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LUDWIG F. SCHLECHT

RE-READING 'THE WILL TO BELIEVE'

I

John Hick offers a summary account of William James's 'The Will to Believe' which is typical of the way that this essay has been understood by many in the one hundred years since it was first published. According to Hick, James argues

> that the existence or nonexistence of God, of which there can be no conclusive evidence either way, is a matter of such momentous importance that anyone who so desires has the right to stake one's life upon the God hypothesis.[1]

After a brief discussion, Hick concludes: 'The basic weakness of James's position is that it constitutes an unrestricted license for wishful thinking'.[2]

What may be the merits or weaknesses of James's position can only be addressed if it is fairly represented. Hick's assessment is not justified by reference to what James actually claims. The problem is not just that Hick has distorted James's position as authorizing us to believe whatever we may desire. More basically, Hick – and countless others – have read James's essay as an attempt to justify belief in the existence of God as affirmed in traditional theism. Nowhere does James claim that this is his intent. He writes that his essay is

> an essay in justification *of* faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect many not have been coerced.[3]

James's identification of what constitutes 'religious matters' in 'The Will to Believe' is rather broad and vague, and careful attention to what he writes may well leave us with some uncertainty as to what he means. It is clear, however, that religion is not defined in terms of a traditional theistic affirmation of God's existence as Hick assumes.

Just what is it that James argues we have a right to believe? This is not an easy question to answer. In much of his writing James expresses a vital concern regarding religious faith, and makes provocative points about its role in our lives; he does not, however, provide us with a theology that is clearly or fully formulated. Part of the difficulty in understanding James's

[1] John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, fourth edition, (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), p. 59.
[2] *Ibid.* p. 60.
[3] William James, 'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979), p. 13. 'Faith' and 'belief' are used interchangeably by James.

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views regarding religion is due to the informal lecture style of his essays; his writing is often more suggestive than precisely and systematically developed. Part of the problem is the result of his aversion to abstract theology; his concern is with the concrete experiences of religious life, not intellectualized doctrine or dogma. Part of the problem is that James's views develop over time. In some of his early essays a traditional theism does indeed seem to be intended.[4] In many works, however, theism is not clearly expressed, and James 'keeps rather fluid what the "hypothesis of God" really denotes'.[5] Theism is eventually explicitly repudiated. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James acknowledges his 'own inability to accept either popular Christianity or scholastic theism'.[6] In *A Pluralistic Universe* he criticizes theism as dualistic; 'the theistic conception, picturing God and his creation as *entities distinct* from each other, still leaves the human subject outside of the deepest reality in the Universe'.[7] A pluralistic pantheism is there affirmed, a position distinct from both traditional theism and monistic pantheism (i.e. absolute idealism).[8]

So where does that leave us in understanding 'The Will to Believe'? What is needed, I would suggest, is an interpretation that is faithful to the text – a text, however, that can be helpfully supplemented by being attentive to what James writes about the same issues in other works. In 'The Will to Believe' James offers us a 'very generic and broad' concept of religion; he is concerned to identify a common core to various types of religious expression – not the 'accidents' peculiar to any one religious position such as traditional theism.[9] It is the affirmations of religion in this broadest sense that we have a right to believe, James argues. In the essay the specific claims of theism regarding the existence of an independent, external deity are not considered at all.

James discusses religion, broadly understood, and its relation to faith in many other works written at about the same time and later – indeed it is a central and continuing topic of concern for the rest of his life. His emphasis on the importance of faith, and his argument on its behalf, recur frequently, and with remarkably consistency.[10] Consideration of these other sources can help us to clarify and elaborate on what James writes in 'The Will to Believe'.

I shall attempt in what follows to provide an account of James's essay

[4] 'Reflex Action and Theism' and 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life' are two such essays. Both are included in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*.

[5] H. S. Thayer, Introduction to William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1975), p. xxxiii.

[6] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1985), p. 410.

[7] William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1977), p. 16.

[8] A helpful study of the development of James's thought is presented in Bennett Ramsey's *Submitting to Freedom: The Religious Vision of William James* (New York: Oxford UP, 1993).

[9] 'The Will to Believe', p. 29.

[10] A restatement of the position developed in 'The Will to Believe' can be found in one of the last essays that James wrote – 'Faith and the Right to Believe', an Appendix to the posthumously published *Some Problems of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1979).

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which includes an interpretation of his understanding of religion and religious faith that conforms to the text and which also accords with what he writes elsewhere. With such a reading of James, the argument of 'The Will to Believe' can be recognized as more cogent and convincing than it is often thought to be.

II

James's thesis is that

> *Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide, but leave the question open', is itself a passional decision – just like deciding yes or no – as is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.*[11]

A 'genuine option' is defined as a decision between hypotheses that is forced (rather than avoidable), living (rather than dead), and momentous (rather than trivial). When there is insufficient objective evidence to decide what is true in such matters, a choice must be made based upon our 'passional nature' – our subjective interests, attitudes, or concerns. There are important questions that are incapable of determination on intellectual grounds that we nonetheless cannot avoid answering one way or another.

What are examples of such questions? James does not propose any questions of empirical fact for consideration here. He rather identifies moral questions and questions concerning personal relations: whether or not something has worth – whether or not someone likes me. The truth in such matters, James insists, can not be ascertained on the basis of detached intellectual inquiry but depends in part upon our attitudes and actions, what we are willing to commit ourselves to or invest in. Indeed, our commitment can be an important factor in making something come true. I cannot know whether marriage to a particular person will be deeply satisfying, a source of continuing joy and comfort, simply on the basis of disinterested observation. The love, openness, and trust that I bring to the relationship are necessary to allow for its ideal realization. 'There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create the fact*'.[12]

In 'The Sentiment of Rationality' James clearly distinguishes issues where faith is not appropriate – and where it is:

> The future movements of stars or the facts of past history are determined once for all, whether I like them or not. They are given irrespective of my wishes, and in all

[11] 'The Will to Believe', p. 20.

[12] *Ibid.* p. 29. James makes the same point in 'The Sentiment of Rationality': 'there is a certain class of truths of whose reality belief is a factor as well as a confessor; and that as regards this class of truths faith is not only licit and pertinent, but essential and indispensable. The truths cannot become true till our faith has made them so'. Again, in 'Is Life Worth Living?' he writes that 'often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true'. Both essays are included in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, pp. 80; 53.

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that concerns truths like these subjective preference should have no part; it can only obscure the judgment. But in every fact into which there enters an element of personal contribution on my part, as soon as this personal contribution demands a certain degree of subjective energy which, in its turn, calls for a certain amount of faith in the result – so that, after all, the future fact is conditioned by my present faith in it – how trebly assinine would be it for me to deny myself the use of the subjective method, the method of belief based on desire![13]

Faith is relevant only where the truth in question is at least partly dependent upon what the agent may contribute to it. Religion, James claims in 'The Will to Believe', presents us with just such an issue. We have a right to believe what is affirmed in religion; whether it is true depends in part on our belief in it!

Now such a claim would, of course, be preposterous if religion were understood to affirm the existence of the God of traditional theism – a perfect personal Being. Faith might be relevant to our receptivity, or ability to recognize and respond, to such a God, but not to the question as to whether He exists. Those who interpret James's essay as a defense of theism understandably find his logic seriously flawed at this point.[14] As we have noted, however, James does not define religion in theistic terms; and what he does say about religion is fully consonant with the notion of self-fulfilling faith. We need to take seriously what he says about such faith, recognizing it as an important part of his argument rather than dimissing it as something carelessly or misleadingly included.

In his attempt to provide a 'very generic and broad' understanding of religion, James writes that 'religion says essentially two things'.

> First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things… the things in the universe that throw the last stone… and say the final word. 'Perfection is eternal'.
>
> The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.[15]

What are we to make of the vague, rather obscure, 'first affirmation' (upon which the second depends)? James does not offer us much assistance in understanding his meaning in 'The Will to Believe' itself. However, if we are attentive to what he says about faith in this essay, and integrate this with what he writes elsewhere, an interpretation of what he regards as 'the religious hypothesis' – which poses a genuine option for us, requiring a decision, one way or the other – can be plausibly derived.

For James, religion provides a basic perspective on life which affirms that ultimately human existence and endeavor have value – the universe is a

[13] 'The Sentiment of Rationality', pp. 80–81.

[14] One example of such criticism, among many that could be cited: Gerald E. Meyers claims that 'James came close to treating religious hypotheses as if they were truths dependent on personal action or instances where faith creates its own verification; this emphasis misleadingly suggests that faith in a god will somehow help to create that god'. *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1986), p. 452.

[15] 'The Will to Believe', p. 29–30.

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place where our spiritual yearning for harmony and at-homeness can be satisfied. Religion declares that 'the inmost nature of the reality is congenial to *powers* which you possess'.[16] We are encouraged to proceed in life with openness and trust, recognizing that despite trials and tribulations we may experience, meaning and fulfillment are possible. It is an 'open universe', still in the making – thus moral seriousness is important, our choices and efforts make a difference, our ideals can be realized. 'We crave alike to feel more truly at home with it, and to contribute our mite to its amelioration'.[17] Religion proclaims that such cravings can be satisfied – and believing this, and acting upon this belief, helps to make it so. From a religious perspective, 'The world *is* good, we must say, since it is what we make it – and we shall make it good'.[18] We are invited to embrace life, allowing our hopes rather than our fears to prevail. 'Be not afraid of life. Believe that life *is* worth living, and your belief will help create the fact'.[19]

Religion offers us a fundamental understanding of ourselves in relation to the reality that underlies all finite objects and events – 'the inmost nature' of reality that transcends all of our ordinary categories of thought.[20] As such, its truth cannot be guaranteed on the basis of a rational assessment of objective evidence. What is required is personal commitment – faith – a willingness to live and act in accordance with what is proclaimed to be true. 'I will treat it as if it *were* true so far as my advocacy and actions are concerned', faith declares.[21] It is 'the greeting of our whole nature to a kind of world conceived as well adapted to that nature'.[22]

What is proclaimed in a religious tradition is typically expressed through concrete images; its language is symbolic, not literal. As James noted in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

> the only material we have at our disposal for making a picture of the whole world is supplied by the various portions of that world of which we have already had experience.... All philosophers, accordingly, have conceived of the whole after the analogy of some particular feature of it which has particularly captivated their attention.[23]

In western religions, the most basic symbols for expressing and evoking an understanding of reality and our relationship to it are personal. In 'The Will to Believe' James points out that

[16] 'The Sentiment of Rationality', p. 73.
[17] *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 11.
[18] 'The Sentiment of Rationality', p. 84.
[19] 'Is Life Worth Living?', p. 56.
[20] In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James indicates that religion is 'a man's total reaction upon life', in which we 'must go behind the foreground of experience and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as everlasting presence'. He goes on to stipulate that 'the word "divine", as employed therein, shall mean for us not merely the primal and enveloping and real, for that meaning if taken without restriction might well prove too broad. The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest' (pp. 36–37, 39).
[21] The concluding step in James's 'faith-ladder' as found in 'Reason and Faith', *Essays in Morality and Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1982), p. 125.
[22] 'Faith and the Right to Believe', p. 111.
[23] *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 9.

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The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*, if we are religious; and any relation that might be possible from person to person might be possible here.[24]

The universe is represented in personal terms. It is viewed as having 'affinity with my being'; and like persons, its mysteries 'are not exhaustible by objective analysis'.[25] Relations between persons and the universe are viewed as analogous to those among persons. Since interpersonal relationships have been identified as prime examples of experiences where 'faith in a fact can help create the fact', similarly our faith can contribute to making true what our religion proclaims. Living with the conviction that we can be related to the universe with intimacy and harmony helps make it so. Proceeding with the kind of trust and openness that would be necessary to develop and sustain a meaningful relationship with another person helps create a universe in which meaning and fulfilment are realizable – in which 'life *is* worth living'.

Note that James says that religion represents the universe itself as a Thou; he does *not* say that it affirms the existence of an independent, external creator as a Thou. For James, religion provides us with a perspective on 'Being Itself', as Tillich would put the matter; he does not define it as postulating the existence of 'a Being' such as is maintained in traditional theism.[26]

Indeed, as James's thinking develops in his later works, there is an explicit rejection of theism. The pluralistic pantheism that James affirms in *A Pluralistic Universe* is a more 'intimate' *Weltanschauung*, he tells us. Pantheism gives us a 'vision of God as the indwelling divine rather than the external creator, and of human life as part and parcel of that deep reality'. With such a view, rather than being wary and guarded, 'we may give way, embrace, and keep no ultimate fear'.[27] We are part of a pluralistic, continually developing world of interrelationships, continuous with forces and powers that are often beyond our knowledge or control. Amidst the contingencies of life, possibilities for significant response are ever present. Neither passsive resignation nor fearful defensiveness are appropriate; rather what is called for is 'active good-will'.[28] As John McDermott points out: 'For James, it is precisely the ability of man to enter into the relational fabric of the world, in

[24] 'The Will to Believe', p. 31.

[25] Phrases Jeffrey Gordon uses to convey James's meaning in 'The Rational Imperative to Believe', *Religious Studies* **29** (1993), p. 15. Gordon, who is attentive to what James actually writes in 'The Will to Believe', claims that James, in fact, argues not just that we have a right to believe, but that it is illogical not to believe.

[26] Parallels with Tillich's theology have been pointed out by others. John Wild, for example, in quoting James's claim in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that religion is 'a man's total reaction upon life', notes that 'this is close to Paul Tillich's notion of "ultimate concern"'. *The Radical Empiricism of William James* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1969), p. 295. John Smith, in his Introduction to *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, makes the same observation (p. xxv). Some kinship between James and Tillich is also discussed by Robert J. Vanden Burgt in *The Religious Philosophy of William James* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1981), pp. 139–140, 147–148.

[27] *A Pluralistic Universe*, p. 19.

[28] 'The Will to Believe', p. 31. In 'Faith and the Right to Believe', James indicates that 'faith-tendencies… are but expressions of our good-will towards certain forms of result' (p. 122).

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a participative and liberating way, which enables him to become human'.[29] Such a position is entirely consonant with James's discussion of faith in 'The Will to Believe'.

James is clear that any religious position is fallible; our fundamental perspective on life may be mistaken. There can be no guarantee; what may seem to be insight could prove to be illusion. Allowing ourselves to be open and trusting may yield only despair and hurt rather than meaning and fulfilment. Any act of faith involves risk – and requires courage. Religious faith, like any faith, 'is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance. It is in fact the same moral quality which we call courage in practical affairs'.[30] James's position is nicely summarized in 'Pragmatism and Religion':

> It is then perfectly possible to accept sincerely a drastic kind of universe from which the element of 'seriousness' is not to be expelled. Whoso does so is, it seems to me, a genuine pragmatist. He 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.[31]

III

James's conclusion in 'The Will to Believe' is that 'we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will'.[32] Despite what has been argued above, this statement might seem to suggest that James really is to be interpreted as encouraging us all to believe 'whatever we like' – and that he is thus open to the charge of providing us with 'an unrestricted license for wishful thinking'. It could be understood as a statement of 'universal permissiveness',[33] warranting the affirmation of any belief, including theism.

The statement is admittedly not a carefully formulated summary of James's position and, as such, may well leave James vulnerable to misunderstanding. It clearly needs to be qualified. But such qualifications are evident in the essay itself – the conditions for exercising the right to believe are quite specifically developed. A review of these conditions may further help us to recognize the merits and avoid the misconceptions of his essay.

For James, we have a right to believe a hypothesis under the following conditions:

[29] John J. McDermott, editor, *The Writings of William James*: *A Comprehensive Edition* (New York: Modern Library, 1968) pp. xxv–xxvi.

[30] 'The Sentiment of Rationality', p. 76.

[31] *Pragmatism*, pp. 142–143. In 'Faith and the Right to Believe', James writes: 'As individual members of a pluralistic universe, we must recognize that, even though we do our best, the other factors also will have a voice in the result. If they refuse to conspire, our good-will and labor may be thrown away. No insurance company can cover us or save us from the risks we run in being part of such a world'. James, characteristically, recommends that the attitude we should take toward such a world – 'the only wise way' to respond – is to '*trust*' the other powers in the universe, 'and at any rate to do *our* best' (pp. 115–116).

[32] 'The Will to Believe', p. 32.

[33] The quoted phrases are all from Hick, p. 60.

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1. We are presented with a 'genuine option' (i.e., live, forced and momentous).

2. It is an issue that cannot be decided on 'intellectual grounds' (i.e., it cannot be settled with reference to objective evidence).

3. The truth of the hypothesis is at least partially dependent upon the agent (i.e., it is a case where 'faith in a fact can help create the fact').

What James presents as the 'religious hypothesis' meets these conditions. Religion provides a basic perspective on life. However expressed in different traditions, its essential affirmation is that there is more to reality than what we can know or control, but that with all of its mystery and wonder the universe is ultimately hospitable to the human longing for harmony and at-homeness. Whatever be the pains and problems we experience, possibilities of meaning and fulfilment are ever present – and can be realized if we allow ourselves to be open and responsive to them.

Religion thus poses for us a 'genuine option' – a fundamental decision about how to 'be' in the world: do we – or do we not – proceed with trust and good-will? Whether what religion affirms is true cannot be guaranteed on the basis of any detached accumulation of objective evidence. But it is a decision that cannot be avoided; some perspective or other must be taken as to 'the inmost nature' of reality and our relation to it. To withhold assent from the religious hypothesis on the basis of insufficient evidence – to remain agnostic – is, in effect, to accept and act upon a non-religious view. 'In either case we *act*, taking our life in our hands'.[34]

Finally, the truth of what religion affirms at least in part depends upon our willingness to embrace it. As is true in personal relations, what we think and do can make a difference as to what will be. Not to accept and act upon the religious hypothesis is to be denied any chance of confirming its truth – the possibilities that may be present will go forever unrealized. To maintain a distanced objectivity cuts us off from experiencing any sense of intimacy or affinity with reality that might be available; we find nothing but the world of things that we expected. Thinking in terms of *Thou* rather than *It* allows for very different results. In a recent article on 'The Will to Believe', Jeffrey Gordon expresses the point as follows:

> Cultivate that perception of nature that sees in her the power, depth, variegation of mood of a person, and it will not be long before your kinship with her will be felt and palpably real… .Remain, on the contrary, resolutely aloof to her, shut up in dispassionate objectivity, and she shall show a correspondingly barren face.[35]

Faced with such a 'genuine option', James invites us to recognize the viability of religious faith – faith that is based upon our hopes rather than our fears – and faith which is necessary for those hopes to be realized. He argues that under the conditions specified, we have a 'right to believe', to

[34] 'The Will to Believe', p. 33.

[35] Gordon, p. 17.

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proceed 'at our own risk' to live in accordance with what religion in the broadest sense proclaims and promises. It is not a proclamation regarding an external creator, but rather regarding life that is 'worth living'.

Department of Philosophy,
Muhlenberg College,
Allentown
Pennsylvania 18104

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