

James on religious experience

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine the connection between William James's account of religious experience and his pragmatist theory of truth. I argue that, although there are other ways in which James's rich ideas about religious experience might be important, the pragmatist theory of truth is best if it keeps its distance from them.

Keywords: William James; pragmatism; religious experience; Charles S. Peirce; evidence.

1. *Introduction*

Perhaps it would be most charitable to view William James's thoughts on religious experience in the context in which he found himself: searching for meaning in a life that at times seemed to him devoid of it. He sought solace wherever he could, and his position was that if someone were to find it in religious experience, such solace is a validation of religious experience and knowledge. For that approach to James, I recommend John Kaag's new and excellent *American Philosophy: A Love Story* (Kaag 2016).

But James was also America's most famous philosopher at the turn of the 20th century and the most visible proponent of its home-grown philosophy called pragmatism. His thoughts on religious experience were melded with his thoughts on the pragmatist conception of truth and were the cause of many a philosopher giving up on the tradition. That is the entry point I will take in this paper, arguing, in effect, that the pragmatist account of truth and rationality can and should be prised away from James's account of religious experience. That would leave the other approach to James and his insights intact – the approach that mines James's account of religious experience for its insights into the human condition.

2. *Empiricism and religion*

In his best-known paper, “The Will to Believe”, James urges us to believe in accordance with the evidence, but not to go merely on the “literal evidence” or the “scientific evidence” (James 1979: 76, 80). The scientist, he says, thinks “that there is something called scientific evidence by waiting upon which they shall escape all danger of shipwreck in regard to truth”. But in thinking this, the scientist disregards all sorts of other kinds of evidence, and so it is unlikely he will reach the truth (7). James’s “radical empiricism” has it that “experiments of living” (to borrow Mill’s phrasing in *On Liberty*),¹ for instance, count as evidence. I shall argue that all this is well and good, as long as experiments in living are restricted to the domain for which they are appropriate: not as evidence for what exists, but as evidence for whether it is, say, good for the lives of human beings (to believe in God, to adopt a particular moral principle, or to organize our political lives in certain ways). We shall see that James was not always clear on this matter, and hence he left his position, and the reputation of pragmatism, in some peril.

James started to work on “The Will to Believe” in 1875, and eventually published it in 1896. The ideas that concerned him in this paper continued to occupy him until his death in 1910. I will mostly focus on how they manifested themselves in his 1901-1902 Gifford Lectures, delivered in Edinburgh, and published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1985). This book had as much, if not more, impact than “The Will to Believe”. It was widely read in Britain, where it had a deep and positive impact on Wittgenstein and a deep and negative impact on Russell, Moore and Ramsey. The cause of this divergence of opinion, I shall suggest, was in part due to the fact that James toggled between keeping experiments in living in their (important) place, and exporting them into territory in which they do not belong.

James approached the phenomenon of religious experience both from the perspective of the psychologist and the philosopher. He set out to rehabilitate the category of mystical experience as a legitimate way of perceiving. Just as a dog who reacts to the blowing of a whistle perceives a real noise, despite the fact that James cannot hear it, mystical and conversion experiences are legitimate and “important” perceptions for those who have them, despite the fact that James himself happens to be mostly shut out from them. He is talking here about a wide range of experiences: déjà-vu, trances, dreams, and the meditative and heightened states of consciousness cultivated by adherents to

¹ See Mill 1989 [1859]: 57. On Mill’s influence on James, both generally and with regard to “experiments of living”, see Proudfoot (2000: 54-55).

various religions. He also includes the paranormal and experiences had under the influence of alcohol and nitrous oxide, which “stimulate the mystical consciousness in an extraordinary degree” (1985: 307). He was active in the British and the American Society for Psychical Research.

James was ever committed to considering all forms of experience – ever committed to “sportsmanlike fair play in science” (1979: 9). He was dead set against any closed-minded approach. When this methodological point is what he is getting at, as it is in the following passage from “The Will to Believe”, it is eminently sensible:

Why do so few ‘scientists’ even look at the evidence for telepathy, so called? Because they think, as a leading biologist, now dead, once said to me, that even if such a thing were true, scientists ought to band together to keep it suppressed and concealed (1979: 19).

James’s insistence to instead follow the evidence wherever it leads is only empiricist good sense.

Another of his central aims was to show that if anything provides the motivation for and justification of religious belief, it is experience, not abstract rationalist philosophy. The God of classical metaphysics, which the rationalist offers the theist, is “a metaphysical monster” – “an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind” (1985: 353). We would do much better to look to the “religious propensities of man” (12). Again, we have a nice empiricist point here. Religious belief and knowledge, if it is to be had, flows from a special category of experience, resulting in various doctrines and beliefs. Religion, like science, proceeds from experience to theory.

James, however, saw a significant difference between religion and science as they happen to be conducted. Religious theory, unlike scientific theory, is almost inevitably no good. The scientist builds up a theory from experience, and keeps that theory subject to overthrow by further experience. In religion, what passes for a theory is a creed or doctrine or orthodoxy. The theory that stands up to all the experience is true. That is James’ pragmatist account of truth. But once *religious* experience gives us a creed or doctrine, that theory destroys what is important in religion: “when a religion has become an orthodoxy, its day of inwardness is over: the spring is dry” (270).²

Even more dry are all those “second-hand” religious believers who, in contrast to the “geniuses” who have first-hand experience, are merely brought up in, or inculcated into, a religion (397). Indeed, James thought that it is orthodoxy and inculcation that cause the bigotries of fundamentalism, not individu-

² Bacon (2017) is excellent on this point.

als who rely upon their first-hand experiences (271). What we need, to ward off these unwanted results and make for better religious theory, is a discipline which James calls “the science of religion”, the aim of which would be to more rigorously test religious beliefs with the experimental methods of the natural sciences. In this way, James thinks that we might overcome our bigotries and our differences by “offer [ing] mediation between different believers, and help to bring about consensus of opinion” (359). In other words, if we can make religion more responsive to experience, it will be a method of inquiry very much like science, giving us access to a reality that most other sciences do not address and being aimed at consensus, which seems to be how James conceives of truth.

3. *Religion, the world, and our needs*

It is important to keep in mind that James thinks that mystical experience is the province of the subconscious and is as telling for the perceiver as is the experience of ordinary, mundane consciousness. Indeed, he argues that our vision is limited by ordinary consciousness. We need to try to get beyond “the pretension of non-mystical states to be the sole and ultimate dictators of what we may believe” (1985: 338). But for James, mystical experience does not merely tell us something about our own subconscious. It tells us something about the world. At one juncture, for instance, we find him arguing that all religions believe in the same core tenets. As evidence of this “uniform deliverance”, he cites the ubiquity of a feeling of uneasiness, “a sense that there is *something wrong about us* as we naturally stand”, as well as the ostensibly universal belief that “*we are saved from the wrongness* by making proper connection with the higher powers” (400). The physical or “visible” world belongs to a largely-unseen “more spiritual universe”, from which, during prayer, “spiritual energy flows in and produces effects” in the physical world (382).

So on James’ view, mystical states “break down the authority of the non-mystical or rationalistic consciousness, based upon the understanding and the senses alone. They show it to be only one kind of consciousness” (335). Other kinds of consciousness provide access to other “kinds of truth”, some of which “relate to this world – visions of the future, the reading of hearts, the sudden understanding of texts, the knowledge of distant events” (325). Indeed, James thinks that “the most important revelations” are those that have “metaphysical significance” (308) – for instance, experiences of “God’s touches” (327). They relate to a world that goes beyond the earthly one. Mystical consciousness, that is, delivers us insights about the world, widely conceived.

James tangles matters further by asserting that our metaphysical conclusions

are tempered by our *needs*: “The gods we stand by are the gods we need and can use, the gods whose demands on us are reinforcements of our demands on ourselves and on one another” (266). Religious experience can change us for the better. For instance, it can aid in overcoming depression and addiction:

[It] is thus an absolute addition to the Subject’s range of life. It gives him a new sphere of power [...] This sort of happiness in the absolute and everlasting is what we find nowhere but in religion (46).

We are taken to a serious problem that afflicts James’s account of truth. Those needs and demands differ from person to person and change over time, and hence the truth-values of our religious doctrines or creeds also differ from person to person and change over time. The needs of what James calls the “healthy-minded”, who focus on good and doing good, are very unlike the needs of the “sick-souls” who focus on evil and damnation. To use a term that James employs in his book *Pragmatism*, matters seem rather plastic when it comes to assessing what religious claims to accept: “Any idea upon which we can ride [...] any idea that will carry us prosperously from any one part of our experience to any other part, linking things satisfactorily, working securely, simplifying, saving labor, is [...] true instrumentally (1975: 34). “Satisfactorily”, for James, “means more satisfactorily to ourselves, and individuals will emphasize their points of satisfaction differently. To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic” (35).

Again, this is fine if what we are inquiring into is what would help this or that person. But it is not fine if we are inquiring into whether there in fact is a God, or a hell or everlasting damnation. The consensus that might arise from the science of religion as James conceives it cannot, it seems, tell us about what exists. The problem of appropriate domain looms large. If the consensus is one about whether it would be good to believe in hell, we want to say that it is perfectly appropriate to bring the needs of human beings to bear on the question. If the consensus is that hell does in fact exist, then the needs of human beings are not relevant. We shall see that one reader of James – Frank Ramsey – argued that we cannot separate these questions, making an even larger problem loom large for James.

James is not unaware of the issue. He asks himself whether mystical experiences “furnish any warrant for the truth” of the conclusions to which they point or whether they merely seem to do so (1985: 335; emphasis omitted). His answer is that mystical states do indeed “open out the possibility of other orders of truth”. But he tempers this conclusion in three ways. First, “those who stand outside them” are not obligated to treat mystical experiences as authoritative. Such experiences license faith “so far as anything in us vitally

responds to them”, but they cannot require belief from those who do not have the mystical states themselves (335). This makes religion differ from other sciences, in that in science, we rely on the reports of those in the lab – we do not have to have the experiences ourselves. The second way James tempers his metaphysical conclusions is to say that religious experience offers “possibility and permission” to believe, not a duty to believe (339). This is the line he took in “The Will to Believe”.³ And finally, he says: “What immediately feels most ‘good’ is not always most ‘true’, when measured by the verdict of the rest of experience” (1985: 22). Indeed, he thinks the sick soul is more in tune to the rest of experience than the healthy soul. Given other things we know, depression might be the right response to our situation:

[M]ankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature’s portion. The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation (120).

He thinks we can conclude that the person who focuses on sadness might be getting “the best keys to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth” (136).

James thinks, though, that his conclusion that “God is real since he produces real effects” (407) is one in which he has weighed *all* the evidence, not just evidence such as what immediately feels good. It is clear, then, that James is right when he says the following: “If one should make a division of all thinkers into naturalists and supernaturalists, I should undoubtedly have to go [...] into the supernaturalist branch” (409). But he does not really tell us what that other kind of evidence amounts to. The warrants for religious belief seem to be all about need: “the uses of religion, its uses to the individual who has it, and the uses of the individual himself to the world, are the best arguments that truth is in it” (361). Matters are complicated by the fact that James sees that we find both the “mean” and the “noble” amongst the religious and the non-religious (383). That might lead one to think that there is no obvious practical advantage in being religious – religion does not obviously work best for humankind.

James strikes a similar set of discordant notes in the 1908 Hibbert Lectures, also given in Oxford, and published as *A Pluralistic Universe* (James 1977).

³ But he took this line only after being bullied into the weaker, more sensible, conclusion by Chauncey Wright. See Misak (2013: 62 ff.).

There he holds that “the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience”, and he reports that part of his aim in the lectures is “to unite empiricism with spiritualism” (Perry 1935, 2: 443). James’ position is that “[w]e have so many different businesses with nature that no one of them yields us an all-embracing clasp”, and so we find ourselves in the business of reconciling all of the types of experience that have us in their clasp, including religious experience (1977: 19). He says: “there *are* religious experiences of a specific nature [...] I think that they point with reasonable probability to the continuity of our consciousness with a wider spiritual environment from which the ordinary prudential man (who is the only man that scientific psychology, so called, takes cognizance of) is shut off” (135). In these lectures, he invokes a “faith-ladder”, the process by which a person’s epistemic stance toward a “conception of the world” moves (legitimately, in James’s view) from “it *might* be true” to “it would be *well if it were true*” to “it *shall be* as if true, for *you*” (148).

4. *Critical responses*

In 1903, the American psychologist James Leuba, writing in *The International Journal of Ethics*, argued against James’s view:

If [...] we are to abide by these conclusions, the judgment of absurdity and irrationality commonly passed by the ordinary consciousness upon mystical, insane, and drunken dreams would have to be declared altogether irrelevant, for the reason that they would belong to other aspects of consciousness. Each aspect of consciousness would be its own judge of reality (1903: 331).

Leuba’s argument is that as soon as statements are made, not merely about one’s own experience, but about the world – “that the ecstatic feelings are due to God’s descent into the believer; that Christ was actually, bodily, present; that the feelings of repose, of vastness, of illumination and the increased ethical power, imply the existence of a world of spiritual existences” – then they must be open to criticism. We can, for instance, use the “canons of logic” such as the “principle of logical contradiction”, and we can test mystical or drug-induced experiences against our ordinary experiences (1903: 331-334). We have seen that while James sometimes sees this, he is not consistent on the matter.

James friend and co-founder of pragmatism, C.S. Peirce, took James to task in a similar way. Peirce also wanted to have a broad account of experience, but he thought that there has to be some basis for separating the experiences that really do verify claims from those that do not. He argued in “A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God” (1910) that, while the belief in God has “a

commanding influence over the whole conduct of life of its believers”, that is not enough to give it empirical or pragmatic significance (Peirce 1935: 6, §§ 490 ff.). Commanding influences – consequences for the lives of believers – are not the sorts of consequences that can support such a belief. If statements about God are factual claims, asserting the existence of a particular entity, then they are subject to the kinds of requirements that all statements about the existence of entities are subject to – verification by the senses and the usual standards of belief and theory choice. James, on the other hand, when he asks himself “where the differences in fact which are due to God’s existence come in”, he offers “prayerful communion”, which “exerts an influence” by raising our personal energy and producing “regenerative effects” (1985: 411-412). These are, of course, internal effects on a person, not publicly observable effects on the world.

James’ “radical empiricism” has it that experience must determine what is true and what is rational to believe. Experience, he thinks, could result in our believing in supernatural phenomena – for instance, the subconscious or a vapour-like God. If this empiricism is taken merely as claiming that some conceivable experiential states could warrant some such conclusions, then every empiricist agrees. Consider the near-death experience of arch-positivist A.J. Ayer. The logical positivists thought that the hypothesis of an afterlife was verifiable – one just had to wait and see.⁴ Ayer concluded from his near-death experience that the proposition that consciousness continues after bodily death is potentially verifiable and that he might even have had some evidence for it. It thus admits of disinterested inquiry.⁵ But if James’s empiricism holds that experiences such as those had under the influence of drugs or in religious trances count as verification of claims about the supernatural, without any need for independent evidence of the reliability of such experiences, no other empiricist is going to agree.

Ayer’s predecessors in the British empiricist tradition, Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore and Frank Ramsey, also thought that James was misguided on these grounds. I will let Ramsey speak for them, as he was the most generous to pragmatism, being a card-carrying member himself. He says:

To say a man believes in hell means, according to the pragmatists that he avoids doing those things which would result in his being thrown into hell. Such conduct will be useful to the man if it really saves him from hell, but if there is no such place it will be a mere waste of opportunities for enjoyment. But besides this primary utility there are other ways in which such conduct may or may not be useful to the man or

⁴ See, e.g., Carnap (1963: 881). See Rosenthal (2004) for the background on Ayer’s experience.

⁵ See Rosenthal (2004: esp. 514).

others; the actions from which a belief in hell would cause him to abstain might bring disasters in their train either for him or for others even in this present life. But these other consequences of the belief, whether useful or not, are clearly not relevant to its propositional reference or truth [...] . William James [...] included explicitly these further kinds of utility and disutility, which must obviously be excluded if pragmatism is to have any plausibility, and thought that the truth of the belief in hell depended not on whether hell in fact existed but on whether it was on the whole useful for men to think it existed (Ramsey 1991: 91-92).

Wittgenstein, that great interlocutor of Ramsey, Russell, and Moore, half agreed with James on the matter of religion. He agreed that the rationalist God is a worthless invention of the scholarly mind, and that we could be saved from our wrongness. But the idea that religion might be subject to evidence and to inquiry was an anathema to him. In 1912, he wrote to Russell:

Whenever I have time I now read James's "Varieties of religious exp". This book does me a *lot* of good. I don't mean to say that I will be a saint soon, but I am not sure that it does not improve me a little in a way in which I would like to improve *very much*: namely I think that it helps me to get rid of the *Sorge* (in the sense in which Goethe used the word in the 2nd part of Faust) (McGuinness 2012: 30).

Wittgenstein thought that James' writing on religious experience was good for his soul – good for helping humanize him and for dealing with his despair. Many years later Wittgenstein commended *Varieties* to his friend Maurice Drury as "a book that helped me a lot at one time" (Drury 1984: 106). He told Drury that one must not try to "give some sort of philosophical justification of Christian beliefs, as if some sort of proof was needed" (Drury 1984: 102). The beauty of religions is grounded not in their rightly describing reality, but in their role as "the ways in which people express their religious feelings". It is James' exploration of the significance of religious ideas in personal life that attracts Wittgenstein.

What does not attract Wittgenstein is James's being "so impressed by the importance of these phenomena" that he adopts "the hypothesis which they so naturally suggest" (James 1985: 411-412). It is that kind of hypothesizing that was an anathema to Wittgenstein. Religious experience should be taken for what it can give us, personally, not as a font of wisdom about what exists or about what creed to adopt. We would still encounter the problems Ramsey identified – how to figure out what is good for us, or for humanity, without taking into account the metaphysical truths, or the truths about what really exists (hell for instance). But at least then the science of religion would be something potentially tractable, not completely intractable, as it must be if we rely on our needs and wants to guide us in our inquiries into what exists.

5. Conclusion

The classical American pragmatists found themselves at a turning point when it came to religious thought. They were in large part motivated to forge their new philosophy of pragmatism by Darwin's revolutionary ideas on the place of man in the world. Some of the founders of pragmatism, most strikingly, Chauncey Wright, were resolute atheists. Peirce was a believer, more than James. He did not want to exclude a belief in God – indeed, he tried hard to show that there was evidence for such a belief. But what distinguishes him from James is that Peirce saw that evidence could not be a matter of the belief in God being necessary for his (Peirce's) well-being or some other kind of completely subjective evidence. It had to be the usual kind of evidence that speaks for or against an existence claim. James dedicated the volume *The Will to Believe* to Peirce, and he repaid the kindness by writing to James that James's position amounted to "Oh, I could not believe so-and-so because I should be wretched if I did" (Peirce 1935: 5, § 377). Peirce thought that the evidence relevant for a belief in God could not be his own wretchedness if God turned out not to exist. He (vainly) tried to spell out some verifiable consequences for the world, if the hypothesis of God's existence is true. If there is to be evidence for the existence of God, it cannot be as James conceives it.

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