

## **WILLIAM JAMES ON SELF-VERIFYING BELIEFS**

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For an essay of about 30 pages, William James's "The Will to Believe" (1897) has resulted in much debate. Discussion on the exact nature of James's argument continues to occupy the pages of philosophical journals, and it seems that no consensus has been achieved about its merits. In this paper, I first sketch an overview of James's "will to believe" argument in an attempt to show that the concept of (what has become to be called) "self-verifying beliefs" – such beliefs the truth of or evidence for which are somehow sensitive to their being believed in – is surprisingly central to James's essay. Secondly, I investigate the question whether there are such beliefs in the light of the pragmatists' concept of belief. By examining James's examples, it is shown that no interesting cases of self-verifying beliefs exist in the sense required for James's thesis, which renders James's view problematic. The failure of his argument makes the choice between a believing and doubting attitude towards a belief even more pronouncedly ethical. In the third and last section of this paper, I discuss some merits of James's position and end the discussion with a brief pragmatic consideration of the concept of hope.

### **I**

The topic of James's essay is the relationship between belief and evidence. James's intention is to contest the evidentialist conception of W.K. Clifford, who – in his "Ethics of Belief" of 1879 – argued that it is "wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence". James does *not* wish to counter the view that our beliefs should primarily

be based on and conform to available evidence. Instead, he considers the question as to what exactly we are to do by way of belief when there is no (sufficient) evidence available.

The main thesis of James's essay is that in some cases, it is not unethical to believe without any available evidence: "*Our passionate 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*" (WB 20).<sup>1</sup> James's thesis has both a descriptive component, according to which we *cannot* always postpone belief until we have received sufficient evidence, and a normative component, according to which – when faced what he calls a "genuine" option – we are both *entitled to* and *should* believe without evidence. James's argument for the normative component of his thesis rests heavily on the pragmatic conception according to which beliefs are (or can be "translated" into) rules for (or habits of) action. As such, beliefs have an intimate relationship with our conduct, each belief contributing to the way we will act at least in some conceivable circumstance. Not believing in some belief, we are prone to act differently from how we would if we did believe it.

It is evident that our practical needs and available evidence for beliefs to be adopted as guides to action at times do not go hand in hand (cf. WB 27). In some cases, we are forced to choose between believing – adopting some belief as a guide to action – or doubting, remaining without that belief. Cases of believing without completely compelling evidence are of course ample in everyday life. Stopping at a service station, most of us do not run chemical experiments on what it is that the pump serves, only later gaining any indication of whether it was petrol or water we paid for. Oftentimes, we rely on the testimony of others as a basis for our conduct. And in some cases, we may simply notice that some of our beliefs rely on no considerable evidence at all.

Of course, some of our beliefs may turn out to be of very little practical import. Indeed, the actual course of our lives may run completely similarly whether we believe a particular belief or not, if that belief does not "actualize" and affect our conduct in any situation we face. However, the beliefs James wishes to discuss – most notably religious belief – are of such central importance to the conduct of life that the choice will unavoidably affect our action to a great extent.<sup>2</sup> To limit the application of the "will to believe" strategy, in addition to his

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<sup>1</sup> The following abbreviations are used to refer to James's works: ILWL = "Is Life Worth Living?" (1895), MPML = "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891), SR = "The Sentiment of Rationality" (1879, 1882), WB = "The Will to Believe" (1897) (all in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*, 1897), VRE = *Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), P = *Pragmatism* (1907). All references are to the Harvard edition *Works of William James*.

<sup>2</sup> Being a proponent of tolerance and pluralism, James never refers to a particular type of action motivated by religious belief. Like religious experience, there is a variety of religious belief, the common core of which James attempts to grasp in his dictum "the best things are the more eternal things" (WB 29). James does not wish to

requirement that no (sufficient) evidence on the issue is available, James poses three conditions for the “genuineness” of an option. Firstly, the option between different hypotheses 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.

It is important to note that James does not think doubting amounts to *disbelief*. One of the central claims of his pragmatism (as well as James’s psychological work of the 1880’s and 1890’s) is that the opposite of belief is doubt instead of disbelief, the latter itself being another belief. Doubting  $p$  does not necessarily result in our acting as if  $p$  were untrue, but disbelieving  $p$  (or the belief that not- $p$ ) does. However, our doubting  $p$  will most probably in many situations result in action differing from that of someone who believes  $p$ . As James puts it, doubting religious hypothesis will lead us to act “more or less as if religion were *not* true” (WB 32): “it is often practically impossible to distinguish doubt from dogmatic negation” (SR 88). Accordingly, it is a somewhat prominent misunderstanding of James that a “forced” option is a choice between  $p$  and not- $p$ .<sup>3</sup> In James’s own words, it is rather the choice either to “accept this truth or go without it” (WB, 15). Such “going without” does not necessarily entail belief of any kind. The same is true of the “liveness” of the alternatives of a genuine option: James explicitly states that the choice may be, in an example case of religious belief, “[b]e an agnostic or be a Christian” (WB 14; cf. WB 30). Nothing here implies that the other “live” alternative, aside belief, must be disbelief.

When evidence is available, James thinks that the question is (and should be) pressed beyond a decision by what he calls our *passional* nature. Faced with sufficient evidence, we are to believe accordingly. But in a case of a genuine option, without sufficient evidence, doubting and believing are on a par as “passional” attitudes we may adopt towards a hypothesis: neither of them is unequivocally recommendable.<sup>4</sup> In such cases, James argues that both doubt and belief are expressions of our *passional* nature, the former simply placing the “fear of [the hypothesis’s] being in error” before the “hope that it may be true” (WB 30).

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recommend a certain religious belief at the expense of others, and his expressions about the exact content of religious belief often remain rather vague.

<sup>3</sup> This is not to say that some of James’s own, careless formulations would not suggest such a view. Considering the whole of the argument of “The Will to Believe”, however, it seems clear the decision must be between doubt and belief. In the case of the religious hypothesis, nothing prevents the *belief* one chooses to be *disbelief* in God.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, it is not the simplest of questions what would constitute “sufficient evidence”. For the “empiricist” James, it is the testimony of experience (in a wide sense of the term). However, James also holds that our criteria for sufficient evidence are themselves open to revision (WB 22–24). Thus, James’s reply would be simply to note that whatever we may at any time consider sufficient evidence, if *such* evidence is available, the “will to believe” strategy is not to be applied.

Why should we rather believe than doubt, then? It is important to notice that – contrary to widespread assumptions – James’s argument in “The Will to Believe” does not include much reference to usefulness of religious belief. The popular view that James thinks we should believe in God without evidence because such belief is simply useful is not completely unfounded: arguments of somewhat this sort are found both in *The Varieties of Religious Belief* (1902) and, more explicitly, in *Pragmatism* (1907). In “The Will to Believe”, James does point out that religious belief entails a promise of a “vital good” that will be lost unless one believes (WB 30). However, this is far from the gist of James’s argument, and for good reason: such “vital good” may of course ensue of a doubting attitude as well.

Rather, James argues 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. In our intellectual life, James holds, we are faced with a choice between two maxims. This may be called the first premise of his argument. Either we follow the rule “*We must know the truth*” or another, substantially different maxim, “*we must avoid error*” (WB 24). James’s whole argument converges on this choice – and, arguably, James’s reasoning about this choice is philosophically far more interesting than the question whether our “passional” nature may affect our decisions about belief, especially if it is taken as a simple matter of course that it at least sometimes does.

James never thought that the two maxims are mutually exclusive in many, if not most respects. “Believing truth” and “shunning error” often coincide. However, James’s argument requires that there is a practical difference resulting from our choice of maxim. And indeed, James holds that sometimes by following the second maxim we end up shunning truth quite like by following the first we end up believing falsehoods. If we believe only what we have gathered evidence for, some truths will be left out; if we believe more, we are prone to believe what is not true (WB 24–25, 30–31).<sup>5</sup>

But this far, the maxims seem to be, at best, on a par. Why should we follow the first maxim instead of the second? James’s second premise is that “*a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule*” (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.

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to say that we will not end up believing falsehoods even if we follow the second maxim. James is a fallibilist about belief: any one of our beliefs may be untrue. He thinks this even lends some support to his preference of the first maxim: “Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things” (WB 25).

It is noteworthy that James's argument itself is "intellectual": he appeals to our conception of rationality in his second premise. Thus, James's exploration of the limits of full-fledged evidentialism is not based on arationalism or irrationalism about belief. Quite the contrary, James wishes to show that we are intellectually better off by following the first maxim, at times giving our passional nature the chance of adding truths to our inventories of belief.

As one may expect, the third premise of James's argument is simply that there indeed are cases where following the second rule would prevent us from attaining (a) truth. This premise is based on his idea that 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 holds, 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 refers to the possibility that "evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way" (WB 31). Hence, doubting, according to James, can in some cases result in a permanent loss of truth. And it is because of this that we should, at times, believe without evidence, or let our "passional" nature decide for the believing attitude.

## II

From the discussion above it should be clear that the *normative* component of James's main thesis rests on his claim that there are what I have referred to as self-verifying beliefs – at least if we accept his other premises. The idea that the second maxim would (forever) prevent us from believing some truths is the *reason* James gives for the adoption of the first intellectual maxim; and the reason why this would be is that in the case of some beliefs, without any initial belief, we are (forever) unable to verify them. But how convincing is this latter premise?

At this point, it is in order to say that "self-verifying belief" (or "self-fulfilling belief") is something of a misnomer, especially in this context. While verification is a key term to James's pragmatism, he himself never uses "self-verification" – or any other "technical" terms – to describe the beliefs he discusses. What is usually meant by this term is a belief that is (made) true by virtue of belief in it. In James's case, "self-verification" can be understood more broadly. James does not need to show that the truth of some belief *results* from believing that belief. However, for the purposes of his argument it is also not sufficient just to state that some beliefs in our practical lives are verified only after they are believed. It is required that in some cases, belief in a belief is prerequisite for the truth of that belief; or that believing a belief is prerequisite for the possibility of gathering evidence for the belief. That is, the belief in a belief

has to be a *necessary* condition for making it true *or* attaining evidence that supports it. And it is exactly of such beliefs that James attempts to give examples.

Thus, by a self-verifying belief, two things may be meant in the context of this discussion:

- (1)  $P$  is self-verifying if and only if belief that  $p$  is a necessary condition for the truth of  $p$ .
- (2)  $P$  is self-verifying if and only if belief in  $p$  is a necessary condition for obtaining evidence that shows the truth of  $p$ .

Let's consider the first criterion first. In addition to serving James's argument, this idea is quite naturally of broader interest. If such self-verifying beliefs exist, and we have the capacity of assuming ("at will") at least some of these beliefs, we are at times forced to *decide* whether one or another belief is true. If our belief can "create the fact", as James holds (WB 29), in many cases we will even face an ethical choice of choosing what to "make true". But are there such beliefs?

There are beliefs that "logically" or "performatively" entail their own truth when believed, for example the belief "I believe this belief". In this and similar cases, believing the belief seems to be either a sufficient or a necessary condition to its truth (or both). But such beliefs are of quite limited interest in the context of evaluating the relationship between belief and evidence. Moreover, from a pragmatist point of view, it may be that (all) such "beliefs" fail to be beliefs in the first place: they do not entail a habit of action. Unsurprisingly, it is not such "logical" cases that James is interested in. His actual examples of what he claims to be self-verifying beliefs (in the first sense) entail beliefs about the following:

- a) First-person capacities
- b) Social cooperation or beliefs of others
- c) Moral value

Of beliefs of the first type, James's patent example is the belief of a mountain climber that she can leap over a wide gulf to save her own life. If she believes that she 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.)

It is evidently the case that if we doubt whether we are capable of some action, and success in performing that action is of great importance, we will not even attempt it. Say, if I doubt my ability to climb up the wall of this building to enter this classroom, and failure would result in my death, I will not even try my luck but take the stairs instead (of course assuming that I desire to stay alive). Furthermore, as James holds, my belief in the possibility of success may contribute to the actual performance. Doubt and hesitation may turn out fatal, while a more trusting attitude can be of considerable aid.

However, it is rather dubious whether these considerations imply the self-verifying nature of such beliefs in the sense required for James's argument. Firstly, 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. The truth about one's capacities, then, is not dependent of one's beliefs about them, despite the fact that some particular actions in particular situations may remain unperformed without such beliefs.

Secondly, even if a lack of hesitation may turn out to be beneficial for one's purposes, it is not true that such a lack is invariably prerequisite to one's success, or even that doubt necessarily results in possibly fatal second-guessing. Certainly there are situations in which it is not recommendable to have great faith in one's ability of leaping over abysses, and situations in which one fails despite having every confidence in one's success. More importantly, against James's view it can be held that in various conceivable scenarios one may jump unhesitatingly despite the fact one doubts whether one will succeed: doubt itself (unlike utter disbelief) does not necessarily result in a lack of serious attempt.

Another set of examples James gives, those that concern social life, face similar problems. James holds that in some cases, belief or "faith" in the beliefs, actions or emotions of others is prerequisite for the truth of those beliefs. In "The Will to Believe", James presents two (different) scenarios of this sort. In the first example, a person's belief in the amicability and liking of another may, James holds, ultimately bring about the truth of that belief by modifying the first person's actions so that they are prone to result in such liking (WB 28, 31). But it is evident that this example fails to serve James's purposes: belief in such a belief is certainly not required for its truth.

A second example concerns cooperation: a train full of passengers ends up being robbed "because the [passengers] cannot count on one another, while each passenger fears that if

he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up” (WB 29). Such situations would allow for a variety of analyses in terms of action and belief. For the purposes of James’s argument, however, it would be needed to show that beliefs about actions or beliefs of others are truly necessary for such action or belief to occur. In this example, again, at least the belief of any *individual* does not seem to be a necessary condition for its truth in the required sense. And, again, even doubt about what others believe or how they will act does not preclude spontaneous (albeit perhaps unusually courageous) cooperation.

The third set of examples James discusses – moral beliefs, or beliefs about value – is of more interest. James is particularly interested in showing how the *belief* that “life is worth living” *makes* life worth living (ILWL 52–56; SR 83–84). As James (perhaps quite intentionally) blurs the divide between different types of attitudes and beliefs of moral kind, aiming at convincing his reader with his typical rhetorical bent, some particularly attentive consideration is required here. By a moral belief, many different things may be meant. Firstly, there certainly are some value-laden “attitudes” – say, of simple admiration or disinterest – we may at times adopt towards people and events. If this is all that is meant, James is perhaps right. We may, probably at least to some extent at will, adopt an approving or disapproving attitude, even towards the whole of life itself. And it also seems such emotional adjustment requires effort on our part. However, while such temporary emotional attitudes may “colour” our view of the world, they do not affect our conduct in any respect. To this extent, they simply fail to be *beliefs* by the pragmatist definition.

Secondly, and in the main, James thinks that moral beliefs are of great importance to our conduct. Indeed, at times he claims that “our own reactions on the world” is what may make life and the world “*from the moral point of view* [...] a success” (ILWL 54–55). Our acting according to moral beliefs may make the world a better place according to those moral beliefs (cf. P ch. 8). But it is surely dubious if “moral truths” are sensitive to belief in this manner. For example, the fact that we have strived for and even achieved a certain moral order in our world and society is no condition for the truth of the claim that we *should* have done so in the first place. Thirdly, James discusses belief in moral value as such – the belief that there *is* good and evil in the first place (WB 27–28). What makes this belief more interesting than the particular scenarios of James’s other examples is that such belief is required for moral action in general, like the belief that there is a truth to be found about an issue seems factually prerequisite to a prolonged investigation into it. That is, while belief in moral value (or truth) is (again) not required of us to perform some singular action, it is prerequisite to the *general* type of conduct that constitutes moral life (or investigation).



It can very plausibly turn out that we cannot ever gather (enough) evidence to disprove scepticism but, especially if we are to remain unsceptical, need to act based on faith. James himself holds this view, stating that “[m]oral scepticism can no more be refuted or proved by logic than intellectual scepticism can” (WB 28). While, like other pragmatists, James is not a proponent of a strong distinction between facts and values, he does usually hold that questions of value are quite distinct from questions of fact. Moral questions are not “questions of what sensibly exists, but what is good”, and as such, they do not allow for “sensible proof” (WB 27).

However, somewhat mystically James at least at times holds that moral beliefs may be verified via the action that ensues of them, as moral conduct can ultimately lead to such results that he considers evidence for their truth. In an early essay, James describes this process of verification as follows:

“[T]he verification of the theory which you may hold as to the objectively moral character of the world can consist only in this – that if you proceed to act upon your theory it will be reversed by nothing that later turns up as your action’s fruit; it will harmonize so well with the entire drift of experience that the latter will, as it were, adopt it, or at most give it an ampler interpretation, without obliging you in any way to change the essence of its formulation.” (SR 86; cf. P ch. 8.)

What does such “harmonizing” with the “entire drift of experience” amount to? James certainly does not hold that the simple fact nothing in our experience fails to contest a moral belief is sufficient for its truth. Such a view would be both philosophically and practically dubious. Moral action and its fruits are notoriously often out of accord, with the best of intentions leading into the worst of results for the acting individual. However, this is not usually considered an objection to specific valuations or to the moral conduct of life itself.

Instead, James thinks it possible for our conduct to acquire value by “terminating and eventuating and bearing fruit somewhere in an unseen spiritual world” (ILWL 52; cf. MPML 161). It is here that moral belief approaches (or becomes confounded with) religious belief. 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). Religious belief can make a single ideal, which our various ethical theories and beliefs may imperfectly reflect, as binding over our conduct, and thus act as a foundation for our moral beliefs (ILWL 52–55). James’s idea here is perhaps something akin to the Kantian *summum bonum*: that experience will ultimately show a fitting together of the moral conduct and happiness of individuals.

To return to the original question about the self-verifying nature of these beliefs, however, it is difficult to conceive how the outcome of such eternal matters could depend on our

personal belief. James himself claims that by being sceptical, we can fail to be on “the winning side” in this matter (WB 31), and must face the consequences, whatever they may then be. A belief by a singular agent is not required to the verity of religious claims. Indeed, the (only) reason James gives for thinking such religious and moral beliefs are self-verifying is, at least at one point, the highly dubious idea that the very existence of God (or gods) can to some extent be an outcome of religious belief: “God himself [...] may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity” (ILWL 55).

As it seems, James’s examples simply fail to be self-verifying beliefs in the first sense of the term. But are there beliefs that would fill the second condition, that is, be self-verifying in the sense that belief in those beliefs is a necessary condition of gaining *evidence* for (or perhaps even against) their truth? James himself seems to think that this may at times be case, especially what comes to the religious hypothesis: “making the gods’ acquaintance” may require “some participation of our sympathetic nature” (WB 31). As already stated, however, doubt suffices for experimenting – indeed, it is doubt that often gives the impetus to test a hypothesis. Accordingly, James himself holds that it is possible to simultaneously remain open to evidence for and against a belief, although at times advances of science have in practice depended on the scientist’s personal faith that her pet hypothesis bears some truth to it (WB 25–27). It goes without saying that devising and implementing a test for a hypothesis does not require belief in its truth, and in many cases hasn’t.<sup>6</sup>

Generally, the problems James’s examples of self-verifying beliefs face are based on two related confusions. Firstly, in his examples, James seems to confound the truth of a belief with an actualized *action* based on it. However, no singular belief is a necessary condition for a particular action. Secondly, James verges on confusing doubt with *disbelief*, which (at least in some life-threatening circumstances) could prevent one from such action that might lend evidence for (or against) a belief. But doubt does not preclude action in the way disbelief does: when unsure, experiment always remains a possibility. An experiment need not be based on the belief that what is attempted is going to succeed, but simply on the (other) belief that trying out, one will find out what the fact of the matter is.

### III

It seems there are no interesting cases of self-verifying beliefs in either of the senses required for James’s argument. This renders James’s third premise dubious; and thus his “will to believe”

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<sup>6</sup> Of course, testing a hypothesis can often imply that the experimenter does not believe that the hypothesis is *necessarily* false – otherwise such experimentation would be futile at least from the perspective of an economy of science.

argument fails in conclusively showing that we should follow the first intellectual maxim. What, then, remains of the “will to believe”? Although James’s argument for the first maxim is not fully successful, it does not follow that we should prefer the second rule. Quite the contrary, James has certainly managed to show that in the course of our actual lives, we face situations in which we do and need to act although we are far from convinced we know exactly what we are to do to arrive at what we aim at.

Thus, if it is not that we *should* in some particular cases go ahead and believe without sufficient evidence, nothing prevents us from doing so. The choice between the two intellectual maxims, if not decidable on intellectual grounds becomes – without any pretence of “rationality” – even more pronouncedly *ethical* (in a broad sense of the word). We may *consciously* risk, in our personal lives, a belief without evidence – and indeed we in many cases do. Unlike James himself perhaps thought, it is our “passional” nature that must decide *which rule to follow* when we are faced with a genuine option between believing and doubting.

What has not yet been addressed here is the question whether belief can, in any cases, be voluntary. It has often been considered dubious that we might adopt beliefs wilfully – even dubious enough to render James’s whole “will to believe” mistaken. However, James’s pragmatist conception of belief seems to give room for just such adoption of belief to some extent “at will”. If nothing in experience contradicts us – if there is no sufficient evidence to the contrary – it is not really implausible that we may at times follow a rule of action while completely unsure whether it is true. Doubting opens the doors for experimentation. Hoping that our action leads to the result desired, we can choose to act *as if* what we do not know is true. If the action needed is not singular but we constantly face the same choice – which is the case what comes to such overarching beliefs as the religious one – we may consciously decide to act, in all of these situations, according to what we *hope* is true.

It is in this manner that hope may become belief. If, in all scenarios, one acts as if the belief *p* were true, one does not merely hope that *p* is true, but, pragmatically, *believes* that *p* is true. By the pragmatic definition, if we follow the rule of conduct in all (conceivable) circumstances, we *de facto* believe. In this sense, to the pragmatist, the distinction between belief and hope is a matter of degree.

What should we hope, then? Like all beliefs, a religious “over-belief” alters our conduct *now* because it refers to what will occur in the *future*, depending on our current action. In his longest and most sustained discussions, James does not contest evidentialism in this sense (either): the truth of the religious hypothesis is a matter for future experience to decide. Unless religious

belief and “a purely naturalistic scheme of belief” postulate something different about the world, they amount to the same belief (WB 32 fn 4; cf. VRE 407–408): unless there is a practical difference as to the course of the future, nothing about our conduct alters whether we believe in one or the other of these hypotheses. Thus, while we can, by changing our conduct, perhaps slowly induce full-fledged belief in what we have no evidence for, quite like the mountain climber, we are better off hoping only what is *true*. It is ultimately in this sense that truth is – as James has it elsewhere – what is “*good in the way of belief*” (P 30).