

PRAGMATISM AS A GUARD AGAINST MAKE-BELIEVE

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I

I will save everyone’s time by just stating two things I think we can all agree upon. Firstly, it is difficult to say what exactly counts as *genuine* religious belief. Secondly, it is an important question to discuss. In what follows, I will argue, by a consideration of the classical pragmatists Charles S. Peirce and William James, that pragmatism helps us with this task by providing a guard against (religious) make believe

Firstly, with its emphasis on the connection between belief and action, pragmatism is able to distinguish genuine belief from false profession. This is not only to say that the pragmatists remind us to practice what we preach; more importantly, pragmatists have argued that if our religious tenets are to be meaningful, some practical consequences must follow from their adoption. Otherwise they simply fail to have an impact on human life and conduct, or differences between different creeds reduce to merely verbal disputes. Secondly, I hope to show that pragmatism is able to discern between the genuine maintaining of religious beliefs and the mere acting as if one believes. It will turn out such an investigation of practical consequences is not as easy a task as one might initially imagine. Indeed, I will suggest that James made a couple of blunders on the way.

I will not have the space to consider various possibilities of a pragmatic ethics of belief in much detail. Instead, in these brief remarks, I’ll be interested in elucidating some differences between Peirce’s and James’s views on such matters by drawing from a couple of

exchanges between the two pragmatists in their writings and their correspondence – especially from some remarks by Peirce concerning James’s famed “will to believe” argument.

Before turning to the critical points I wish to suggest, it is needful to give an initial idea about what is meant by religious belief in this discussion. Based on Peirce’s and James’s ideas, I think at least the following three conditions are to be imposed on such belief that may properly called religious.

Firstly, religious belief must be *genuine belief*. That is, a religious belief like any other belief must have the relevant characteristics of belief. Of course, an amazing variety of religious tenets and doctrines have been proposed. But from the pragmatist perspective at least, the mere profession of some tenet is not enough for belief.

Secondly, religious belief is, it seems almost by definition, such that its truth is factually *impossible to prove*. Any genuine inquiry into the truth of such belief is distinctly out of the reach of any finite human life (WB, *; cf. other essays). Indeed, if religious belief were testable during the course of one’s life, we would quite likely think such belief is not religious at all but simply a matter for a thoroughly scientific study to decide. Such things that religious belief concerns are, however, barely touched upon by scientific research.

Thirdly, religious belief cannot be just any belief genuinely believed without sufficient evidence. There is something about the *content* of such belief that makes it religious in particular. It is, of course, somewhat difficult to give it any clear and distinct import. Both Peirce and James consider our conceptions of God inevitably vague. Still, for both, God’s reality postulates something about the course of events on a wide, cosmic scale – a certain direction or tendency in the world. Peirce, on his part, emphasized the growth and unfolding of a rational structure of reality; for James religious belief often entailed that a certain moral order will ultimately prevail.

II

After these preliminaries, let me start with the first of the two guards. I’m going to concentrate on Peirce, who, in one of his later writings, claimed that the gist of his pragmatism can be summed up in a simple command: “Dismiss make-believes” (EP 2, 335; 1905). In Peirce’s view, what we genuinely believe and what we consciously think or assert we believe might often be two different things. Furthermore, Peirce’s criticism of make believe is as much, or even to a greater extent aimed against what could call *make doubt*. According to his anti-skeptical tenets, the simple profession of questioning the truth of a

proposition, or “paper doubt,” is not sufficient for a genuine inquiry.

Peirce’s points about the fundamentals of pragmatism are familiar enough. According to him, beliefs are not only connected to action but beliefs themselves *are* habits of action. Believing involves the preparedness to act in a certain manner in some conceivable scenario. For believing to be real, such preparedness must be there; and conversely, for doubting to be real, there must be a deprivation of such habit.

What I just briefly described could be called the descriptive claim of Peirce’s pragmatism, the tenet Peirce variously attempted to prove during the last decade of his life. However, the slogan “dismiss make-believes” has a distinctly normative cling to it. The same can perhaps be said also of the early formulation of Peirce’s pragmatism in “How to Make Our Ideas Clear,” which may be interpreted as *encouraging* us to *consider* the practical effects of the objects of our conceptions (EP 1, *). Such normative tones should be no surprise if we recall that for Peirce, pragmatism is fundamentally a *maxim of logic*; and logic, as Peirce became to conceive of it, is a *normative* science concerned with investigating the nature of good reasoning or the “goodness of representation” (EP 2, 203; 1903). Often, Peirce makes no clear divide between the descriptive claim about the connection between belief and action and the normative thesis about the admissibility of hypotheses. This is not to say Peirce confused these claims, however: both are a part of his pragmatism.

But on what exactly does the normative power of pragmatism rely upon? I think Peirce’s ideas here are quite closely allied with another (relatively little explored) doctrine of his, the *ethics of terminology* (cf. EP 2, sel. 19). Peirce, as we know, was for a considerable amount of time engaged in large encyclopaedic projects, contributing extensively to both J.M. Baldwin’s *Dictionary of Psychology and Philosophy* and the *Century Dictionary*. At several points, Peirce suggests it is simply misdemeanor to lack consistency in one’s terminology. Especially in science and philosophy, “each word should have a single exact meaning” to which the users of the symbols are bound, even in case they have introduced the term themselves (EP 2, 264–266; 1903). Only with sufficient terminological precision can scientific ideas attain much needed clarity and be communicable to other inquirers. This ethics is, of course, a central reason why Peirce renamed his pragmatism with the more specific term *pragmaticism* after noticing the former word had become to refer to views far removed from his original conception.

Peirce’s call to strictness about scientific terms was designed serve one goal: the advancement of science and the attainment of truth, in accordance with what Peirce called the first rule of logic: “do not block the way of inquiry” (EP 2, 48; *). Similarly, the lack of clarity

about one's *beliefs* hinders the advancement of science. Confused ideas cannot be communicated, precisely stated or evaluated in a scientific community. Thus, the foundation of Peirce's criticism of "make-believes," is, briefly put, the rather unconditional duty to truth he proposes. Combined with the descriptive thesis of beliefs as habits, these ideas produce the pragmatist maxim of dismissing make-believes.

Peirce's charge to make our ideas about our own beliefs clear had an import on religious beliefs as well. Many of Peirce's examples of ideas to be clarified are explicitly derived from theological doctrine. An obvious target of such criticisms are theological tenets which by pragmatist grounds turn out to be simply meaningless. This is not all, however. Already in "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" Peirce discussed the concept of transubstantiation, pointing out that it is "foolish for Catholics and Protestants to fancy themselves in disagreement about the elements of the sacrament, if they agree in regard to all their sensible effects, here and *hereafter*" (EP 1, 109; 1878; emphasis added). Here, Peirce is not contesting the meaningfulness of such beliefs that believers have about the Eucharist. Rather, he criticizes the theological jargon that confuses us by drawing differences where there really are none, while the dispute is merely verbal.

III

Pragmatism, then, may help us in separating genuine beliefs from mere professions of belief. Moreover, when there are genuine beliefs, we can distinguish whether debates surrounding those beliefs are real or merely verbal. There is, however, another, related guard against make-believes I wish to extract from the exchanges between Peirce and James – namely, the fact that pragmatism may help us detect situations in which even those who seemingly engage in religious conduct do not actually entertain genuine religious beliefs. I will suggest that James's "will to believe" argument itself is rendered problematic by such considerations. To make my point reasonably clear, however, I will take a somewhat longer route by first briefly considering Pascal's famous wager scenario.

Briefly put, according to Pascal's wager, while we are unable to prove that God exists, we are forced to either believe in God or not. But if God is real, the reward of belief in God is salvation. Pascal argued that if there is the chance of gaining such eternal bliss, no stake is too low: according to the decision theoretical scheme he proposes, because of possibility of an infinite reward, waging one's whole life is the *rational* choice to make. (Pensées 233; cf. *.)

Of course, such arguments seem counterintuitive, and needless to say, Pascal's wager has faced a great deal of critique from various directions. Here I will first briefly address two

mistaken criticisms of the wager because similar counterarguments have been raised against James's "will to believe." First, it is to be noted that Pascal does not suggest that becoming a believer is a momentary decision, something one can simply decide to do. Rather, according to him, it is a process of slowly picking up the habits of a believer. Pascal understood the connection between belief and action quite similarly to the pragmatists.

Second, unlike some have claimed, Pascal nowhere suggests that the religious life wouldn't be a burden to a normal human being. Quite the contrary, according to him, there is, indeed, a clear difference between the conduct of the believer and the non-believer; and it may turn out that the life of the believer is much more filled with hardship, and lacks the pleasures of that of the non-believer. But it is still reasonable to select such a life for the simple reason that the reward is infinite: for such a reward, no sacrifice is too big.

Contrary to what is sometimes thought, in "The Will to Believe" James does not suggest that we have the right to belief without evidence because of the *practical benefits* of such belief. That is, James's position is not, in this respect, akin to Pascal's. There is, however, an important similarity.

As I read it, the main thesis of James's essay is that in some cases, it is not *unethical* to believe without any available evidence (WB 20). 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" (WB 24). James didn't think that the two maxims are mutually exclusive in many, if not most respects. But he James did hold 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 (WB 24–25, 30–31).

Now, according to James "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" (WB 31–32). 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 drop that rule at least when it would be detrimental to our search for truth about some issue.

James argued for the justification of believing without evidence on the grounds that without such belief, we may be forever severed from attaining a number of truths. According to him, there are such beliefs the truth of or evidence for which is in some way sensitive to the beliefs being initially believed. In some cases, James thought, beliefs cannot be true without being believed: "our faith beforehand in an uncertified result *is the only thing that makes the*

result come true” (ILWL 53; cf. WB 29). In other cases, he referred to the possibility that “evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way” (WB 31). For James, initial belief in some beliefs is a *necessary* condition for making such a belief true *or* at least attaining evidence that supports it. Thus, what comes to such belief, it is *rational* for us to believe without sufficient evidence, because doubting, according to James, can result in a permanent loss of truth.

James’s reasoning here is akin to Pascal’s in a key respect: exploring the alternatives, belief in an unjustified proposition is found the most *rational* course of action under certain circumstances. However, instead of a consideration of possible utilities and benefits of more practical nature, like those involved in Pascal’s wager, James is concerned with the *epistemic* merits of the two maxims. In effect, James holds that without initial, unjustified belief in some proposition, we will not act accordingly, barring ourselves from verifying that proposition. James’s worry here is thus founded on similar considerations as Peirce’s: we must act so as to not block the way of inquiry. Still, the “will to believe” argument, as I hope to show in what follows, shares a central problem involved in Pascal’s wager.

The criticism of James I’m about to explore was already proposed in 1897 by Peirce, who, after having read “The Will to Believe,” 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. (Peirce to James, March 13, 1897; mention Russell.)

In effect, Peirce here described a practical experiment on the hypothesis that the business partner is honest. But, as the example shows, such experimentation requires no belief in the truth of the hypothesis itself. We may be uncertain whether the hypothesis we are testing is true but still consider proceeding along a certain line of conduct rational because we think that hypothesis is the most reasonable one to test, even if it is not likely true. While Peirce then

acts as if the business partner were an honest man, the fact Peirce does not really believe in his integrity is clearly shown by his being simultaneously engaged in gathering evidence about his honesty. In practical situations, genuine belief in effect renders such inquiry impossible: we do not waste time and effort investigating what we already believe.

This, I think, is also the reason why Peirce famously exclaimed that belief has no place in science (EP 2, *). For the pure scientist does not believe in the hypothesis he is trying to prove. Far rather, he often attempts to accumulate evidence against it. To be sure, as such Peirce's claim is still something of an exaggeration: the proving or disproving of a hypothesis is itself done with reliance on other theories – theories which form the bedrock of the particular scientific practice. Still, it seems James overstated his case. The point is, simply put, this: any *particular* belief is not a *necessary* condition for any *particular* action.¹ Differing beliefs may result in similar actions in similar circumstances. For this reason, doubt about some particular belief cannot bar us from finding out the truth of that belief.²

To put this point differently, we may inquire whether the religious hypothesis suggested by Pascal's wager is genuine belief by employing a pragmatic consideration of the practical effects such belief may entail. Considering a variety actual circumstances only, there seems to be no difference between a genuine religious belief and a religious wager. The believer and the wagerer act similarly; and for the pragmatist, this may suggest their beliefs indeed are the same: after all, according to pragmatism, we are to evaluate differences between two beliefs by their import on our conduct.

However, this reasoning omits an important consideration of differing background beliefs involved in the two scenarios. In the case of the genuine believer, if it should turn out the rewards of religious conduct are not exactly infinite, it is likely his conduct would still not be altered in any way. It is highly conceivable that the believer does not even consider such benefits and rewards when acting according to his religious beliefs. But in the case of the wagerer things stand differently. Perhaps he were to learn that God will only reward the

1 Similarly, James seems to confuse the actual verification of a belief with its being true. Consider James's patent case of the mountain climber stuck on a cliff, having to leap over a wide gulf to save her own life. If she believes that she will succeed, 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. (ILWL 53–54; SR 80.) James's account is seemingly based on an "actualistic" view according to which beliefs about such capacities are "made true" via their actualization in some circumstances. But although doubt about one's capacities may at times result in one's not even trying a leap, one's ability to jump over gulfs of certain width under certain conditions itself does not depend on whether one ever attempts to do so.

2 A related problematic seems to underlie another complaint by Peirce: that the will to believe is a confusion between real willing and the willing not to will (*). Because of its habitual nature, belief, for Peirce, was beyond our willing in this latter respect: to believe completely is to push the belief beyond self control.

believer with less than infinite bliss. Or maybe, as Peirce and James at points seem to have thought, the benefits of belief are mostly this-worldly rather than otherworldly: perhaps the believer gets his reward in this life rather than in another.³ If this were to occur, the wagerer would certainly be inclined to lower his stakes.

Thus, what I would like to suggest here is that Pascal's wager is actually not, by pragmatist principles, about genuine religious belief at all. The wagerer entertains no religious beliefs but, rather, based on some completely different beliefs, believes in the rationality of acting *as if* one believed. Related difficulties plague James's "will to believe" argument: belief in a hypothesis is not a necessary condition of probing its veracity, and thus, the lack of such belief does not bar us from finding out whether the proposition is true. This renders problematic James's argument for adopting the first intellectual maxim and risking untruth.

James himself famously noted that he should have named his piece "The *Right* to Believe" – something that has been taken to indicate he wished to tune down the rhetoric of the essay. Thus, James has been read as merely suggesting that we have the right to engage in an experiment over a religious hypothesis (cf. Welchman *). While this might make James's position more consistent, according to our second guard against make-believes such an experiment entails no real belief in the hypothesis. On the contrary, it might be suggested that James only wished to say we are in the right to believe what we already *do* believe, despite the fact no sufficient evidence is available. In this case, at least there is no make-believe involved. However, then the argument would arguably lack any import to the genuine believer or perhaps even to a discussion of the ethics of belief in general.⁴

IV

To conclude my remarks, I wish to point out I am not contesting the idea that adopting the "will to believe" strategy with some belief is impossible. On the contrary, by deciding to always act as if a belief we *hope* is true it may be possible for us to slowly turn this mere hope into a full-fledged belief. Still, if James's argument for the rationality of adopting such beliefs the truth of or evidence for which is somehow "sensitive" to our believing those beliefs does not work, "The Will to Believe" is unable to tell us what *kind of* beliefs we are ethically correct to assume so to speak at will, or even what kind of hypotheses we should experiment upon.

3 The essence of religion, James holds, is 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" (WB 29–30; emphasis added).

4 (The uncontrollability of belief; the assuming that it is right if one believes.)

Certainly. in “The Will to Believe,” James famously poses three conditions for the “genuineness” of an option between hypotheses. Firstly, the option must be live: both alternatives have to be appealing and possible to entertain. It has to be forced: there cannot be any third alternative. And it must be momentous: unique and important consequences must result from it. The triad of conditions does seem to incorporate the ideas central to Peirce’s normative claim of pragmatism: a live, forced and momentous option can hardly be considered meaningless on pragmatist grounds. If the choice is between doubting and believing a belief that fits all three conditions, the complaint about make believe or make doubt should not arise. But I don’t think, although you might not concur, that the three criteria posed by James amount to much more than this.

Perhaps more interestingly, both Peirce and James seem to have held that we are allowed to assume as beliefs such hypotheses that naturally suggest themselves to such creatures as ourselves. According to Peirce, we are attuned to nature in such a way that we more often guess correctly than not. But with matters of such sweeping scope as fundamental religious and ethical beliefs, this hardly seems sufficient; more about these things should be said. Pragmatism makes the forceful point that genuine beliefs are not without consequences what comes to one’s conduct. Belief, even religious belief, is certainly not a completely private matter: our actions have consequences not only in our personal lives but also in those of others.