„On trust and open windows: A Jamesian Account of Philosophy of Religion"

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James can be considered being the focal point[1] of the increasing tendency towards uncertainty which at the turn of the last century began to unsettle the area of science to the same degree as the area of religion. On the one hand, science – not at least in the uprising of darwinism and a increasing positivistic climate – challenged the fundaments of religious belief. Religion was on the verge to be branded as an anachronism, to become a last resort of irrationality and pre-enlightenment. On the other hand, the fundaments of science itself as it has been known began to crumble. The concept of objectivity and science as a mirror of nature that gives us the one and only, correct and neutral description of the world got lost in the development of a multiplicity of competing theories about how nature works. James was very well aware of the erosion of certainty which was not only a background of his personal feeling but also the permanent companion of his philosophical thinking.[2] The urge to regain the secure ground lost by either committing oneself to materialistic empirism or absolutistic idealism was familiar to him, while at the same time he recognized, not without a certain amount of regret, the failure of these means. This makes him a distinguished representative of modernity.[3]

In what follows I'd like to outline the main features of James' pragmatism, namely, his radical empiricism, humanism and theory of truth, to give an impression of the way he tries to handle the uncertainty without falling into one of the extremes he repudiated so much. Subsequently, I will present a short outlook on the implications for a Jamesian account of philosophy of religion.

For James, certainty was a kind of hubris. One of the main themes throughout his works is the fight against the imperialism he found in the ideologies of certainty: be it absolutistic philosophy or orthodox theology – both manifestations of vicious intellectualism – be it medical materialism or positivistic scientism as examples of a wrong-headed empirism. What's common to all their preachers is the certainty they preach with, a certainty that condems all other thinking as mistaken, so that this kind of certainty finally leads to the closing of the mind.

But openness was central to James' thinking, a crucial value. The radical pluralism James advocates allows no closed system of thought, in this, it fits his empiricism and belief in a world still in the making: „Philosophy, like life, must keep the doors and windows open."[4] But do we have to give up

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1   Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, 17.
2   Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, x.
3   See Taylor, Die Formen des Religiösen in der Gegenwart, 55.
4   SPP, 100. See also Bixler, Religion in the Philosophy of William James, 208: „Pragmatism [...] is first of all a protest

living on secure ground, our minds full of disturbing uncertainty? On closer inspection it becomes obvious that it is only a certain kind of certainty James rejects, that is, a certainty about what is "really real", what the world is "really about", in short: about what's true in an absolute sense. What is not denied is that there are a lot of things we can rely on. It is positively James' intention to design a philosophy that makes us feel at home in the world, that allows intimacy and some peace of mind.

Therefore classical empirism is not an acceptable option for James, as it implies skepticism, materialism and determinism – all of which are to be repudiated according to James. His radicalization and reformation of empirism avoids these implications. Taking all human experience as real, regardless of its content, his radical empiricism widens the range of phenomena that can be a subject of scientific and philosophic inquiry. Experience becomes the reliable anchor of Jamesian philosophy. This leads us to his pragmatic humanism.

[1] Humanism

Under the conditions of humanism knowledge becomes relational to human interests and environmental contexts like language, culture: „The only kind of knowledge we can have is human knowledge, which is, whatever other conditions it has to satisfy, something human beings think, hence NOT something independent of what human beings think and do."[5] In this sense, reality is humanized and never objective. But it is far from falling into a constructivistic conception of reality. James highlights the human factor in the process of reality-making, but reality is not only made, but also found and pre-figured. Human interests, needs and volitions play a crucial role, but they cannot play freely and arbitrarily. We have to work with the raw material given like a sculptor carves a statue out of a block of stone. With this metaphor, James points to the fact that we cannot remain only receptive and passive: „Operate we must!"[6] We have to become active agents in the world to create reality, to carve it out, so to speak. Reality is ever increasing with our actions and explications, it is open with regard to the future and plastic. These characteristics yield some severe consequences for the notion of truth.

[2] The Notion of Truth in Pragmatism

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against narrowness in thinking."
5   Putnam, William James and Moral Objectivity, 8. See also Putnam, Die bleibende Aktualität von William James, 195.
6   James, Reflex Action and Theism, 30.

Even though James doesn't drop the conception of truth as correspondence, there are some modifications due to the pragmatic reformulation he conducts. The meaning of the word 'truth' is revealed only in the workings of the proposition in which it is stated.[7] James seems to advocate a purely instrumental notion in giving the following definition:

> True ideas are those that we can assimilate, corroborate, and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot. That is the practical difference it makes to us to have true ideas; that therefore is the meaning of truth, for it is all that truth is known as.[8]

Contrasting the notion of truth as correspondence, which defines truth as fixed and absolute, the pragmatic notion is relational to a situative context and therefore not at all immutable but changeable depending on the conditions of uttering a proposition. The process of verification could be described as an expedition with uncertain outcome to the „the great unpent and unstayed wilderness of truth"[9].

Nevertheless, James doesn't step into the trap of skepticism. One more time we find him to be in a middle-position between two extremes: He acknowledges the possibility of the acquisition of truth – in this, he holds to the intuition against skepticism – and at the same time denies the secure knowledge of when we acquired truth [10] – in this, he shares the impulse of the skeptic to reject any foundation for true knowledge. Indeed, for James there exists nothing like uncorrectable, secure knowledge, but he doesn't count that as evidence for the impossibility of knowledge at all.[11]

Uncertainty also lurks in the way we acquire truths. To a large amount, James argues, we adopt beliefs of other people. We trust them to tell us a truth without testing these truths by ourselves, we just take that knowledge for granted: „Our faith is faith in someone else's faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case."[12] This is a necessity, as we just are not in the position to verify all our beliefs on our own. So „[w]e live on credits everywhere"[13]. In most cases we are only what James calls *„virtual knowers"*[14]. This is not only due to the impossibility of verification or at least the huge time and effort one has to spend to verify every belief to be adopted, but first and foremost James tells us that „[t]o continue thinking unchallenged is, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, our practical substitute for knowing in the completed sense."[15] As long as our beliefs fit with what we

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7   See James, The Existence of Julius Cæsar, 221, 224.
8   James, Preface, vf., and also PRG, 125f.
9   James, Humanism and Truth, 77.
10 See Croce, Science and Religion in the Era of William James, 229.
11 Levinson, The Religious Investigations of William James, 223: „He argued that philosophers were bound to spin their wheels so long as they took radical skepticism seriously, but could make real progress if they would assume that people did know things and if they would begin to aks how."
12 James, The Will to Believe, 9.
13 James, Professor Pratt on Truth, 164.
14 James, The Relation Between Knower and Known, 115. A critique of virtual verification is found in Gale, The Divided Self of William James, 142.
15 James, The Relation Between Knower and Known, 116. See also James, Eine Welt der reinen Erfahrung, 43f.

experience in the world, as long as they work properly, there is just no good reason to doubt their truth.

This trust in unhindered functioning as an indicator of truth shouldn't be mistaken as naïve or even opportunistic, as it often happened. The difference between truth and certainty is in no way eliminated: It is possible to be certain about something that is, to take it as a truth, and the adopted belief can still prove mistaken. James pronounced *fallibilism* always allows for our beliefs to turn out wrong tomorrow. If there should occur an experience conflicting with my belief in the future, my belief will be revealed as wrong or at least not perfectly true. Similar to the development of scientific theories, a belief may be modified to fit better. Seen this way, truth is a matter of *graduality* and not of all-or-nothing as stated in the classical conception. By ongoing corrections our beliefs approximate what could be called the "absolute" truth,[16] something, which is reached in the long run, at least, this is the ideal perspective James wants us to adopt. Absolute true would be ideas that are confirmed in the total drift of thinking.[17] But we never know if the process of verification is completed, there's always a good chance that our beliefs may be falsified on the next day. As a consequence, we have to make peace with the tentativeness of knowledge and alleged truths as a matter of principle. In an open, plastic reality, „no point of view can ever be *the* last one"[18]. Truths are only truths "as far as we know".

[3] The Will to Believe

The last element of Jamesian philosophy I want to introduce is one that is especially designed to deal with situations of uncertainty. The controversial doctrine of the *will to believe* is grounded in the plastic and open character of reality and explicates the role of human beings as co-creators of reality. According to James, there are situations of decision in which it is not only allowed and acceptable, but even necessary and perfectly rational to choose the option that my needs and wishes point to. Volition is a proper determinant of the outcome of a decision and – what seems to be far more problematic – truth:[19] „The belief creates its verification. The thought becomes literally father to the fact, as the wish was father to the thought."[20]

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16 Vgl. James, A Word More About Truth, 155f. He assumes an „extreme approach to being absolutely true" (James, A Word More About Truth, 156).
17 Vgl. James, The Will to Believe, 17.
18 James, Humanism and Truth, 90. See also Gale, The Divided Self of William James, 102.: „The long run seems to have no cut-off date".
19 See James, The Will to Believe, 19, 25 and James, Is Life Worth Living?, 60. Due to the element of personal decision, „*subjective pragmatism*" seems to be an adequate label, especially to mark it off the variations of Dewey and Peirce, see Myers, Pragmatism and introspective pychology, 22. The parallel to Kant is thematized in Bixler, Religion in the Philosophy of William James, 83.
20 James, The Sentiment of Rationality, 103.

To believe what you wish is demanded in cases, in which your belief or disbelief determines the result: „You make one or the other of two possible universes true by your trust or mistrust, – both universes having been only maybes, in this particular, before you contributed your act.“[21]

To bring in the volitional element is a reaction upon the strategy of *evidentialism* as for example James comtemporary Clifford advocates. To consider a belief only legitimate in the case of full evidence for it counts as another embodiment of vicious intellectualism for James and is misguided in two ways. (1) The traditional conception of rational action has to be rejected under the conditions of a reality in the making. Of course we want to „play it safe“ and settle our decisions on complete knowledge. But, as a pity, we actually are seldom in the ideal situation to be in possession of full knowledge about the consequences of our actions prior to our actions and commitments and often have to make a choice without that security.[22] A strict evidentialism would force us into a paralytic stance: „Virtually it amounts to forbidding us to *live*.“[23] (2) Moreover, evidentialism leads to a deceptive neutrality, namely one, which isn't neutral at closer inspection. „[I]t is often practically impossible to distinguish doubt from dogmatic negation. [...] Who is not for is against.“[24] Inaction, then, has to be counted as a "kind of action" and therefore true "neutrality is an unattainable thing"[25].

It is important to notice the list of restrictions that are given to the operation of the will to believe. First the situation of decision has to qualify as a *genuine option*, which is a live, forced and momentous option. Second, there are cases in which the facts are not interdependent with human actions, like the movement of the stars or historical facts.[26] The creative part of human beings is clearly limited: „[I]n our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth“[27]. Third, there's the requirement of epistemic indecidability [28] which implies the obligation to search for as lot of evidence as is possible. Just laziness or disinterest are no legitimate starting point to create a genuine option.[29]

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21 See James, Is Life Worth Living?, 59.
22 See Pappas, William James and The Logic of Faith, 797.
23 James, Reason and Faith, 126.
24 James, The Sentiment of Rationality, 109.
25 James, Is Life Worth Living, 54f. Vgl. ebenso SPP, 223.
26 See James, The Sentiment of Rationality, 97: „They are given irrespective of my whishes, and in all that concerns truths like these subjective preference should have no part; it can only obscure the judgement.“
27 James, The Will to Believe, 20.
28 Gale names it the *„undecidable-by-the-chooser-before-the-choice-is-made requirement“,* see Gale, The Divided Self of William James, 101. Ebenso "[T]he will to believe is only operative in those situations wherein one has two diverse hypotheses, each equally coherent and each capable of corresponding to empirical data to an equal extent" (Gavin, The 'Will to Believe' in Science and Religion, 139). See also Gale, The Divided Self of William James, 152: „We are always prima facie morally obligated to believe in a manner that is epistemically warranted, except when epistemic justification is not possible.“ This point is one of the most commonly misunderstood in James, see. Hudson, Pragmatism, Philosophical Respectability and the Meaning of Life, 234f.
29 See Gale, The Divided Self of William James, 100f.

[4] What Does That Mean for Philosophy of Religion?

In terms of religious thinking we are offered a third option between evidentialism and fideism. With the concept of trust we find to be central in James' thinking there is disclosed a way to act in cases of imponderability of consequences due to missing knowledge – as it is typical for questions of religious belief. It is this weak mode of knowledge which seems to be the most prominent basis for all kinds of action. The decision to follow our will to believe is in no way a decision against reason as it has been accused of, on the contrary: „Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear?‟[30] So irrationality is ruled out as a legitimate element in James' philosophy of religion, though it is clear that he establishes a conception of rationality that is wider than the classical one. In short, for James rationality consists in a sentiment of harmony, whereas irrationality causes a severe feeling of uneasiness and is therefore rather evaded.[31] The state that human beings naturally aspire is that of a rational equilibrium, and religious thinking is no exception of this rule.

[5] Trust in religious experience

The setting of James' radical empiricism and theory of truth results in a re-evaluation of religious experience. Even the most exotic and morbid mystic experience, as we encounter them in the *Varieties,* is judged not by its perhaps pathological origin, but is taken serious as possible true insight.

Despite the massive authority the experience has for the subject of the experience itself, the mystic believer is not justified to impose any insight it might have gained of it on others. The belief he adopted may appear true to him, but he isn't allowed to state it as *the* truth, as James places any retrospective act under the reserve of fallibilism.[32] So the direct impression of our inner life, for example a mystic experience, definitely appears self-evident and pushes us to take it for true. But it is possible to be corrected about my beliefs about my own state of mind.

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30 See James, The Will to Believe, 27.
31 See James, Reflex Action and Theism, 125: „Not any nature of things which may seem to *be* will also seem to be *ipso facto* rational; and if it do not seem rational, it will afflict the mind with a ceaseless uneasiness, till it be formulated or interpreted in some other and more congenial way.“
32 The "weak link" so to speak is the reflective act of introspection which leads from the experience to a belief. By understanding introspection by analogy with observations of a third person, despite privileged access to one's mind, introspection is not infallible. James isn't preoccupied with the question of the infallibility of introspection. He acknowledges its fallibility as well as its usefulness. Again, we find him to hold a „middle-of-the-road“-position between Brentano (infallibility) and uselessness (Comte): „For James, a psychology that is pragmatic (rather than, say, rationalistic) uses introspection as an investigative tool just because it is practically valuable“ (Myers, Pragmatism and introspective psychology, 12).

In the issue of the truth of religious beliefs the specifics of the Jamesian theory of truth and reality grow most acute. Even without the proof of the existence of God or any higher being, belief in and about him can be hold for true if these beliefs meet some standards. Put very shortly, they have to work. As religious "[f]aith is synonymous with working hypothesis"[33], it is treated like every other belief and runs through the process of verification with equal criteria. Religious beliefs belong to no separate, special sphere and thus are not immune against the intermediations and modifications every beliefs subdues to in order to reach consistency in the web of beliefs. And as long as no serious problems arise, there's no reason to abolish our religious hypotheses. Only if there is no more "cash value", to speak in James' terms, we have to drop a belief, as this has to be taken as an indication for its wrongness.

Yet the right to belief can be fostered even more than with the hint to its not being falsified up to now. Adding the will to believe as relevant factor, we find ourselves in the position to rationally cling to a religious belief which meets all the conditions. If we find, for example the option of the existence of God to be live, forced and momentous and wish to believe in God, then according to James it is perfectly rational to do so and even unwise not to.

But even though believing under these conditions is the best thing we can do, it cannot be denied that the the statement "God exists" is still not verified. Due to James' realism, there has to be some being independent from the subjective thinker. If talking about a god wants to be more than symbolic talking or self-delusion to make us feel well, there has to be a referent outside our mind, otherwise it's all self-delusion and actually wishful thinking.

Taking into account that this lack of final confirmation applies to any existence statement which aims for objective existence rather that the question if it is rational for us to suppose that an entity exists, the result may lose some of its sobering effect. In the end, uncertainty persists, but we can learn to treat it as fundamental condition of human thinking and living we don't have to despair about.

[6] Meliorism

As ideological manifestation of the handling of uncertainty James advocates meliorism, which is situated between the optimistic view that the world will be redeemed for sure and the pessimistic view that the world will find no salvation. Following meliorism, salvation is possible, though not certain. Holding this view means having hope without denying the reality of evil: "I find myself

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33 See James, The Sentiment of Rationality, 95.

willing to take the universe to be really dangerous and adventurous [...]. I am willing that there should be real losses and real losers, and no total preservation of all that is."[34] It also means facing uncertainty without yielding to the temptation of resignation, which is also an easy way out.

When James tells us that the pragmatist „is willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he trusts; willing to pay with his own person"[35], he acknowledges the precarious state of the world and at he same time appeals for seizing this precariousness as a chance to create a better world.

[7] Conclusion

Taking everything said into account, even though the Jamesian philosophy of religion doesn't provide us with the benefits of certainty and the option of firm belief without any doubt, it has something even more valueable to offer: it transforms the uncomfortable, menacing concept of uncertainty into the hopeful view of open possibilities and an undetermined future. Though living with open windows may contain the risk of letting in something unforeseen or getting a cold, it definitely is the only way to have a breath of fresh air and a wide perspective.

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34 PRG (engl.), 114.
35 PRG (engl.), 115.

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