect have been doing—that it is silent on the question of what should occur when an option is not genuine. Nevertheless, this first instance where James replaces epistemology with sociology is still a little worrying. Here is how I think the worry goes. For Clifford, a traditional evidentialist and James’ foil, when a hypothesis outstrips the evidence we should simply withhold belief. Thus Clifford’s position on the kinds of case we have been considering, though perhaps excessively austere, is clear: we should believe neither in the Mahdi, nor in Christianity, nor in the uniformity of nature. For James, however, the result is a little different: it seems that, in his view, members of his audience should *not* believe in the Mahdi—it would be unreasonable for them to do so (I take it that James is not arguing that we can reasonably believe *anything* that is not actually contradicted by the available evidence)—but *might* believe in Christianity (or, for that matter, the uniformity of nature). And the ‘might’ here is supposed to be not merely sociological but normative—they are *epistemically entitled* to that belief. But *this* distinction, between the Mahdi case and the Christianity one, seems to have no epistemic basis—the distinction comes about for entirely sociological reasons. There seems, then, to be a gap in James’ toilings.

Now on to the second version of the ‘subjectivism’ charge. This holds that, though James may not have sought to preserve religion by *limiting* the scope of scientific scrutiny, he did advocate ‘wishful thinking’ for options—which include religious belief—that run beyond the available evidence. That is, as Bertrand Russell among others have argued, the appropriate epistemic attitude towards James’ ‘genuine options’ is to withhold belief entirely in such cases, rather than to adopt or retain beliefs that are not supported by evidence. This is consistent with taking an epistemic stance in order to continue the inquiry, Russell argued, but this should be characterized as hypothesis-adoption rather than belief-adoption (Russell 1910).

How can James answer this, centrally important, charge? It seems to me that such an answer might have two parts. The first component would be an argument that our choices in the case of genuine options really are forced—that is, in certain cases, we simply cannot withhold belief in the face of evidential underdetermination, and so must settle on one option or the other. Clearly, James did not believe that *all* underdetermined options are of this sort: cases which allow for the indefinite extension of epistemic commitment are such that James recommends “the attitude of sceptical balance” (James 1986/1979, 101). So we need to be clear about how James distinguishes between forced and unforced cases.

The second component of a Jamesian defence, meanwhile, would of course involve showing that our choice in genuine options need not be inappropriately subjective, prudential or egoistic.

To take the first of these first: James appeals, as part of his characterization of forced options, to options that take the form of a logical disjunction, but obviously this is not enough to settle the issue. That we cannot believe both p and not- p does not entail that we must believe either. To not believe p is not to believe not- p . However, James is aware of this: he says that “[e]very dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, *with no possibility of not choosing*, is an option of this forced kind” (James 1986/1979, ?, emphasis added). So the question becomes: why, sometimes, is there no possibility of not choosing between two options? In James’ discussion, his examples usually turn, not on beliefs, but on *actions*—our choice is not between believing p or not- p but between either doing a or not doing it, and in the latter case the choice really is forced: to not do a really is, it seems, to do not- a . Thus, if my option is to join an expedition to the North Pole, then by either acting or not acting I unavoidably make a choice. But as we have seen this is not generally so in the case of belief.

Perhaps what we should do, then, is treat James as dealing, not directly with a choice of beliefs, but with the option of *believing or not believing* some particular belief. Thus, just as by doing nothing I am thereby choosing not to go to the North Pole, similarly by failing to adopt the belief that p I am choosing not to believe p , while conversely by continuing to believe p I am choosing not to not believe p . This reading does, it seems to me, give content to the notion of an option being forced—we must unavoidably either believe p or not believe p —but it is hard to imagine that this can have been what James meant, since it makes *every* case of belief adoption or retention whatever (at least in those cases where we have a choice at all) a forced option, and James clearly meant the category to be a great deal more circumscribed.

In the end I am not sure what to say on James’ behalf here, but the approach that seems the most promising to me is to connect the notion of a forced option with that of a *momentous* one. That is, we might say, some choices are of such personal moment and magnitude to us that we cannot remain neutral on them, cannot ignore them: we must either adopt the religious attitude or reject it, perhaps; seize the opportunity for fame at the North Pole or deliberately pass by the opportunity once and for all. But this suggestion—particularly when applied specifically to the case of *belief*—is not fully satisfactory. First, the *momentousness* with which some particular issue appears to us is, once again, in danger of seeming to be an artefact of our personal psychological history—a sociological rather than an epistemological factor, and one tending towards subjectivism (in similar ways to the worries I expressed above). Thus, for example, the question of taking some attitude or other towards religious belief might not seem at all pressing to a modern young person raised in an

exclusively secular milieu; for such a person, the question of religious belief would not be a genuine option and so they would not, on James' account, be entitled to adopt a belief one way or the other in the face of underdetermination by the evidence. It might seem from this that the fact that for someone else the choice is one which *is* forced upon them is a mere accident of their personal history, rather than something epistemologically significant about the nature of the choice itself.

Second, even though an option is momentous, and thus pressing, it surely need not *follow* that a choice must be made. Perhaps still we might anxiously postpone the moment of doxastic commitment, perhaps even indefinitely, while we tried to make up our minds—perhaps the very momentousness of the issue might be a *barrier* to us settling on one option or the other. Suppose the choice were, for example, either to believe that a particular action one has performed, perhaps an act of violence during a war, was morally justified, or to believe that it was not. This might clearly be an issue of great weight for a particular individual, but nevertheless it could be something that the individual in question is never able to decide.

Let us move on however. The remaining—and perhaps most crucial and interesting—component in the construction of a non-subjectivist reading of James is an account of how belief can be “lawfully” adopted or retained even in the absence of compelling evidence. As Professor Brown puts it: “All restraints on subjectivity do not vindicate religious belief decisively, from an evidential point of view. What, then, entitles one to hold a belief which moves beyond such restraints on subjectivity, and which credits the ... personal benefits of religious belief with any justificatory significance at all?” (Brown 2000, 26).

One possible tactic here is to suggest that existing beliefs can reasonably be *retained* as long as there is not good enough evidence to abandon them. This, perhaps, makes James' task a little easier, since we are already dealing exclusively with cases where we have *conceded* that the evidence is not sufficiently strong to rule out the belief in question. Professor Brown defends this view of James. As he puts it:

The issue that concerns James above all, then, particularly in his will to believe doctrine, is what would constitute intellectually responsible behaviour towards certain existing beliefs, including religious ones which, while not entirely conclusive evidentially, are nonetheless generally congruent with the many constraints on subjectivity.... This concern is far from the focal point of stereotypes of James which portray him as contending that, in cases of insufficient evidence, purely subjective influences may legitimately seize the field and dominate the determination

of belief. (Brown 2000, 24)

But this alone is surely not enough: unless we have quasi-epistemic *reasons* to *retain* our beliefs, it remains far from clear that we ought to do so, rather than moving to agnosticism. It might well be that abandoning the belief that p and adopting the belief that not- p would be just as epistemically arbitrary as doing the reverse, or doing nothing at all, in such situations: but on the face of it all of these options are epistemically *more* arbitrary than choosing to believe neither p nor not- p in the face of insufficient evidence. Indeed, on a charitable reading of Clifford, this is precisely the point he is trying to make in “The Ethics of Belief,” and thus the very point that James is setting out to answer.

So what kind of ‘reasons’ can we postulate for retaining certain of our beliefs that are not supported by evidence. It is on this issue, it seems to me, that Professor Brown’s book is especially valuable, and it is at this stage that we must pause to indicate at least one of the aspects in which my earlier characterization of James’ problematic suffers from over-simplification. I have been talking of belief outstripping the available evidence; this suggests that, when faced with a genuine option, the subject somehow ‘tops up’ the available, underdetermining evidence with some personal contribution from their “passional nature.” But this picture is too simple. Rather, as Professor Brown puts it, for James, “[s]ubject and world are *simultaneously* implicated in the constitution of experience and belief” (Brown 2000, 9). This relationship is not a matter of *willing* belief, but of a certain kind of intellectual relationship with the world. “While James emphasizes subjectivity in his account of religion, then, it is a notion of subjectivity that is profoundly enriched by his conception of the wide range of relationships among subjective and non-subjective influences which constitute immediate experience as a whole” (Brown 2000, 17).

This comes out particularly, for Professor Brown, in his account of the *liveness* of options. An option is live, Professor Brown explains, where it is:

- a) A situation where one has an existing belief or propensity to believe which is ‘threatened’ by an alternative proposition which one also has a propensity to believe.
- b) Intellectually entirely reasonable or plausible to those who hold the beliefs.
- c) Produced by a complexly interdependent bundle of factors, not all of which are evidential. As James puts it, “pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds” (James 1986/1979, 95).

It is this last criterion which is, it seems, of particular importance to Professor Brown’s account of James:

The liveness or deadness of particular propositions or belief systems has to do with an

extraordinarily complex field of relations which involves extensive interdependence among its many elements. Particular beliefs, much less large belief systems which are as complex as those involved in religion, ethics and politics, implicate an incalculable number of intertwining historical, cultural, linguistic, temperamental, neurological, volitional, and other influences. (Brown 2000, 64)

A key feature of this, Professor Brown emphasises, is that live beliefs are produced and upheld by a prevailing social and personal climate. These “passional tendencies and volitions” run before belief, and are major influences in our ability to recognize the potential merits of various propositions.

For James, Professor Brown points out, it follows from this that “our next duty, having recognized this mixed-up state of affairs, is to ask whether it be simply reprehensible and pathological, or whether, on the contrary, we must treat it as a normal element in making up our minds” (James 1986/1979, 95).

But, at least on the face of it, this summation conflates two dichotomies, one descriptive and one normative: there is the question of whether being guided by our “passional tendencies and volitions” is *normal* or whether it is pathological; and there is the quite distinct question of whether being so influenced is epistemically *desirable*, or illegitimate. James, as Professor Brown shows, makes a compelling case that we *are* frequently and inevitably led by our passional nature in the formation and retention of belief, if such a case were needed, but the pressing question is whether we *should* be so guided. That is, James’ question—at least in the evidentialist reading—is *what tends towards truth, not towards what do thinkers normally tend?*

The quickest way to bridge this gap would be simply to add the following lemma: ought implies can; we *cannot* (as a matter of at least psychological necessity) form beliefs in ways other than those guided by non-intellectual nature; therefore it is illegitimate to *require* that we do so. As Professor Brown puts it:

What he argues is that it is often not possible to isolate such extra-subjective influences entirely from other influences involving the subject and the community in a way which would satisfy Clifford’s invocation of evidence *per se*. It is often not possible, that is, to isolate ‘intellectual insight,’—‘*pure* reason’—from ‘wish and will’ in the development of belief. ‘If any one should ... assume that intellectual insight is what remains after wish and will and sentimental preferences have taken wing, or that pure reason is what then settles our opinions, he would fly quite as directly in the teeth of the facts.’ (Brown 2000, 49, quoting James 1986/1979, 93)

And again:

While the ‘dispassionately judicial intellect ... ought to be our ideal,’ James willingly concedes, it remains the case that the processes by which actual human beings concretely live out an intellectual relationship with the world at many levels make the establishment of conclusive evidential credentials for beliefs concerning complex matters very difficult. (Brown 2000, 50)

Now, it may be that this is really all there is to it. If so, this would make James something of a precursor to modern naturalized epistemology, as Henry Jackman has recently argued (1999). This interpretation has many virtues, and is doubtless at least part of what is going on in “The Will to Believe,” but it does leave us with several problems. Among the most pressing are the following two. First, why should James restrict this thesis only to genuine options, when it seems—at least on the face of it—that any claim about the psychological *inevitability* of non-intellectual influences will hold for all types of belief formation and retention? Second—and this is, of course a problem that dogs modern naturalized epistemology as well—in what sense would this still be *epistemology*? Or, to put this objection in a way more consonant with the current essay, why should this be considered any kind of an *evidentialist* account at all, and not mere subjectivism—put very crudely, people believe what they want to believe, and what they want to believe is determined by the historical circumstance?

There is, however, a second strand in James’ essay, to which Professor Brown draws our attention, and this shows perhaps more promise as grounding an ‘evidentialist’ account of belief that goes beyond the evidence. This is the matter of the ‘strenuous mood.’ To put it perhaps rather over-simply, for James as a pragmatist the *implications* for religious belief or disbelief are part of what is involved in their assessment, and James considers these in the unjustly neglected notion of the ‘strenuous mood.’ This is, of course, central to James’ ‘pragmatism,’ but—Professor Brown plausibly argues—has been widely misunderstood as entailing a kind of prudentialism. Rather, the strenuous mood is not an “unambiguously desirable state” but instead one which “invites many forms of substantial but eminently avoidable ills. ... It calls for a moral heroism and self-denial” (Brown 2000, 117–118). “Genuine religiosity, as James understands it, does not provide intellectual or dogmatic peace” (Brown 2002, 119); it is a broadening and deepening of the moral and intellectual horizons.

I am inclined to think that this is one of the key points in James’ argument. For this might be a reason why leaving “the question open ... is attended with the same risk of losing the truth” (James 1986/1979, ?) as is adopting one of the positions—and *this*, it has turned out, is the crucial question.

But there is a dilemma waiting here for James, it seems to me, and I will close my essay by drawing attention to it. Suppose that James claims that the strenuous mood is beneficial—not egoistically or prudentially, but in some other, higher, sense—even if religious belief is *false*. Then its status as an *epistemic* indicator is called into question: its beneficial effects would not be signals of its truth. Recall that, for James, his pragmatist theory of truth was importantly tied to his *realism*: the “workability” of a belief was an indicator of its truth because, very roughly, *the world*, over the long term, tends to act in accordance with true propositions and not with false ones. James certainly did *not* hold—as Bertrand Russell claimed he did—that “any doctrine which tends to make people virtuous and happy ... is ‘true’ in the sense in which he uses the word” (Russell 1961, 770). Hence, if the strenuous mood did no more than this—even if it did that much—it would not constitute a good enough reason for religious belief.

On the other hand, suppose that James claims that the strenuous mood is beneficial only if religious belief is *true*: self-denial, for example, might be thought beneficial, both personally and in the abstract, only if there exist moral facts that make that self-denial good. But then it is not clear that the strenuous mood can be *evidence* for the truth of religion: on this, flawed, form of the argument, the truth of religious belief is supported by its beneficial effects in the production of a strenuous mood in its practitioners; but these effects are beneficial only if religious belief is true, and so the argument becomes circular.

Where then does this leave James, Professor Brown, and us? Let me state *a* possible conclusion, in as pointed a way as possible, and then leave it to the discussion to reveal what—if anything—has actually been shown. Professor Brown and I agree, I think, that James was attempting to show that belief held in the face of evidential underdetermination can, in some cases, be normatively justified as at least quasi-epistemically “lawful.” In particular, for James, religious faith can be legitimate—not just egoistically but more objectively—even in the absence of sufficient evidence for its truth. Professor Brown, I take it, argues in his book that James fundamentally succeeds in that project. I, however, have attempted to suggest that James did not.

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