

## **DESCRIPTION AND CRITICAL REFLECTION IN JAMES ON RELIGION**

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To consider the bearing of pragmatism on philosophy of religion we have to attend not only to different versions of pragmatism but also to different conceptions of religion. I want to trace the development of William James’s understanding of what he took to be the central religious question, show how he reinterprets Peirce’s pragmatic criterion of meaning in a way that enables him to turn to religious experience as evidence in support of religious belief, and briefly consider a criticism that John Dewey of James’s pragmatic approach to the meaning of the term “God” in his lectures on Pragmatism.

William James’s essay, “The will to believe,” has been read in many different ways. James describes the article as a “defense of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced.”(13). His criticism seems to be directed chiefly to William Clifford’s claim that “It is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (18). But this is not so clear. We might expect that in cases in which the evidence is insufficient, or in James’s terms “our logical intellect has not been coerced,” Clifford’s principle would call for withholding assent. But James tries to set up the issue in such a way as to preclude this possibility.

He begins by speaking not of whether to adopt a particular hypothesis, but of options, that is to say, choices between two hypotheses, and restricts his focus to what he calls genuine options. A genuine option, for James, is one in which both hypotheses are

live ones, the opportunity at stake is momentous, and the choice is forced. The fact that the choice is forced means that there is no place on which to stand that is outside the two alternatives. So the difference with Clifford cannot be over whether or not one should withhold assent, or remain agnostic, when the evidence is insufficient. James has already built into the description of the cases that he will consider a stipulation that the choice is forced. To withhold assent is actually to choose. He thinks that there is a practical and momentous difference between a life informed by religious belief and one without it, that therefore the choice is forced, and that the evidence is insufficient to settle the matter one way or another. For Clifford, of course, the burden of proof is on the person who adopts the religious hypothesis, and the default condition is to reject it in the absence of convincing evidence. James has replaced Clifford's asymmetric description with one in which both logic and evidence are insufficient to determine a choice between two live hypotheses.

After stipulating what he means by a genuine option, James turns to look at what he calls the "actual psychology of human opinion." He notes that it seems impossible to decide to believe something. If I am engaged in inquiry about a particular topic, it seems both impossible and illegitimate to try to settle the question by just deciding. Charles Peirce had addressed this question in his essay "The fixation of belief," in which the first and least effective way of resolving a problem and eliminating doubt that he considers is what he calls the method of tenacity, to just will to hold on to a particular belief come what may. As Peirce points out, this is very difficult to achieve and usually does not satisfy the inquirer.

James is not concerned with this kind of willing, but with something much broader. What has made certain hypotheses dead for us, he says, and unavailable for belief, is for the most part a previous action of our willing nature. By "willing nature," he writes, "I do not mean only such deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from—I mean all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set. As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why"(18). James's topic in the article is not solely, and not chiefly, explicit acts of volition, but the ways in which believing and change of belief are shaped, in part, by interests, by

something other than logic and evidence. As he writes after introducing Clifford's jeremiad against believing on insufficient evidence: "if anyone should... assume that intellectual insight is what remains when wish and will and sentiment have taken wing, or that pure reason is what settles our opinions, he would fly... directly in the teeth of the facts"(18).

An important point in James's essay is his identification of empiricism with fallibilism, or what we might call anti-foundationalism. We can know something, but we can never know with certainty that we know it. No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon. Different philosophers have proposed different criteria, but none of these criteria is infallible. As empiricists, he says, we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, but we don't give up the quest or hope of truth itself. Pragmatists, James later writes, represent the empiricist attitude in a more radical and less objectionable form(27).

James's thesis then reads: "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; for to say, under such circumstances, 'Do not decide but leave the question open,' is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth"(20). The main point of this thesis is a descriptive one: not that our willing nature may tip the balance in such instances, but that it must; that is to say, it always does. So the essay is not so much a proposal that we decide these matters as it is a claim that our interests are always at work in fixing belief. Given that our interests, or willing nature, play this role, James wants his readers to acknowledge that, to make those interests explicit, and in some cases to self-consciously endorse one or another of them. Later in the essay he adopts the rhetoric of persuasion to encourage the reader to ask what she can do with a particular belief and then to actively side with that interest, when the issue is one that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds.

When James arrives at the point in the essay where he identifies what he takes to be the religious hypothesis, it seems frustratingly vague and empty. He writes: "Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says essentially two things. First, she says that the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and

say the final word. ‘Perfection is eternal’...is the first affirmation of religion... The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off now if we believe her first affirmation to be true”(29-30). To unpack the meaning of this cryptic summary we need to look briefly at the development of James’s conception of religion.

The volume The Will to Believe was published in 1897 and dedicated “To my old friend Charles Sanders Peirce, to whose philosophic comradeship in old times and to whose writings in more recent years I owe more incitement and help than I can express or repay.” The first six essays in that volume, those most relevant for the philosophy of religion, are the product of twenty years of reflection on the fact that interests shape belief and on the extent to which that might be epistemically acceptable. In “The fixation of belief,” published in 1877, Peirce had argued that genuine inquiry is elicited by doubt, had described several ways of satisfying that doubt and had concluded that “it is necessary that a method should be found by which our beliefs may be caused by nothing human, but by some external permanency—by something upon which our thinking has no effect” (EP,I: 120). In articles beginning with “The sentiment of rationality” in 1879, James argues that it is neither possible nor desirable to find a method by which our beliefs are caused by something on which our thinking has no effect. Our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions, and that is a normal factor in our making up our minds.

In three articles published in the early 1880’s James sets out what he takes to be the religious question. “The radical question of life,” he says, is “whether, at bottom, this be a moral or unmoral universe” (RAF, 81). It is the question of materialism. Despite the comments of some of his critics, James was interested, both as a philosopher and as a person, in the truth of the matter. Clearly it is underdetermined by the evidence and his interests motivate the inquiry. In these articles James considers how we might fix belief on such an issue. He reflects on the criteria by which we decide that one belief is more rational than another.

In “Rationality, activity, and faith” (1882). James writes: “Of two conceptions equally fit to satisfy the logical demand, one may awaken the active impulses or satisfy other aesthetic demands far better than the other. This one will be accounted the more rational conception and it will deservedly prevail” (RAF, 59). This statement, like its

analogues in “The will to believe,” is first descriptive (“It will prevail”) and then normative (“It deserves to prevail”). What are those demands? James proposes two: (1) it must define expectancy in a way that fits with future consequences, and (2) it must define the future congruously with our spontaneous powers. The first means that it must not be refuted by future experience. The second is more elusive, but is central to James’s conception of religion.. The future, and in fact the universe of which we are a part, must be characterized in a way that is congruous with, or continuous with, our moral life, where “moral” is not narrowly defined but means our interests and our powers. Idealism is to be preferred over materialism, James says, because it makes the universe more intimate, more continuous with us and with our values. When he tries to set out the lineaments of his metaphysics in his final book, A Pluralistic Universe, he proposes that intimacy be used as a criterion for an adequate metaphysics. Here, in this early essay, he writes: “A nameless Unheimlichkeit comes over us at the thought of there being nothing eternal in our final purposes, in the objects of those loves and aspirations which are our deepest energies... We demand in (the universe) a character for which our emotions and active propensities shall be a match” (RAF, 65).

Approaching the same topic in a different way in “The dilemma of determinism” James writes, descriptively, that we work to cast the world into a more rational shape than we have found it, and, prescriptively, that he is “as willing to try conceptions of moral, as of mechanical or logical necessity”(115). We employ logical and scientific concepts to make sense of the world and there is no reason to think that we don’t, or shouldn’t, try to make moral sense of it as well. His argument in this article is that determinism, which he takes to be a “block universe” devoid of freedom or novelty makes a mockery of our moral perceptions and judgments, especially the judgment that some actions and events are bad and that the universe would be better off without them.

Reflecting on the need to define the universe congruously with our spontaneous powers, James thinks that only a conception of reality defined in a way similar to the way God is described in traditional theism is both rational and possible for the mind (93). While idealism is more intimate than materialism, mysticism and the idea of the rational absolute go too far. They amount to a kind of gnosticism, of which he thinks that Hegel’s

philosophy is the most recent variety. Theism lies between gnosticism and agnosticism and accords most fully with the mind's interests.

Peirce also held that there is a natural fit between the mind and the cosmos. His later metaphysics reflects this and his "Neglected argument for the reality of God" rests on it. But it wasn't an open question for Peirce and therefore not a central topic for inquiry, as it was for James. James expressed what he took to be a universal need for this kind of fit and looked constantly for confirmation or legitimation of belief in it. The question of whether or not this is a moral universe is not meaningless, he wrote, because contrary answers lead to contrary behavior. The religious hypothesis could not be verified in a single lifetime, but a person could act on it and see whether or not it harmonized with experience. "If this be a moral universe," he wrote, all acts I make on that assumption will fit with the phenomena. "The more I live, the more satisfactory the consensus will grow. If (it is) not, experience will produce even more impediments" (RAF, 75). This wasn't solely a speculative matter for James. "If this (life) is not a real fight," he writes, "it is only play-acting. But it feels like a real fight" (55).

James thought that confirmation need not come only from individual experience, but from historical evidence as well. In the preface to The Will to Believe he writes: "If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out. The truest scientific hypothesis is that which as we say, 'works' best; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses. Religious history proves that one hypothesis after another has worked ill, has crumbled at contact with a widening knowledge of the world, and has lapsed from the minds of men. Some articles of faith, however, have maintained themselves through every vicissitude, and possess even more vitality today than ever before: it is for the 'science of religions' to tell us just which hypotheses these are. Meanwhile the freest competition of the various faiths with one another, and their openest application to life by their several champions, are the most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed." The scientist ought not to worry about this, James says, because those faiths that best stand the test of time will adopt her hypotheses and incorporate them into their own. James's language

here echoes not only Darwin, but also John Stuart Mill's argument in On Liberty for freedom of opinion and experiments in living.

In The Varieties of Religious Experience James proposes that philosophy of religion transform itself from theology to a critical science of religions. Such a science would begin with spontaneous religious constructions as well as doctrine, eliminate those beliefs that conflict with natural science, and arrive at some conceptions and hypotheses that are possible, testing them and trying to distinguish what is to be taken literally from symbolic expressions. It would be a critical reconstruction that depended for its original material on facts of personal experience.

In 1898 James traveled to Berkeley to deliver a lecture, "Philosophical conceptions and practical results," which was the first public use of the term "pragmatism" as the name for a philosophical method. There he introduced the pragmatic criterion of meaning, giving full credit to Peirce, and then applied this criterion to the concept of God. This lecture was also, as he wrote to his son, a rehearsal for the Gifford Lectures he was to give in Edinburgh, which became Varieties. Much of the lecture is included verbatim in Varieties and most of the rest of it in the book Pragmatism. David Lamberth argues, in William James and the Metaphysics of Experience, that James's pragmatism is unimportant for understanding Varieties, which comes out of his independent work on radical empiricism. Lamberth calls attention to some important material and offers a very good reading of that book, but it is misleading to suggest, as he does, that it is only marginally related to James's pragmatism.

James introduces the principle of pragmatism in the Berkeley lecture by paraphrasing accurately from Peirce's "How to make our ideas clear." The same thought may be expressed in different words, but if the words suggest no different conduct, they contribute nothing new to the meaning of the thought. In order "to develop a thought's meaning we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce; that conduct is for us its sole significance" (259). "Consider what effects," Peirce wrote, "which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is our whole conception of the object" (W4:266). Peirce illustrates the criterion by examining the concept "hard," in the sense in which we

say that a diamond is hard. We can elucidate its meaning, Peirce says, by noting that a diamond cannot be scratched by most objects. “Hard” means “not easily scratched.”

Peirce wrote “How to make our ideas clear” for a series he called “Illustrations in the logic of science,” and his model here is the clarification of scientific terms and hypotheses by designing and conducting experiments. To elucidate a thought we need only determine what conduct it is fitted to produce. We can use a diamond to cut glass or scratch most metals, but cannot expect to easily scratch it.

James comments at this point that he would like to interpret Peirce’s principle more broadly, and his reinterpretation is in fact a revision. He removes it from the logic of experiment to descriptive phenomenology. “I should prefer for our purposes this evening,” he writes, “to express Peirce’s principle by saying that the effective meaning of any philosophic proposition can always be brought down to some particular consequence, in our future practical experience, whether active or passive; the point lying in the fact that the experience must be particular, (rather) than in the fact that it must be active.”

James has broadened the principle and changed it considerably. In Peirce’s diamond example, the meaning of “hard” tells us what to expect, what reactions to prepare, if we act with or on the object. We can’t expect to scratch it. This is what Peirce takes to be required for the clarification of scientific concepts. James is interested in the difference made to our future experience but not in the logic of the concept. The effect could be something that we take ourselves to experience rather than the result of some active intervention on our part. (James’s focus on particular experience is also a sign of what Peirce referred to as James’s nominalism. In the diamond example, Peirce is interested in the general case, in what “hard” means. James looks rather toward particular experiences.)

Applying his revision of Peirce’s criterion to the term “God,” James asks what is at stake in the debate between theism and materialism. Continuing the reflection from his earlier essays James says that theism and materialism point to completely different practical consequences, to opposite outlooks on future experience. The notion of God, he writes, “guarantees an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. A world with a God in it to say the last word, may indeed burn up or freeze, but we then think of him as still mindful of the old ideals and sure to bring them elsewhere to fruition; so that, where

he is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things. This need of an eternal moral order is one of the deepest needs of our breast. Materialism means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes; theism means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the letting loose of hope” (264).

It is clear, James says, that this is a genuine issue and not some empty metaphysical debate, but abstract theological ideas and systems do often seem empty. The place to look for what is at stake in religion is not religious doctrine, but concrete religious experiences in the lives of ordinary people. As examples, James lists “conversations with the unseen, voices and visions, responses to prayer, changes of heart, deliverances from fear, inflowings of help, assurances of support, whenever certain persons set their own internal attitude in certain appropriate ways” (266). What the word “God” means, he says, is just those passive and active experiences. Theological doctrines are secondary effects on these direct experiences of the spiritual life. In both this characterization and in Varieties James’s understanding of what difference religion makes was highly influenced by what seemed most salient in late nineteenth century American religious life, Protestant revivalism and various forms of spiritualism.

The project of a science of religions as pursued in the Varieties rests on an examination of personal experiences described from the first person point of view. James writes in the book that “feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue” (431). He defines religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (31). In his proposal for a science of religions he says that people always define the divine in ways that harmonize with their temporary intellectual preoccupations, but philosophy ought to be able to eliminate the local and accidental from these definitions. As a result, even though James’s quotations are sometimes extensive, he doesn’t attend to the details of what a particular person considers the divine and how he takes himself to stand in relation to it.

James writes at the outset of Varieties that his descriptive account of religious experience has filled the whole book and that the philosophy has had to be postponed

until later. But in fact philosophical distinctions and judgments are at work throughout the book and are often made explicit. After introductory methodological comments in the first three chapters, James structures the book around a classification of his often quite vivid first person narrative accounts.

One of James's methodological remarks is especially important. He says that in recent books on logic a distinction is made between two orders of inquiry. The first is an inquiry into what something is, including its constitution, origin, and history; the second is an inquiry into its value. They proceed, he says, from diverse intellectual preoccupations and one cannot be deduced from the other. These two judgments, the first of which he calls existential and the second spiritual, must be made separately. The allusion to recent books on logic is to Peirce's point in "The fixation of belief" that the epistemic value of an hypothesis is to be judged not by its origin, but by how well it works. A physicist who has been working on a problem might come upon an hypothesis or formula that she finds promising. The value of that hypothesis will depend on how well it works when she plugs it into the appropriate equations or designs an experiment to test the hypothesis. How the formula or hypothesis came to her is irrelevant, whether it came in a dream, from poring over her notes, or by association from something seemingly unrelated. What matters is how it works for the task at hand.

James takes this to be a descriptive point as well as a normative one. Despite what people claim, he says, they don't judge the significance or value of an hypothesis or an experience by its origin, whether they are appealing to the Bible or Aristotle or some other source for authority. In fact, when Luther goes back to the New Testament, for example, he is quite selective about what he takes from there. He takes those things that will be of value and use to him. The criteria we employ when judging experiences, James says, are three: (1) immediate luminousness, that is, the authority it seems to convey, (2) philosophical reasonableness, and (3) moral helpfulness. The first is often unreliable and usually gives way, upon reflection, to the other two.

These remarks shed some light on the problems with James's examination of experiential reports. James defines religion as the feelings, acts, and experiences of individuals so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. This means that a religious experience is identified under a

description, and that that description includes reference to the way the person who has the experience understands him or herself to stand in relation to what he or she considers the divine. But James does not take his own definition sufficiently seriously. The first of his two chapters on conversion is devoted chiefly to a description of the experience of the convert and the second to explanations of that experience. He speculates that sudden conversions might be explained by activity that goes on subliminally in the subconscious mind, and that invasive experiences from that region abruptly interrupt the primary consciousness. After making that suggestion, he writes: “I don’t see why Methodists need object to such a view.” (Methodism was the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. in the nineteenth century and the locus of many of the revivals.) “You may remember,” he writes, “how (in my first lecture) I argued against the notion that the worth of a thing can be decided by its origin. Our spiritual judgment, I said, our opinion of the significance and value of a human event or condition, must be decided on empirical grounds exclusively. If the fruits for life of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize it and venerate it, even though it be a piece of natural psychology; if not, we ought to make short work with it, no matter what supernatural being may have infused it” (237).

For a person who has a sudden conversion experience, a belief about the cause of the experience is itself a part of the experience. A convert at a revival experiences what happened to her as the work of the Holy Spirit. Were she to become convinced that it could be exhaustively explained by crowd psychology, or by some other natural explanation, it would no longer be the same experience. James seems to recognize this in his definition, but he forgets it when he says that he doesn’t see any reason why a convert would object to such a view. A belief about the cause of the experience, in this case the belief that it cannot be completely explained by natural causes, is itself constitutive of the experience.

James’s sharp separation of judgments about what an experience is and how it is to be explained, on one hand, and judgments about its value or significance on the other, may have blinded him to the fact that for the one who undergoes the experience a judgment about its proper explanation might figure into, or be assumed in, a judgment about its significance. Ordinary perceptual judgments are of this sort. If I discover that

what I took to be a sighting of a tree up ahead was the result of a certain kind of reflection or refraction of light through the fog, I will change my judgment about whether or not there is a tree in that spot. Similarly, for some of the subjects whose reports James quotes, learning that what they had taken to be the action of the Holy Spirit on their hearts could be convincingly explained by natural psychological and social causes might diminish the importance of the experience. By arguing that causal explanations and judgments of value are completely independent, James misses this point.

In an essay published in 1905 John Dewey criticizes appeal to immediate experience in a way that raises questions about James's extensive use in Varieties of first-person narratives. He cites as an example a person's being frightened by a strange noise. After investigation, she realizes that the source of the noise is the wind tapping the shade against the window. Reality is now changed, reorganized. Her fright, as a reaction to the sudden noise, turns out to be useless or even detrimental. It is, he says, a maladaptation. Then he adds: "pretty much all of experience is of this sort..., and the empiricist is false to his principle if he does not duly note this fact" (117). Immediate experience, what something is experienced as, is only what something seems to be. It is not knowledge until it has been tested, subjected to inquiry, explained and thus understood.

James selects his examples because they are vivid and because they are experienced by their subjects as religious. Any one of them could be similar to the frightening noise in Dewey's example. Further testing and inquiry might yield other causes that would give rise to a new explanation, reinterpretation, and thus a changed reality. The religious explanations, and thus the religious experiences, might be transient stages in the inquiries into the causes of each of these examples. James assembles and classifies them, observes that all attest to something More beyond and continuous with what he calls the higher parts of the self, and adds his overbelief that though this may be partially explained by appeal to the subconscious it is not exhausted by that kind of natural explanation. Dewey's point is that experience only tells us what something is experienced as, that is to say, what it is taken to be. To focus on the fact that these experiences seem to their subjects to be religious, may arrest inquiry rather than serving it.

In the postscript to Varieties James criticized those whom he called universal supernaturalists, transcendental idealists like his colleague Josiah Royce and others who affirmed an absolute mind beyond the world of natural causes, but held that it is indiscernible and would not make any difference in what we could observe and do. James thought that this was too facile. Such a claim is meaningless if it doesn't make some kind of experienceable difference. While Varieties was directed chiefly against naturalism, offering examples of experiences that seemed to suggest something beyond the natural realm, James 1907 lectures on Pragmatism were directed chiefly at Royce and the idealists. Early in the lectures James distinguishes between two types of philosophy of religion, transcendental idealism and traditional theism. The pragmatic criterion, he says, requires us to ask "What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion be true?" Not what difference would it make if we were to believe this hypothesis rather than that, but what difference it would make if it were true. James agrees with the idealists that truth is correspondence with reality, but wants to transform the empty and static notion of correspondence into some kind of active commerce between particular thoughts and experiences. The rationalist philosophy of absolute mind, he thinks, doesn't allow for any such commerce. "It is no explanation of our concrete universe, it is another thing altogether, a substitute for it, a remedy, a way of escape."

James repeats in Pragmatism the passage from the Berkeley lecture in which he says that the practical meaning of the concept of God is a guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. "Materialism," he writes, "means simply the denial that the moral order is eternal, and the cutting off of ultimate hopes; spiritualism means the affirmation of an eternal moral order and the letting loose of hope" (50). At the end of Varieties he had concluded that such a guarantee may not be possible and may not be necessary for religion. In the final chapter of Pragmatism James elaborates on this point. He has argued that pragmatic reflection on the issue of one and many shows that while we unify our world in our knowing the idea of an already existent unity in an absolute knower is empty. Both our knowing and our moral experience of the world are best accounted for by a pluralism. There is in the world as much unity as we can find or can make, but we should not begin by assuming it. James says that this pluralistic view fits

better with pragmatism. Perfection is not guaranteed, but is contingent on actual agents doing their best. The pragmatist is willing to accept this moralistic religion, without a guarantee and with real losses. Evil is not aufgehoben. It is up to us to bring about the moral order. But, James adds, “I firmly disbelieve, myself, that our human experience is the highest form of experience extant in the universe... We may well believe, on proofs that religious experience affords, that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own.”

In his review of Pragmatism Dewey argues that when James applies the pragmatic principle to determine the meaning of the term “God” and of the debate between theism and materialism, he assumes that that meaning is already fixed ahead of time. James proceeds as a teacher who is trying to elucidate the meaning of a certain concept rather than as a philosopher who is trying actively to determine the meaning in a way that might possibly transform it. This, Dewey says, is quite different from Peirce’s procedure. To use one of Peirce’s examples, the meaning of the term “force” is determined by asking what consequences we can expect if we act on an object in a certain way. That is not an elucidation of traditional meanings of the term “force,” but it is a clearly defined meaning that has served useful for modern physics.

James writes: “The whole function of philosophy ought to be to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instances of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be true.” Dewey responds that this is not the whole function of philosophy. The pragmatist should first determine the meaning of the world-formula, not just accept it as given and then try to elucidate its meaning. After concluding that the concept of God means a “guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved,” James had written in the same paragraph: “Here then, in these different emotional and practical appeals, in these adjustments of our concrete attitudes of hope and expectation, and all the delicate consequences which these differences entail, lie the real meanings of materialism and spiritualism.” Dewey argues that James takes the latter specification of its consequences to illumine and to justify the traditional use of the term “God” when the pragmatist ought not just accept that traditional use but transform it so that it refers directly to something like the adjustments of our concrete attitudes of hope and expectation.

For James, Matthew Arnold's conception of God as "an eternal power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness," a description to which James alludes at several points, is a live option. The religious question for him, from the outset, is whether or not there is such an order, whether this is a moral or unmoral universe. It is a pressing question for James. He eventually relinquishes his requirement that such a God would guarantee that an ideal order be permanently preserved, but he still believes "that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own." For Dewey that is no longer a live option. Dewey takes this to be James's failure to pursue the pragmatic method thoroughly. But Dewey is already well on the way toward a naturalism from which it seems clear that the idea of "God" defined as an antecedently existing source of moral order is of no practical use and therefore is in need of radical transformation. That shift, from the search for a "power, not ourselves, that makes for righteousness" to a belief that any moral order in the world is one that we ourselves make using the resources of the natural world, is not solely the result of applying the pragmatic method to religious concepts and questions, but of larger changes in their conceptions of the world.