"James's Anti-dogmatism in the Defense of Religious Belief"

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Workshop on Pragmatism and the Ethics of Belief, Nordic Pragmatism Network, Dec. 15-17, 2008, Jyvaskyla, Finland

William James asserts that philosophy and science will only have something positive to contribute to determining the objective truth of religious claims when they cease to be dogmatic and become experimental. In this paper, I focus on how James's anti-dogmatic approach affects his defense of religious belief and psychical research. I conclude that in his efforts to undermine the dogmatic rejection of the very possibility of genuine religious phenomena by positivistic scientists and naturalist non-believers, James appeals to the pragmatic experimental method but is unable to produce convincing evidence. His version of pragmatic anti-dogmatism is then contrasted with John Dewey's.

After explaining why William James was opposed to dogmatism and what he argued for in its stead, I will be focusing on how his anti-dogmatic approach affects his philosophy of religious experience and his defense of psychical research. According to Robert A. McDermott, James dismisses the dogmatism of both scientific skepticism, on the one hand, and religious belief, on the other, and offers instead a defense of religious and psychic modes of perception.[1] James uses the same scientific or radically empiricist methods in both his psychic and religious research; namely, searching for concrete facts through a wide range of experiences and formulating them as testable hypotheses. While such evidence is still being gathered, analyzed, and tested, James contends that it would be mere dogmatism for psychologists to prematurely dismiss such possible additions to the range of experiences they investigate.[2] Since he conceived of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as being his contribution to developing a science of religious experience which had important philosophic repercussions, I will use the evidence provided by some contemporary researchers in the area of psychic or para-normal phenomena to

test the cogency of James's anti-dogmatic pragmatic method as a useful means of mediating disputes over religious phenomena.[3] By now, such evidence can no longer be considered premature.

1. *Dogmatism Versus Experimentalism*

In a familiar passage from *Pragmatism*, William James compares the pragmatic method to a corridor in a hotel.[4] Innumerable rooms open off from it, variously occupied by atheists, religious believers, chemists, metaphysicians, and anti-metaphysicians. The only thing they have in common is the corridor; that is, a practical way of getting into or out of their rooms. The attitude or orientation they all share is a willingness to judge beliefs by their usefulness for purposes deemed worthwhile. Switching metaphors, James denies that theories are transcripts of reality, asserting instead that they are man-made languages giving a report of nature from some perspective or other. The point being stressed is that languages, unlike truth claims, tolerate many choices of expressions and many dialects. Both the hotel metaphor and the language metaphor illustrate James's claim that pragmatism "has no dogmas, and no doctrines save its method" (PM, 32).

James is quite proud of this aspect of pragmatism, which he takes to be its central strength, and repeats it often. He says even more emphatically that pragmatism is well suited to mediating disputes and reconciling opponents because it "has in fact no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof" (PM, 43-44). *Prima facie* such a claim would be hard to defend, but it is somewhat mitigated if attention is paid to two modifiers James adds in this formulation of his anti-dogmatism. Is he perhaps saying--not that pragmatism has no dogmas–but only no dogmas sufficient to obstruct inquiry, and that it does have canons of what shall count as proof, only that they are not rigid ones because not restricted

to certain forms of evidence, such as that produced in laboratories or by use of statistical analysis? Even if we accept this weaker sense of being non-dogmatic, though, it is clear that James himself is not; he is keen to distance himself from dogmatism of any sort. He is also at pains to demonstrate that pragmatism is committed to no beliefs whatever, so certainly to no beliefs held dogmatically, but instead is only "an attitude of orientation" (PM, 32). He instructs us to judge beliefs solely by looking for the consequences they lead to.

Since pragmatism is often summarily dismissed as a worthwhile philosophy on the grounds that it is a method merely, a position that aligns it with positivism's value-free stance, how can James's claims be reconciled with a more responsible, value-oriented approach? How can it even be reconciled with James's own claims to be combating positivism by explicitly defending the absolute dignity of the human person and the centrality of values to every way of organizing experience, not excluding scientific procedure? One way has been to distinguish between pragmatism as merely a method and the theory of radical empiricism as a defense of a particular world view or metaphysics. But this defense cannot be sustained because, as I have argued elsewhere, James equates the two, distinguishing them only as expressing different emphases, and he even uses the same definition for both.[5] He says that pragmatism starts from the same postulate as the principle of pure experience; namely, that "[e]verything real must be experienceable somewhere, and every kind of thing experienced must somewhere be real."[6] As a pragmatist method for determining the truth, the emphasis is on workableness, not correspondence with objects, and as a doctrine of radical empiricism that limits discussion to what is or can be experienced, the emphasis is on the fact that the relations among things *can* be directly experienced.[7]

James's explanation for why pragmatism is a method without metaphysical or other biases is that it will accept any premises as long as they can be shown to have practical consequences. Nothing is ruled out beforehand. But 'practical' is not a vernacular term for James. It has specific meaning within his philosophical perspective: "the practically real world for each one of us, the effective world of the individual, is the compound world, the physical facts and emotional values in indistinguishable combination" [VRE, 151]. In this context, he means that the "only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted" (PM, 44). Of all possible consequences, only the best solutions for the ends desired should be selected, and these ends in turn must be answerable to the widest demands of experience. The "leadings" we seek as we navigate our way through experience must be worthwhile as well as efficacious.

Even taking James at his word that experience has such resources, is it enough to keep working at a solution until every interest is accommodated, every relevant aspect of experience accounted for? Will acceptable values result from this process and unacceptable ones be rejected? On the other hand, is such a criterion even possible? How can we know that a particular belief fits every part of life at all, let alone fits them the best? How can we know that nothing in experience has been omitted? James uncharacteristically uses the absolute term "the best" twice, rather than his more usual comparative term of what is "better" given the circumstances and the ends-in-view. Is it significant or merely a rhetorical flourish that he uses as his test of probable truth (note the 'probable'!) what works *best* and what fits *best*? Are there on pragmatist grounds any approach to the best except through comparisons of what is better?

And since truth is always truth for us, who is it best for? He seems to be saying that whatever leads all of us to our ends in every aspect of life is best. But can we start out from the global mass of people, which encompasses a diversity of premises, beliefs, values, ways of life and experiences, and agree on a path that fits all our demands without dogmatically, surreptitiously, sneaking in someone's, or some sub-set of, beliefs and values as more worthwhile?

It seems that we cannot. In *The Meaning of Truth* James says that "[t]he only *real* guarantee we have against licentious thinking is the circumpressure of experience itself, which gets us sick of concrete errors" (MT, 47). To the criticism that the "humanist will always have a greater liberty to play fast and loose with truth than will your believer in an independent realm of reality that makes the standard rigid," James appeals to "empirical methods of inquiry in concrete affairs. To consider hypotheses is surely always better than to dogmatize *ins blaue hinein*" (MT, 47). In this sense, dogmatic belief is rigid because it claims a secure hold on reality. If one already has the truth, there is no need to entertain mere hypotheses. This hold on reality is independent of experience, however, derived as it is from some extrinsic source of enlightenment, whether rationally independent or religiously transcendent. The dispute is over conflicting beliefs about how reality is apprehended– directly through insight or revelation, or indirectly through empirical experimentation guided by interests. Even assuming that reality is always reality-for-us and that rationalists must therefore have some experience on which to base their beliefs, it is nonetheless the case that "[w]hen absolutists reject humanism because they feel it to be untrue, that means that the whole habit of their mental needs is wedded already to a different view of reality. . . . Their own subjective apperceiving mass is what speaks here in the name of eternal natures and bids them reject our humanism–as they apprehend it" (MT, 49).

Humanists do not experience reality the same way, as James points out in identifying himself with them: "Just so with us humanists, when we condemn all noble, clean-cut, fixed, eternal, rational, temple-like systems of philosophy." [8] Such cooly rational systems conflict with our own experiences, which disclose "the *dramatic temperament* of nature" (MT, 49). It is not that humanists reject objectivity and the independence of truth as the rationalists claim, but they find it in the surprises and uncertainties more characteristic of forays into a wilderness than in the "neater and cleaner intellectual abodes" artificially erected by dogmatic rationalists.

James assures us that "the concrete truth *for us* will always be that way of thinking in which our various experiences most profitably combine" (MT, 47). But he also explains how, as unique individuals, we will have different experiences according to different temperaments, leading to different beliefs as well as to different actions. He even formulated what I call a pragmatic hermeneutic principle to convey the dynamic character of the way that beliefs function experientially to yield a sense of the truth: "We plunge forward into the field of of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already; these determine what we notice; what we notice determines what we do; what we do again determines what we experience; so from one thing to another, altho [sic.] the stubborn fact remains that there *is* a sensible flux, what is *true of it* seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation" (PM, 122).[9] As Dewey will later phrase it, experience has its own resources for sifting and testing beliefs: experience is experimental. But if the truth is subjectively apprehended as the most useful way of organizing my own particular experiences, and the world, like language, tolerates many forms of expressions, then we are still left with irreconcilable world views seemingly immune to arbitration on rational *or* experiential grounds.

James insists that new opinions or experiences have to cohere with the stock of old opinions an individual already has (PM, 34). When some new experience strains or challenges our beliefs, we try to save as much of our old beliefs as we can. But if even "the most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing,"and if this "older stock of truths" is a settled religious view strongly held, then it is unlikely that any experimental outcome will be sufficiently persuasive to overturn it. In fact, James asserts that loyalty to older truths is not only the first principle that guides us in our determination of truth, it is often the only principle, "for by far the most usual way of handling phenomena so novel that they would make for a serious rearrangement of our preconceptions is to ignore them altogether, or to abuse those who bear witness to them" (PM, 35). The verb, 'abuse,' is telling, given the long history of religious strife and intolerance.

Despite this coercive force of preconceptions, James also exclaims over "how plastic even the oldest truths nevertheless really are," as shown by the reinterpretations of old truths in light of new evidence. Except for James's posing the imagined possibility of his unexpectedly exhibiting such erratic behavior on stage as to cause his audience to re-assess his sanity, all the examples he gives of the malleable character of even long-held truths are taken from the sciences. In contrast to this scientific willingness to transform old beliefs in light of new evidence which challenges them, rationalism rejects the claimed plasticity involved in determining what satisfies old and new beliefs. Rationalists exalt the objective truth of an absolute reality and denigrate the pragmatist view of truth as accommodating any number of definite working-values in experience. They are implacably opposed to views of the pragmatist model of the 'go-between function' of truths continuously made and re-made and prefer instead a

universe “so much purer, clearer, nobler” than “the rich thicket of reality” offered by the pragmatists (PM, 38-9).

James’s intention is to show that even truths “petrified in men’s regard by sheer antiquity,” “purely objective truth, truth in whose establishment the function of giving human satisfaction in marrying previous parts of experience with newer parts played no role whatsoever, is nowhere to be found.” This is because the reason anything is thought to be true is precisely because it performs this very marriage-function” (PM, 37). However convincing this explanation of how even absolute truths have been continually re-interpreted over time as new needs and interests have emerged and new situations have succeeded old ones, the point I want to make is also one James recognizes; namely, that it is the way those holding ancient truths understand them–as absolute and unchanging rather than subject to revision–that separates the dogmatist from the experimentalist. But it is this very attitude that calls into question James’s prematurely optimistic hope “that pragmatism may be a happy harmonizer of empiricist ways of thinking, with the more religious demands of human beings” (PM, 39). If religious demands are as implacable as those of the rationalist, it seems impossible, or at least extremely unlikely, that they could be reconciled with the pragmatist point of view. As long as the religious absolutist holds onto her or his beliefs unconditionally, the pragmatic method has to omit this attitude from the collectivity of experience’s demands.

Dogmatism and experimentalism are irreconcilable as attitudes, but are they mutually incompatible in all respects? Only by adopting the concrete point of view and putting the pragmatic method to work within the stream of experience does it become possible to begin considering what the pragmatist response should be to dogmatists other than sheer rejection. As

James says, "it is evident that something happens when you pass from the abstract to the concrete, that complicates the situation" (PM, 43). When considered "less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed,*" we may begin to find some way beyond the impasse.

2. *"The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"*

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* James is uninterested in the particular religious meaning or theological metaphysics of the religious and mystical experiences he relates. This is because pragmatic meaning, as we have seen, consists entirely in what acting on any given belief predictably leads to. Even the question of God's existence lies in the way such an existence affects ours: "Not God but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion" (VRE, 522, 507). It is not God's metaphysical but his moral attributes that signify anything (VRE, 447). The nature of moral conduct is therefore central to James's critical science of religions, as is obvious in the way he explains moral philosophy, to which I will now turn.

Despite all of James' lectures and appeals to the "common man," the gentleman whose tastes are the most developed, or--on a more charitable reading disregarding the gendered nature of his remarks--to each person's own experience as the ultimate arbiter of beliefs, James twice draws a sharp distinction between the philosopher as a professional and everyone else.[10] Once, he also makes the distinction in regard to knowledge and truth. Because of the over-riding need to put oneself into a satisfactory relationship with the ends sought in life, the ordinary person's most urgent concern is to be right, even for the wrong reasons. By contrast, the philosopher must

obtain a license–a warrant–for his (or her) beliefs.[11] Another time, in regard to morality, James contrasts the right of each person to embody and fight for those values they hold most dear with the moral philosopher's duty to arbitrate among conflicting views. This is similar to the role he accords the impartial scientist of religions, who would sift out a common body of doctrine from the many differences found among pantheists, theists, mystics, and other supernaturalists.(VRE, 510). Is the manner of this mediation different in the moral realm than in the realm of reality as apprehended by knowledge? For it is surely the case that James's purpose in holding religious experiences up to scrutiny is to find a warrant for what he already believes or at least deeply desires.

James wants to undermine the dogmatic rejection of the very possibility of genuine religious phenomena by positivistic scientists and naturalist non-believers, but he himself does not enter the arena as a neutral observer, but as an interested party. Do not such interests predispose him to finding evidence for his position and ignoring or underplaying counter-evidence? After all, he believes that sensations supply only the merely hints, which "we extend by imagination or add to by analogy."[12] His personal overbeliefs are already full of unseen forces or presences whom he imagines reaching out to assist us from beyond the fringes of our everyday sensibilities. He explains our failure to be aware of their presence by analogy with animals, like dogs, being unaware of the human content of the books in any library they might happen to be in. I am not arguing that these overbeliefs are dogmatically held by James; after all, he continually tries to find experiential collaboration for them, but neither will they be rejected for the lack of any such evidence.

James announces his intentions in the first line of "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" when he proclaims that its purpose "is to show that there is no such thing possible as an

ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance."[13] Not only do we continually contribute to reworking our ethical beliefs, but the final truth of any ethical position, like any proposition of physics, can only be known at the end of time, when all our experiences have been taken account of. Interestingly, in light of his position that we participate in making-true what can only be a reality-for-us, he does not say, 'when all the evidence is in,' as Charles Sanders Peirce might, but when every person has had their experiences and has given their views of them.[14] For our purposes, it is also important to note that he resoundingly rejects skepticism as a refusal to participate in the task of weaving the various moral claims already existing in the world into the unity of a stable system, which he takes to be the proper goal of a philosophical ethics. In *The Will to Believe*, he does not even flinch from calling such a deliberate rejection of systematic philosophical skepticism in regard to the reality and accessibility of truth a decision he reaches on purely dogmatic grounds (WB, 20).

James ultimately finds that philosophical ethics plays too thin a note in the rich and varied symphony that includes an "infinite scale of values" (WB, 160). He thinks that in strenuously trying to overcome the abundance of evils and suffering in the world, we would be overcome by the depth of the tragedy that is inseparable from life if we did not have religious faith in a God. For the earlier four sections he strictly limited himself to what can be finitely experienced and to the insecurity of choosing the best possible universe of good when we cannot know for certain in advance which particular universe *is* the best. He even rejects the possibility of a scientific ethics and urges instead recourse to literature because it "is confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic" (WB, 158-59). But then in the last section, he turns dogmatic himself, proclaiming triumphantly that since those of a strenuous type of character will

always outlast the more easy-going type, “religion will drive irreligion to the wall.” His final conclusion is that “the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands” (WB, 161).

How does this differ from the dogmatic temper he had described a few pages earlier as one which rejects the growing, unsettled state of morality for absolute rules or pronouncements? James’s lack of skepticism ultimately leaves him vulnerable to prematurely accepting as fact interpretations of phenomena that are congenial to his own needs rather than investigating alternative explanations. Nowhere is this more apparent than in regard to religious experiences. He admits that the mystical states he describes in *Varieties* can be explained medically as pathological conditions, ones in which certain intense and unusual experiences such as are induced by drugs, shock, or the physiological conditions of dying are interpreted according to the subject’s beliefs or superstitions (VRE, 413). But he denies that they can be fully explained this way, not because he can demonstrate anything in the state over and above what has already been explained medically or psychologically, but by introducing an additional criterion; namely, the nature of the consequences for life that follow from the experience.

3. *The Appeal to Consequences for Life in* The Varieties of Religious Experience

James could find no other escape from the debilitating effects of nihilism than belief in an afterlife. His existential anguish is palpable as he declares that “insecurity of all well-being, failure, pain and suffering are pivotal human experiences” (138). Our lives are fraught with “illness, danger, nausea, melancholy–[and] an irremediable sense of precariousness” (136). It is because the healthy-minded ignore or easily dismiss from their minds the prevalence in this life of tragic death from “freezing, drowning, entombment alive, wild beasts, worse men, and

hideous diseases" that their approach can never be taken seriously (363-4). For sick-minded souls, the enjoyment of life is poisoned as long as it unfolds against the background of "the great spectre of universal death, the all-encompassing blackness" (139). From such experiences, the need for a God arises (139-41).

These conclusions are prepared for by James's method of analysis. Mostly, he goes with personal feelings and private consolations as best embodying what he calls his empirical method. He even characterizes his goal in *Varieties* as "rehabilitating the element of feeling in religion and subordinating its intellectual part" (501). Our only guides for judging whether the consequences of believing that our experiences have put us in touch with something beyond give us sufficient evidence for these claims are "our general philosophic prejudices, our instincts, and our common sense" (327). Even when he begins with current scientific views, as soon as he cannot find verifiable causes for some experience, he hypothesizes theological or mystical causes instead of withholding judgment. Grasping at the insight that the scientific method cannot sufficiently explain all the facts (236, n1) and believing that even when it does so, it interprets the unknown after the manner of the known (235), James feels justified in filling in the gaps with his own beliefs. A truly scientific approach doesn't blindly invent mechanisms to explain mysterious events, however, but proposes hypotheses requiring "a vast program of work to be done in the way of verification" (235-6). As a philosopher, James holds himself to this same scientific standard, but he weakens its meaning to such an extent that it hardly restricts his will to believe.

He thinks it is legitimate, for example, to appeal to "the unseen" or mysticism to explain otherwise unexplainable bursts into consciousness of mysterious phenomena (236n) not reducible to subliminal aspects of consciousness. He grants that "the significance and value of a human event or condition must be decided on empirical grounds exclusively." But by 'empirical' he means radially empirical; that is, by its results for bettering human life. He says, for example, that "if *the fruits for life* of the state of conversion are good, we ought to idealize and venerate it" whether it is a merely natural or a supernatural phenomenon (237). A century later, Dr. Melvin Morse has provided such evidence of the improvement of human life by tracking down adults who, as children, had near-death experiences of a life continuing beyond this world and found that the experience did in fact brighten their lives forever. His research with adults who have had near death experiences shows that they have also been transformed by the experience, exhibiting "a greater zest of life and virtually no fear of death.[15] Since any belief, no matter how ludicrous it may appear to someone else, can have for the person holding it a salutary effect on their lives and that of others, what restraints, if any, has James imposed on unsubstantiated beliefs, fantastical or not?

By judging beliefs solely by their consequences, their "fruits for life," most particularly by their consequences in promoting a better way of life for oneself and others, James demonstrates his whole-hearted anti-dogmatism but at the price of encouraging nonsense (VRE, 413). Any belief can lead to good behavior. Those who swear by Elvis-sightings could indeed demonstrate their claims by living good lives as a consequence of that belief. And those who believe in evolution as a model for the biological sciences could provide grounds for rejecting the theory if they happen to live self-destructively because of a perceived indifference to human values in the natural world of evolutionary processes. There are at least two reasons why those

who are sympathetic to James's philosophy of radical empiricism do not recognize or admit these flaws in the application of his criterion. The first is an ambiguity in James's own use of his criterion of the 'consequences for life.'

According to the pluralism of James's radical empiricism, we are doubly partial in our interpretations of experience: we can only select a few aspects out of all of reality or of the multiplicity of phenomena available to pay attention to and we can only do so from some particular angle of vision for the sake of some subjective interest.[16] These aesthetic or subjective limitations of perception and the beliefs we develop as a result require the pragmatic method as a way to arbitrate between conflicting interpretations and between particular beliefs and the reality which they are supposed to disclose. The sensible world is the paradigmatic reality for most of us. Because this is so, we can use the pragmatic method as a criterion according to which "before I can think you to mean my world, you must affect my world; before I can think you to mean much of it, you must affect much of it; and before I can be sure you mean it *as I do*, you must affect it *just as I should* if I were in your place" (MT, 23-24). This criterion is rather straightforward if we want to find out whether we both mean the same thing when we say that we cook by means of a microwave oven, or whether this object in front of us is indeed such an oven, but becomes less useful as we move from beliefs about physical realities to religious and moral beliefs.

The problem is that we do not inhabit just one kind of reality, but function within various levels of reality. Even given the coercive force of the physical world which impresses itself on our senses whether we will it or not, as when I slam my fingers in a car door, in a "less real or

relative sense . . . *reality means simply relation to our emotional and active life, . . . whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real*" (PP II, 923-24). James concludes that moral and religious truths are therefore real for those who find them to be 'emotionally and exciting objects.'"[17] And the belief in an afterworld or in a sacred realm accessible in altered states of consciousness are surely among the most emotional and exciting beliefs we can hold. It follows that the sensations that might induce the belief that someone is having an out of body experience, or a mind-altering encounter different in kind to normal perception, which are experiences of great emotional resonance, need only be triggered by unfamiliar but all-engrossing sensational hints and yet be sufficient to be extended by imagination or analogy to be taken as a reality of a certain sort. Whether the reality as believed in and the reality that is taking place is the same is a question of interest only to those who can imagine that having an experience and having an experience of a definite, demonstrable kind or object are not the same thing.

A second reason for not recognizing the weakness of James's criterion of the consequences for life that follow from believing something is an ambiguity in the meaning of experience. The pragmatic criterion requires the assumption that false beliefs will be demonstrated to be false in the course of experience. But James also acknowledges that some proofs take more than one life-time to work themselves out. In the meantime, one can happily persist in unsuspected error or folly. Even more serious an objection is that if the content or referent of one's belief is irrelevant or not directly apprehensible, then on what grounds are the consequences being judged as 'good' or 'better'? It is just because the good life as perceived and lived by one person can be judged as bad, harmful, or destructive by other persons that ethics, psychology, social criticism, religious beliefs, and the laws of civil society were developed. These all have explicit or implicit standards as to what constitutes the good life. I am not

denying that James also develops such standards, but only pointing out that they were not derived from his own pragmatic method nor appealed to in *Varieties*. Moreover, in *Varieties* he explicitly rejected the claim "that there can be one intrinsically ideal type of human character, nor any need for theoretically determining truth apart from utility" (374, 377). Ideal types "vary according to the point of view adopted" (376). His test of religious phenomena deliberately abandons all theological criteria and judges by practical common sense and the empirically pragmatic method (377). This comes perilously close to saying: "you'll know it when you see it."

Against the majority of the academic and scientific professions, James thinks that two hypotheses best satisfy the evidence he has been describing. The evidence concerns "certain kinds of incursions from the subconscious region." It suggests that something ideal beyond mere human consciousness can cause regenerative changes in individual lives (VRE, 523). He thinks that the hypothesis that best explains this phenomena is a religious one; namely, "that there exists a larger power which is friendly to [us] and to [our] ideals.- (VRE 525). The two hypotheses that the given "facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves."

Do the facts actually require or prove these hypotheses? In the *Varieties of Religious Experience* James is careful not to claim more certainty than the evidence permits. He lists three possible conditions that would lend plausibility to the desired conclusion, but is careful not to call them facts. What is important about stating these conditions is that they cohere as an intelligible theory and one must have an intelligible theory or at least a particular hypothesis in order to test it by the experimental method. He is warding off the contention by those dogmatic

adherents of the scientific method who deny that *any* coherent theory can be formulated about supernatural or transcendent causes. David Hume, for example, famously denied that the reality of miracles, events contrary to the laws of nature, could even be coherently stated as a reasonable proposition. James's three conditionals are: "If, then, there be a wider world of being than that of our every-day [sic.] consciousness, if in it there be forces whose effects on us are intermittent, if one facilitating condition of the effects be the openness of the 'subliminal' door, we have the elements of a theory to which the phenomena of religious life lend plausibility" (VRE, 523-4).

This amounts to little more than the claim that if extra-human forces exist, then the religious phenomena he has been describing could plausibly be understood as revealing these forces. But, of course, since whether they do in fact exist is what we need to ascertain, this line of reasoning doesn't get us very far. James has seized on a new phenomenon that the psychology of his day was elaborating as the missing empirical evidence that could provide the scientific backing for religious claims that has remained so elusive. The door which opens to both the supernatural and the natural world, which partakes of both, is the region of the subliminal or the unconscious.

4. *The Clash of Classic and Romantic Imaginations*

James explains this subliminal, or what we would today call the unconscious region of the mind, in an article commemorating the life and work of Frederic Myers, his good friend and co-worker in the field of para-psychology.[18] In this article, he first tries to induce a certain openness of mind, a willingness to entertain uncommon hypotheses, by contrasting two approaches to mental science, which he calls the classic-academic and the romantic. These two approaches are distinguished by their different uses of the imagination. The traditional or

classic-academic type of imagination admitted only physical facts and studies of the brain and left metaphysical questions to philosophers. James poetically calls attention to the reductivist character of normal science and its dependence on the metaphor of transparency. He says that "it has a fondness for clean pure lines and noble simplicity in its constructions. It explains things by as few principles as possible and is intolerant of either nondescript facts or clumsy formulas." He continues in a deflationary vein: "The facts must lie in a neat assemblage, and the psychologist must be enabled to cover them and 'tuck them in' as safely under his system as a mother tucks her babe in under the down coverlet on a winter night."[19] Consequently, the scientific imagination can only encompass the normal range of human psychic phenomena and deal with what can be simply and elegantly explained. What doesn't fit is ignored.

By contrast, the romantic type of imagination, which is more gothic than classic, looks beyond the clean, orderly world of conventional consciousness to take in its darker regions. According to James, some of these new candidates for psychological description are "fantastic, ignoble, hardly human, or frankly non-human . . . The menagerie and the madhouse, the nursery, the prison, the hospital, have been made to yield their material."[20] Consequently, the mind has been found to be infinitely more complex than had earlier been imagined. Most psychologists, having lingering prejudices for the nobler simplicities, shrink from hypnotism, mesmerism, clairvoyance, mediums, and out-of-body experiences. Myers understood all these phenomena as aspects of the Subliminal Self.

Is it dogmatic to deny the possibility of spirit return from beyond the grave and short visits to an afterworld during out-of-body experiences? Human history is replete with such reports. Once consciousness emerged long ages ago in human organisms, death has been our

constant companion. Realization brings with it recognition of the death of friends and enemies alike, anticipation of our own demise, and vigorous rejection of death as an affront to our desire for continued existence. Disembodied spirits of the dead, both desired and feared, were encountered everywhere in pre-modern times. Beseeching, welcoming or placating them were common ritualistic features of religions in cultures around the world. But after the brilliant debunkings of Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, it is more difficult to credit these phenomena as anything more than human, all-too-human denials of our deepest fears and wishful expressions of our strongest desires.

Such a priori rejection of the possibility of the experience of life beyond death is an expression of dogmatism according to James. But the uncritical acceptance of spirit life as a demonstrated reality is also ruled out by his pragmatic method. Having early been beset with doubts and recognizing the legitimacy of Chauncey Wright's cool scientific demonstrations of the indifference of the physical world to human needs and desires, James made it his life-long task to demonstrate the reality of a world of co-operating spirits separated from the everyday world of experience by the thinnest of veils that was sometimes penetrated. The experiential point of entry had to be both demonstrable according to the accepted protocols of experimental method on the one hand, and properly other-worldly on the other. In the Foreword to *Closer to the Light*, Raymond Moody reports that Dr. Morse has found such a point of entry in an area of the brain close to the right temporal lobe which he says "is genetically coded for near-death experiences" and in *Cleansing the Doors of Perception*, Huston Smith says that mind-altering substances which he calls entheogens "hold the possibility of opening the doors of perception to the sacred unconscious"[21] The evidence of subliminal experiences satisfied James's scientific requirements as to the real possibility of such a point of entry in this world, as a certain area of

the brain does for Dr. Morse, and altered states of consciousness brought on by entheogens do for Smith, but the needed demonstration of the reality of the world beyond this world which penetrated from the other side, was for James on shakier ground. It was attested to by mediums and their clients through seances. The near death experiences are reported to Dr. Morse by his young and older patients and Smith describes his own experiences and what others report of what happens after taking mescaline and other drugs. In all these cases, what needs to be established, according to James, is whether the self-reporting of receiving communications from beyond or of having "psychedelic theophanies" are what they seemed to be.

Although it may be an issue for those who do not share his belief in the many levels of reality beyond the merely mundane, for James, there is no reason not to accept the experiences as being experienced as described by those who have them. Indeed, many of the mystical experiences described by James in the *Varieties* sound like the sense of the sacred experienced by Smith. They may even be found attributable to the same combination of chemical processes in the brain with some tradition of religious beliefs, language, and imagery. Whether the object of such experiences exists in just the way it is perceived or the content of the experience is disclosive of the reality as it is interpreted or understood by the one having the experience, is another issue. James reluctantly concludes the *Varieties of Religious Experience* with the admission that "[f]acts . . . are yet lacking to prove 'spirit return" (VRE 524). Dr. Morse and Huston Smith think they do have such facts. James's philosophy of radical empiricism does not dogmatically exclude either the reality of the experiences or the interpretation given them. Neither does it ratify either without experimental evidence. But do his pragmatic criteria for ascertaining the truth of such claims really eliminate false assertions?

I use criteria in the plural because James gives several different explanations of the pragmatic method. These include the marriage function of traditional beliefs with novel happenings, the pragmatic hermeneutic circle, and a leading that is worth-while. But put simply, since a belief is that on which we are prepared to act, and if having acted on it, our expectations are met, then such a belief is by that process justified, so long as it is not contradicted by further experiences or by what we already know to be the case (unless our new experience causes us to revise and re-arrange the store of beliefs we already have). But James does not distinguish between the evidentiary values of claims about the existence or non-existence of external objects like tigers or Harvard's Memorial Hall, which can be predicated and then reached in space and time by anyone who cares to try, and religious beliefs in unseen objects like gods or spirits, which are attested to only indirectly by the character of the lives of those who believe in them. How odd this is can be seen if we used the religious criterion for tigers in India, which could be proved simply by acting as though they existed; for example, by writing stories about them, collecting the food they supposedly eat and describing their habitats, dancing in tiger-like movements, and always acting as though they existed, but without ever having to actually come into the presence of one and providing directions that anyone else could also follow and get the same results. We know that such circumstantial evidence is enough for many people to believe in the Loch Ness monster or in Big Foot, but James thought that the pragmatic method would be able to distinguish true from false beliefs.

Despite James's recognition that mystics' experiences did not carry with them any factual evidence of their interpretation of what it was they were experiencing, he is less scrupulous when the interpretation is left deliberately vague. He claims, for example, that the evidence of the

religious experiences he has been reporting "unequivocally testifies to [the fact] that we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and in that union find our greatest peace" (VRE, 525). Perhaps this is because he wants to undermine the monotheistic bias of the mystics he has been presenting but does not want to cast doubt on their claims to transcend the limits of this world. He presses the point that the facts do not require the existence of a singular, all-powerful deity, but only that some power or powers larger than our conscious selves are friendly to human beings and our ideals. He himself is more comfortable with a pluralistic hypothesis of multiple higher beings who require our cooperation in order to save the world. Better to leave some parts of the world unsaved and some persons irretrievably lost through our failures, than to believe in an Absolute God in whom all things will come right. Since such an Absolute power needs nothing from us, belief in his existence will fail to elicit our utmost efforts and thus fail to serve as an all-inspiring ideal of conduct. This is important because conduct is observable, while the identity of the object of mystical experience is not.

Even those who have had an experience of the same sort can have an interest in making explicit the conditions which bring such experiences about. James calls this effort "following up the suggestions nascently present in them, working in the direction they seem to point, clearing up the penumbra, making distinct the halo, unraveling the fringe, which is part of their composition, and in the midst of which their more substantive kernel of subjective content seems consciously to lie" (MT, 29). This effort to unravel the fringe, to investigate the conditions responsible for religious experiences, would be a science of religions in the only sense in which James takes religion, namely as personally experienced. Dr. Melvin Morse, for example, does allude to some scientific studies to bolster his position. Do his explanations provide stronger

evidence of the conditions responsible for religious experiences than James did a century ago? Morse says that "[s]olar storms which generate bursts of electromagnetic radiation have been shown to affect human behavior," and "[p]ower-line electromagnetism has been linked to an increase in suicides and a decrease in neurochemicals serotonin and dopamine which control such things as sleep and mood." (137). After adding some stories of electric currents inducing limb regeneration, Morse says "I mention these studies to demonstrate that this 'unseen power' has in fact been well researched" (141). Neither the precise scientific studies of which these are the conclusions nor studies which challenge these conclusions are cited or discussed. As readers, we don't have enough evidence to decide whether these studies have been well-researched or not. Even if they were found to be well-verified, they wouldn't demonstrate the truth of his claims. Despite his disavowal of relying on merely anecdotal evidence, the book is filled with just such reports, together with speculation about possible explanations. To give just one example. After reporting a patient, Loretta's, story of a near death experience she had while suffering from scarlet fever, Morse says: "She had a strong feeling that it had led to her rapid healing" (150). He then asks whether it really did and answers "I think it triggered an electromagnetic charge that stimulated her body's immune system" (150). That's it. She thinks so and he thinks so and it might have been due to an electromagnetic charge because Dr. Becker, a bio-electric researcher, says such things could happen, and after all, "the human body is a machine driven by energy" (151). These surmises could be formulated into a testable hypothesis and then tested, but they have not been.

Charles Sanders Peirce thinks there is little to constrain those sanguine beliefs which are not contradicted by experience. Even a lifetime of experiential checks on our willingness to believe whatever suits us best does not dampen our enthusiasm. "Where hope is unchecked by

any experience," according to Peirce, it is likely that our optimism is extravagant."[22] He goes so far as to argue that there may even be an evolutionary advantage to certain fallacious tendencies of thought insofar as such pleasing and encouraging visions buoy up our spirits, independently of their truth. But for those like Peirce, for whom the truth of their beliefs is a concern, a habit of mind "is good or otherwise, according as it produces true conclusions from true premises or not." James certainly wanted to believe just as strongly as Morse does, but as someone who well knew our propensity to believe what we wanted to believe, he also wanted–at least in his better moments-- better evidence than self-reporting, no matter how many times these were multiplied.

It is this holding out for evidence, as much as his willingness to support even unpopular hypotheses and improbable beliefs, that makes James's approach non-dogmatic. And as such, it is a healthy antidote to an unrestrained will to believe. But when it comes to what counts as experiential evidence, the shape-shifting aspect of experience from subjective apprehension to intended object and then back again to subjective feel is finally too ambiguous to discriminate the demonstrable from the merely desirable. James undercuts even the minimal requirements he gives of what would constitute a critical science of religions when he says that it not only takes personal experiences as its subject matter, but that its critical reconstructions should also "square itself with personal experiences" without adding, as John Dewey does, that the reconstructed experience is a transformation of, not simply a reproduction or repetition of, the original experience (VRE, 456).

James brackets his proposal for a science of religions between two withering criticisms of philosophy and science as having any right to adjudigate religious claims or pass judgment on the reality of religious experiences. In Chapter 18, he rejects "the pretensions of philosophy to found religion on universal reason" because logical reasoning is limited to claims of universal

validity and religion is a matter of feelings and personal experiences (436). The divine presence vouched for in mystical experiences is a factual claim based on feelings, which are not subject to the veto of abstract reasoning. And in Chapter 20, he worries that the materialist bias of the sciences makes it all too likely that they will fail to recognize the truth of religious beliefs. He counters this by limiting the scope of science to questions of objectivity and situating religion within the realm of subjective experiences, in which alone reality is to be had (498-99). Religious experience is, finally, declared impervious to both philosophic and scientific attacks (507). Why, then, bother to appeal to a science of religions at all?

According to James, the science of religions can only answer some of our intellectual needs. It cannot replace or defeat psychic or religious experiences. It can only make some of the claims made about such experiences more or less plausible. But philosophy and science will only have something positive to contribute to determining the objective truth of religious claims when they cease to be dogmatic and become experimental. Only when they abandon metaphysics and reject a priori reasoning (455), only when they cease trying to coerce beliefs by the force of their arguments and instead humbly adopt the hypothetical stance (511), will they have they anything of value to offer to religious discussions.

A science of religions, as James conceives it, would "abandon metaphysics and deduction for criticism and induction" (VRE, 455). In its critical function it would eliminate the local and accidental by determining what is common and essential in religious beliefs (456). This includes removing historic encrustations from dogma and worship and anything incongruous with the natural sciences. In its empirical function, it will examine the widest variety of religious experiences. What is left will be treated as a hypothesis to be tested both positively and

negatively. Mere symbolism and over-beliefs can by this means be distinguished from what is to be taken literally. James hopes that because they have been arrived at non-dogmatically by an experimental method, these hypotheses can then mediate among conflicting religious beliefs and at last bring about consensus of opinion where now there is only dissension and acrimony.

However, James's own anti-dogmatic assumptions, radically empiricist principles, and concrete findings make it highly unlikely that such a science could perform its functions effectively. He has vindicated his claim that pragmatism has no rigid canons of what shall count as proof, but only by holding fast to his own prejudice or dogma that his investigations of reports of religious experience "unequivocally testifies to" the fact "that we can experience union with *something* larger than ourselves and that in that union find our greatest peace" (525). Since he has already questioned the possibility of there being only one type of ideal human character and holds as a postulate of the empirical method that conclusions are always matters of relation, changing with changing circumstances and beliefs, how can such a hoped-for science ever mediate successfully between such a non-negotiable claim and any other (374)? Any verdict reached "will vary according to the point of view adopted" (376). After re-emphasizing that the science of religions is utterly dependent on personal experiences in all their variety, James flatly denies that any verbal formulation can capture the truth and fact of lived religious experiences.

But what is the use of an impartial science of religions formulating a common body of doctrine which is unobjectionable to science if "religion must be considered vindicated in a certain way from the attacks of her critics" insofar as it already exerts "a permanent function, whether she be with or without intellectual content?" (510, 507). Does James even mean to hold religious experience accountable to scientific confirmation or refutation if he already feels that

personal religious experiences are intrinsically subjective and non-interchangeable? His attempts to institute a science of religions falters on his own anti-dogmatism, which secures its status by eliminating all doctrines and all verbal formulations as being so much hollowness and irrelevancy, and therefore eliminating anything remotely testable by experimental methods (457).

5. *An Alternative Hypothesis*

John Dewey could never have subtitled a book on *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as James did; namely as *A Study in Human Nature*. In his own book on *Human Nature and Conduct*, which is subtitled An Introduction to Social Psychology, religious experiences are not even among the human experiences he examines.[23] In *Experience and Nature* the reason why this is so becomes clear. Dewey turns on its head James' invocation invocation of the anguish, pain, and suffering that the melancholic person is sensitive enough to acknowledge and attribute to the irremediable evil of the world, a feeling of personal failure from which James thought that "the need of a God very definitely emerges" (VRE, 138 n2). Dewey instead blames cynicism, indifference and pessimism for preventing people from acknowledging that common experience has sufficient resources for intelligently directing one's life and that we need no extrinsic standards of judgment or value for overcoming evils and deficiencies.[24] Disillusionment with life and tragic failure are attributed to losing touch with concrete experience, rather than with its full acceptance. Where James criticizes philosophies and religions that focus on happiness as the meaning of life for ignoring the very real evils that are just as much a part of life, Dewey blames them for obscuring "the potentialities of daily experience for joy and for self-regulation" (LW 1:41). Both James and Dewey want, in Dewey's words, to create and promote "respect for concrete human experience and its potentialities," but differ greatly in what they think constitutes experience and its intelligent appropriation.

The problem with both materialists and spiritualists, according to Dewey, is that they convert traits of experience that are operational and relational into entities. James's subliminal explosions bursting through the boundaries of consciousness to take palpable form as glimpses of a parallel spiritual world is an example of what Dewey calls "ghosts walking underground" (LW 1:65). Dewey agrees that it is a mark of intelligence to strive "to make stability of meaning prevail over the instability of events," but this effort is too often "dropped from the province of art and treated as the property of given things" (LW 1:49). Only when the precarious, perilous, and uncertain nature of existence is treated as a scandal offensive to our longing for stable, sure, regular, and harmonious experiences as James does, only when "the existing mixture of the regular and dependable with the unsettled and uncertain" is treated as two separate realms does the need arise to create a parallel world above, below, or behind the world of everyday experience to house one of them (LW 1:52-53). Out of this conversion of different aspects of the world into different worlds of existence is created the contrasting philosophies feeding off these dualisms such as spiritualism/materialism, transcendentalism/positivism, rationalism/sensationalism, and idealism/realism (LW 1:46).

James is appalled at the eventual disintegration of ourselves and those we love; he cannot reconcile himself to the evils, suffering, and cruelty that recur with numbing regularity throughout life. Dewey's laconic response to these revulsions is that nothing lasts forever. In mind-numbing understatement, he says that this realization "is discomfiting when applied to good things, to our friends, possessions and precious selves," and continues "it is consoling also to know that no evil endures forever" (LW 1:63-64). He fears that attitudes such as James

expresses distract people from choosing what goods to pursue and what evils to transform by developing ideals to inspire and guide conduct and instead leads them into seeking "a refuge, an asylum for contemplation" in other-worldliness (LW 1:51). James, in his turn, thinks that the experience of intractable evil and suffering and the inevitability of one's own death will be paralyzing to sensitive natures like his own who need reassurance that their efforts to eradicate evil will not finally be in vain and their lives will not be snuffed out forever. As we have seen, he characterized these two approaches to life as that of the sick soul and that of the healthy soul.

Whether the sick soul more truly grasps the actual world as it is concretely experienced, as James thought, or the healthy soul does, as Dewey thought, they both agreed as pragmatists that the truth should not be determined by personal need or preference alone, but only as tempered by observation and experiment.[25] But Dewey rejects outright the search for "a refuge, an asylum for contemplation" in other-worldliness by choosing instead to grapple with the problems and sorrows of the present world. James, despite his rejection of such refuges when described as merely contemplative, chooses to believe in the comforts provided to the sick soul by active interventions from beyond in preference to Dewey's robustly healthy soul. Such are our choices.

1. Robert A. McDermott, intro. to William James, *Essays in Psychical Research* (Harvard University Press, 1986), xix.

2. James, "Frederic Myer's Service to Psychology (1901)," *Essays in Psychical Research*, 197.

3. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Penguin American Library, 1984), 433, 455-56. Abbreviated in text as VRE.

4. James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 32-33. Abbreviated in text as PM.

5. Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 238-39

6. James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 81. Abbreviated in text as ERE.

7. James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 6-7. Abbreviated in text as MT.

8. I am using pragmatism and humanism as equivalent. For James's unsuccessful attempts to distinguish them, see Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany, New York, 1990), 282-88.

9 *Ibid.*, 231, 250, 297. See also PM, 108).

10 For James's inability to accept women and other marginalized ethnic and racial groups as fully human, see Chapter 6, "The Feminine Mystical Threat to the Scientific-Masculine Order," *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 111-141.

11. See Seigfried, "The Philosopher's 'License': William James and Common Sense, *William James: Pragmatism*, ed. Klaus Oehler (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000), 93-110. James always characterizes philosophers as male and takes mysticism as a more typically female experience. See Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism*, 131-141.

12. Quoted in Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, Vol. II, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1935), 455.

13. James, *The Will to Believe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 141. Abbreviated in text as WB.

14. He actually says "the last man."

15. Raymond A. Moody, foreword, in *Closer to the Light* by Melvin Morse, M.D., with Paul Perry (New York: Villard Books, 1990), xii. Morse with Perry, *Transformed by the Light* (New York: Villard Books, 1990), ix.

16. See Ch. 7, "Interpretive Theory and Praxis," in Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany, N. Y., 1990), 173-207.

17. Seigfried, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy,* 192; James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. II, 935.

18. James, "Frederic Myer's Service to Psychology (1901)," *Essays in Psychical Research* (Harvard University Press, 1986), 192-201.

19. James, *Essays in Psychical Research*, 193

20. *Ibid.*, 194.

21. Moody, *Closer to the Light*, xi and Huston Smith, *Cleansing the Doors of Perception* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 2000), xvi and 78.

22. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Pragmatism: The Classic Writings*, ed. H. S. Thayer (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), 64.

23. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Modern Library, 1957 [1922]). He does mention religious experience in passing when he criticize James's defense of taking moral holidays, 242-43, and, like James, he thinks that institutional religion fosters dogmatism and intolerance, 301-02.

24. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* in *Later Works*, Vol. 1: 1925 (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 41. Abbreviated in text as LW 1, followed by page numbers.

25. Although James thought that whether one was a sick or a healthy soul was more a matter of temperament than choice, and that either approach can lead to union with the divine, he rated the sick or twice-born soul more highly in that its outlook on life was wider and completer and it did not evade evil. (VRE, 488, n1).