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Sensitive Truths and Sceptical Doubt

Henrik Rydenfelt

1 Introduction

For an essay of about 30 pages, William James' 'The Will to Believe' (1897) has resulted in much debate. Discussion on the exact nature of James' argument continues to occupy the pages of philosophical journals, and no consensus has been achieved about its merits. In what follows, I will first sketch a reading of James' 'will to believe' argument which maintains that James attempts to defend a *passional* decision to believe on *epistemic* (as opposed to either prudential or moral) grounds. Central to this reading is a premise of James' which maintains that there are claims the truth of or evidence for which is sensitive to our believing attitude towards those claims, and where a 'passional' decision to believe is thus required. I will then proceed to argue that James' examples of such 'sensitive truths' are problematic and insufficient for the purposes of his argument. Instead, as I will propose, the 'will to believe' argument is largely vulnerable to an objection first raised by Charles S. Peirce, who pointed out that the testing of a hypothesis does not require a believing attitude towards it.

While James' argument as such is not successful, as I will then attempt to show, there is an interesting case of belief where a *passional* decision such as that recommended by James appears to be called for: the belief that there is a reality independent of our thoughts, beliefs, wishes, and the like. In practice, this belief underlies the scientific project of experimentation itself. Thus doubt—such as that exhibited by the traditional epistemological sceptic—concerning it will render the project of (scientific) inquiry practically futile. Moreover, this issue bears an interesting analogy to the discussion of moral beliefs in 'The Will to Believe'. In James' view, there is a practical difference between the



1 'moralist' who believes that there is a moral order to the world
 2 independent of our ethical preferences and ideals—a notion which
 3 James connects with the 'religious hypothesis'—and the moral *sceptic*
 4 who doubts the reality of such an order. This difference lies, I will argue,
 5 in that the moral sceptic will not—analogously to his epistemological
 6 counterpart—engage in the project of improving his moral preferences,
 7 as he doubts the very possibility of their development. While not sen-
 8 sitive truths in the sense required for James' argument, the belief in
 9 an independent reality and the belief in the moral order of the world
 10 remain special cases of belief of central importance, where a 'passional'
 11 decision instead of any intellectual argument is our only response to
 12 sceptical doubt.
 13

14 2 A Reading of James' Argument

15
 16 The topic of James' essay is the relationship between belief and evidence.
 17 James sets out to contest the (evidentialist) view of W. K. Clifford,
 18 who in his 'Ethics of Belief' of 1879 argued that it is 'wrong always,
 19 everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient
 20 evidence'.¹ James does not intend to argue that our beliefs should not
 21 primarily be based on and conform to available evidence; instead, he
 22 wishes to question the universality of Clifford's position. The main
 23 thesis of James' essay is that in *some* cases, it is *not* wrong to believe
 24 without sufficient evidence, but quite the converse, we *should* do so:
 25 '*Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option*
 26 *between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its*
 27 *nature be decided on intellectual grounds.*'² This thesis is by its nature
 28 normative: it maintains that when faced by what James calls a 'genu-
 29 ine' option we have both the right *and* the duty to make our choice
 30 between belief and doubt without sufficient evidence. While James
 31 defends the entitlement to *choose* between doubt and belief, as doubt
 32 is our default condition, his argument in effect intends to show that
 33 in some cases we *may and should believe* without sufficient intellectual
 34 grounds, or evidence.

35 In addition to his requirement that passionate decisions to believe can
 36 only be made when evidence is unavailable, James poses three further
 37 conditions to an option that may be considered 'genuine' and open
 38 to the application of the 'will to believe' strategy.³ Firstly, the choice
 39 between doubt and belief must be *live*: both alternatives have to be
 40 appealing and possible to entertain. It has to be *forced*: there cannot
 41 be a third alternative. And it must be *momentous*: unique and important

1 consequences must result from it. In such cases, James argues that
 2 neither doubting nor believing is unequivocally recommendable but,
 3 rather, both are expressions of our passionate nature, the former simply
 4 placing the 'fear of [the hypothesis's] being in error' before the 'hope
 5 that it may be true'.⁴

6 An obvious criticism of James' position is that, even when faced
 7 with a genuine option, it is dubious whether and how we can *choose*
 8 to believe rather than doubt. We cannot, as many have pointed out,
 9 believe 'at will'. However, James' argument does not require that our
 10 choice is one involving a momentary decision to believe or doubt. In
 11 his view, the passionate decision to believe can be made only when one is
 12 already inclined to believe; and such a decision is by its nature a process:
 13 it is to set aside doubts about a live option which one is already prone
 14 to believe.

15 Assuming, then, that the choice between the two passionate attitudes
 16 is at least to an extent available to us, how are we to make that choice?
 17 It is important to notice that—contrary to widespread assumptions—
 18 James' argument in 'The Will to Believe' does not include much
 19 reference to the usefulness of religious belief. The popular view that
 20 James thinks we should believe in God without evidence because such
 21 belief is advantageous is not completely unfounded: suggestions of an
 22 argument of this sort can be found both in *The Varieties of Religious Belief*
 23 (1902) and, more explicitly, in *Pragmatism* (1907).⁵ Even in 'The Will to
 24 Believe', James does point out that religious belief entails a promise of
 25 a 'vital good' that will be lost unless one believes.⁶ However, this is far
 26 from the gist of James' argument. His defence of his normative claim
 27 does not rest on *prudential* considerations: he does not argue that we
 28 should believe rather than doubt because of the practical advantages of
 29 belief. Also, while James like Clifford before him does not draw a clear
 30 distinction between ethical and epistemic normativity, James does not
 31 argue that belief without sufficient evidence is recommendable because
 32 such belief, in some cases, leads to the ethically right, or morally more
 33 acceptable conduct (at least in any straightforward fashion).

34 Rather, James' argument is based on *epistemic* considerations. He
 35 argues for the justification of believing without evidence on the
 36 grounds that without initial belief, we may be forever severed from
 37 attaining a number of truths. In our intellectual life, James holds, we
 38 are faced with a choice between two maxims. Either we follow the rule
 39 'We must know the truth' or another, substantially different maxim, 'We
 40 must avoid error.'⁷ This may be called the first premise of his argument,
 41 which on the whole centres on the choice between these two maxims.

1 As James points out, in many cases, the two maxims will have the same
 2 results: 'believing truth' and 'shunning error' often coincide. However,
 3 the 'will to believe' argument requires that there is a practical differ-
 4 ence resulting from our choice of maxim. And indeed, James holds that
 5 sometimes by following the second maxim we end up shunning truth
 6 quite like by following the first we end up believing falsehoods. If we
 7 believe only what we have gathered evidence for, some truths will be
 8 left out; if we believe more, we are prone to believe what is not true.⁸

9 But so far, the maxims are at best on a par. Why should we in some
 10 cases follow the first rather than the second? James' second premise is
 11 that '*a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging*
 12 *certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an*
 13 *irrational rule*'.⁹ That is, if it can be shown that following some intellectual
 14 rule will result in our *not* attaining all truths attainable, it is reasonable
 15 to abandon that rule at least when it would be detrimental to our search
 16 for truth about some issue. Again, the rationality—and hence the norma-
 17 tive consideration—in question is epistemic rather than ethical or moral
 18 in nature. James wishes to show that we are *intellectually* better off by
 19 following the first maxim, at times giving our passionate nature the
 20 chance of adding to our inventories of belief. James' conclusion should
 21 hence be read as the expression of an *epistemic right and duty* to believe
 22 without sufficient evidence when truths would otherwise be lost.

23 The most central problem with James' second premise is that there
 24 appears to be no relevant asymmetry between the two intellectual
 25 rules. Namely, an opponent could easily formulate a *converse* premise:
 26 an intellectual rule which would lead to believing certain kinds of
 27 *falsehoods* without sufficient evidence would be an irrational rule. There
 28 is, one might argue, a similar right and duty to *doubt* in cases where
 29 falsehoods would otherwise continue to be believed. Accepting James'
 30 premise thus already entails an inclination towards one of the two
 31 choices of our 'passionate nature', that of the hope of gaining a truth
 32 rather than the fear of believing a falsehood. For James' argument to be
 33 successful, we will already need to be prepared to risk believing false-
 34 hoods, if that enables us to (potentially) believe all truths, rather than
 35 the converse. Here James appears to have no choice but to rely on the
 36 reader's willingness to take such a risk.

37 Finally, the third premise of James' argument is, as one might expect,
 38 that there indeed are cases where following the second maxim would
 39 prevent us from attaining some truths. This premise maintains that
 40 there are claims the truth of or evidence for which is in some way
 41 sensitive to initial belief in them. In some cases, James holds, beliefs

1 cannot be true without being believed: as he puts this idea elsewhere,
 2 'our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes*
 3 *the result come true*'.¹⁰ In other cases, he refers to the possibility that
 4 'evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypo-
 5 thesis half-way'.¹¹ Hence, doubting, according to James, can in some
 6 cases result in a permanent loss of truth. For this reason we should,
 7 at times, believe without evidence, or let our 'passional' nature decide
 8 for the believing attitude as the epistemically rational alternative. Rather
 9 than further contesting James' two other premises, as constructed here,
 10 it is this idea that the following criticism will concentrate on.

12 3 Sensitive Truths

14 For James' third premise to hold sway, it must be shown that, in some
 15 cases, belief is prerequisite for the truth of that belief itself, or that
 16 believing is prerequisite for the possibility of gathering evidence for the
 17 belief. That is, in some cases, belief has to be a *necessary* condition for
 18 making a claim true *or* obtaining evidence that supports it. Such truths
 19 sensitive to our attitudes ('sensitive truths' or henceforth STs) will thus
 20 need to fulfil either of the following two conditions:

- 22 (1) p is sensitive if believing that p is a necessary condition for the truth
 23 of p , or
 24 (2) p is sensitive if believing that p is a necessary condition for obtain-
 25 ing evidence that shows the truth of p .

27 In addition to serving James' argument, this idea is naturally of broader
 28 interest. If STs of the first sense exist, and we have the capacity of
 29 believing these STs, we are at times forced to *decide* whether one or
 30 another belief is true. If our belief can 'create the fact', as James holds,
 31 in many cases we will even face a choice of what to 'make true'.¹² And
 32 if STs of the second sense exist, our success in finding out truths may
 33 to a surprisingly large measure depend on what we are prone to believe
 34 without sufficient evidence, or what sort of ideas and hypotheses natu-
 35 rally suggest themselves to us as believing agents.

36 But are there such 'sensitive truths'? James' examples of what he
 37 claims to be STs include beliefs about the following:

- 39 (A) First-person capacities
 40 (B) Cooperation with others
 41 (C) Moral value

1 All of these examples rest heavily on the pragmatist idea that belief
 2 are habits or rules of action, each contributing differently to the way
 3 we will act at least in some conceivable circumstances. James does not
 4 equate the practical consequences of doubt (or the lack of belief) with
 5 *disbelief*: doubting *p* does not necessarily result in acting as if *p* were
 6 untrue, while disbelieving *p* (or the belief that not-*p*) does. However,
 7 he points out that doubting *p* will in many situations lead to action (or
 8 lack thereof) similar to that which results from disbelief. For example,
 9 doubting a religious hypothesis will lead us to act 'more or less as if reli-
 10 gion were *not* true',¹³ or, as James puts this point elsewhere, 'it is often
 11 practically impossible to distinguish doubt from dogmatic negation'.¹⁴
 12 On these grounds, James then argues that without the sort of *conduct*
 13 that results from believing *p*, we will be in some cases prevented from
 14 learning the truth of *p*.

15 Of cases of the first type, James' patent example is the belief of a
 16 mountain climber that she can leap over a wide gulf to save her own
 17 life. If she believes that she has the ability to make the jump, James
 18 argues, she will act unhesitatingly and succeed, in effect bringing
 19 about the truth of her belief. But if she doubts whether she can make
 20 it, she hesitates at the decisive moment, and fails—or she may even
 21 decide not to try the jump at all.¹⁵ Now, it is evidently the case that if
 22 we doubt whether we are capable of some action, and success in perform-
 23 ing that action is of great importance, we will not even attempt it. And
 24 as James points out, doubt and hesitation may turn out fatal, while a
 25 more trusting attitude can be of considerable aid.

26 Still, it is highly contentious whether such cases are STs in the first
 27 sense. Facts concerning one's capacities, after all, are not dependent on
 28 their *actualization* in some circumstances. Although doubt about one's
 29 ability to jump may at times result in one's not even trying a leap, the
 30 ability itself does not depend on whether one ever attempts. In other
 31 words, the *truth* about one's capacities does not hinge on one's beliefs
 32 about those capacities, despite the fact that some particular actions in
 33 particular situations may remain unperformed without such beliefs. Even
 34 if a lack of hesitation may turn out to be beneficial for one's purposes, it
 35 is not true that such a lack is invariably prerequisite to one's success, or
 36 even that doubt necessarily results in possibly fatal second-guessing.

37 In a similar vein, neither is the *belief* in one's capacity to jump over a
 38 cliff necessary for acquiring evidence for that capacity itself. In various
 39 conceivable scenarios (including ones with careful security measures
 40 in place) one may attempt the jump despite the fact one doubts
 41 whether one will succeed. Doubt itself—unlike utter disbelief—does not

1 necessarily result in a lack of serious attempt, even at great personal risk.
 2 The first type of cases then fail to be STs also in the second sense.

3 The second set of examples James considers, beliefs concerning social
 4 relations and cooperation, faces similar problems. James holds that in
 5 some cases, belief or 'faith' in the beliefs, actions or emotions of others
 6 is prerequisite for the truth of those beliefs. In 'The Will to Believe', he
 7 presents two (different) scenarios of this sort. In the first example, a
 8 person's belief in the amicability and liking of another may ultimately
 9 bring about the truth of that belief by modifying the first person's
 10 actions so that they are prone to result in such liking.¹⁶ But it is evident
 11 that this example fails to serve James' purposes: believing is certainly
 12 not a necessary condition for such a belief to be true. Another example
 13 concerns cooperation: a train full of passengers ends up being robbed
 14 'because the [passengers] cannot count on one another, while each pas-
 15 senger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot
 16 before anyone else backs him up'.¹⁷ While such situations would allow
 17 for a variety of analyses in terms of action and belief, for the purposes of
 18 James' argument it would be needed to show that beliefs about actions
 19 or beliefs of others are necessary for such action or belief to occur. In
 20 this example, again, at least the belief of any *individual* does not seem
 21 to be a necessary condition for its truth in the required sense. As in the
 22 first type of cases, even doubt about what others believe or how they are
 23 likely to act does not preclude spontaneous—albeit perhaps unusually
 24 courageous—cooperation. For this reason, such beliefs fail to be STs in
 25 the second sense, too: doubt over the attitudes, beliefs, and cooperation
 26 of others does not prevent one from acting. Rather, especially in cases
 27 such as that of the train robbery, doubt is an element of the bravery of
 28 the acting individual.

29 The reason for James' troubles is that, with both the first and the
 30 second set of examples, he appears to confound doubt—which as such
 31 does not exclude attempt, or experimentation—with disbelief, which
 32 would render *trying* practically unlikely to occur. Already in 1897,
 33 a criticism along these lines was proposed by Charles S. Peirce, to whom
 34 James dedicated his volume *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* that
 35 year. After having read 'The Will to Believe', Peirce made the following
 36 remark to James in a letter:

37
 38 If an opportunity occurs to do business with a man; and the success
 39 of it depends on his integrity, then if I decide to go into the transac-
 40 tion, I must go on the hypothesis he is an honest man, and there
 41 is no sense at all in halting between two lines of conduct. But that

1 won't prevent my collecting further evidence with haste and energy,
 2 because it may show me it is time to change my plan. That is the
 3 sort of 'faith' that seems useful. The hypothesis to be taken up is not
 4 necessarily a probable one. [...] You must have a consistent plan of
 5 procedure, and the hypothesis you try is the one which comes next
 6 in turn to be tried according to that plan.¹⁸

8 In effect, Peirce here describes a practical experiment on the hypothesis
 9 that the business partner is honest. As the example shows, such experi-
 10 mentation requires no belief in the truth of the hypothesis itself. We
 11 may be doubtful about the truth of a claim while nevertheless consider
 12 proceeding along the line of conduct that it suggests the most rational
 13 course of action. Peirce, as no contrary evidence is available, decides to
 14 act as if the business partner were honest, as that course of action is the
 15 most reasonable one in light of his (other) beliefs concerning his cir-
 16 cumstances. But the fact he does not fully *believe* in the businessman's
 17 integrity is shown by Peirce's being simultaneously engaged in gather-
 18 ing further evidence. In practical situations, genuine belief would rather
 19 render such inquiry futile: we do not waste time and effort investigating
 20 what we already do believe.

21 This is the case also in a more clearly *scientific* setting, where the test-
 22 ing of a hypothesis does not require belief in *that* hypothesis. Indeed,
 23 on the contrary, Peirce famously exclaimed that belief has no place
 24 in science.¹⁹ To be sure, taken as such this claim is something of an
 25 exaggeration: proving or disproving of a hypothesis is itself done with
 26 reliance on other theories—the beliefs which form the bedrock of that
 27 scientific practice at that time. But the point Peirce intends to make is
 28 that the pure scientist, seeking truth merely, does not believe in the
 29 hypothesis he is trying to prove; far rather, he often attempts to accu-
 30 mulate evidence against it.

31 The general problem of James' examples so far results from the prob-
 32 lematic idea that belief is *necessary* for some course of action ever to
 33 take place. As Peirce's example shows, no *particular* belief is a necessary
 34 condition for any *particular* action. As differing beliefs may result in
 35 similar actions in similar circumstances, doubt over a claim cannot bar
 36 us from testing and attempting, from finding out whether it is true. In
 37 a practical, everyday setting, our other beliefs may recommend a course
 38 of action despite our uncertainty and indeed doubt about the chances
 39 of that action attaining our aims. In scientific inquiry, this is even
 40 more pronouncedly the case: experimentation requires no belief in the
 41 hypothesis to be tested; if anything, the converse is usually the case.

4 Moral Beliefs and the 'Religious Hypothesis'

The third set of examples James discusses—moral beliefs, or beliefs about value—is more complex and also of more interest. Here James addresses questions of wider philosophical import, and his most general examples approach central issues in philosophy of religion, including those of the existence and nature of the divine. Understanding James' intricate position here, however, requires some attention to the details of his overall position. Firstly, there is James' account of moral claims. In 'The Will to Believe', James draws a clear distinction between moral beliefs and beliefs concerning facts. Moral questions are not 'questions of what sensibly exists, but what is good', and as such, they do not allow for 'sensible proof'.²⁰ This account receives its clearest statement in his earlier address, 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life' (1891), where James—anticipating the contemporary expressivist position in meta-ethics—maintains that our moral claims do not refer to properties in the world but are expressions of the desires or demands of 'sentient beings' such as ourselves. Secondly, James (in 'The Will to Believe') also draws a distinction between the 'moralist' and the moral sceptic. The former maintains that his moral claims (as expressions of his own desires and demands) can be further *met* by a moral order that exists in the world itself. It is due to this belief that the moralist, unlike the moral sceptic, who doubts such a view, thinks that our moral claims may be true.

James' examples of the third type of STs, exhibit James arguing that some moral claims are *made true* by our belief in them. In his other presentations and writings of the time he wrote 'The Will to Believe', James is particularly interested in showing how the *belief* that 'life is worth living' *makes* life worth living.²¹ 'Our own reactions on the world', James holds, is what may make life and the world '*from the moral point of view* [...] a success'.²² This claim is, however, immediately dubious. Naturally, our reactions to the world, motivated by *our* moral point of view, may make life and the world better *from* that point of view. But from the fact that we have strived for and even achieved a certain moral order in our world and society it does not follow that we *should* have done so in the first place—that there is anything in the world that would meet *those* exact demands. Any moral claim—however suspicious—might otherwise be 'made true' in this manner.

James also presents moral beliefs as the slightly more complex, second type of STs: he argues that our gaining evidence for moral claims is (at least sometimes) dependent on initial belief. In his early writings,

1 he appears to maintain that moral beliefs may be verified via the action
 2 that ensues of them, as moral conduct can ultimately lead to such
 3 results that he considers evidence for their truth. In the early piece, 'The
 4 Sentiment of Rationality' (1879, 1882), James describes this process of
 5 verification as follows:

6
 7 [T]he verification of the theory which you may hold as to the objec-
 8 tively moral character of the world can consist only in this—that if
 9 you proceed to act upon your theory it will be reversed by nothing
 10 that later turns up as your action's fruit; it will harmonize so well
 11 with the entire drift of experience that the latter will, as it were,
 12 adopt it, or at most give it an ampler interpretation, without obliging
 13 you in any way to change the essence of its formulation.²³

14
 15 But how are we to understand such 'verification'? A simplistic reading
 16 would have James here proposing that a moral view is 'verified' by being
 17 met by rewards of a kind. Such a view would obviously be both philo-
 18 sopherically and practically dubious. It is hardly the case that morally
 19 correct action leads to beneficial results (at least of any immediate sort).
 20 Quite the converse, moral action and its 'fruits' are notoriously often
 21 out of accord, with the best of intentions leading into the worst of
 22 results for the acting individual.

23 Surely, this is not the interpretation James intended. Rather, the
 24 gist of the matter for James does not concern the 'verification' of
 25 a particular moral view, but goes back to the more profound issue
 26 between the 'moralist' and the moral sceptic: whether or not there
 27 is a moral order to reality, which our moral preferences may (imper-
 28 fectly) reflect, in the first place. Throughout his writings, James'
 29 defence of the 'moralist' position oscillates between the idea that
 30 such an order may be actualized in the course of history as known to
 31 us and the notion that belief in such an order forces us to assume a
 32 further dimension to reality, our conduct 'terminating and eventuat-
 33 ing and bearing fruit somewhere in an unseen spiritual world'.²⁴ It is
 34 here that moral belief approaches religious belief, especially James'
 35 formulation of the *essence of religion* in 'The Will to Believe'—the pair
 36 of affirmations that 'the best things are the more eternal things' and
 37 that 'we are better off even now if we believe [the] first affirmation
 38 to be true'.²⁵

39 This essence of religion is the foundation of the pluralistic world-view
 40 that permeates James' later writings. Against the absolute idealist, James
 41 maintains that the world is not a ready-made, rational whole: instead,

1 our particular strivings can make a difference as to its future. Against
 2 the materialistic, scientific world-view, James argues that the world is
 3 not one without any rational order such that our actions may advance.
 4 God, in the pluralistic scheme, is perhaps a finite but powerful being,
 5 an important ally in our strivings, whose reality secures that the ideal
 6 and the 'eternal' moral order in some way remains, whatever turn actual
 7 history may take. From the perspective of the pluralistic thinker, their
 8 mutual differences aside, the absolutist and the materialist rather side
 9 with the moral *sceptic* by undermining the importance of our active
 10 participation in this development. For the pluralist, we may make a
 11 genuine difference: through our actions, the world *may* develop so that
 12 it reflects a higher moral order.

13 The exact connection between (the belief in) the reality of the moral
 14 order and (the belief in) the existence of a divine thinker is a formidable
 15 issue on its own right, and cannot be considered in any detail here. One
 16 question concerns whether James simply assimilates the moral order
 17 with the divine thinker itself: whether God, in this picture of things,
 18 simply *is* the moral order of the world. A more naturalistic interpreta-
 19 tion of the order itself may be suggested in an evolutionary vein, setting
 20 the two ideas more clearly apart. But when these two ideas are sepa-
 21 rated, another question concerns the fashion in which the moral order
 22 of the world itself entails (or implies) the existence of a divine thinker.
 23 For example, in his much debated piece, 'A Neglected Argument for
 24 the Reality of God' (1908) Peirce argued—among other things—that
 25 the order and growth of the universe *suggests* (but does not necessarily
 26 entail) the hypothesis of God's reality.²⁶

27 A problem for James' position, more relevant for the discussion
 28 at hand, ensues of the very distinction he draws between the moral
 29 sceptic, materialist and absolutist, on the one hand, and the plural-
 30 istic 'moralist' of his own vision, on the other. The former three, in
 31 their different ways, reject the pluralistic view that our strivings may
 32 make a difference as to the (moral) course of the world. But they all
 33 are similar to the Jamesian pluralist in that they *act* in accordance
 34 with their moral views (whatever those views may be). Importantly,
 35 James nowhere maintains that that the moral sceptic is refuted, or
 36 guilty of contradicting himself, by *acting* with moral intentions: it is
 37 merely a differing interpretation of how such action may be reflected
 38 in the order of the world that distinguishes the sceptic and the
 39 moralist. But what, then, is the genuine *practical* difference between
 40 accepting the pluralistic moralist view that James proposes and its
 41 alternatives?

1 The centrality of this issue is forcefully emphasized by James himself
 2 in connection with religious belief. On pragmatist grounds, if ‘such
 3 action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way
 4 different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis’, religious
 5 belief remains a ‘superfluity’ and the quarrel one of words merely.²⁷ At
 6 many points, however, it remains unclear what the relevant difference
 7 in conduct is supposed to amount to. James often suggests that the
 8 view he proposes, especially in contrast to that of the sceptic and the
 9 materialist, leads to a *strenuous mood*, which is a more serious attitude
 10 towards our strivings and their relevance to the course the world may
 11 take. But this change in mood or attitude, or emotional adjustment,
 12 while perhaps central to our view of life, appears to inspire no relevant
 13 change in conduct itself.

14 James’ difficulties in spelling out the practical consequences of
 15 moral and religious belief has important consequences on our original
 16 question: whether moral beliefs can be STs in the second sense, or
 17 presuppose initial belief in order for us to ever gain evidence for them.
 18 As James does not supply a view of what would count as evidence
 19 for a moral belief, it remains unclear what sort of conduct, on part of
 20 the believer, would be required to gain such evidence. In the absence
 21 of such an account, moral beliefs are not plausible cases of STs in
 22 the second sense. Moreover, this is the case even with the belief far more
 23 central to James’ discussion—the belief that there *is* moral order to the
 24 world and the related ‘religious hypothesis’. If the moral sceptic (as
 25 well as the absolutist and the materialist) and the Jamesian pluralist all
 26 engage in moral action, it remains open how this belief could be of any
 27 (necessary) aid in gaining evidence for the reality of the moral order.
 28 Indeed, in what follows, I will suggest that there *is* a salient practical dif-
 29 ference between the moralist and the moral sceptic, but this difference
 30 will not have implications as to our gaining evidence for the ‘moralist’
 31 position (or the ‘religious hypothesis’) itself.

32
 33 **5 Scepticism and (Moral) Science**
 34

35 The third premise of James’ argument in ‘The Will to Believe’, as
 36 construed here, requires that some truths are sensitive to our attitudes:
 37 either the truth of a claim, or our learning its truth, requires belief in
 38 that claim as its necessary condition. As we have seen, none of James’
 39 examples of such beliefs holds sway; indeed, it appears dubious that any
 40 truths are ‘sensitive’ in this manner. For this reason, James’ argument
 41 as such falters: it does not succeed in showing that sometimes the

1 believing attitude is recommendable on solid epistemic grounds. As we
 2 have noted, especially in connection with the examples James presents
 3 as cases of the second type of sensitive truths, the underlying reason for
 4 this problem is that doubt over a hypothesis—unlike, at least in most
 5 practical scenarios, straightforward disbelief—does not prevent us from
 6 testing and attempting. What, then, remains of the ‘will to believe’?

7 In what follows I will argue that there is an interesting case of belief
 8 which, while not a ‘sensitive truth’ in the sense James’ argument would
 9 require, is set apart from most others. This is the belief that there is
 10 a reality independent of us, which is prerequisite for the (scientific)
 11 practice of experimentation itself. As such, this belief plays a special
 12 and crucial role in our intellectual lives. While the testing of particular
 13 scientific hypotheses or practical beliefs does not require any particular
 14 belief, my suggestion here goes, a strategy akin to James’ ‘will to believe’
 15 may be our only response to overarching, *sceptical* doubt. Moreover, as
 16 I hope to show, this belief bears an important analogy to the case James
 17 considered, the belief that the world has a moral order.

18 Consider the pragmatist account of truth especially as presented by
 19 Peirce. In his famous pieces of 1877 and 1878, ‘The Fixation of Belief’
 20 and ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’, Peirce argued that there is only one
 21 method of the settlement of opinion that we will ultimately find satisfac-
 22 tory. Instead of rendering our beliefs dependent on subjective changes
 23 of view, this *scientific method* attempts to fix belief so that it accords with
 24 a reality independent of our opinions, hopes, wishes and the like. In
 25 practice, Peirce maintained, truth is the opinion that inquirers into the
 26 nature of such a reality would ultimately agree upon, and that further
 27 investigation would not bring into doubt.²⁸ This scientific method is the
 28 ‘empiricist’ attitude that James describes and assimilates his own view
 29 with in ‘The Will to Believe’: it gives up the notion of (immediately)
 30 achievable objective certitude, while retaining the belief that there is a
 31 truth which a systematic inquiry may approach. The realistic hypothesis
 32 that underlies the scientific method implies that there *is* truth (con-
 33 ceived of in the scientific fashion) attainable by inquiry.

34 The distinctive feature of the realistic hypothesis is that belief in
 35 it appears to play a special role in our intellectual lives, one which
 36 mere doubt is enough to undermine. Consider the case of the *epi-*
 37 *temological sceptic*, who doubts that his beliefs reflect anything in an
 38 independent reality. By analogy with the Jamesian moral sceptic’s view
 39 of moral preferences, he considers his beliefs as merely (a part of) the
 40 habits of action his conduct is based upon. (In the view I am ascrib-
 41 ing to them here, neither kind of sceptic thus *denies* that our beliefs or

1 moral preferences can be met by something in the world; they merely
 2 doubt that this is the case.) As we have seen, doubt over any particular
 3 hypothesis does not prevent us from obtaining evidence for or against
 4 it: when in doubt, we may always experiment. However—and this is the
 5 crucial point—the sceptic’s doubt over whether there is a reality that
 6 would respond to such experimentation would make the whole *point* of
 7 such experimentation practically dubious or futile. Why experiment at
 8 all, if one does not *believe* that experimentation may yield evidence for
 9 or against the hypothesis?

10 To be more precise, there is a relevant disanalogy between doubting
 11 a particular hypothesis and doubting the whole idea of experimenting
 12 itself. Doubt over a particular hypothesis leaves open the *possibility* of
 13 that hypothesis being true and, hence, allows for experimentation.
 14 However, doubt about whether there is an independent reality—in
 15 effect, doubt about truth itself, conceived of in the scientific fashion—
 16 makes such experimentation practically pointless. Obviously nothing
 17 prevents the sceptic from engaging in something analogous to scientific
 18 inquiry. But unlike the scientist in doubt over the truth of a hypothesis,
 19 the sceptic who doubts the feasibility of the acquisition of evidence
 20 (or the ‘existence’ of truth) itself has no real incentive to engage in
 21 experimentation of any kind. Viewed from the perspective of the
 22 scientific method, the belief in an independent reality is required for
 23 experimental inquiry to concretely take place.

24 Importantly, in the moral case, an analogous consideration presents
 25 itself. As we have seen, the moral sceptic, in doubting that our moral
 26 preferences can be met by reality, is not prevented from acting in
 27 accordance with his moral views. This was the reason why the belief in
 28 a moral order of the world does not appear to be a ‘sensitive truth’ in
 29 either of the senses required for James’ argument. However, moral scepticism
 30 appears to prevent the attempt of *revising* one’s moral preferences
 31 in accordance with an independent moral order. And for this reason,
 32 there indeed turns out to be a practical difference between (also) the
 33 *moral* sceptic and the Jamesian moralist.

34 James’ own writings include at least a suggestion of such a difference
 35 between the moralist (or those who are taken by the ‘strenuous mood’)
 36 and those doubtful of whether there is more to morality than our sub-
 37 jective preferences merely. In ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral
 38 Life’, James considers three fundamental questions of ethics, of which
 39 the last and the most difficult concerns the measure of our different
 40 demands, moral preferences, or ideals. We should first note that James’
 41 main answer to this *casuistic* question is that in optimal circumstances,

1 all our ideals are satisfied with the least harm done to the development
 2 of others. This Jamesian *Republic of Ends*, as we could call it, is a rather
 3 problematic response. For one thing, its measure of ideals is itself ques-
 4 tionable from the point of view of other ideals of measurement itself;
 5 for another, it is dubious that we could consistently maintain that any
 6 ideal or demand is as worthy of satisfaction as any other. Perhaps for
 7 reasons related to such problems, in his later writings, James never
 8 appears to repeat this 'republican' suggestion.

9 However, James' discussion of the casuistic question includes another
 10 strand of thought, which is more relevant to the issue at hand: his
 11 comparison of the development of ethics to that of physics. Here it is
 12 worth quoting James at length:

13
 14 [E]thical science is just like physical science, and instead of being
 15 deducible all at once from abstract principles, must simply bide its
 16 time, and be ready to revise its conclusions from day to day. The
 17 presumption of course, in both sciences, always is that the vulgarly
 18 accepted opinions are true, and the right casuistic order that which
 19 public opinion believes in; and surely it would be folly quite as great,
 20 in most of us, to strike out independently and to aim at originality
 21 in ethics as in physics. Every now and then, however, some one is
 22 born with the right to be original, and his revolutionary thought or
 23 action may bear prosperous fruit. He may replace old 'laws of nature'
 24 by better ones; he may, by breaking old moral rules in a certain place,
 25 bring in a total condition of things more ideal than would have
 26 followed had the rules been kept.²⁹

27
 28 The moral philosopher, in James' view, has to accept that moral thought
 29 itself is in development. While it is mostly recommendable to rest con-
 30 tent with the received ethical vision, or our moral common sense, the
 31 unearthing of new moral rules is possible in a manner analogous to the
 32 discovery of new natural laws. As I have argued, the sceptical position,
 33 by contrast, would disclose the notion of such development of moral
 34 preferences, or the casuistic scale itself: it would render *moral inquiry*
 35 practically pointless. (The extent to which the moral order itself implies
 36 a divine thinker is, as already noted, another complicated issue.)

37 This last point can be made differently by distinguishing two different
 38 understandings of the central pragmatist concept of *meliorism*. By that
 39 concept, James usually means the (pluralistic) idea that our actions may
 40 make the world a better place in accordance with our moral beliefs and
 41 preferences. But based on his idea of moral science, meliorism could

1 also be understood to imply that it is possible to *improve* our moral
 2 preferences themselves in light of the world's moral order. Aside of our
 3 conduct improving the world merely, here it is the world that improves
 4 our conduct. It is this second notion of meliorism that complete scepti-
 5 cism about such a moral order undermines; just like physical science,
 6 moral science requires initial belief in its core 'hypothesis'. Conceived of
 7 in the Jamesian fashion, our acceptance of this belief is dependent on a
 8 passional decision rather than a proof of an intellectual nature.

10 6 Conclusion

11
 12 By the epistemic reading of James' argument in 'The Will to Believe'
 13 presented here, James maintains that the passional attitude of believing
 14 without sufficient evidence must sometimes be followed in order for
 15 us to gain access to some truths. The success of the argument crucially
 16 depends on the claim that there are truths sensitive to our attitudes:
 17 such claims either the truth of which or evidence for which neces-
 18 sarily requires initial belief. But the three kinds of cases concerning
 19 first-person abilities, cooperation, and moral beliefs that James presents
 20 as examples fail to be 'sensitive' in either of these senses. Truth itself
 21 is hardly sensitive to our attitudes of belief and doubt; and evidence
 22 may be acquired without any belief in a scientific hypothesis or a prac-
 23 tical course of action to be tested and attempted. This, in a nutshell,
 24 is why the 'will to believe' argument is ultimately unsuccessful.

25 However, as I have suggested, there are special cases of belief where
 26 an analogue of James' 'will to believe' strategy is called for. These cases
 27 are not particular scientific hypotheses or practical beliefs, but rather
 28 the sort of beliefs that contest a globalized, *sceptical* doubt: the belief
 29 that there is an independent reality which may be the object of inquir-
 30 ies, and the belief that there is a moral order to the world. These beliefs
 31 are required for the meaningfulness of the project of inquiry, or the
 32 improvement of our beliefs and moral stances themselves. The sceptic—
 33 whether epistemological or moral—may obviously act on the *possibility*
 34 that there is an independent reality: as his view has been phrased here,
 35 this is something he does not *deny* but merely consistently *doubts*. In
 36 practice, however, without such belief, inquiry—whether scientific
 37 or moral, to the extent that these can be separated—does not get off
 38 the ground. As the epistemological or moral sceptic cannot, as James
 39 himself maintained, be shown to be wrong on intellectual grounds, in
 40 practice, recommending a 'passional decision' of the sort he envisioned
 41 remains our only response to such sceptical doubt.

Notes

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1. W. K. Clifford (1879) 'The Ethics of Belief' in *Lectures and Essays*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan), p. 186.
2. W. James (1979) *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), p. 20.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
5. W. James (1985) *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press); W. James (1975) *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), chapter 8.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 30.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 24–5, 30–1.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 31–2.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 53; cf. p. 29.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 32.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 53–4, 80.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 31.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
18. Letter from Peirce to James, March 13, 1897 (MS L 224).
19. C. S. Peirce (1998) 'Philosophy and the Conduct of Life' in *The Essential Peirce*, Vol. 2, ed. Peirce Edition Project (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press), p. 33.
20. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 27.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 52–6, 83–4.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 54–5.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 52; cf. p. 161.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 29–30.
26. C. S. Peirce (1998) 'A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God' in *The Essential Peirce*, Vol. 2, pp. 434–50.
27. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 32 footnote 4. Cf. James, *Varieties*, pp. 407–8.
28. C. S. Peirce 'The Fixation of Belief' and 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear' in *The Essential Peirce*, Vol. 1 (C. Kloesel and N. Houser, eds., Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 109–23 and 124–41, respectively.
29. James, *The Will to Believe*, p. 156.