

William James' 'The Will to Believe': A Contribution to the Theory of Decision-Making rather than to the Theory of Truth

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In the following, I will focus on one particular article of William James, his famous article 'The Will to Believe' (henceforth TWTB)<sup>1</sup>. My interpretation of James' article differs from others in that I take James to provide not so much a *positive* theory on religion. Rather, I read it as being, above all, a *negative* theory of religion. It seeks to undermine the *Opinio communis* on the issue. Concerning its *genre*, I read it as being similar to Karl Barth's famous 'Comment on the Letter to the Romans', second edition. Barth's point is here to undermine the then-dominant paradigm in theology, Liberal Theology.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, TWTB can be read as an attempt to undermine the then-dominant paradigm in philosophy. I will flesh out in the following what those paradigm consists of in the days TWTB was written, i.e. at the turn from the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Philosophy is characterized in those days by attempts to import the stringency and clarity used in logics and mathematics into the rest of the philosophical enterprise. An example of those attempts is analytical philosophy with its emphasis on the (logical) analysis of sentences, worked out by Bertrand Russell and George Edward Moore. The idea is to construe an exact language which eliminates the vagueness of ordinary language as well as philosophical language-up-to-that-point. A one-to-one relation between words and objects should be established, i.e. reference should be fixed unambiguously. The most ambitious attempt in this spirit is probably Russell's and Alfred North Whitehead's '*Principia Mathematica*', published from 1910-1913.

It is probably true that the most serious consequences of those attempts would be felt only some 20 years later, e.g. with Ludwig Wittgenstein's '*Tractatus*' and, still later, with the unmatched success of Logical Positivism. Yet, some of the groundbreaking work was done around the turn of the century already – for example, Russell's '*On Denoting*' was published as early as 1905<sup>3</sup>. And the spirit in which those philosophical movements were conducted

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<sup>1</sup> William JAMES, *The Will to Believe*, in: William JAMES, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Cambridge (1896) 1979, 13-33 (in the following abbreviated as 'TWTB').

<sup>2</sup> See e.g. DIRK-MARTIN GRUBE, *Reconstructing the Dialectics in Karl Barth's 'Epistle to the Romans': The role of transcendental arguments in theological theorizing*, in: *Bijdragen. International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 69/2, 2008, 127-146.

<sup>3</sup> See Bertrand RUSSELL, *On Denoting*, *Mind* 14 (1905), 479-93, reprinted in Russell, *Essays in Analysis*, 103-19.

must have been noticeable already at the turn of the century. For lack of a better term, let me summarize that spirit as that of '*scientism*'.

TWTB is in my reading a reaction to this spirit of scientism. In particular, it is evidentialism and intellectualism which James criticizes. As Barth's "Comment on the Letter to the Romans" reacts to the then-dominant paradigm of Liberal Theology, James' TWTB reacts to the then-dominant paradigm of scientism, in particular, to evidentialism and intellectualism. And as Barth overreacts at times in his fight against this seemingly overwhelming opponent, James overreacts at times in his fight against this seemingly overwhelming opponent<sup>4</sup>.

Reading TWTB in this fashion has a particular hermeneutical corollary: Rather than attempting to embed it within the greater whole of James' work, I will embed it in its philosophical context, characterised by the rise of scientism. Obviously, I do not mean to imply that there is something wrong with attempts to embed TWTB in the whole of James' work. Yet, as it is worthwhile to read Barth's Comment on the Letter to the Romans not so much within the whole of its work but, rather, within the intellectual horizon having emerged in Europe after World War I, it is worthwhile to read James' TWTB within the philosophical horizon at the turn of the century.

In this article, I will interpret James in this fashion by pitting him against evidentialism. This reading allows to draw a line to current discussions because evidentialism still implicitly or explicitly shapes the philosophical discourse in some contexts. Rydenfelt suggests that evidentialism à la Clifford is dead-wrong.<sup>5</sup> I agree. Yet, this does not mean that evidentialism should be neglected. For example, in the intellectual context I currently work in, the Dutch intellectual context, evidentialism still is a 'live' doctrine – as is probably the case in other intellectual contexts as well in which the intellectual parameters are set by the natural sciences. Thus, I regard attempts to criticize evidentialism not as beating a dead dog but to be relevant for the current discussion – and James, read in the way suggested below, is a valuable ally in this fight against evidentialism.

### ***1) Introduction***

James' defence of religion in TWTB is among the most ferociously attacked arguments there are. James is charged with promoting intellectual laziness, wishful thinking

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<sup>4</sup> This critical remark has to do with the provocative style of both arguments. That is, both arguments could have been cast in much less provocative terminology without loss of substance. Yet, my critique refers to the style only – as far as TWTB's argument is concerned, I wholeheartedly agree with it, provided that it is reconstructed properly.

<sup>5</sup> See ... in this volume.

and the like. Not only notorious critics of religion, such as Russell, are highly critical of James but also people being generally sympathetic to religion, such as John Hick<sup>6</sup>.

There are several reasons for the ferociousness of that critique. Among others, James' provocative style in TWTB contributes to it<sup>7</sup>. But what fuels the resentments most is probably the assumption that James tries to provide an argument to the effect that the will can make religious claims true. His critics take James to argue that we can use the will or, worse, passion to make us believe that religious claims are true, whereas truth is understood more or less along the lines of a classical correspondence theory of truth.

In line with many current James-interpreters, I think that this criticism is mistaken. The reason is that, at least, in this article, James does not target the issue of truth. TWTB can and should be read as *not* contributing to the theory of truth.

But then the question rises to what theory it *does* make a contribution. On this point, opinions differ. It has to be acknowledged that answering positively what James' contribution consists of is more difficult than ruling out the mistaken assumption that he contributes to the theory of truth. The reason is that this loosely woven article can be read in different ways. For example, the reading that he suggests that it is 'impossible to distinguish sharply between intellectual and non-intellectual reasons in the practice of human decision-making' since both are 'reciprocally contained in one another', as Sami Pihlström has suggested<sup>8</sup> can be supported from the text.

However, I will follow a slightly different line here. This has to do with the above mentioned approach according to which I try not so much to embed TWTB within James' anthropology or even within his overall philosophy but, rather, to embed it in the intellectual context of the time in which it was written and draw consequences for current theorizing from there. My suggestion is to interpret James as arguing that it is legitimate under certain circumstances to invoke non-intellectual resources once our intellectual resources are exhausted. This being the case, he contributes to questions of *entitlement or the theory of decision-making*, i.e. to the question as to whether we are justified or entitled to make certain decisions regarding religious issues. I will flesh out that point in the following.

## **2. The function of the 'logical intellect'**

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<sup>6</sup> See Bertrand RUSSELL, William James' Conception of Truth, in: RUSSELL Essays, 112-130 (see also RUSSELL, Essays, 79-111), John HICK, Faith and Knowledge, Ithaca 1966, 35-44, John HICK, Philosophy of Religion, Prentice Hall, NJ, (1963) 1990, 59-60.

<sup>7</sup> TWTB grew out of an address delivered originally to the Yale and Brown University Clubs. It is written to be presented orally, often paying more attention to the effect of the argument rather than to its systematic analysis.

<sup>8</sup> Sami PIHLSTRÖM, Pragmatism and Philosophical Anthropology: Understanding our Human Life in a Human World, New York, Washington, D.C./Baltimore, et al., 122.

In TWTB, James wants to provide ‘a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced’<sup>9</sup>. Here, James criticizes the universal pretensions of people arguing that the ‘logical intellect’ is the only true judge in religious and related matters. Against them, James contends that it can be legitimate to invoke ‘non-intellectual’ resources, such as will or passion, when it comes to judging religious belief.

What is the point of introducing the notion of ‘intellectualism’ at this point? James does not explicitly answer this question and our reconstruction of his intentions should thus go beyond what he explicitly says. I think that the introduction of intellectualism cannot be accounted for if we do not assume that it is linked with evidentialism. Put more straightforwardly, *James regards the evidentialist to be an intellectualist*, whereas the evidentialist insists on evidence as being the sole ground for adopting a belief. According to James, when the evidentialist insists on the provision of evidence, he has only intellectual evidence in mind. For the evidentialist, there is no such thing as non-intellectual evidence. The use of will, passion, and the like is excluded on *a priori* grounds.

But what if the intellectual evidence for and against a given case is equal, asks James. In some cases, we can leave it at that and walk away from the issue. But in other cases, this is impossible. And religious belief is among those cases. What is at stake in the decision to believe or unbelieve is of such importance that remaining neutral is out of the question. The evidentialist suggestion that if there is insufficient evidence for religious belief we should simply walk away from it is not convincing. Above all, the evidentialist making such a suggestion has no right to occupy the ‘high-grounds’ regarding belief-acquisition. His suggestion is not based upon purely intellectual, ‘rational’, considerations but upon a sort of passion as well, *viz. upon the passionate fear of being mistaken*. Thus, from a meta-epistemological perspective, the person invoking passion to the effect of hoping that religious belief is true is no worse off than the evidentialist sceptic.

Thus, contrary to what is often assumed James does not advocate a general hostility towards ‘intellectualist’ reason. Nor does he provide an all-out legitimation for abrogating intellectual reason in favour of emotions or the will. Rather, he argues with the special characteristics of the situation at hand, in this case the religious beliefs at hand. Only in situations such as the one of religious belief are we entitled to invoke non-intellectual resources, such as will<sup>10</sup> or passion, when being intellectually uncertain. And the evidentialist

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<sup>9</sup> JAMES (see above, f.1), 13.

<sup>10</sup> See M. Gail HAMNER, *American Pragmatism*, Oxford 2003, 126vv, for how James’ emphasis upon the will emerges from his engagement with the German and Scottish psychology of the day.

denying this possibility deprives us unwarrantedly of valuable resources. This complex set of conditions should be kept in mind when evaluating the strength of James' argument.

### ***3. Religion as a genuine option***

Crucial for the following reconstruction is James' use of the notion of a 'genuine option'. He defines an 'option' as a decision between two hypotheses. A '*genuine option*' is an umbrella-notion that embraces three different sorts of decision-situations: Only if the decisions involved in it are 'live' rather than 'dead', 'forced' rather than 'avoidable' and 'momentous' rather than 'trivial', an option is a genuine one.<sup>11</sup>

The point of those specifications can be characterized for our purposes here as follows: A 'genuine option' is a situation in which making a decision is of crucial importance while *not deciding is not an option*. That is to say, a genuine option is a decision-situation in which the stakes involved are very high but from which you cannot walk away; rather, you *have to* decide one way or the other.

James' emphasis on genuine options functions as a restraint on the use of the justificatory strategy employed in TWTB. He argues that the strategy employed in justifying religious belief is not open to just *any* sort of belief but works only in case genuine options are at stake. Since the religious beliefs he has in mind *are* genuine options, this particular strategy works in this case but not in others. In short, within the overall strategy of the argument, *invoking the notion of a genuine option has the function to exclude an arbitrary usage of the justificatory strategy implied in TWTB*.

James concedes that in natural scientific affairs a decision between two options can often be avoided, say, if it is about the theory of Röntgen rays<sup>12</sup>. Not so in religion. Here, 'we cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as we positively chose to disbelieve'<sup>13</sup>. Given what is at stake in religion, it is not possible to avoid the issue and walk away from it (as it is in the Röntgen case). Walking away from it would be tantamount to unbelief. 'It is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married someone else?'<sup>14</sup> Refraining from making a decision comes down to *having made a decision already* in a number of cases. Religion is one such

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<sup>11</sup> For the further specifications of those decision-situations, see TWTB, 14-5.

<sup>12</sup> C.f. JAMES (see above, f.1), 26.

<sup>13</sup> JAMES (see above, f.1), 30.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

case: Concerning the question of religious belief, refraining from making a decision comes down to *having made a decision already*, viz. in favour of unbelief.

#### **4. Summary of the crucial ingredients of TWTB's argument**

From his considerations thus far, James proceeds to an indirect justification of religious belief. He does so by criticizing what he now calls scepticism, i.e. the evidentialist prohibition to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. To that end, he uses the following, much-quoted words.

‘Scepticism, then, is not avoidance of option; it is option of a particular kind of risk. Better risk loss of truth than chance of error - that is your faith-vetoeer’s exact position... To preach scepticism to us as a duty until “sufficient evidence” for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true. It is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law. And by what, forsooth, is the supreme wisdom of this passion warranted? Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear?’<sup>15</sup>

Here you have most of the ingredients of James’ argument in a nutshell:

-The evidentialist critic of religious belief is betraying himself when thinking that his refusal to make a decision on the question of religious belief can really avoid the issue. In truth, he has taken sides already, viz. he has opted for the side of unbelief. Having taken sides he has, intentionally or not, implicitly decided to accept the risks that come with such a decision, chiefly among them the risk of losing truth.

-He is also betraying himself when thinking that he has a right to occupy the moral high grounds by not relying on passion or the like. In truth, he is relying on passion or some other pre-rational emotion in the same way as his religious opponent is. It is just a different kind of passion, viz. a passionate fear to be mistaken.

-Finally, there is no reason to think that the passion based upon the fear of being mistaken is in any way epistemically superior to the passionate hope that religious belief may be true. Thinking differently is simply an act of intellectual imperialism, ‘intellect with one passion laying down its laws’, as James criticizes it (see above).

What is the strategic pay-off of this argument? Crucial to the evidentialist strategy is to lie the burden of proof concerning religious belief on the shoulders of the believer. James undermines that strategy effectively. He claims successfully that the evidentialist who lies the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

burden of proof on the shoulders of the believer while claiming for herself the privilege of not having to carry such a burden is mistaken. In effect, the evidentialist is making a decision as well. That is to say, she has no right to claim an epistemically privileged position by pointing fingers at the believer while granting herself the luxury of not having to carry any burden of proof.

### ***5. TWTB does not provide a blank check for believing on arbitrary grounds***

As indicated above, invoking the notion of a genuine option serves as an instrument to hold in check an arbitrary usage of the justificatory strategy envisaged in James' argument. Only in as far as a decision is a genuine option in the sense specified, the justificatory strategy implied is applicable. It is only if we cannot avoid the necessity to decide either way that we are entitled to reject the evidentialist ideal. If, however, we *can* avoid deciding, it may be wiser to wait until sufficient evidence is found. In short, only if the requirements laid down by the notion of a genuine option are met, we are justified in believing that a religious claim is true, whereas 'believing' should be specified as being legitimately entitled to hope that our religious beliefs are true. In other cases, however, we are not justified to believe in this fashion. Thus, the justificatory strategy implied in James' argument works in the case of certain religious claims (and related cases) but is *not a blank check for invoking hope in the place of evidence as a general rule*.

There is one further presupposition implied in this line of argument which is crucial for appreciating its success. *This argument makes sense only if the evidence for and against a given religious claim is equal or roughly equal*. If, however, the evidence is overwhelming one way or the other, the justificatory strategy implied in James' argument does not apply.

To put the matter in the above nomenclature: Only in cases in which we are uncertain on intellectual grounds are we entitled to rely on non-intellectual resources, such as will or passion, for the purposes of justifying claims such as religious ones. In cases, however, in which we *are* 'intellectually' certain, i.e. in which we have overwhelming evidence either way, we do not need to resort to non-intellectual resources but possess more straightforward means of adjudicating the claims under consideration. In short, then, the justificatory strategy implied in the TWTB-argument presupposes the absence of overwhelming evidence that religion is true or false.

That the TWTB-argument presupposes that there is no overwhelming evidence for or against religion is important for judging its merits. James' critics frequently overlook it when they charge him with licensing wishful thinking, intellectual laziness and the like. They think that he wants to *substitute* will or passion for evidence. But, at least, in this article, this is

clearly *not* his intention. He does not suggest that non-intellectual resources, such as will or passion, could substitute intellectual ones, the search for evidence, as a general rule. Rather, he suggests that we are justified in looking for non-intellectual resources in cases in which our intellectual resources are exhausted *and* in which we are confronted with genuine options, i.e., in which we cannot afford to walk away from an issue but have to make a decision. In summary, our right<sup>16</sup> to invoke the justificatory strategy implied in TWTB is not a blank check for all sorts of irrationalism but works only in case certain requirements are met: *A decision must be a genuine option and the evidence for and against a belief must be roughly equal. Those requirements must be met for us to legitimately invoke the justificatory strategy implied in TWTB.*

However, if those requirements *are* met, then there is no reason to give priority to the sceptical or evidentialist rule over the ‘rule of hope’, to say things in Jamesian parlance. On the contrary, under those circumstances, it would be imprudent or even irrational to refrain from believing a claim unless sufficient evidence for it can be found. For those religious claims that meet those requirements *and* the evidence for and against them is roughly equal, the sceptical rule does not apply. That being the case, the evidentialist does *not* occupy the high-grounds concerning the ethics of belief-acquisition when playing off his sceptical principle against religious belief. On the contrary, the principle to refrain from hoping religious claims to be true for evidentialist reasons is imprudent or irrational in the case of religious beliefs meeting both requirements.

### ***6. A critical appreciation of the emergence of evidentialism***

I emphasize that point that strongly because in the intellectual environment in which I currently live evidentialists and other hard-nosed scientists often still think they can occupy the high-grounds in epistemology. In the Dutch intellectual culture - an environment in which pragmatism does not receive much appreciation, neither as a school of philosophy nor as a way of thinking in general - religion is still attacked on evidentialist and related grounds. And not only is it attacked on those grounds but, also, those evidentialists attacking religion often feel their own methodological vantage point to be superior to alternative methodological vantage points.

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<sup>16</sup> Following a clue James provides in one of his letters (see the discussion in HICK, Faith (see above, f. 6), 40, f. 19), some James-researchers call this line of argument ‘right to believe’ and distinguish it from the ‘will to believe’-doctrine according to which acting in accordance with a particular belief can help to make that belief true (see GAIL KENNEDY, Pragmatism, Pragmaticism, and the Will to Believe - A Reconsideration, in: The Journal of Philosophy 55 (1958), 578-88). I am interested here only in the first doctrine. However, I will not discuss it under the heading ‘right to believe’ but follow the standard usage and discuss it under the heading ‘will to believe’.

James succeeds in demonstrating that this feeling of superiority is unwarranted. I agree. Yet, my point is not to deny the achievements of evidentialism in general. I would be prepared to admit that, originally, it had a valuable point. When it emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century, its purpose was to shake the philosophical and cultural establishment. In the times of Locke and Hume, it was probably an innovative doctrine that liberated human research from outside interferences, those exerted by the church and other authorities. If you wish, call it the Anglo-American equivalent of the Continental quest for human autonomy – and, emerging in the Anglo-American context, it could not but be couched in methodological terms rather than, say, anthropological ones (as was the case with Kant).

Yet, after Enlightenment-thinking had become commonplace in the West, evidentialism could not claim to be innovative any longer. It had become a mainstream ideology, as suffocating as mainstream ideologies can be at times. As is so often the case, a fresh, revolutionary idea turned into a stifling mainstream-doctrine, oppressing non-mainstream views on the grounds that they are based upon ‘methodologically inferior’ presuppositions. In my view, the point when evidentialism turned into such an oppressive doctrine was reached by the time Clifford and Russell wrote. And this point is certainly reached today. Thus, there is no reason for the evidentialist to claim the methodological high-grounds. Rather, she should ask herself whether she is not an imperialist – imperialism not only being a political but also a methodological vice – who illegitimately suffocates views alternative to her own.

### ***7. Why evidentialism should be regarded to be useless or morally questionable today***

By ‘evidentialism’, I mean principles such as Russell’s ‘true precept of veracity’: ‘We ought to give to every proposition which we consider as nearly as possible that degree of credence which is warranted by the probability it acquires from the evidence known to us’.<sup>17</sup> Or Clifford’s principle which serves as a vantage point for the criticism James mounts in TWTB: ‘It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence’.<sup>18</sup>

I am highly critical of principles of that sort. I think that in today’s environment, principles of that sort are useless or even harmful in many cases. The more complex our environment becomes, the more implausible they become. The reason is that the more complex our environment becomes, the less clear evidence there is. For example, only very few readers of this article, if any, know of enough evidence to decide the question whether the

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<sup>17</sup> Bertrand Russell, ‘Pragmatism’, in: *Philosophical Essays* (London 1966 [rev. ed. from 1910]), 79–111, 86.

<sup>18</sup> W.K. Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief*, in: *Lectures and Essays*, (London: Macmillan 1897), 186.

current changes in our weather patterns are ‘man-made’ or ‘natural’. Yet, in all likelihood, we cannot afford to wait until sufficient evidence will be available. The reason is that it could turn out that crucial decisions hang on this question which need to be taken *now*. Examples of those decisions are the questions how to control the pollution of the earth more effectively, how drastic the controlling-measures must be, how much of our economic growth must be sacrificed to those measures etc. In short, although there is not enough evidence, or, at least, not enough *clear* evidence available, we cannot afford the luxury to refrain from forming opinions on the issue. We have to make a decision one way or the other (not deciding amounts to having decided already).

Worse, evidentialism can have morally highly questionable consequences. It can, intendedly or unintendedly, be taken to affirm the status quo. Take the case of the nuclear catastrophe at Tchernobyl in 1986. Radioactive fallout was released on a large scale and I remember that in Germany there was a lively discussion what the consequences of this are for everyday life. For example, there was a discussion as to whether it would still be safe to eat dairy and wild-grown mushrooms. In that situation, some experts invoked evidentialist principles: They argued that, since there is not enough evidence available on the issue, there are not enough reasons to believe that eating dairy and wild grown-mushrooms will have detrimental consequences for our health. That is, they suggested that we should continue our diet since there is not enough evidence to change it.

I think that such an invocation of evidentialism is morally highly questionable, even straightforwardly harmful. Thus, maxims such as Clifford’s ‘it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence’ are highly questionable, even harmful. Their implication that, under all circumstances, we should refrain from believing something until sufficient evidence for it is available, are in many cases either useless, or, worse, harmful.

They are worthless in cases in which there is not enough evidence but decision-making is unavoidable. Telling us that, in such a case, we should not form beliefs one way or the other is not helpful at all. If we *have to* decide, then we must look for other decision-forming mechanisms than our regular belief-forming mechanisms in order to come to a reasonable decision. And in cases such as the above mentioned one of the experts suggesting after Tchernobyl that we should continue our diet, evidentialism entails morally questionable consequences. It can lead to an unreflected confirmation of the status quo, thereby excluding the necessity to make important changes.

Furthermore, there are obviously those cases in which evidentialism's tendency to support the status quo ('refrain from decision-making until sufficient evidence is available') can be abused deliberately to avoid the necessity to make vital changes. For example, evidentialism and like-minded principles came in handy for the tobacco-industry. With their help, this industry could counter claims of the non-smoker's lobby effectively: That lobby's findings concerning a correlation between smoking and the development of lung-cancer was based upon insufficient evidence – a convenient way to undermine the significance of information you don't like, in this case information to the effect that smoking can be related to lung-cancer. Although abuses of a principle do not necessarily speak against the principle as such, they succeed in casting further doubts on its legitimacy. That is, the fact that evidentialist principles can be abused that easily casts further doubts on their legitimacy.

In sum, evidentialism is a principle which is useless or can even entail harmful consequences in a whole range of cases. Those are cases such as the above mentioned ones, i.e. cases in which not enough evidence is available one way or the other but we cannot afford the luxury to refrain from decision-making. And the more complex our environment becomes – think e.g. of the rapid technological developments – the more the number of cases will increase in which we do not have enough evidence but still have to make a decision. In all those cases, evidentialist principles, such as Clifford's, are useless or lead to harmful consequences.

Rather than relying on such general principles as evidentialism, we should try to develop much more specific principles, custom-tailored for the issue at stake. *This* would help us to rationalize the process of decision-making. In our current situation, given the complex environment we live in, we need principles which help us to rationalize the process of decision-making in the face of insufficient evidence. That is to say, many of our current problems are to be treated as *problems of decision-making under conditions of uncertainty*. This being the case, general principles of a Cliffordian sort are useless and should be abrogated for principles which allow for the possibility of rationalizing the process of decision-making, given a certain amount of uncertainty.

#### **8. *TWTB contributing to a theory of decision-making rather than to a theory of truth***

I have commented on the distinction between justification and truth on several occasions and restrict myself here to summarizing it: My point is that we need to distinguish between, on the one hand, holding a proposition, p, to be true and, on the other hand, being justified in holding p.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> See e.g. Dirk-Martin GRUBE, Die Pluralität der Religionen in Lessings Ringparabel und die Unterscheidung zwischen Rechtfertigung und Wahrheit, in: Theologie der Religionen. Positionen und Perspektiven evangelischer Theologie, C. Danz und U. Körtner (eds.), Neukirchen-Vluyn,

The above examples of having to make a decision although we do not have enough evidence fall on the justification-side of this distinction: Although we are not sure about the truth of *p*, a proposition or set of related propositions, we have to decide on it, if *p* is of a certain sort. If *p* consists of e.g. the question whether the current changes in climate are ‘man-made’ or natural, we have to decide on it although we are not sure about the truth of the matter. The same holds for the question whether changes in our diet are necessary after Tchernobyl and for the other examples mentioned above.

The point is that we can be justified in deciding one way or the other even though we do not know the truth of the matter. In short, justification is, at least, in some cases, independent of truth. The examples I have given above are cases of that sort.<sup>20</sup>

My contention is that TWTB falls on this side of the distinction as well. No matter how inconsistent James may be at times, this is clearly one of the crucial points he wants to make in TWTB. He suggests that, in certain cases, we can be justified in holding *p* although we are not sure about its truth. We are justified in ‘believing’ *p*, although we do not have enough evidence for it.

This point is rather plain from the examples James uses, e.g. the example of the man hesitating to propose marriage to a woman because he is not sure that she will turn out to be an angel.<sup>21</sup> James’ point is independent of all considerations concerning truth, i.e. whether or not this woman truly is an angel. Rather, his point is that the *cost* for waiting to propose can be so high that, at least, under certain circumstances, waiting is tantamount to not proposing. His point is not about truth but, in this case, about the costs of taking a particular decision or failing to do so. That is to say, his considerations do not fall under the theory of truth but under the theory of decision-making.

Although this point is rather plain from the examples provided in TWTB, it is often misconstrued.<sup>22</sup> I think this may have to do with the fact that the term ‘believing’ plays such a prominent role in TWTB. Since this term is in the English-speaking context often associated with the notion of truth, (English-speaking) James-interpreters often automatically assume that he contributes to the theory of truth in TWTB. But no matter how James’ theory of truth

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2005, 153-186, 177-81, and GRUBE, Justification rather than truth: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s defence of positive religion in the ring-parable, in: *Bijdragen. International Journal in Philosophy and Theology* 65, 2005/4, 357-378, 371-3.

<sup>20</sup> Another example is the context of a pluralist theory of religion: If we wish to pursue a pluralism worth its name, we need to distinguish between the case of holding a religion to be true and the case of being justified to believe it (see GRUBE, *Die irreduzible Vielfalt der Religionen und die Einheit der Wahrheit*, in: *Wahrheitsanprüche der Weltreligionen. Konturen gegenwärtiger Religionsphilosophie*, Christian Danz, Friedrich Hermann (eds.), Neukirchen, 2006, 41-66, 58-61, and, for the case of Lessing’s famous ring-parable, GRUBE, *Die Pluralität der Religionen in Lessings Ringparabel und die Unterscheidung zwischen Rechtfertigung und Wahrheit* (f. 20), 160-77.

<sup>21</sup> See above, section 3 and JAMES (f. 1), 30.

<sup>22</sup> For a characteristic example, see e.g. HICK (f. 6), *Philosophy*, 60, and Faith, 42-4.

is to be construed in general, it is plain that in TWTB his prime concern is not to contribute to the theory of truth. Rather, his prime concern, or, at least, one of his prime concerns in TWTB, is to contribute to the theory of decision-making. He has it over being justified to make certain decisions in certain cases, i.e. cases in which genuine options are at stake. That is his point of invoking the notion of genuine options (see above, section 3). His argument is that, given that a case is a genuine option, we are justified in making a decision even in the absence of clear evidence on it.

And religion is a genuine option (see above, section 3). Religion is thus one of those cases in which we are justified in making a decision in the absence of clear evidence. The reason is that we cannot simply walk away from religious issues. That is to say, those issues are one of those cases in which we are justified in making a decision on different grounds than truth-related ones (once again, under the provision that the evidence for and against them is equal or roughly equal).

*That* is the point in the argument where will and passion come into play. James suggests that once our intellectual resources are exhausted, non-intellectual resources may legitimately come into play. We are justified in invoking them in cases which are genuine options, i.e. in which we cannot walk away from the issue at stake, yet, do not have clear ‘intellectual’ evidence to decide on it. In such cases, non-intellectual resources can fulfil a legitimate role in the process of decision making. Since religion *is* such a case, non-intellectual resources can fulfil a legitimate role in coming to a decision on it. In short, in the case of religion, we can be justified to invoke non intellectual resources, such as the will or passion, in order to come to a decision on it.

### ***9. TWTB embedded in the history of apologetics***

What are the apologetic upshots of this interpretation of TWTB? Jackman contends that James’ argument ‘...is not intended to convince an atheist that she would be better off believing in God. Rather, it is intended to convince someone already inclined to believe in God that there is nothing wrong with such a belief in spite of its lack of conclusive evidence for it’<sup>23</sup>. That being the case, TWTB is conceptually equivalent to the *ontological argument* for the existence of God. At least, in a reasonable re-interpretation, the ontological argument is not so much meant to convince the unbeliever<sup>24</sup> but to convince the believer that there is nothing wrong with her belief. And so it is with James: He succeeds in demonstrating that *if*

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<sup>23</sup> Henry JACKMAN, Prudential Arguments. Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe, in: Transactions of the Charles Sanders Peirce Society, Vol. XXXV, No. 1, 1999, 1-37, 8.

<sup>24</sup> Watch the first chapter of the *Proslogion*, which is a prayer of the already faithful (Anselmus) to be further (intellectually) enlightened; see also Ingolf U. DALFERTH, Gott. Philosophisch-theologische Denkversuche, Tübingen 1992, 51-94.

we believe in religious matters and if this belief is generated via the will or passion, then our belief-acquiring mechanisms are not necessarily epistemically flawed.

Obviously, invoking will or passion in the case of insufficient evidence does not *necessarily* justify holding religious beliefs. In principle, our passion or will could also lead us into the opposite direction, viz. to reject them. The likelihood of that possibility depends on the sort of religious claims at stake, personal preferences etc. – just like in the above mentioned examples, e.g. the one in which we have to come to a decision on whether we will change our diet after Tchernobyl. In any case, we should thus answer the question what the apologetic achievements of TWTB are in the following, moderate fashion: James shows here that it is *not impossible* to justify religious belief with the help of non-intellectual resources, such as will or passion, in the case of insufficient evidence, provided certain provisions are met, e.g. that genuine options are at stake.

The upshot of this contention for apologetic purposes is that it undermines the claim that the only grounds on which religious questions can be settled in a reasonable fashion are evidentialist or like-minded ones. Although, personally, I do not wish to follow James all the way down with his emphasis upon will or even passion, I still think that he is a valuable ally against evidentialism and the evidentialist critique of religion.

There is yet another apologetic upshot of James' arguments which is hardly mentioned in the literature but which I take to be an interesting corollary of the argument of TWTB. It does not only cast doubts on the evidentialist critique of religion as has been put forward in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (and in some intellectual contexts even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century) but also on the classical criticism of religion that was mounted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Let me explain: In the interpretation provided, TWTB does not contribute to the discussion as to whether religious claims are true or not. That is to say, the argument does not have the same function as the classical arguments for the existence of God have, especially the cosmological and the teleological argument. Its point is not to show that religious claims, such as the one that God exists, are true. For the same reason, its proper polemical partner is not atheism proper, say, of Kai Nielsen's or J.L Mackie's sort<sup>25</sup>.

Rather than contributing to the question as to whether religious claims are true, TWTB contributes to the question as to whether we have a right to decide in their favour. In the interpretation provided above, TWTB answers the question as to whether we are *justified* to hold them. Thus, it belongs to the strand of the discussion which does not target the issue of the truth of religious beliefs, but, rather, the issue whether we are entitled to hold them.

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<sup>25</sup> For a brief summary of those positions, see e.g. the account in Timo KOISTINEN, *Philosophy of Religion*, Helsinki 2000, 39-81.

Contributors to this strand of discussion are most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century critics of religion, e.g. Feuerbach and Freud.<sup>26</sup>

Characteristic of this strand of discussion is that it does not so much target the issue of whether or not religious beliefs are true but, rather, the issue of whether the belief-forming mechanisms upon which the acquisition of religious beliefs are based upon are reliable or not. *That* is the point of Feuerbach's projection-charge, i.e. the charge that the concept of God consists of a projection of the essence of humanity (without its all-too human deficiencies) and Freud's different charges, e.g. the one that religion consists of a regression into infancy. Common to those charges is the assumption that the belief-forming mechanisms which generate religious beliefs are unreliable.

This is the point where TWTB comes into play. If its argument succeeds, as I have tried to demonstrate above, then the contention that a belief is formed by supposedly unreliable belief-forming mechanisms is not as fatal as Feuerbach, Freud and other 19<sup>th</sup> century critics of religion suggest. There *are* circumstances in which we are justified to rely on 'unreliable' belief-forming mechanisms, i.e. on non-intellectual mechanisms. In certain circumstances, it would even be irrational or harmful to fail to rely on them (see above, section 6). Thus, contrary to what most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century critics of religion suggest, the *charge that a belief is formed via supposedly unreliable belief-forming mechanisms is not necessarily a fatal charge.*

I do not want to go that far as to suggest that there are circumstances conceivable in which we are entitled to 'wishful thinking' (although that is debatable, too). But the above argument shows that there are circumstances conceivable in which we are *entitled to rely on 'willful thinking'*.

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<sup>26</sup> As well as some 20<sup>th</sup> century defenders of religion, e.g. Alvin Plantinga (see e.g. ALVIN PLANTINGA, *Warranted Christian Belief*, New York, Oxford, 2000).