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WILLIAM JAMES AND THE LOGIC OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

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The central focus of the writings of William James is the attempt to construct a religious position that is viable in a modern scientific age. Thus, he offers the lectures on pragmatism as the statement of a program that can “remain religious” while preserving “the richest intimacy with facts.” The final statement of his metaphysics of radical empiricism ends with the expression of hope that it will lead “a new era of religion as well as philosophy” in which “empiricism once again [will] become associated with religion.”

No doubt it was the religious thrust of James’s pragmatism and his metaphysics of radical empiricism which, at least in part, generated widespread opposition from critics. His unorthodox blend of tender-minded religious aspiration with a tough-minded empirical orientation did not seem convincing either to the prevailing religious orthodoxies or to the logical and positivistic climate of the scientific community. These heterogeneous forces joined momentarily in dismissing James’s religious observations as unphilosophical appeals to blind feeling that lacked any technical rigor. Bertrand Russell’s latter comments were typical of many; James’s religious position seemed to him “to be designed to afford a specious but sophistical defense of certain religious dogmas—a defense, moreover, which no whole-hearted believer could accept.”

James considered the charge that his position lacked philosophical rigor to be unjust. He was convinced that the point of view presented in the popular essays of The Will To Believe was “capable of being argued in as technical a shape as any one can desire.” He noted that his “free and easy and personal way of writing, especially in Pragmatism,” had made him “an object of loathing to many respectable academic minds”; he observed that he was “tired of awakening that feeling” and longed to present his philosophy in a form that was “impersonal and exact.” The collection of occasional responses to critics gathered together in The Meaning of Truth shows that his position can be defended

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with some degree of technical rigor. Often it is his critics who prove to be guilty of careless reading and simplistic interpretations of his intent. On the other hand, James also urged his critics to balance their interest in technical points of difficulty with an appreciation of his position as a new philosophical gestalt or weltanschauung. He argued that “the critic ought not to be too sharp and logic-chopping in his dealings with it, but should weigh it as a whole.” He considered that he was the spokesman for “one of those secular changes that come upon public opinion overnight” and which cannot be stopped, any more than a river can be stopped by planting a stick in the middle of its bed, simply by finding some single point of careless expression or apparent contradiction.  

In the following essay, I re-examine James’s religious position, taking seriously his claim that there is in it much more than the caricature of a manifesto for irrationalism that has frequently been assumed. I seek to discern the kind of technical rigor it may reveal, and the extent to which the underlying philosophical presuppositions of his system of thought as a whole render it more convincing. At the same time, I specify certain difficulties that remain, even on a sympathetic reading of his basic intent.

1. THE WILL TO BELIEVE AND THE LOGIC OF RELIGIOUS BELIEFS

James’s famous essay of 1896 entitled “The Will To Believe” has made most philosophers committed to the life of reason uneasy. He begins by calling it an “essay in justification of faith, a defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced.” To Russell, the conclusion of the argument is that “James wants people to be happy, and if belief in God makes them happy, let them believe in Him. This, so far, is only benevolence, not philosophy.”

Such judgments represent a too hasty response to the overtones of certain phrases like “will to believe” rather than to the basic intent of the essay. In point of fact, James’s motive is the exact opposite of a desire to defend religion by exempting it from rational scrutiny. As R. B. Perry notes, “His critics had accused him of advocating license in belief, whereas, on the contrary, his aim had been to formulate rules for belief.”

In the light of more recent philosophic styles, James’s approach to religious propositions can be most profitably compared at one crucial point to the “ordinary language” perspective that has stressed the flexibility of language and the varieties of ways it can function and be useful. James also wishes to recognize the semiotic diversities among the sciences, abstract logics, commonsense observations of the everyday world, aesthetic judgments, and moral valuations.

James is approaching religious assertions as one important type of human language; his attitude toward them actually shows him to be the opposite of a proponent of irrationalism. In a curious way, both the theologian who ignores the rational character of religious statements on the grounds that they are “mysterious” utterances of faith and the positivist who does the same because they are “meaningless” exercises in emotional exclamation end in a common obscurantist refusal to
submit religious statements to a rational analysis. James wants to subject these statements to intellectual scrutiny. As he puts it: these propositions should not "lie hid, each under its bushel, indulged-in quietly with friends. They ought to live in publicity, vying with each other."

To James, a rational scrutiny of one type of language, like that of religion, does not require the imposition on it of the criteria for meaning and truth implicit in a very different type of language, like that of science. Such an approach can only result in the distortion and impoverishment of the former. James proposes to find the standards of intelligibility and truth commitment within religious propositions themselves and then to note both points of similarity with and difference from the prestigious language of science.

James does not refer to "languages," "statements," or "propositions" as much as he does to "beliefs." There is an important advantage in his emphasis on this particular term which he has in common with most American pragmatists. By so doing, he stresses the integral connection between the concrete person using the language and what is affirmed through it. An ambiguity affects the term "belief," which is an asset rather than a defect. It refers both to "the psychic attitude in which our mind stands towards the proposition taken as a whole" and to the proposition itself. My belief is both what I believe and my commitment to the affirmation. But does this not introduce an unfortunate psychologism into an analysis of statements? Not according to such philosophers as P. F. Strawson, who makes a similar distinction between a statement and a sentence. The latter is an arrangement of words according to the rules of a particular syntax. But the arrangement only becomes a statement when it is used by someone to make an assertion. According to James, a logic of belief-statements requires a reference to someone who is committing himself to the belief that what is affirmed is so.

James points out the diversity of beliefs that purportedly reasonable men actually entertain. "Here, in this room, we all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for 'the doctrine of the immortal Monroe.'" Yet, in noting James's respect for "ordinary language" and common beliefs, we should not conclude that he thereby advocates a passive acceptance of any and every kind of belief gambit simply because it is "played." To him, beliefs must establish their rational "right" to be believed. Thus, James frequently expressed his regret that he had not entitled his famous essay "The Right To Believe," rather than "The Will To Believe," as closer to his basic intent. James is concerned with developing a "logic" of beliefs subjected to criticism, not of beliefs in their original pre-critical form. Yet this criticism must utilize principles congenial to the kind of statement in question, and not those derived from some very different kind of language structure.

Charles Peirce had written a brilliant essay in which he argued that the scientific method substantiated beliefs in a way far superior to the methods of tenacity, authority, or personal preference. James has high respect as any for the scientific method as one major technique by which beliefs are substantiated. But he holds that in the rich context of
our concrete existence, other reasonable methods also have their efficacy. He insists that in many areas of life, judgments are forced upon us: Shall I marry this person? Shall I support the war policies of my country and the "immortal Monroe"? Shall I adopt a religious stance? Although these questions cannot be decided by laboratory techniques, they need not be left to caprice. A practical logic of belief is possible which can enable me to be reasonable in these obscure yet humanly important areas of life and decision. Aristotle observed long ago that the mark of wisdom is to recognize the kind of clarity and logic that "the subject matter allows." This is the kind of rationality James seeks to advance.

Nevertheless, although James's credentials to rational respectability can be defended along these lines, doubt about them returns when his specific description of the logic of belief is examined. From the various essays of The Will To Believe volume, we may abstract the following three rules as a summary of the basic elements in the logic of religious belief, as James sees it:

1. A person has the rational right to believe in (i.e., act appropriately in response to) certain religious hypotheses, even on insufficient evidence, if they fulfill the following three conditions: (a) they do not contradict other well-established beliefs of our science or common sense, (b) they do not violate the canons of our logic, (c) the person needs the belief to achieve some fundamental life-purpose.

2. One ought to believe certain religious hypotheses because the beliefs are heuristic and melioristic; that is, the belief itself helps one to discover its truth and in some instances helps to create the conditions of its truth.

3. Certain religious propositions are forced options concerning which, since they also involve live and momentous stakes, it is reasonable to opt in their favor.

These three rules present an interesting gradation from the recognition of a rational possibility of belief (one may believe under certain conditions), through a more firm recommendation (one "ought" to believe), to a final declaration that almost, but not quite, maintains the necessity of belief (in the third, the option, if not the choice of sides of the alternative, is forced). The first rule represents the heart of James's position. Its validity must be established if his analysis is to have any cogency. The other two might be rejected and the first still be viable. If the first is invalid, the others lose their force. Also, the major difficulties critics have found in James's position are all implicit in the first. Therefore, our major attention will now be focused on it.

II. BELIEF, NEED, AND BEHAVIOR

If the reader finds the first rule questionable as summarized above, it must appear even more dubious in the form of James's original expressions. In "The Will to Belive," he uses italics to emphasize his central thesis: "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." It is easy to see why many have interpreted this thesis as it stands alone to be the espousal of the sacrifice of reason on the altar of blind emotion and passion. However, if the critic attempts to be
responsive to James's underlying intent, he will discover that such statements are more convincing in the total context of the discussions in which they appear. James has a flair for stating his positions in ways that will attract attention and hopefully focus it on crucial but neglected aspects of the phenomenon he is considering. Such a technique has the defect of generating misunderstandings; its virtue lies in the possibility that it may cause us to look at old realities in new ways and perhaps make fresh discoveries.

This same thesis had already been presented in James's *Psychology*, in the important chapter on "The Perception of Reality." There he had argued that "that theory will be most generally believed which, besides offering us objects able to account satisfactorily for our sensible experience, also offers those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs."  

One important point in James's argument as stated here has been summarized in the (a) and (b) sections of the first rule. James is very clear that the right to believe does not include beliefs that contradict known facts gained by commonsense observations or scientific observation. Neither should it violate the canons of our logic with its criteria for coherence and consistency. In one popular essay, he refers in a loose manner to three "departments" of human nature: the first apprehends the facts of the sensible world; the second organizes the data according to conceptual and logical categories; the third aspires after those ideals which our valuating nature has discerned. James argues that all three aspects have their place in establishing a belief, but the third can be considered only when it does not violate the established beliefs and norms of the first two. This principle, about which James is very clear and insistent, is one important factor that enables him to avoid caprice and whim while remaining open to emotional considerations. Departments 1 and 2 are criteria that restrict the number of religious options to those of a certain kind only. James nowhere suggests that one has the right to believe anything he wishes, no matter what the evidence may reveal.

But surely the merely negative factor that a belief does not contradict factual or logical deliveries is not enough to warrant our adopting it. The most controversial part and the heart of James's analysis is the rule that a human need can be the reasonable and positive basis for the adoption of a belief. To appreciate James's point, we must consider (a) more exactly what he means by a "need" and (b) the specific kinds of religious beliefs that he has in mind.

The first point to note is that James does not mean by "need" the desire for a state of subjective happiness, a condition of private euphoria. Although he is continually accused of arguing that if a belief makes a person happy he has a right to believe it, James consistently and repeatedly denies that this is his meaning. The vital need to which James refers is not primarily a subjective state of feeling, though it may be connected with such; it is rather a basic, human, biological need for constructive and value-oriented action.

This point is probably the crucial one in understanding James's position accurately. To James, the human being is fundamentally a behavioral organism. In his *Psychology*, he affirms that
“consciousness is in its very nature impulsive. We do not have a sensation in a thought and then have to add something dynamic to it to get a movement. Every pulse of feeling which we have is the correlate of some neural activity that is already on its way to instigate a movement.”

Thus, in working out his religious position, James makes use of the theory of the triadic form of the reflex arc. Afferent nerves bring impulses to the brain; there, an image or concept is formed that elicits an efferent discharge, resulting in some kind of action. “In plainer English, perception and thinking are only there for behavior’s sake.”

In such a context, we can see why a value and need might be relevant to the question of belief. If James’s Psychology is correct on this part, then it may be doubted whether there exists a neutral truth established in a disinterested manner without reference to need and desire. James does not deny that certain important beliefs about the world are established through scientific methods that are, in a sense, disinterested. Nevertheless, the detachment is a relative factor, since, in his view, all conceptual activity has a teleological, value-oriented aspect. For example, concepts themselves are teleological instruments that represent a form or character that has interested us and thus been distinguished from the innumerable other characters we have neglected. The “essence” of anything is simply that aspect of it that we have recognized as most important for our interests and concerns. Furthermore, rationality itself represents a kind of “sentiment” or need, first to distinguish parts, and then to simplify our heterogeneous knowledge of the parts by some sort of useful pattern implicit in it as a whole. We choose those unifying systems, whether in mathematics or physics, that are most useful for our purposes. Aesthetic factors of elegance and beauty also affect our decision to use one theoretic formula rather than another. If these are significant aspects of conceptual activity which are readily acknowledged by leading practitioners in every intellectual and scientific field, why, then, in the special case of religion, where values are certainly an integral aspect of the subject matter, should axiological considerations be rejected as a cue to rational suicide?

All beliefs are connected with the need for action. Thus, Peirce noted that
pragmatism is scarcely more than a corollary of Alexandre Bain’s definition of belief as “that upon which a man is prepared to act.” James calls a hypothesis anything that may “be proposed to our belief” and that is measured by our “willingness to act”; indeed, “there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.”

The next step in developing a sympathetic interpretation of James’s intention is to consider more exactly the kinds of religious hypotheses he has in mind to which his rules apply. One confusing aspect of James’s discussion is his failure to make sufficiently clear a distinction between two kinds of religious propositions that are implicit in his discussion. First are very specific statements about particular religious entities, events, and situations. For example, James is very interested in religion as the belief “in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained.” He also defends belief in the existence of a finite God. James picturesquely calls such beliefs a kind of “piecemeal supernaturalism.”

However, what confuses the issue is that James’s most pertinent arguments more often refer to a second kind of religious proposition that he calls “generic and broad.” In this second sense, religion is defined, as in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, as a “total reaction upon life.” He argues that “total reactions are different from causal reactions. . . . To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree everyone possesses.” This total reaction is “our more or less dumb sense of what life honestly and deeply means . . . it is our individual way of just seeing and feeling the total push and pressure of the cosmos.” When conceptualized, it becomes a philosophy of life, a metaphysics, an overview, a weltanschauung.

James wrote his essay on “The Will To Believe” in partial response to an article by W. K. Clifford entitled “The Ethics of Belief.” One reason the two articles do not significantly engage with each other is that Clifford deals mainly with religious propositions of the “piecemeal” type, such as Muhammad’s purported inspiration by Allah, whereas James responds mainly with examples of the “total reaction” kind. Although James applies his logic of belief to both kinds of propositions, he is more convincing when the “total reaction” variety is considered.

In many of the related essays and lectures composed during the last thirty years of his life, an identical contrast and differentiation between two alternative “total reaction” beliefs emerge; the terms differ but the underlying axiological option is the same: materialism or theism, determinism or tychism, pessimism or optimism, vanity or purpose, blind mechanism or teleology, fatalism or meliorism, universe as it or universe as thou.

According to one position, the fundamental structure of the world is alien to the deepest purposes and aspirations that emerge within human experience. These profound needs and desires are but a minor incident within a mechanical system of atoms and void that moves with predetermined inevitability toward further conditions in which the existence of our subjective ideals is destroyed and eliminated. Our intimate powers are denied “all relevancy in uni-
versal affairs.” According to the other, there is some measure of “intimacy” between our aspirations and the course of the world: “the inmost nature of the reality is congenial to powers” that man possesses. *

Man’s struggles to realize his ideals are not destined by a structural necessity in things to be ultimately nullified. It is the alternative between a universe without prospective human hopes and one with “promise.”

Now, beliefs are rules of actions, and these two opposing hypotheses indicate two opposing kinds of behavior. “Of the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds. I myself believe, of course, that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief.”

Since this question of differences in courses of action is crucial to James’s argument, one could wish that he had elaborated the distinguishing features more exactly. Nevertheless, the basic features are clear. On the one hand is the typical kind of behavior of the moral subjectivist, who holds his values to be matters of subjective preference only, with no relation to the world as a whole. To him, “when his moral feelings are at war with the facts about him, [he] is always free to seek harmony by toning down the sensitivity of the feelings. Being mere data, neither good nor evil in themselves, he may pervert them or lull them to sleep by any means at his command.” He represents an “easy-going mood” in which the avoidance of present ill takes precedence over the attainment of greater ideals. On the other hand, the objective moralist, who holds that there is some kind of essential congruence between his moral goals and the cosmos as a whole, will have greater motive to adhere to his ideals in the face of adversity. He is thus an exponent of the “strenuous mood” which is capable of the sacrifice of present pleasures for a future value of higher worth.

James is aware of a diverse number of nuances possible within each ideal type. The easy-going mood can allow for some striving after future ideals. The strenuous mood can on occasion relax. But in the situation of crisis, the essential difference between the two is revealed: “in commonplace matters all moral schools agree. It is only in the lonely emergencies of life that our creed is tested: then routine maxims fail and we fall back on our gods.” Then we discover that “Anaesthesia is the watchword of the moral sceptic brought to bay and put to his trumps. Energy is that of the moralist.”

This recognition of the specific kind of need and belief James has in mind helps to defend his argument against some of the more obvious objections against it. Not any casual need, but this basic need for value-oriented action, is the paramount aspect in James’s intent. To see why he should consider it reasonable that such a need can be the basis of belief, we must note his conviction that certain pessimistic over-beliefs can have an inhibiting effect upon behavior. If our total response to the world reveals it as a mechanical “it,” incongruous with our purposes and ideals, we may, he feels, be led to the paralysis and anesthesia of all motive
and energy for constructive action. "In nightmare we have motives to act, but no power; here we have powers, but no motives. A nameless unheimlichkeit comes over us at the thought of there being nothing eternal in our final purposes, in the objects of those loves and aspirations which are our deepest energies." The logic of belief is a kind of therapy; more important than any positive overview with which it may provide the practitioner is its negative function of freeing the mind from the inhibitions of certain unnecessary and paralyzing rules. Clifford, for example, has argued that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." But to James, belief means action. If I am restricted from a certain optimistic overbelief, I am restricted also from a certain strenuous stance that can pervade all my specific actions and give them a distinctive impetus and propulsion. James argues that the logic of belief must allow one in some instances to adhere to a belief that has not yet been established by sufficient objective evidence (but never one that contradicts a sufficiently established truth), if such a belief will release the springs of constructive action. A reason that kills the biological vitality in which it operates can hardly be reasonable. To James, the right to religious belief under the conditions indicated is the more rational rule.

III. BELIEF AND MEANING

It is not sufficiently emphasized that James's account of religious beliefs contains more than an instructive account of belief in truth. It also contains a suggestive theory of religious meaning. A common objection to the kind of total reactions to the world and the overbelief they elicit, which have just been indicated, is that such references are essentially meaningless except in some extremely vague, emotive sense. James is acutely aware of this problem and offers an intriguing solution to it.

His solution is closely connected with his general theory of pragmatism, which was first stated as a theory of meaning. In Peirce’s original statement in 1878, it was a method to achieve a certain degree of clearness in certain kinds of scientific ideas. James’s restatement of it in 1898 also emphasized this aspect: "To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object... we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception of these effects... is then for us the whole of our conception of the object."

The meaning of a concept is found then through some consequent action of the one making the intention. For example, in Peirce’s scientific example, the meaning of “the hardness of a diamond” includes the action I might perform in using it to cut glass. All meanings indicate some kind of behavioral act or class of actions which is the terminus of the intention.

One clarifying point concerning pragmatism both as a theory of meaning and of truth must here be noted. Pragmatism does not obliterate the theoretical aspect of human behavior. Actions are operations taking place in time, but these can be mental acts, like logical thinking, as well as physical acts, like pushing an object about in space. In either case, the meaning of a concept is found in some further activity, whether mental or physical, determined by the concept in question.
Furthermore, pragmatism does not encourage the mere fact of activity as an end in itself; on the contrary, the action must be purposive; it must be the kind specified by the meaning of the idea in question. Thus a meaning must be particular, definite, and distinct. Here is a kind of nominalism, but James's main concern is to insist, not that only single things and events are meaningful and real, but rather that every meaningful intention indicates some condition that can be differentiated from others. James's theory of meaning is closely allied to a "contrast" theory. A meaning must "make a difference," that is, it must point to some difference in concrete fact or conduct consequent on that fact.\(^{42}\)

With these considerations as background, let us consider James's application of these principles to the question of the meaning of religious beliefs (i.e., total reactions to the world). James is, of course, acutely aware of the emotive aspect of such beliefs. He had gone through a personal crisis of despair and once, for a period of time, was haunted by the image of a patient he had seen in an asylum "with greenish skin, entirely idiotic." He had felt a "horrible dread at the pit of my stomach" and known the feeling, like a "revelation, that 'that shape am I . . . potentially.'" After this, the "universe" was "changed."\(^{43}\)

But are such total reactions, whether positive or negative, only emotive? A note written by James in 1873 offers an illuminating answer. "Religion in its most abstract expression may be defined as the affirmation that all is not vanity. The empiricist can easily sneer at such a formula as being empty through its universality, and ask you to cash it by its concrete filling—which you may not be able to do, for nothing can well be harder. Yet as a practical fact its meaning is so distinct, that when used as a premise in a life a whole character may be imparted to the life by it. It, like so many other universal concepts, is a truth of orientation, serving not to define an end, but to determine a direction."\(^{44}\)

Thus, James argues in "The Will To Believe" that axiological judgments about the "worth of life" and the final "goodness of the world" are more than emotive, poetic, or affective exclamations. They are cognitive judgments conveying a meaning: "an enraptured man and a dreary-feeling man are not simply aware of their subjective states; if they were, the force of their feelings would all evaporate. Both believe there is outward cause why they feel as they do: either, 'It is a glad world! How good life is!' or, 'What a loathsome tedium is existence!' Any philosophy which annihilates the validity of the reference by explaining away its objects or translating them into terms of no emotional pertinency, leaves the mind with little to care or act for."\(^{45}\) Thus: "Please remember that optimism and pessimism are definitions of the world, and that our own reactions on the world, small as they are in bulk, are integral parts of the whole thing and necessarily help to determine the definition."\(^{46}\)

A philosophy like James's is able to make more "sense" out of such utterances than is a "picture theory" of meaning that considers a meaning to be some kind of mental form seen by the mind's eye. Overviews as total axiological responses to the world disclose no clear image and hence seem, in such a perspective, meaningless. But a prag-
matic account, finding meaning in behavioral responses, can surely be broad enough to recognize the "meaningfulness" of responses that eventuate in such distinctive qualities of strenuous, easy-going, or paralyzed activity. James's solution to the question of meaning is one of the most significant and enduring parts of his analysis.

IV. BELIEF, HYPOTHESIS, AND TRUTH

The major source of resistance to James's logic of belief is the association of it with a theory of truth. Even if James's argument can establish the meaningfulness of a belief, the doubt remains as to whether the need to believe that some aspect of the universe is congruent with my axiological energies offers any significant indication that the universe is, in fact, so congruent with my personal aspirations.

To clarify James's position on this issue, we should note that his analysis of belief in The Will To Believe volume is more concerned with rules for the selection of reasonable hypotheses than it is with the question of truth, though the latter problem is not absent. The question of selecting hypotheses for rational investigation is an extremely important, though neglected, one. Peirce wanted to develop a section of logic called by him "abduction," which would be devoted to the problem of establishing rules for deciding which hypotheses are worth the energy of serious investigation to determine their truth or falsity. James's logic of belief is basically a set of rules for the selection of meaningful and important religious proposals worth attending to for their possible truth value.

James makes this point clear in a letter written in 1907: "As regards the 'Will to Believe' matter, it should not complicate the question of what we mean by truth. Truth is constituted by verification, actual or possible, and beliefs, however reached, have to be verified before they can count as true. The question whether we have a right to believe anything before verification concerns not the constitution of truth but the policy of belief; it is usually poor policy to believe what isn't verified; but sometimes the belief produces verification." 47

Many common objections to James's position are unjust because they fail to take into account his appreciation of the diversity among the kinds of beliefs that may be entertained. The term itself is essentially ambiguous. On the one hand, a belief seems to indicate the lowest level of certainty, as when we contrast "truly knowing" something with "merely believing" it. On the other hand, to believe also conveys the highest pitch of personal commitment to the affirmation in question, as in the recitation of a religious credo beginning with the words "I believe." To "believe" can mean merely to entertain a proposal as a living hypothesis that might be true, or it can mean to be extremely certain that it is in fact true.

Too often, it is assumed that James means by "belief" only a proposition about whose truth no doubts can be entertained. Thus, Russell accuses James of failing to recognize the gradations possible in our beliefs, but the fact is that James accepts the entire spectrum of belief possibilities, except for a final limit in which any belief is presumed to achieve apodictic certainty. 48 James is committed to his own version of Peirce's "fallibilism." "To know" is to have good reasons for believing that a given statement is true. It is never to have access to some in-
fallible intuition of our "truth" that eliminates the possibility of doubt. "To know is one thing, and to know for certain that we know is another."49

Again, critics have taken James to be advocating a stance of dogmatic tenacity in which a belief is adopted in an inflexible manner that resists any rational attempts to change it in the light of further evidence. Thus, Peirce noted that if "making up one's mind," "belief," and "faith" mean that "you are not going to be alert for indications that the moment has come to change your tactics, I think it ruinous in practice."50 But James makes very clear in a number of passages usually neglected by his critics that the religious beliefs he has in mind are to be held in an attitude open to change, if further experiences so indicate. At the end of the lectures on Pragmatism, he observes that we cannot yet decide which type of total religious response will finally be most viable to human beings. "Pragmatism has to postpone dogmatic answer. . . . The various over-beliefs of men, their several faith-ventures are in fact what are needed to bring the evidence in,"51 In the Preface to The Will To Believe, he refers to the need for "religious fermentation" and observes that "religious history proves that one hypothesis after another has worked ill, has crumbled with a widening knowledge of the world, and has lapsed from the minds of men. Some articles of faith, however, have maintained themselves through every vicissitude, and possess even more vitality today than ever before."52 The religious proposals that most interest James are usually presented as a question of maybe.53

In this connection, a related charge frequently brought against James should also be discarded. It is not the case that he has an extremely individualistic and nominalistic view of the final verification of religious belief in a single experience or in the life of a solitary believer. In one important passage, he adopts a very Peircian emphasis on the historical community of investigators which he applies to the religious situation. "For the sake of simplicity, I have written as if the verification might occur in the life of a single philosopher—which is manifestly untrue, since the theories still face each other, and the facts of the world give countenance to both. Rather we should expect that, in a question of this scope, the experience of the entire human race must make the verification, and that all the evidence will not be 'in' till the final integration of things, when the last man has had his say and contributed his share to the still unfinished x."54

When all this is duly noted, the question of truth does remain as an important aspect of James's account. A belief has implicit in its stance a claim that what is believed is true. James's policy of religious belief thus becomes involved with his pragmatic theory of truth. This theory is too complex to be fully considered here. It must suffice to note a few crucial features that affect the logic of religious belief. The theory claims that truth is a concrete relation existing between an idea or proposition and a particular experience or situation to which it points. This relation is not an abstract, timeless relation between an idea and reality. The copy theory of truth is clearly rejected. Thus, as James likes to note, truth is not a "saltatory" eternal leap between the idea as a picture and the reality which it resembles. It is a concrete "ambulatory" movement from an idea that predicts a certain experience to a
later moment in time, when that idea is verified by the occurrence of the predicted experiences. 56 "The verified leadings are certainly the originals and prototypes of the truth process." 56

Connected with this emphasis on leadings is the most controversial aspect of the theory. James defines the character of the kind of experiences that serve as the verifying terminus of an idea's leadings by such terms as "satisfactory" and "useful." Truth is called one species of the good. 57 As with James's religious theory, here also many patently absurd objections based on clumsy interpretations have been made. The "satisfaction" meant by James is clearly more than peace of mind, pleasure, or material well-being. The pragmatic rule specifies that the prospective terminus which, by "making a difference," serves as a truth criterion must be the sort precisely indicated by the particular idea being examined. A "practical" consequence is a particular one, but it can be mental, theoretical, conceptual, as well as physical, sensual, and concrete. 58 A mathematical idea is verified in some sort of "practical" mathematical operation, just as an idea about a physical thing is verified in some sort of "practical" physical activity. The point is that even a timeless (i.e., immutable) set of logical or mathematical relations takes time for the temporal knower to discover. He moves from propositions that initiate his inquiry to further definite operations of a logical sort that verify the "idea" in question, in a way formally analogous to that by which a small boy verifies the commonsense belief that a pudding is in the refrigerator when he goes there and eats it. There are as many ways of verifying a proposition as there are kinds of propositions, kinds of action, kinds of experience. 5 "To take account of" and to be 'satisfactory' are terms that admit of no definition, so many are the ways in which these requirements can be practically worked out. 59

However, in each case the "usefulness" that serves as a kind of criterion for truth is not an abstract recognition of any kind of usefulness that may happen to accompany an idea. The satisfactory quality is rather the definite successful operation that the idea has specifically indicated. Thus, even a proposition indicating an "unsatisfactory" fact (such as the death of my friend) is true if it enables me to operate in "satisfactory" ways with my situation (e.g., give help to his widow, no longer expect to meet him at certain places, etc.). The term "satisfaction" is also used to escape from the limitations of the copy theory of truth. As James finally works out his theory, he acknowledges the need for a true idea to "agree" with reality, but agreement now means any kind of successful operation with or on the reality that is indicated by it and not just a literal resemblance between a picture-image and its original. Behavior and action, not images in the mind, become the criteria of meaning and truth according to the pragmatic approach. "Ideas (which themselves are but parts of experience) become truth just in so far as they help us to get into satisfactory relations with other parts of our experience." 60

These considerations have special bearing on the second rule with which we summarized James's logic of religious belief to the effect that certain hypotheses ought to be believed because they are heuristic and melioristic. The pragmatic approach stresses the concrete relation between believer and
beliefs, between truth-affirmer and what is affirmed. The knower is not a passive spectator before a reality with which he has no concrete relations. His investigation actually affects and transforms the reality observed, just as physicists affect the paths of the atoms that they observe. If so, then it is possible that belief in certain religious hypotheses might actually affect the truth judgment that results.

First of all, in a heuristic sense, a hypothesis that the world is moral, or that it contains "promise," may cause us to notice more accurately the kind of data that will verify given proposals. Furthermore, one of James's favorite points is to contrast the attitude of overscrupulosity with a kind of courageous exuberance in the search for truth. The former seeks at all cost to avoid error and consequently would never venture to believe on insufficient evidence, no matter what the situation. The latter ventures to act on a creative hypothesis in spite of difficulty and doubt. The former makes few mistakes and runs the risk of failing to discover truths that its caution has caused it to ignore. The latter may make many errors, but also may uncover great truths about momentous matters.

Religious propositions may also affect truth in a stronger sense by performing a melioristic function. In some instances, they actually "make" the truth in question. For example, if I believe that the cosmos is a moral one, then I will attempt to behave morally in conformity with this thesis. But since I am myself a member of the cosmos, my actions contribute to a future state of the cosmos which will verify my hypothesis. Conversely, if I decide that "all is vanity," my own consequent vain life, as a part of this "all," will contribute to the eventual verification of that pessimistic proposal.

Can we go as far as to affirm that the adoption of a religious response has actually established the truth? In certain senses, James answers in the affirmative. Since pragmatic truth is defined as an idea leading to a specified operation with reality that is successful, why may not the criterion be applied in this instance? A religious hypothesis will not be designated as true simply because I need it or because it gives me a subjective feeling of peace. But if the hypothesis has succeeded in releasing the strenuous mood in a successful manner that is the kind of success specifically meant by the hypothesis, why is it not appropriate to apply a truth predicate to it? We have seen that this strenuous quality of action indicates a certain cognitive assertion about reality to which a predicate of truth or falsity is applicable. Further, if the hypothesis leads to successful action (not in the sense of accomplishing every particular desire and avoiding every discomfort, but in the sense of enabling us "to live with energy, though the energy bring pain"), does it not indicate that the particular affirmation has led to a truthful relation with reality? Granted, such "truth" is broad and vague; no clear conceptual images are involved. Yet, since meaning and truth are defined by behavior, surely the essential elements are present in this case.

Furthermore, since no truth in any field conveys apodictic certainty, but rather only an indication of satisfactory operations in a specified field, James is not embarrassed that his theory of religious truth retains the possibility of doubt and future correction. A religious proposition can be consid-
ered true to the extent that experiences corroborate its usefulness in leading to certain successful operations with reality. Since many such hypotheses are about the future "promise" of the world, they cannot be considered as finally verified until future actions have engaged with that "promise" in some future satisfactory experience. Until then, we can rather speak of these propositions as in process of becoming true, with the understanding that future events of a negative sort (promises not kept) could falsify as well as verify the proposal.

Many philosophers resist James's position and deny the intelligibility of such phrases as "becoming true" and "making true." They will insist that truths are already true independently of any inquiry or belief about them. For example, surely common sense and sound philosophy agree that the fact that a certain tree is growing in my backyard is already true, regardless of any human opinion or belief about it.

Such obvious objections are based on a refusal to accept (and perhaps to understand) some basic tenets of James's theory of truth. A fundamental technical point of some importance is to accept his distinction between truth as a property of propositions and the reality (or facts) to which the propositions lead. To James, a fact, a reality is not true; it simply is. Many objections to his position are simply stating the empty tautology that reality is what it is, that facts are what they are. James decidedly agrees. But truth refers to my propositions about that reality which will be judged true or false according to the kinds of leadings to future experience that they indicate.

Another technical point of some importance is a distinction between first-order statements about reality or facts and second-order statements about statements. The pragmatic theory of truth is a second-order theory about statements, not a first-order theory about reality. This point does not mean that a pragmatist can never use first-order propositions to mean the facts themselves. It does not mean that he cannot verify propositions which are about the world and not about his methodological analysis of his propositions. On this point, an examination of The Meaning of Truth will reveal that James is often more technically astute than his critics. For example, Russell argues that the pragmatic theory equates the proposition "it is true that other people exist" with "it is useful to believe that other people exist." Thus, pragmatists are accused of being unable ever to believe in the existence of any reality, but only in the utility of some of their ideas about reality.

James correctly points out that such objections involve a confusion of "different areas of discourse." The pragmatist does not examine theories about pragmatism; he uses these theories as tools with which to examine first-order beliefs about facts, realities, existing things. The proposition that some of these beliefs are useful is a second-order judgment, used as a criterion for applying to some propositions the predicate of being true. If this distinction between truth and reality is maintained together with the recognition of truth as a concrete process in time involving a particular thinker moving temporally from one set of ideas to other terminal experiences indicated by them, the most common objections to the notion of a "becoming" truth are dispelled. Further objections may be met by following James's advice of placing
his methodological theories within the context of his philosophy as a whole.

V. BELIEF AND CONCRETE METAPHYSICS

James observes, on several occasions, that both his pragmatism and his religious logic often seem unconvincing because they are presented in too abstract a form. In a way, James, the arch enemy of abstractions, has met a great deal of his resistance because he has attempted to play too well the intellectual game of his opponents. Thus, it is surprising to find James argue that difficulty in accepting the “will to believe” argument may be caused by failure to adhere to his “abstract logical point of view”; he calls this pragmatism a “speculative field of inquiry” that “abstracts from particular terms altogether.”

James has here noted an important characteristic about his methodological formulas; the reason such rules as “the true is the useful” or “one has the right to believe in some instances on the basis of vital needs” have a strange sound to many ears is that they represent a process that has achieved a high degree of abstraction from the particular propositions in which they find their application. We thus are introduced to the irony that the philosopher who has perhaps most celebrated the concrete has endured his greatest difficulties in communication because of his flirtations with abstractions. The problem which we cannot here solve is whether the abstract formalism of his rules was not a serious mistake in strategy. James, of course, felt that, as a philosopher, he was obliged to deal with problems in terms of useful general concepts. Yet it may be that the final judgment about James is not that he espoused too extreme an irrationalism but that he attempted to be too abstractly rational in a field where such formalism is not appropriate.

However, James’s basic point is that abstractions can be useful, as long as we always return to direct experience as the locus of all our meanings and truths. James’s greatness lies in his awareness of the concrete, which he considers to be the final support of his methodology and metaphysics. “The whole originality of pragmatism, the whole point of it, is its use of the concrete way of seeing.” In his Psychology, James provides a phenomenological description of immediate experience; he bypasses half-hearted empirical approaches of those who see experience as affairs of sense data only. Pervading the specific taste, odors, sights, sounds, and tactile feelings of sense experience are a “thickness, concreteness and individuality” where the “radical” stage of experience is directly felt.

Such experience reveals itself as comprising continuous relations (“on,” “by,” “with”) between entities as well as the discrete entities themselves. The most important one of these is the relation of temporal flow and continuity. The heart of James’s psychology and radical empiricism is his emphasis on the experience of temporal quality, transition, and change. He argues: “Within each of our personal histories, subject, object, interest, and purpose are continuous or may be continuous. Personal histories are processes of change in time, and the change itself is one of the things immediately experienced . . . to be a radical empiricist means to hold fast to this conjunctive relation of all other, for this is the strategic point.”

James presents a
brilliant description of consciousness and thought characterized as in "constant change" and "sensibly continuous." The metaphor of a "river" or "stream" is suggested to indicate the inexorable flow of thought, consciousness, subjective experience. Time is treated as a direct perception, not an intellectual inference made by examining discrete sense data placed in a series. It is the experience of the "spacious present," a feeling of duration moving from a past still remembered into a future that is anticipated. Thus: "The smallest pulse of consciousness, whatever else it be conscious of, is also consciousness of, is also consciousness of passing time. The tiniest feeling that we can possibly have involves for future reflection two sub-feelings, one earlier and the other later, and a sense of their continuous procession."  

Furthermore, James argues for the inclusion of affective quality in our description of the total texture of experience. Emotions, valuations, feeling-tones belong to experience as much as bare sense data and spatial relations. For example, our thoughts and states of consciousness are experienced as "beautiful, happy, intense, interesting, wise, idiotic, focal, marginal, insipid, confused, vague."  

Using experiential "models" from his *Psychology*, James then attempts to construct a general account of reality. "Reality" itself is a term that finds its meaning in the direct feel of experience itself. Further generalized description of this experience involves a pluralistic metaphysics of the myriad kinds of continuous relations meeting and affecting one another in various ways. Thus, the "each-form" takes precedence over the "all-form." Metaphysics must be "synechistic"; the universe is described as "strung-along" through relations of "continuity, contiguity, or concatenation."  

Because of the emphasis on time as the most radical texture of direct experience, the pluralism becomes a *tychism*: reality is changing, growing, at every moment. No feeling ever returns to consciousness exactly as it was before. The fundamental model of temporal flow thus gives us no basis for a static determinism in which the future is simply a different combination of static "atoms" already formed in the past. On the contrary, novelty emerges in every bud of temporal becoming. Change that means an advance in value is thus possible though not already a matter of necessity. The world is fluid; reality is in process; the future is the locus of creation. "What really exists is not things made but things in the making."  

If this overview and its radically empirical base is understood and accepted, the analysis of meaning, truth, and religious belief is rendered more convincing. James's most frequent rebuttal of his critics consists of an appeal to consider the concrete temporal texture of the truth relation. He quotes the epigram: "Wie Kommt es, . . . dass grad' die Reichsten in der Welt, Das meiste Geld besitzen?" The mistake here is obvious. "Wealth" does not exist apart from the concrete situation in which one possesses his gold. Similarly, truth is not an abstract relation of resemblance between a static idea and a reality; it exists only in the concrete movement in time between an idea causing a thinker to move temporally to a verifying experience predicted by the idea. The truth relation is thus a concrete triadic relation between concrete be-
liever, idea, and verifying consequence.89

The emphasis on concrete time in this analysis is important. If the reality of which pragmatic truth takes account is a static and finished state of affairs, then it is puzzling to speak of “making” either truth or reality. But if truth is a process taking time, and reality is a growing, changing flux, then we can see how our actions as part of reality affect both ourselves and those aspects of the process with which we are engaged. The axiological response to the world as a whole is not about the world as it is but as it is becoming.81

Direct experience has acquainted us with the rich flow of temporal becoming where we seem to “catch real fact in the making.” “Our acts, our turning places, where we seem to ourselves to make ourselves and grow, are the parts of the world to which we are closest, the parts of which our knowledge is the most intimate and complete. Why should we not take them at their face value? Why may they not be the actual turning-places and growing-places which they seem to be, of the world—why not the workshop of being . . . ?”82

James admits that from one point of view he seems to be advancing the following syllogism: “All good desires must be fulfilled; the desire to believe this proposition is a good desire; ergo this proposition must be believed.”83 James declares that, abstracted from the “concreteness of the believer’s vision,” the syllogism is a “naked absurdity.” But in concrete experiences where one senses temporal being in creative transition, questions like “Is life worth living at all? Is there any general meaning in all this cosmic weather? Is anything being permanently bought by all this suffering?” are meaningful and important.

The final appeal of the logic of belief is thus to a sense of the import of temporal experience felt at its most radical level of immediacy. Here we may feel: If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight,—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our ideals and faithfulness, are needed to redeem . . .

In the silence of our theories we . . . seem . . . to hear something like the pulse of being beat; and it is borne in upon us that the mere turning of the character, the dumb willingness to suffer and to serve this universe, is more than all theories about it put together.84

VI. CONCLUSION

The foregoing considerations are not presented to support the thesis that James has developed a completely viable position. For example, his formal approach to meaning and truth as a “property” of propositions has been corrected and transformed by contemporary discussions in ways he only dimly anticipates.85 I have attempted here a historical survey that has examined James’s argument according to his own basic categories of analysis; I have tried to show that some common attacks on him are not as devastating as they first appear. I have argued that the emphasis on the need for optimistic behavior in religious belief is an instructive point that still repays attention. In conclusion, I would like to note briefly some problems that remain even when James’s position is evaluated in terms of his own analysis and not from some more contemporary vantage point.

First, we should recall the distinction made between “piecemeal” reli-
gious hypotheses and broad generic ones. The latter have claimed our attention, but James also is vitally concerned with the former. However, the rules of belief summarized in this paper are not sufficient alone to develop a viable hypothesis about a particular God as "a wider self from which saving experiences flow in." Such a belief must be reinforced by an appeal to particular concrete religious experiences, rather than a "total response" to the world alone. These are the visions and mystical moments reported in religious traditions; they are also those experiences of failure and despair that have been followed by the acquisition of unexpected vitality and psychic strength. The main difficulty is that, as John Dewey demonstrates, the fact of such experiences can be accepted while a non-theistic interpretation can be applied to them.

The broad generic hypotheses of basic optimism or pessimism also have their difficulties. First, a nest of problems remains centered about the relation between a hypothesis and even a low-level belief. A hypothesis is an assertion that I consider worth testing in some way. Why say that I believe it even in a weak sense before I have properly tested it? Evidently James is distinguishing a certain kind of life or existential hypothesis in which even seriously to test the hypothesis involves belief actions. To verify the honesty of my friend or the goodness of the universe, I must act in a certain way. Since behavior is the test of belief, my active response along the lines indicated by the hypothesis indicates at least a degree of belief from the very beginning of the process.

Since James wants always to keep the concrete situation in mind, he feels that tentative hypothesis, belief, and action are intimately connected. Sharp distinctions among them can be misleading. It is along these lines that I think James would answer the astute criticism that he has confused the beneficial consequences of believing that an idea is true with the beneficial consequences of its being true. For a moment, James faltered and considered that such a criticism might be valid. However, James could argue that since the believer is a part of the very process being considered, such a distinction between his belief and the rest of the process is not finally significant. The believer who believes the truth is led to the verifying consequences. The "truth" is the concrete relation among all these elements.

But another important difficulty does involve the distinction between belief as the action and belief as a commitment to a conceptual hypothesis leading to the action. The contemporary mood sometimes resists James's argument by stressing the possibility of action without the need for verbal formulas articulating it. Thus, Dr. Rieu of Camus's novel fights the plague but does not consider this to indicate any "belief" at all, in the sense of a formal hypothesis about the universe. James's point seems to be that action indicates an affirmative belief whether or not it is articulated in words. But if so, why consider the problem at all on a conceptual level? James would certainly agree that beliefs as actions are more important than beliefs as words. I think his defense of his way of dealing with the issue is based on the need for philosophy as therapy. Man is a conceptual animal and certain kinds of action-inhibiting hypotheses—"the world is absurd," "the world is a dead machine,"
etc.—may be presented to his mind. James’s method is then needed to turn these pessimistic hypotheses into affirmative ones that will again release the springs of action.

The basic factual judgment that must be accepted if James’s argument is to make any sense at all is that man is a value-oriented animal and that thought and behavior are teleological. If this is admitted, James takes it for granted “as a matter of common observation that, of two competing views of the universe which in all other respects are equal, but of which the first denies some vital human need while the second satisfies it, the second will be favoured by sane men. . . . To choose the first view under such circumstances would be an ascetic act of self-denial of which no normal human being would be guilty.” To James, we have no right to believe an optimistic hypothesis that conflicts with known facts; but if two positions are equally tenable from a logical or factual point of view, is it rational not to choose the one that leads to constructive action?

Such is the argument which is suggestive but not irresistibly convincing. It could rather be argued that a useful rule for procedure in the truth inquiry is to be suspicious of what appeals to us; we might rather choose, like Sartre, to measure “the obvious truth of an idea by the displeasure it causes” us (The Words). And what if, as many contemporary thinkers contend, a strenuous life is possible while entertaining pessimistic overviews?

We must further note that James’s argument depends on his very high evaluation of morally strenuous action. Is there no value in detachment, in contemplative ecstasy, in a hang-loose ethics, in a game-theory of life? James summarizes these styles as “moral holidays”; he acknowledges the need for them, but cannot integrate them fully into his approach. He concludes: Within religion, emotion is apt to be tyrannical; but philosophy must favor the emotion that allies itself best with the whole body and drift of truths in sight. I conceive this to be the more strenuous type of emotion; but I have to admit that its inability to let loose quietistic raptures is a serious defect in the pluralistic philosophy I profess.

James, of course, is aware that his method does not enable the thinker to arrive at one optimistic hypothesis that is alone viable. In this particular realm of existential commitment to basic life-beliefs, rich diversity is inevitable. “Although we can lay down in advance the rule that a philosophy which utterly denies all fundamental ground for seriousness, for effort, for hope . . . can never succeed—one cannot, in advance, say what particular dose of hope . . . the definitely successful philosophy shall contain.” A useful task for a thinker sympathetic with James’s basic position would be a careful description of alternative life-stances more complete than those which James has himself provided.

These descriptions would include such types of response as an ethical naturalism that believes that an impersonal world has in it the grounds and cues for ethical action (Santayana), an absurdist ethics in which the recognition of death releases the springs of life-affirmation (Camus), and a Jamesian sense of a pluralistic universe creating a future promise. Hopefully it would make more clear than James does himself what is meant by religion’s thesis that “the best things are the
more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that . . . say the final word.” James is not clear whether he is referring to the material realization of our ideals in the finite future or to the transfiguration of these ideals in a “higher consciousness.”

The greatest difficulty in James’s position is to show in any meaningful way the degree of the serious response that any particular philosophy will elicit. Furthermore, since the sum of consequent actions is the total meaning of a hypothesis, two different religious positions (e.g., Brahminism or theism) resulting in identical qualities of action really mean the same. Why, then, cannot different believers work in reverse and, beginning with a commonly accepted ethical action, develop the same overbeliefs to articulate the behavior? In concrete experience, the differences of explanation are notorious.

Finally, one well-known aspect of James’s logic which we have summarized under our third rule needs serious qualification. On occasion, James seems to be arguing not only for the right to believe but for its necessity. He argues that if an option is live, not dead; forced, not avoidable; momentous, not trivial, then we must decide according to the policy of belief that has been described. But in his initial statement of this argument, James presents the necessity, the forcedness, as strictly logical in nature. “If I say ‘Either accept this truth or go without it,’ I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.”

But most of the options determined by these logical disjunctions are, in his own words, dead and trivial. It may well be that I have, in a sense, made a decision about every religious proposal that I have ignored through lack of conviction of its relevance. Simply because all options are on one side or the other of a logical dichotomy, they do not become forced in the sense James is really concerned about. James is, rather, referring to an existential necessity. The must is generated by need, aspiration, not logic, in our concrete experience of the temporal process moving and changing in value-oriented directions. Man cannot wait with scrupulous caution in an intellectual eternity of timeless contemplation until somehow a “bell” tolls the “truth” of one option or the other. “If a thinker had no stake in the unknown, no vital needs, to live or languish according to what the unseen world contained, a philosophical neutrality and refusal to believe either one way or the other would be his wisest cue.”

A comparison between George Santayana and James is instructive at this point. Santayana considers the pragmatic analysis of a person wondering if he can “jump a ditch.” What sense does it make to say that his belief that he can make it helps him to verify the belief by actually succeeding in the leap? Only, says Santayana, if the belief is a proper assessment of the width of the ditch and his own capabilities. Otherwise, he is a fool and will get a “ducking.” But James does not argue that the man’s belief automatically assures the success of his venture. If the facts, as ascertained by careful observation, show that it is physically impossible to make the leap successfully, no amount of “willing” can change the situation. If this example is to apply to James’s
analysis of the situation in which religious beliefs operate, we must rather imagine the ditch as being wide enough to make failure a real threat but narrow enough to make success a genuine possibility. In this case of objective uncertainty, the will to believe of the jumper might actually elicit that extra energy needed to bring about success.

And there is a further point. Santayana’s example makes the option to jump or not both trivial and avoidable. Why must he jump? If he does, failure means only a “ducking.” In James’s alternative example, he argues:

Suppose... that I am climbing in the Alps and have the ill-luck to work myself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Being without similar experience, I have no evidence of my ability to perform it successfully; but hope and confidence in myself make me sure I shall not miss my aim, and nerve my feet to execute what without those subjective emotions would perhaps have been impossible. But suppose that, on the contrary, the emotions of fear and mistrust preponderate, or suppose that, having just read the Ethics of Belief [by Clifford], I feel it would be sinful to act on an assumption unverified by previous experience,—why, then I shall hesitate so long that at last, exhausted and trembling, and launching myself in a moment of despair, I miss my foothold and roll into the abyss. . . . There are cases then where faith creates its own verification.97

James argues that the issue is momentous and forced. The threat of the “abyss,” not a “ducking,” is before us. The caution and circumspection that are virtues in the laboratory are not possible in this area of fundamental life orientation. Yet “I do not think that any one can accuse me of preaching reckless faith. I have preached the right of the individual to indulge his personal faith at his personal risk. I have discussed the kinds of risk; I have contended that none of us escape all of them; and I have only pleaded that it is better to face them open-eyed than to act as if we did not know them to be there.”98

NOTES
7. WB, pp. 1–2.
15. WB, p. 11.
20. WB, p. 114.
22. Ibid., I, p. 482.
23. Pragmatism, p. 142.
25. *WB*, p. 3.
32. *Pragmatism*, pp. 69, 79, 82; *WB*, pp. 27, 103, 149.
42. *Pragmatism*, p. 45.
44. *Thought*, II, 448.
45. *WB*, p. 86.
47. *Thought*, II, 249.
52. *WB*, p. xii.
60. *Pragmatism*, p. 49.
68. *WB*, p. 29.
71. *PU*, p. 280.
73. *Psychology*, pp. 224–90, 605–42.
75. *Essays*, p. 29.
76. *PU*, pp. 44, 325.
82. *Pragmatism*, p. 186.
84. *WB*, pp. 61, 141.
85. E.g., see the excellent collection of recent discussions in Rorty (ed.), esp. Part III.
87. *CER*, p. 428; *PU*, p. 307; *Varieties*, passim.
90. *MT*, p. xi.
92. *WB*, p. 89.
94. *WB*, p. 3.