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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 skeptic—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
‘moralist’ who believes that there is a moral order to the world independent of our ethical preferences and ideals—a notion which James connects with the ‘religious hypothesis’—and the moral sceptic who doubts the reality of such an order. This difference lies, I will argue, in that the moral sceptic will not— analogously to his epistemological counterpart—engage in the project of improving his moral preferences, as he doubts the very possibility of their development. While not sensitive truths in the sense required for James’ argument, the belief in an independent reality and the belief in the moral order of the world remain special cases of belief of central importance, where a ‘passional’ decision instead of any intellectual argument is our only response to sceptical doubt.

2 A Reading of James’ Argument

The topic of James’ essay is the relationship between belief and evidence. James sets out to contest the (evidentialist) view of W. K. Clifford, who in his ‘Ethics of Belief’ of 1879 argued that it is ‘wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence’.1 James does not intend to argue that our beliefs should not primarily be based on and conform to available evidence; instead, he wishes to question the universality of Clifford’s position. The main thesis of James’ essay is that in some cases, it is not wrong to believe without sufficient evidence, but quite the converse, we should do so: ‘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.’2 This thesis is by its nature normative: it maintains that when faced by what James calls a ‘genuine’ option we have both the right and the duty to make our choice between belief and doubt without sufficient evidence. While James defends the entitlement to choose between doubt and belief, as doubt is our default condition, his argument in effect intends to show that in some cases we may and should believe without sufficient intellectual grounds, or evidence.

In addition to his requirement that passional decisions to believe can only be made when evidence is unavailable, James poses three further conditions to an option that may be considered ‘genuine’ and open to the application of the ‘will to believe’ strategy.3 Firstly, the choice between doubt and belief must be live: both alternatives have to be appealing and possible to entertain. It has to be forced: there cannot be a third alternative. And it must be momentous: unique and important
consequences must result from it. In such cases, James argues that neither doubting nor believing is unequivocally recommendable but, rather, both are expressions of our passional nature, the former simply placing the ‘fear of [the hypothesis’s] being in error’ before the ‘hope that it may be true’.4 An obvious criticism of James’ position is that, even when faced with a genuine option, it is dubious whether and how we can choose to believe rather than doubt. We cannot, as many have pointed out, believe ‘at will’. However, James’ argument does not require that our choice is one involving a momentary decision to believe or doubt. In his view, the passional decision to believe can be made only when one is already inclined to believe; and such a decision is by its nature a process: it is to set aside doubts about a live option which one is already prone to believe.

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

Rather, James’ argument is based on epistemic considerations. He argues for the justification of believing without evidence on the grounds that without initial belief, we may be forever severed from attaining a number of truths. In our intellectual life, James holds, we are faced with a choice between two maxims. Either we follow the rule ‘We must know the truth’ or another, substantially different maxim, ‘We must avoid error.’7 This may be called the first premise of his argument, which on the whole centres on the choice between these two maxims.
As James points out, in many cases, the two maxims will have the same results: ‘believing truth’ and ‘shunning error’ often coincide. However, the ‘will to believe’ argument requires that there is a practical difference resulting from our choice of maxim. And indeed, James holds that sometimes by following the second maxim we end up shunning truth quite like by following the first we end up believing falsehoods. If we believe only what we have gathered evidence for, some truths will be left out; if we believe more, we are prone to believe what is not true.

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

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

Finally, the third premise of James’ argument is, as one might expect, that there indeed are cases where following the second maxim would prevent us from attaining some truths. This premise maintains that there are claims the truth of or evidence for which is in some way sensitive to initial belief in them. In some cases, James holds, beliefs
cannot be true without being believed: as he puts this idea elsewhere, ‘our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true’.\textsuperscript{10} In other cases, he refers to the possibility that ‘evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way’.\textsuperscript{11} Hence, doubting, according to James, can in some cases result in a permanent loss of truth. For this reason we should, at times, believe without evidence, or let our ‘passional’ nature decide for the believing attitude as the epistemically rational alternative. Rather than further contesting James’ two other premises, as constructed here, it is this idea that the following criticism will concentrate on.

3 Sensitive Truths

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

\begin{enumerate}
\item \( p \) is sensitive if believing that \( p \) is a necessary condition for the truth of \( p \), or
\item \( p \) is sensitive if believing that \( p \) is a necessary condition for obtaining evidence that shows the truth of \( p \).
\end{enumerate}

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

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

\begin{enumerate}
\item (A) First-person capacities
\item (B) Cooperation with others
\item (C) Moral value
\end{enumerate}
All of these examples rest heavily on the pragmatist idea that belief are habits or rules of action, each contributing differently to the way we will act at least in some conceivable circumstances. James does not equate the practical consequences of doubt (or the lack of belief) with disbelief: doubting $p$ does not necessarily result in acting as if $p$ were untrue, while disbelieving $p$ (or the belief that not-$p$) does. However, he points out that doubting $p$ will in many situations lead to action (or lack thereof) similar to that which results from disbelief. For example, doubting a religious hypothesis will lead us to act ‘more or less as if religion were not true’, or, as James puts this point elsewhere, ‘it is often practically impossible to distinguish doubt from dogmatic negation’. On these grounds, James then argues that without the sort of conduct that results from believing $p$, we will be in some cases prevented from learning the truth of $p$.

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

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

In a similar vein, neither is the belief in one’s capacity to jump over a cliff necessary for acquiring evidence for that capacity itself. In various conceivable scenarios (including ones with careful security measures in place) one may attempt the jump despite the fact one doubts whether one will succeed. Doubt itself—unlike utter disbelief—does not
necessarily result in a lack of serious attempt, even at great personal risk. The first type of cases then fail to be STs also in the second sense. The second set of examples James considers, beliefs concerning social relations and cooperation, faces similar problems. James holds that in some cases, belief or ‘faith’ in the beliefs, actions or emotions of others is prerequisite for the truth of those beliefs. In ‘The Will to Believe’, he presents two (different) scenarios of this sort. In the first example, a person’s belief in the amicability and liking of another may ultimately bring about the truth of that belief by modifying the first person’s actions so that they are prone to result in such liking.16 But it is evident that this example fails to serve James’ purposes: believing is certainly not a necessary condition for such a belief to be true. Another example concerns cooperation: a train full of passengers ends up being robbed ‘because the [passengers] cannot count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up’.17 While such situations would allow for a variety of analyses in terms of action and belief, for the purposes of James’ argument it would be needed to show that beliefs about actions or beliefs of others are necessary for such action or belief to occur. In this example, again, at least the belief of any individual does not seem to be a necessary condition for its truth in the required sense. As in the first type of cases, even doubt about what others believe or how they are likely to act does not preclude spontaneous—albeit perhaps unusually courageous—cooperation. For this reason, such beliefs fail to be STs in the second sense, too: doubt over the attitudes, beliefs, and cooperation of others does not prevent one from acting. Rather, especially in cases such as that of the train robbery, doubt is an element of the bravery of the acting individual.

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

If an opportunity occurs to do business with a man; and the success of it depends on his integrity, then if I decide to go into the transaction, I must go on the hypothesis he is an honest man, and there is no sense at all in halting between two lines of conduct. But that
won't prevent my collecting further evidence with haste and energy, because it may show me it is time to change my plan. That is the sort of 'faith' that seems useful. The hypothesis to be taken up is not necessarily a probable one. [...] You must have a consistent plan of procedure, and the hypothesis you try is the one which comes next in turn to be tried according to that plan.[18]

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

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

The general problem of James’ examples so far results from the problematic idea that belief is necessary for some course of action ever to take place. As Peirce’s example shows, no particular belief is a necessary condition for any particular action. As differing beliefs may result in similar actions in similar circumstances, doubt over a claim cannot bar us from testing and attempting, from finding out whether it is true. In a practical, everyday setting, our other beliefs may recommend a course of action despite our uncertainty and indeed doubt about the chances of that action attaining our aims. In scientific inquiry, this is even more pronouncedly the case: experimentation requires no belief in the 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'. 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. 'Our own reactions on the world', James holds, is what may make life and the world 'from the moral point of view [...] a success'. 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,
he appears to maintain that moral beliefs may be verified via the action
that ensues of them, as moral conduct can ultimately lead to such
results that he considers evidence for their truth. In the early piece, ‘The
Sentiment of Rationality’ (1879, 1882), James describes this process of
verification as follows:

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

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

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

This essence of religion is the foundation of the pluralistic world-view
that permeates James’ later writings. Against the absolute idealist, James
maintains that the world is not a ready-made, rational whole: instead,
our particular strivings can make a difference as to its future. Against
the materialistic, scientific world-view, James argues that the world is
not one without any rational order such that our actions may advance.
God, in the pluralistic scheme, is perhaps a finite but powerful being,
an important ally in our strivings, whose reality secures that the ideal
and the ‘eternal’ moral order in some way remains, whatever turn actual
history may take. From the perspective of the pluralistic thinker, their
mutual differences aside, the absolutist and the materialist rather side
with the moral sceptic by undermining the importance of our active
participation in this development. For the pluralist, we may make a
genuine difference: through our actions, the world may develop so that
it reflects a higher moral order.

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

A problem for James’ position, more relevant for the discussion
at hand, ensues of the very distinction he draws between the moral
sceptic, materialist and absolutist, on the one hand, and the plural-
istic ‘moralist’ of his own vision, on the other. The former three, in
their different ways, reject the pluralistic view that our strivings may
make a difference as to the (moral) course of the world. But they all
are similar to the Jamesian pluralist in that they act in accordance
with their moral views (whatever those views may be). Importantly,
James nowhere maintains that the moral sceptic is refuted, or
guilty of contradicting himself, by acting with moral intentions: it is
merely a differing interpretation of how such action may be reflected
in the order of the world that distinguishes the sceptic and the
moralist. But what, then, is the genuine practical difference between
accepting the pluralistic moralist view that James proposes and its
alternatives?
The centrality of this issue is forcefully emphasized by James himself in connection with religious belief. On pragmatist grounds, if ‘such action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis’, religious belief remains a ‘superfluity’ and the quarrel one of words merely. At many points, however, it remains unclear what the relevant difference in conduct is supposed to amount to. James often suggests that the view he proposes, especially in contrast to that of the sceptic and the materialist, leads to a *strenuous mood*, which is a more serious attitude towards our strivings and their relevance to the course the world may take. But this change in mood or attitude, or emotional adjustment, while perhaps central to our view of life, appears to inspire no relevant change in conduct itself.

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

5 Scepticism and (Moral) Science

The third premise of James’ argument in ‘The Will to Believe’, as construed here, requires that some truths are sensitive to our attitudes: either the truth of a claim, or our learning its truth, requires belief in that claim as its necessary condition. As we have seen, none of James’ examples of such beliefs holds sway; indeed, it appears dubious that any truths are ‘sensitive’ in this manner. For this reason, James’ argument as such falters: it does not succeed in showing that sometimes the
believing attitude is recommendable on solid epistemic grounds. As we have noted, especially in connection with the examples James presents as cases of the second type of sensitive truths, the underlying reason for this problem is that doubt over a hypothesis—unlike, at least in most practical scenarios, straightforward disbelief—does not prevent us from testing and attempting. What, then, remains of the ‘will to believe’?

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

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

The distinctive feature of the realistic hypothesis is that belief in it appears to play a special role in our intellectual lives, one which mere doubt is enough to undermine. Consider the case of the epistemological sceptic, who doubts that his beliefs reflect anything in an independent reality. By analogy with the Jamesian moral sceptic’s view of moral preferences, he considers his beliefs as merely (a part of) the habits of action his conduct is based upon. (In the view I am ascribing to them here, neither kind of sceptic thus denies that our beliefs or
moral preferences can be met by something in the world; they merely doubt that this is the case.) As we have seen, doubt over any particular hypothesis does not prevent us from obtaining evidence for or against it: when in doubt, we may always experiment. However—and this is the crucial point—the sceptic’s doubt over whether there is a reality that would respond to such experimentation would make the whole point of such experimentation practically dubious or futile. Why experiment at all, if one does not believe that experimentation may yield evidence for or against the hypothesis?

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

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

James’ own writings include at least a suggestion of such a difference between the moralist (or those who are taken by the ‘strenuous mood’) and those doubtful of whether there is more to morality than our subjective preferences merely. In ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’, James considers three fundamental questions of ethics, of which the last and the most difficult concerns the measure of our different demands, moral preferences, or ideals. We should first note that James’ main answer to this casuistic question is that in optimal circumstances,
all our ideals are satisfied with the least harm done to the development
of others. This Jamesian Republic of Ends, as we could call it, is a rather
problematic response. For one thing, its measure of ideals is itself ques-
tionable from the point of view of other ideals of measurement itself;
for another, it is dubious that we could consistently maintain that any
ideal or demand is as worthy of satisfaction as any other. Perhaps for
reasons related to such problems, in his later writings, James never
appears to repeat this ‘republican’ suggestion.

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

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

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

This last point can be made differently by distinguishing two different
understandings of the central pragmatist concept of meliorism. By that
concept, James usually means the (pluralistic) idea that our actions may
make the world a better place in accordance with our moral beliefs and
preferences. But based on his idea of moral science, meliorism could
also be understood to imply that it is possible to improve our moral preferences themselves in light of the world’s moral order. Aside of our conduct improving the world merely, here it is the world that improves our conduct. It is this second notion of meliorism that complete scepticism about such a moral order undermines; just like physical science, moral science requires initial belief in its core ‘hypothesis’. Conceived of in the Jamesian fashion, our acceptance of this belief is dependent on a passional decision rather than a proof of an intellectual nature.

6 Conclusion

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

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

4. Ibid., p. 30.
8. Ibid., pp. 24–5, 30–1.
10. Ibid., p. 53; cf. p. 29.
11. Ibid., p. 31.
12. Ibid., p. 29.
13. Ibid., p. 32.
15. Ibid., pp. 53–4, 80.
17. Ibid., p. 29.
18. Letter from Peirce to James, March 13, 1897 (MS L 224).
20. James, The Will to Believe, p. 27.
22. Ibid., pp. 54–5.
23. Ibid., p. 86.
29. James, The Will to Believe, p. 156.