

## James, Royce, Representation, and the Will to Believe

### Introduction

This paper will discuss the relationship between the views of James and Royce on representation and their attempts to explain the “possibility of error,” views which are, I will argue, closer than many have thought. Appreciating where they do differ will point not only to an unstressed problem with Royces’ argument for the Absolute but also to some unappreciated features of how James’ account of truth ties in with his account of epistemic justification.

### I. Royce

Royce’s argument for the Absolute starts with the claim that, even from “the very heart of skepticism” (45), the existence of error could not be called into doubt. The possibility of error survives even the ‘wildest doubt’ because, if one were correct in supposing that there was no error, then our belief in the existence of error is itself in error. The original supposition contradicts itself. The existence of error, then, cannot be coherently doubted, and so whatever turns out to be necessary for the existence of error cannot be consistently doubted either.<sup>1</sup> This leads Royce to his questions, “*what then is an error?*” (47) and “*What are the logical conditions that make it possible?*” (49).<sup>2</sup>

Error turns out, however, to be harder to explain than one might have originally supposed. It seems to require that our judgments have objects independent of themselves, but how thoughts (especially mistaken ones) come to be about these external objects seems mysterious.

[F]or a judgement to have an object, there must be something about the judgement that shows what one of the external objects that are beyond itself this judgement picks out as its own. But this something that gives the judgement its object can only be the intention wherewith the judgement is accompanied. A judgement has as

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<sup>1</sup> As Royce himself puts it:

We doubted to the last extremity. We let everything go, and then all of a sudden we seemed to find that we could not loose one priceless treasure, try as we would. Our wildest doubt assumed this, namely, that error is possible. And so our wildest doubt assumed the actual existence of those conditions that make error possible. *The conditions that determine the logical possibility of error must themselves be absolute truth.* (Royce, 45)

<sup>2</sup> “We have not the shadow of doubt ourselves about the possibility of error. That is the steadfast rock on which we build. Our inquiry, ultra skeptical as it may at moments seem, is into the question: *How is the error possible? Or, in other words: What is an error?*” (Royce, 48.)

object only what it intends to have as an object. It has to conform only to that to which it wants to conform. But the essence of an intention is the knowledge of what one intends. (52)

Knowledge of what one intends, however, seems to preclude error, which was precisely what we wanted to explain. With though, what we aim at, and what we turn out to hit, seem hard to separate.<sup>3</sup>

This problems seems to arise with even commonplace cases such as how we could be mistaken about another's thoughts. If we consider John and Thomas, we must also consider John's idea of Thomas and John's idea of John, Thomas's idea of Thomas, and Thomas's idea of John. While John can clearly think about his own Thomas-idea, how do his thoughts come to intend, and thus have the potential to be in error about, Thomas himself?<sup>4</sup> Attempts to solve this problem are canvassed and rejected by Royce, who ultimately claims that a higher inclusive thought that contains both John and Thomas is the only way to explain how one is able to think of the other.<sup>5</sup>

Their inclusion in the Absolute thought thus explains how John can have thoughts about Thomas and vice versa.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> "If I aim at a mark with my gun, I can fail to hit it, because choosing and hitting a mark are totally distinct acts. But, in the judgement, choosing and knowing the object seem inseparable." (54)

<sup>4</sup> As Royce puts it:

John and Thomas are independent entities, each of which cannot possibly enter in real person into the thoughts of the other. Each may be somehow represented in the other's thoughts by a phantom, and only this phantom can be intended by the other when he judges about the first. For unless one talks nonsense, it should seem as if one could mean only what one has in mind. (61)

But how then can John or Thomas make errors about each other, when neither is more present to the other than is color to the blind man, the odor of the tracks on the highway to the dog's master, or the idea of an equation to a Bushman? Here common sense forsakes us, assuring us that there is such error, but refusing to define it. (62)

<sup>5</sup> "To explain how one could be in error about his neighbor's thoughts, we suggested the case where John and Thomas should be present to a third thinker whose thought should include them both. We objected to this suggestion that thus the natural presupposition that John and Thomas are separate self-existing beings would be contradicted. But on this natural presupposition neither of these two subjects could become objects to the other at all, and error would here be impossible. Suppose then that we drop the natural presupposition, and say that John and Thomas are both actually present to and included in a third and higher thought...let us overcome all our difficulties by declaring that all the many Beyonds, which single significant judgements seem vaguely and separately to postulate, are present as fully realized intended objects to the unity of an all inclusive, absolutely clear, universal, and conscious thought, of which all judgments, true or false, are but fragments, the whole being at once Absolute Truth and Absolute Knowledge. Then all our puzzles will disappear at a stroke, and error will be possible because any one finite thought, viewed in relation to its own intent, may or may not be seen by this higher thought as successful and adequate in its intent." (Royce, 68)

<sup>6</sup> "Real John and his phantom Thomas, real Thomas and his phantom John, are all present as elements in the including consciousness, which completes the incomplete intentions of both the individuals, constitutes their true relations, and gives the thought of each about the other whatever truth or error it possesses. In short, error

Now Royce's argument has been criticized on a number of fronts.<sup>7</sup> Most of these relate to (1) whether the Absolute is really *sufficient* to explain the objectivity of our thoughts, or (2) whether the Absolute is really *necessary* to explain the objectivity of our thoughts. The first type of objection questions why the Absolute's intentions should have any effect on what *I* am really thinking about, while the second type questions the effectiveness of Royce's arguments against the Absolute-involving explanation.

However, I think that there is another, in some sense more fundamental, problem with Royce's argument. Namely, even if we were to admit that the Absolute was necessary and sufficient to explain the possibility of error, we cannot be assured of the Absolute's existence because, contrary to Royce's original supposition, we cannot be absolutely certain that error exists.

Royce treats the denial of error's existence as incoherent because he associates it with a type or 'relativism' or 'subjectivism' according to which all of our beliefs are true. The position is incoherent because the doctrine that all our beliefs are true would entail that our belief that some of our beliefs are false must be true as well, so it thus contradicts itself very quickly. However, Royce's discussion of representation and objectivity open up another possible way of questioning the existence of error that does not seem to contradict itself in the same way. In particular, by stressing how problematic the idea of objective representation is, Royce opens up the possibility that we may, in fact, lack any such objective representations.<sup>8</sup>

The suggestion that error does not exist because our subjective mental states are not the sorts of things that can be evaluated as true or false, correct or in error does not lead to the sorts of contradiction that the 'relativist' position found itself in. If there is no error for this reason, then the apparent belief that error does in fact exist, rather than being true, will simply be 'contentless,' and thus not be in a position to contradict the 'skeptical hypothesis'.

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becomes possible as one moment or element in a higher truth, that is, in a consciousness that makes the error a part of itself, while recognizing it as error." (69)

<sup>7</sup> Though it is not without its defenders. For a recent defense of his position, see W.J Mander "Royce's Argument for the Absolute", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 36:3 July 1998.

<sup>8</sup> The specter of such a scenario is raised by Royce in the following terms.

Of course, there may be a type of ‘pragmatic’ contradiction in *asserting* that our thoughts and assertions lack such objective content, but such pragmatic contradictions do not provide the sorts of ‘logical certainty’ that Royce claims to have established for the Absolute.<sup>9</sup> Royce develops a type of ‘externalist’ account of what determines a thoughts content (the ‘external’ Absolute determines what we are thinking about) and when one endorses such a radical externalism about one’s representations, one loses one’s certainty that objective thought, and hence error, exists.

James’ criticisms of Royce are usually understood as involving the denial that the Absolute was necessary to explain intentionality, with his doctrine of ‘pure experience’ providing a non-Absolute involving answer to how our thoughts come to be about the world. Nevertheless, his views about *objective* representations, and their reliance on something like the Absolute, are much closer to Royce’s than commonly supposed. Where the two philosophers come apart, I will argue, has more to do with James’ sensitivity to the problem mentioned above about the contingency of such objective representations, and understanding how he hopes to cope with this problem should shed light on how James’ views on truth relate to his account of justified belief in “The Will to Believe.”

## II James<sup>10</sup>

James’ concern with his colleague’s views on intentionality (or “knowing”) was stressed in his review of Royce’s *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, which according to James, presented an

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Without [the Absolute], nothing but total subjectivity would be possible; and thought would then become purely a pathological phenomenon, an occurrence without truthfulness or falsity .... Our thought needs an infinite thought in order that it may get, though this infinite judge, the privilege of being so much as even an error. (71)

<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Royce’s argument, and the problems with it, here bears a number of striking similarities to Davidson’s attempt to undermine skepticism by focusing on what would be required even for *false* representations (See Davidson, D. 1986. “A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge”, in Lepore, E, (ed). *Truth and Interpretation*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.). Like Royce, Davidson understands objective representations in terms of ‘external’ factors that make the initial assumption that we have representation at all something that the skeptic may become willing to question. (For a criticism of Davidson along these lines, see Klein, P. 1986. “Radical Interpretation and Global Skepticism” in LePore (ed.) *Truth and Interpretation*.) The parallels between Royce and Davidson can, I believe, be developed in a number of interesting ways, but I don’t have space to pursue them here.

<sup>10</sup> James’ works will be referred to hereafter with the following abbreviations. “WB” for *The Will to Believe*, “PR” for *Pragmatism*, “MT” for *The Meaning of Truth*, “ERE” for *Essays in Radical Empiricism*, “PP” for *The Principles of Psychology*, and “CER” for *Collected Essays and Reviews*. All six are cited from the Harvard University Press editions.

“original proof of Idealism” based on the question, “How can a thought refer to, intend, or signify any particular reality outside itself?” (CER 384, 385).<sup>11</sup> James was unsympathetic to Royce’s confidence in the Absolute, and he wanted to give a more naturalistic account of how our words and ideas came to possess their intentional character. Nevertheless, when James’ account is more fully developed, his and Royce’s views are not as far apart as most have typically assumed.

For James the most basic cases of our thoughts being about the world are found in perception, and according to his radical empiricism, to perceive an object “is for mental content and object to be identical” (MT 36).<sup>12</sup> James extends the paradigm of perceptual reference by arguing that one’s ideas can know objects outside of one’s perceptual field by leading one through a series of experiences that terminate in an actual percept of the object referred to. For instance, James’ “Memorial Hall” idea may just be a dim image in his mind, but if this image allows James to go to the Hall and recognize it, then “we may freely say that we had the terminal object ‘in mind’ from the outset, even altho *at* the outset nothing was there in us but a flat piece of substantive experience like any other, with no self-transcendancy about it” (ERE 29).

It should be stressed that, on James’ account, our being led to the referent does not merely *indicate* what we had always been thinking about. Rather, the leading relation is supposed to be *constitutive* of the intentional one. As James puts it:

The percept here not only *verifies* the concept, proves its function of knowing that percept to be true, but the percept’s existence as the terminus of the chain of intermediaries *creates* the function. Whatever terminates the chain was, because it now proves itself to be, what the concept ‘had in mind’. (MT 64, ERE 31, italics James’)

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<sup>11</sup> In the same review he presents his worries about the problem of intentionality in a particularly vivid way.

The more one thinks, the more one feels that there is a real puzzle here. Turn and twist as we will, we are caught in a tight trap. Although we cannot help believing that our thoughts *do* mean realities and are true or false of them, we cannot for the life of us ascertain how they *can* mean them. If thought be one thing and reality another, by what pincers, from out of all the realities, does the thought pick out the special one it intends to know? (CER 386)

James hoped to give an account of this relation that was naturalistic, and was willing to describe his account of intentionality as a type of “descriptive psychology.” (MT 14.)

<sup>12</sup> Even if one is not fond of the details of James’ account of perceptual reference itself, the basic idea that our perceptual contact with the world can serve as type of paradigm for how our ideas come to be about it is extremely plausible.

However, if what we are thinking about is constituted by the identification process, then it seems impossible for us to *misidentify* the objects of our thoughts.<sup>13</sup> James tries to avoid this problem and preserve objectivity and the possibility of error in two ways: comparing our current use to our own future use, and comparing it to the usage of our community. Crucially, however, in both cases the purported errors, if they are to be understood as such, must *actually* be recognized.

James feels that one can get a grip on some mistakes by pointing out how some aspects of our usage can conflict with other aspects of it. Our *own* need to make our beliefs consistent will allow for some explanation of error. If we find a new object that more completely resembles our original idea (and ‘blends more harmoniously’ with our general set of ideas) we will be willing to treat that new object as what we had been referring to all along and treat the older object that only *partially* resembled our idea (and only *appeared* to blend harmoniously) as a misidentification. It would thus seem that any set of an agent’s beliefs that reached a stable equilibrium would turn out to be true. Still, for James, the inconsistency must be recognized and resolved by us, and the end of any single individual’s inquiries would probably not reach the sort of stable equilibrium needed for it to serve as an ‘objective’ standard for the rest of that individual’s usage. Meaning and (substantial) objectivity would not be achieved by a single individual, and there is thus a need for an enduring *community* of inquirers.

Correct usage (and the true belief) becomes the one that one hopes that society will, as a whole, ultimately converge upon. As James puts it:

The ‘absolutely’ true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine that all our temporary truths will some day converge. (PR 106-7)<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> James claims, for instance, that he is thinking of his actual hat because his actual hat is what his hat-idea would lead him to go pick up.

I think of my hat which a while ago I left in the cloak room .... this idea-hat, will presently determine the direction of my steps. I will go retrieve it. The idea I have of it will last up to the sensible presence of the hat, then will blend harmoniously with it. (ERE 264-5)

However, if James accidentally picked up *Royce’s* hat, then he picked up the *wrong* hat and made a *mistake*. Just because he picked up Royce’s hat, it should not follow that his hat-idea was *of* Royce’s hat all along. However, if the leading process actually *creates* the function, this result may seem inevitable.

<sup>14</sup> He goes on, “It runs on all fours with the perfectly wise man, and with the absolutely complete experience; and, if these ideals were ever realized, they will all be realized together. Meanwhile we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood.” (Pragmatism 106-7) See also: “This

Truth absolute, [the pragmatist] says, means an ideal set of formulations towards which all opinions may in the long run be expected to converge. (MT 143)

Now, for James, correct use must be understood as someone's *actual* use, so the 'end of inquiry' must be understood in an actual rather than merely 'possible' sense.<sup>15</sup> The objective norm cannot just be what we *would* believe, but in some sense, what we *will* believe.<sup>16</sup> Unless some stable convergence is reached, then, for James, there is no objective fact about how our terms are correctly used, just a continual flux of shifting uses.

The kind of stable convergent community that James would require that we *actually* reach would share many of the qualities that Royce attributes to the Absolute. Indeed, should not be surprising that James claims that the ultimate end of inquiry "runs on all fours with ... the absolutely complete experience" (PR 106-7). James' end of inquiry is much like Royce's higher, organized, complete thought.<sup>17</sup> Both James and Royce agree about the sort of a state required for the objectivity of our thoughts. They just have different attitudes towards whether we can know this state to currently exist. Royce assumes that we have objective representations, and then derives the existence of the Absolute from them. James on the other hand, suggests that such a state is necessary for such representations, but allows its existence, along with the existence of our representations, to be up for grabs.

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regulative notion of a potential better truth to be established later, possibly to be established some day absolutely, and having powers of retroactive legislation, turns *its* face, like all pragmatist notions, towards concreteness of fact, and towards the future." (PR 107).

<sup>15</sup> In this respect he differs from Pragmatists like the Putnam of *Reason Truth and History*, and is more like Royce in rejecting 'ideal observer' theories that rely on mere possibility.

<sup>16</sup> This can seem like a tough bullet to bite, but even in the case of ethics, where such convergence seems to many even less likely, James seems to bite it. (Furthermore, while James is more optimistic about our history of moral progress than some (WB 155-6), he hardly seems to give us any assurance that an end of ethical inquiry will be reached.) Agents in a moral universe face the question of how to reconcile their often-conflicting demands. In such conflicts, one must be right and the other wrong, but this rightness can't be simply grounded in the nature of things, it must be recognized by an *actual* agent. As James puts it, "that truth cannot be a self-proclaiming set of laws, or an abstract "moral reason", but can only exist in act, or in the shape of an opinion held by some thinker really to be found." (WB 151, See also, "If one ideal judgment be objectively better than another, that betterness must be made flesh by being lodged concretely in someone's actual perception." (WB, 147).) It seems that, unless there *actually* is something like an 'ethical end of inquiry' then there can be no sense in which one ethical position can be objectively better than any other, and then they can't be true or objective. The same can be said for meaning in general.

<sup>17</sup> Deference to absolute for Royce is like our hope-for difference to ideal future community.

Should James' view lead one to a type of skepticism about objectivity, representation and truth? The answer for James is, of course, "no". In particular, James can recognize the contingency and uncertainty about the status of objectivity that his pragmatism induces without lapsing into skepticism because of the epistemological views he defends in his earlier paper "The Will to Believe." I won't go into all of the details as to how I think that one should read James' paper,<sup>18</sup> but for present purposes, the main points he makes in it are:

1. We often cannot help but let our 'passional nature' (the 'prejudices' associated with among other things, our instincts and upbringing) determine which of a set of evidentially unsettled propositions to believe.<sup>19</sup>
2. Even if we could withhold belief in such cases, it would not necessarily be rational to do so. This is because the hyperconservative strategy of withholding belief until one is absolutely certain that one has conclusive evidence satisfies the epistemic imperative to avoid false belief at the expense the equally important imperative to acquire true beliefs. Rationality should involve balancing the two imperatives, and our practical needs can effect how the two should be balanced.

James illustrates his view with his famous (but oft misunderstood) discussion of the "Alpine climber" trapped in a storm and needing to make a leap over a chasm in order to make it home safely. The climber has never made such a leap before, but is confident in his abilities, and when he makes his attempt, he succeeds. James then asks us to imagine the same climber facing the same leap, but his time with a more diffident attitude towards his leaping abilities, which prevents him from believing that he can make the jump. He hesitates in attempting the jump, and when he eventually does make a desperate leap, he fails and falls to his death.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For such details, see \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>19</sup> James briefly states the thesis of James paper as follows: "The thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: *Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision -- just like deciding yes or no -- and is attended with the same risk of losing truth*". (WB 20)

<sup>20</sup> "Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith and you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists *say of* maybes, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, your roll in the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage *is to believe what is in the line of your needs*, for only by such a belief is the need fulfilled. Refuse to believe, and you shall indeed be right, for you shall irretrievably perish. But believe, and again you shall be right, for you shall save yourself. You make one or the other of two possible universes truth



There are a number of characteristics of these ‘will to believe’ cases:

1. The must be evidentially unsettled.
2. The must be involve a “genuine option” which is live, forced and momentous.<sup>21</sup>

Some “will to believe” cases also have the following ‘bonus features’, which, while not necessary for the application of the doctrine, make it even more compelling.

3. The evidence that confirms the beliefs may only be available to those who already have the belief in question.
4. The truth of the belief may itself be sensitive to its being believed.

For James beliefs such as whether or not God exists, whether good will eventually triumph over evil, and whether life is worth living all have the characteristics mentioned in #1 and #2 (and possibly ##3-4). In each case, we cannot be sure of what right answer, but we are still entitled to ‘follow our heart’ on such issues.

With these question James contrasts<sup>22</sup> the *optimistic* position which assumes that things are just ‘fated’ to work out, and the *pessimistic* position where we are just fated to perish, with his own *melioristic* position, where things may work out for the best, but only with some effort on our own part. The future isn’t settled, and its up to us to determine whether or not it will work out.

Now the conclusion James draws for our beliefs about these more ‘ethical’ matters can also be drawn for the question of whether we will ever reach the sort of convergence associated with the ‘end of inquiry.’ We can’t know a harmonious stable convergence will occur, but, according to James, that should not prevent us from being justified in believing that it will. The claim that there will be such future convergence, after all, satisfies his criteria for a ‘will to believe’ case. In particular, for most questions it remains the case that. That our inquiries will ultimately reach such a stable convergence is an evidentially unsettled genuine option for James. It is also noteworthy

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by your trust or mistrust -- both universes having been *only* maybes, in this particular, before you contributed your act.” (WB, 53-4)

<sup>21</sup> To put it (very) roughly, an option is “live” if we have some real possibility of believing it, it is “forced” if we must make a choice with respect to it, and it is “momentous” if the choice can be expected to make some significant difference in our lives.

that the end of inquiry may, should it be reached, satisfy the two ‘bonus’ features, (3) and (4). We may not be able to get evidence for it unless we already believe in it (take it as a working hypothesis), and such convergence definitely won't come if we don't believe in it.

As opposed to both the optimism of Peirce (where we are fated to reach the end of inquiry) or Royce (where in some sense we have reached it already) as well as the type of ‘skeptical’ pessimism that assumes that it will never be reached, James defends a kind of *epistemic meliorism*. Inquiry may or may not work out, but if it does, it will be because we made it so.

To the question “Why reasons do you have to believe that that stable convergence you think objectivity requires will occur?” James can answer that he simply does believe this, and since the evidence for this belief is as great as the evidence against it, and given that the convergence won't come about if people don't believe in it, his belief is justified. The belief in convergence is a classic “will to believe” scenario.<sup>23</sup>

If it were embedded within a more traditional epistemic framework, James' pragmatism would thus lead to a type of skepticism about objectivity and truth, and it is only his ‘will to believe’ doctrine that prevents this. Consequently, while James' writings on truth in *Pragmatism* are often viewed as underwriting the views of justification in “The Will to Believe”,<sup>24</sup> I would argue here that precisely the opposite is the case. It is the epistemic position outlined in the earlier paper that underwrites our justification in not taking total skepticism about the objectivity of our thought as the consequence of the view of intentionality defended in *Pragmatism*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> At the end of *Pragmatism* and a number of other places.

<sup>23</sup> That there will be a convergence is not just a ‘posit’. Posits have an independence from the positing that James takes to be absent from many (though not all) ‘will to believe’ cases.

<sup>24</sup> In its most cartoonish form, the story goes roughly as follows: In “The Will to Believe” James presented a view according to which we were justified in believing anything that it was in our interest to believe. One's belief in God, for instance, would be justified because one's life is better with such a belief than it is without. This position has the fault of seeming to divorce justification and rationality from truth: Whether one was justified in believing something (whether it was rational to believe something) had nothing to do with what evidence one had for its truth (or, for that matter, one's reliability in detecting such truths). This sort of gulf between justification and truth seemed intolerable to many, and James' supposedly attempted to bridge it by equating, in his *Pragmatism*, truth with what was ‘good’ for us to believe. If it was in our best interest to believe that God existed (the belief in God's existence ‘worked’), then such a belief was true. Justification was reconnected to truth by understanding both in terms of whatever belief works best for us. This story is probably wrong on just about every count and reasons for thinking so are discussed further in my \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

<sup>25</sup> *Pragmatism*'s last chapter on “Pragmatism and Religion” is thus not just an application of the theory developed in the earlier chapters, but also reestablishes a framework that underwrites those earlier chapters. Indeed, I think that

In conclusion, the conditional claim that error and objectivity require that there actually be a stable harmonious convergence of opinions is shared by both James and Royce. Nevertheless, James thinks that doubts about the later undermine our certainty (but not our entitlement) to the former, while Royce thinks that our assurance about the former can be transferred to the later. The ‘transcendental conditional’ is accepted by both, but they differ about what to do with it.

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the importance of the truth of the ‘religious hypothesis’ for the rest of James’ philosophy is often underrated, and there is a good sense in which, if it were to fail to be true, James would consider all forms of normativity (objective representations being just one example) to be seriously compromised.