

Prudential Arguments, Naturalized Epistemology, and the Will to Believe*

1. Introduction

There are at least two standpoints from which we can reason about what we should believe. The first, epistemic, standpoint reasons about candidates for belief in terms of their truth or probability. The second, prudential, standpoint reasons about candidates for belief in terms of the benefits expected from believing them. What we should believe need not, from these two standpoints, always be the same: it may occasionally turn out to be beneficial to believe what is improbable or untrue. Prudential (i.e., benefit directed) and epistemic (i.e., truth-directed) rationality can thus conflict when it comes to the question of what we should believe. Nevertheless, philosophers have traditionally focused on the truth rather than the utility of our beliefs, and this has frequently led them to the view that the degree to which we believe any proposition should always be directly proportionate to the evidence we have for its truth. (I will follow the common practice of referring to this view as “evidentialism.”)¹ Nevertheless, contemporary defenders of prudential reasoning about belief do claim a philosophical pedigree, and it has often been claimed that William James’ famous essay “The Will to Believe”² is an early instance and defense of prudential reasoning about belief.³ “The Will to Believe” has typically been viewed as arguing that beliefs can be justified not only by evidence in favor of their truth, but also by the benefits associated with holding them. In particular, James is frequently interpreted as arguing that, even if there is no compelling evidence for God’s existence, one’s believing in God is justified by the beneficial consequences it brings to one’s life.

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¹ For a discussion of “evidentialism” and its relation to prudential arguments, see Jordan 1996.

² Hereafter “WB”. In the course of this essay I will also rely on passages from other essays in James’ collection, *The Will to Believe* (James 1979), such as “The Sentiment of Rationality” (hereafter “SR”) and “Is Life Worth Living” (hereafter “ILWL”). All italicization, unless noted otherwise, will be James’.

³ See, for instance, Perry 1938 (ch 5), Pojman 1993, Mouglin and Sober 1994, , and Jordan 1996. Pascal’s famous wager is, of course, also frequently appealed to as an early instance of a prudential argument for belief.

Admittedly, James's sympathy with prudential reasoning about belief is occasionally evident in "The Will to Believe."⁴ Nevertheless, there are other strands of thought running through his extraordinarily rich and complex paper that are arguably more central to it, and those strands ultimately have more philosophical significance than any mere defense of prudential reasoning. If one hands 'epistemic' rationality over to the evidentialist, then it can seem as if the only way to criticize evidentialism is to appeal to the legitimate use of other sorts of rationality (most noticeably prudential) in belief formation. However, what James is doing in "The Will to Believe" is criticizing precisely the assumption that *epistemic* rationality should be handed over to the evidentialist. Rather than merely pointing out that our beliefs fall within the domain of prudential as well as epistemic rationality, James argues that evidentialism should be rejected because it presupposes an unrealistically one-sided picture of epistemic rationality itself. James attempts to give a less 'intellectualistic' picture of epistemic rationality -- a picture that respects the fact that we are not disembodied intellects, but embodied inquirers engaged in practical activities. James' paper thus has more affinities to certain prominent strains in contemporary 'naturalized' epistemology than it does to current defenses of prudential arguments for belief. In particular, James notes that a mere concern for truth cannot tell one what to do in conditions of uncertainty, and his account of rational belief is unusually sensitive to what can be expected of, and required by, our *actual* practice of belief formation.

2. Evidentialism and Crude Pragmatism

Evidentialism is the view that the strength to which we hold any proposition should be directly proportional to the evidence we have for its truth. As Hume famously put it "the wise man proportions his belief to the evidence."⁵ Evidentialism thus rules out deciding what to believe based on what one takes to be the utility rather than the truth of the beliefs in question. Indeed,

⁴ And even more evident in earlier papers of his such as "Some Reflections on the Subjective Method" (hereafter "SM"). However, in the nearly twenty years between that paper (1877) and the "The Will to Believe" itself (1896), James' views became considerably more complex. One noticeable difference is that while the potential for certain beliefs to bring about their own verification is crucial in the argument of the earlier paper, it plays only a subsidiary role in the latter.

⁵ Hume 1777, p. 110. See also Russell 1909 p.86, Russell 1945, p. 816.

James' contemporaries often claimed that it was not only *irrational* but *immoral* to let prudential considerations affect what one believed. Huxley referred to such prudential reasoning as "the lowest depths of immorality," and Clifford famously insisted that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."⁶

Critics of evidentialism have argued, however, that it can be both morally and rationally permissible to adopt various beliefs purely for prudential reasons. This is especially so in 'extreme cases' where a tremendous benefit can be gained (or a tremendous loss avoided) by forming a belief that lacks sufficient evidence.⁷ If, for instance, a madman threatened to kill you unless you came to believe that, say, the moon was made of cheese, or if having such a belief would provide you with some tremendous benefit, it seems both morally and rationally permissible to try to believe the proposition in question. Any philosopher whose criticism of evidentialism are limited to this sort of point will be referred to here as a "crude pragmatist." There is no question that evidentialism of writers like Clifford is incompatible with Crude Pragmatism, and this is so much the worse for evidentialism, since (while it won't be discussed in great detail here) Crude Pragmatism seems in many ways quite plausible.

3. Is James (no more than) a Crude Pragmatist?

The question remains, however, should James' "The Will to Believe" be understood (primarily) as a defense of Crude Pragmatism? Such an interpretation of James' paper has, in spite of its popularity, never been a comfortable one. While prudential arguments are robustly truth-independent, James never seems to give up the traditional 'epistemic' goals of maximizing one's true beliefs and minimizing one's false ones. The range of cases that James focuses on is, consequently, considerably different from the range to which prudential belief formation would

⁶ Both quoted in WB p.17.

⁷ For examples of and discussions of such cases, and rejection of evidentialism with respect to them, see Foley 1993, Mougín & Sober 1994, Meiland, 1980, and Jordan 1996. For a criticism of the relevance of such extreme cases to James' thought, see Gale (forthcoming) p. 97.

seem to apply. As a result, while Mougin and Sober claim that their defense of prudential reasoning about belief “is encompassed in the spirit, if not the letter” of James’ position, they later admit that James puts restrictions on the scope of such arguments which seem “arbitrary from a pragmatic point of view.”⁸ If James were merely giving a prudential argument for religious belief, his restricting the application of such arguments to questions that can’t be settled on intellectual grounds *would* be arbitrary.⁹ Since prudential arguments are not truth-directed, there needn’t be any restrictions upon the evidential support for the hypotheses in question. It is, however, hard to see how James could have missed such an obvious point about the nature of prudential arguments, and rather than trying to explain how James could have made such a blunder, one should understand his restrictions as indicating that he is primarily doing something other than advocating Crude Pragmatism.

Furthermore, since make-belief and self-deception are fair game (and possibly even essential) for effective prudential reasoning about belief, James’ objections to alternate titles such as “The Will to Deceive” or “The Will to Make Believe”¹⁰ suggest yet again that defending prudential arguments was not his primary goal in “The Will to Believe.” Indeed, his discussion of Pascal displays little sympathy with purely benefit-directed arguments for faith in religious matters. Religious belief “adopted willfully after such a mechanical calculation” would, according to James, “lack the inner soul of faith’s reality,” and if he were in the Deity’s place, he would “take a particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward.” (WB 16)

Even more damaging to the prudential reading of “The Will to Believe” is the fact that the sort of conscious reasoning about one’s beliefs and their effects that is essential to prudential reasoning about beliefs seems entirely absent from James’ paper. James talks of the benefits associated with certain beliefs, but considerations of these benefits are never taken to show up in the believer’s

⁸ Mougin and Sober 1994 p. 392, 395.

⁹ Or, at best, put in only for polemical reasons having to do with his debate with the evidentialists. I.e., the restrictions would follow not from the logic of his own argument but from the desire to make his non-evidentialist position as palatable as possible to his evidentialistically inclined audience. (See Gale (forthcoming) p. 95 for a discussion of how James’ presentation of his views may have been affected by his intended audience in this fashion.)

¹⁰ James 1907, p. 124. The alternate titles were suggested in Miller 1898-9.

reasoning. Those who take James to be nothing more than a Crude Pragmatist often fail to see this, and this failure frequently turns up in their characterization of James' famous case of a mountain climber facing a leap over a wide chasm. The following two examples are illustrative:

[T]hink of an Alpine climber who, because of an avalanche and a blinding blizzard, is stranded on a desolate, mountain path facing a chasm. The climber cannot return the way he came because of the avalanche, yet if he stays where he is, he will freeze as the temperature plummets. The climber's only real hope is to jump the chasm, the width of which is obscured by the blizzard. *The climber knows himself well enough to realize that, unless he believes that he can make the jump, he attempt will only be half-hearted, diminishing his chance of survival.* In circumstances like these, one is clearly justified in relying upon pragmatic reasons, since survival is practically possible only given belief.¹¹

James's own example (with my filing out an interpretation) is of a man trapped at the edge of a crevasse, overlooking a yawning gorge. *He calculates that a successful leap is improbable, but it will increase in probability in proportion to his convincing himself that he must get himself to believe what an impartial look at the evidence will not allow.* So he volits the belief.¹²

In both of these examples, the mountain climber is portrayed as explicitly reasoning about the effects of his beliefs on his actions, and in both cases the climber adopts the belief that he can make the leap on the basis of what he perceives to be the belief's effects. When James describes the climber, however, he just envisages two cases: one where he has "hope and confidence" in himself and succeeds, and another where "the emotions of fear and distrust preponderate" and he fails (SR 80). No explicit awareness of the effect of his attitude on his behavior is attributed to the climber in either case.¹³ James' point is only that, even though the climber lacks evidence that he will succeed, he has the right to believe that he will.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the cases that James focuses on are not just a subset of the cases where prudential arguments are sound. The cases James has in mind include some where prudential arguments are inapplicable. It is characteristic of prudential arguments that the believer

¹¹ Jordan 1996 pp. 412-13 (italics mine). Jordan does, however, recognize that his interpretation of James as a defender of such prudential arguments is controversial (418).

¹² Pojman 1993, p. 543 (italics mine).

¹³ In much the same way, James points out that if we enter a situation assuming that we will be liked, we often will be, while if we lack such an assumption we often will not (WB 28). In neither case, is an awareness of the affect of his attitude attribute to the agent. This contrasts sharply with Gale's interpretation where the agent "first gets himself to believe the conditional proposition that if he acts in a friendly manner, people will wind up liking him so that he can muster the necessary courage and confidence to act in a friendly manner and thereby help to bring it about that people will end up liking him" (Gale forthcoming p. 112). This is characteristic of Gale's general analysis of James' doctrine which explicitly requires both that (1) the agent's psychology is such that he can realize the confidence and courage boosting benefits of a belief in some proposition, even if he takes it to be evidentially nonwarranted, and (2) the agent knows that he will act so as to help achieve some desirable outcome only if he first believes the nonwarranted proposition. (Gale, forthcoming p. 114.)

is supposed to be better off through holding the belief in question.¹⁴ James, however, seems to have no such requirement in his discussion of the will to believe. Indeed, James' makes it clear that when a 'genuine' option is underdetermined by the evidence, we have the right to follow our passional nature towards *either* alternative, not just the one that is in our interest to believe. In such cases James might think it "asinine" (SR 81) to believe something that is not in one's interest, but the belief is still justified. The self-fulfilling belief of the mountain climber who believes that he can't make the jump is supported by James' doctrine just as much as is the belief of the successful leaper. The point is not that the useful belief is justified by its usefulness, but rather that, since one is justified in believing either option, one may as well believe the most useful one.

The contrast between James' view and Crude Pragmatism can be further illustrated by considering how his doctrine would apply to Sartre's famous discussion of the 'existential choice' faced by a young Frenchman during World War II. He must either join the resistance, leaving his aging mother alone on their farm, or take care of his mother, doing nothing to help free his country.¹⁵ The youth has no way to tell which of the two courses of action will work out the best, but whichever alternative he chooses will commit him to the belief that that course of action was the right thing to do. He cannot refuse to make any choice, since such a 'refusal' amounts to deciding to stay with his mother. He must choose, and whatever choice he ultimately makes will be an expression of his passional nature. In this case, nothing like prudential reasoning about the benefits or the effects of his beliefs is going on. Indeed, it is important to note that in such cases there *could not* be any such prudential reasoning, since he has no way to tell which belief and course of action is most likely to leave him better off. If James' account can be understood as applying to such a case, then he must be doing more than simply defending the use of prudential reasoning, and how his account does so apply should become clear from what follows.

¹⁴ The benefits can either be from the tremendous utility expected if one has such a belief and it turns out to be true, or simply from having the belief on its own. Such prudential arguments are referred to by Jordan as "dependent" and "independent" respectively (Jordan 1996). Pascal is usually understood as providing some sort of dependent argument, while James is frequently understood as having an independent one.

¹⁵ See Sartre 1948 p.35. The case is usefully discussed in relation to James' doctrine in Putnam 1992 pp. 191-2

4. James' View

4.1. Our passional nature and its contribution

Just what, then, is James trying to do in "The Will to Believe", if he is not advocating the use of prudential arguments? Well, James states the thesis of his essay explicitly, and he puts it 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)

The first thing we should note about what he says here is that the thesis is about the contribution of our "passional nature." If one is to understand James' position, then, one must be first be clear about what he means by this crucial term. There has been, however, remarkably little discussion on what it is supposed to signify, and it has frequently been assumed (especially by those who read James as a Crude Pragmatist) that it is simply another term for our desires. However, there is no reason to think that James intended our "passional nature" to be understood this way. On the contrary, rather than being limited to our desires or explicit calculations of utility, our passional (or "willing") nature is meant to include "all those influences, born of the intellectual climate, that makes hypotheses possible or impossible for us, alive or dead" (WB 18), that is: our hopes, our fears, and all of prejudices and passions that result from our upbringing and situation in life. These 'non-rational' determinants of our belief are inescapable, and an essential part of James' defense of the contribution of our passional nature is his pointing out just how wide-spread this contribution is. Our passional nature, so understood, contributes to countless beliefs, many of which need not be in our best interest.

A second crucial point to notice is that the main thesis of his essay is a *descriptive* as well as a *normative* one. It is not simply that we are occasionally *entitled* to rely on our "passional" nature, but that we ultimately *cannot help* but do so. As James later puts it, there are some options between hypotheses where the influence of our passional nature "must be regarded *both* as an

inevitable and *lawful* determinant of our choice” (WB 25, italics mine).¹⁶ It is important to note that James is making two claims here, because there are intertwined yet recognizable strands in the argument having to do with each claim. James’ concern with genuine options has to do with the inevitability of the passional contribution, while his concern with the conflicting epistemic imperatives and the requirement of faith to create or discover certain facts has to do with the justification of such a contribution. Furthermore, the range of cases covered by these strands need not be the same. For non-genuine options, the contribution of our passional nature is not inevitable, but it may still be justified.

4.2 The Descriptive Claim: The passional contribution is inevitable

We should first examine why James thinks that the contribution of our passional nature is, at times, inevitable. (One should note, incidentally, that such a claim about inevitability is unlikely to be made of prudential reasoning about belief.) James takes the contribution of our passional nature to be inevitable when we are faced with a genuine option that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds, and the option presented to us is “genuine” if it is “live,” “forced” and “momentous” (WB 14).

An option between two hypotheses is “live” when each has “some appeal, however small, to our belief.”¹⁷ One can only misunderstand James if one takes him to be defending our right to believe hypotheses that are no longer living for us, and James compounds this problem by focusing on a proposition, “the religious hypothesis,”¹⁸ which, while certainly living for James,

¹⁶ Furthermore, it is important to stress that (*pace*, among others, Davis 1972 pp.232-3, Suckiel 1982, p. 80, Mounce 1997 p.90) James is *not* claiming that our passional nature is what *justifies* (or provides *reasons* or *grounds* for) the holding of a particular belief. Rather, he is claiming that our passional contribution to belief is *justified*. If one treats James as trying to show how our passional contributions are *justifiers*, rather than being contributing elements that are themselves *justified*, then the prudential reading, which gives non-evidential elements a justificatory role, can seem much more appealing.

¹⁷ WB 14. It should be noted, incidentally, that which hypotheses are “live” for us will itself be an expression of our “passional nature”. James considers the option to be “Mohomedan” dead to his audience while the option to be Christian was live (WB 14), and the difference between their attitudes towards Christianity and Islam is precisely one of those results of our “intellectual climate” that fall under our “willing nature” (WB 18).

¹⁸ James’ religious hypothesis was comparatively abstract and involved no commitment to the details of any particular religious faith. Rather it involved the affirmations that “the best things are the more eternal things” and that “we are better off even now if we believe here first affirmation to be true.” (WB 29-30)

will be dead for many of his readers.¹⁹ James' argument is not intended to convince an atheist that he would be better off believing in God. Rather, he intended to convince someone already inclined to believe in God that there is nothing wrong with such a belief in spite of the lack of conclusive evidence for it. James complains of students of his who while "chock full of some faith or other" still refuse to admit that their faith is "lawful philosophically," and such guilty believers make up his intended audience.²⁰ Elsewhere he describes his project as "the sweeping away of certain views that often keep the springs of religious faith compressed" and "holding up to the light of day certain considerations calculated to let loose these springs in a normal, natural way." (ILWL 40) If the hypothesis were not a live one, our 'passional nature' could not lead us to believe it.²¹

This brings us to the "forced" character of the cases James discusses. A choice is "forced" if the alternatives it presents cannot be avoided. The option between drinking Colombian or Guatemalan coffee when I'm at a local cafe is not forced because I can avoid it by not drinking coffee at all.²² On the other hand, when our mountain climber is stuck on a ledge overlooking a wide chasm, the choice between trying to jump over the chasm or staying on the ledge is forced: he must do one or the other. For James there can be equally forced options between beliefs because he does not take belief to be some purely intellectual attitude that one can take towards a hypothesis without its affecting one's behavior. As James puts it, "belief is measured by action," since "belief

¹⁹ James was aware that he would frequently be misunderstood this way by those sympathetic with Clifford's position (WB 32), and by focusing on dead hypotheses one can come to misunderstand James as defending a prudential argument.

²⁰ WB 13. One could find such believers in, say, the Harvard's Young Men's Christian Association, to which he presented "Is Life Worth Living". James is quite clear that he would preach the opposite (i.e.: that we should be less credulous) if he were addressing, say, the Salvation Army (WB 7).

²¹ That James focuses on the inevitable contribution of our passional nature with live *options* stresses that there is still a certain amount of freedom involved in his picture. Our choice is not determined by our passional nature (in which case there would be no genuine option). Rather, it is determined that we will make a passional choice in such cases. The choice we make is an expression of our passional nature, but it is not determined by it. James' point is precisely that we have the "freedom to believe" (WB 32) either, even if we *must* believe one or the other.

²² Like the question of its "liveliness" whether an option is forced or not may vary from person to person. Someone who is more caffeine dependent than I may not have the luxury of abstaining from coffee, and for him the option may be (comparatively) forced.

and doubt... involve conduct on our part,” and “the test of belief is willingness to act.”²³ He also argues that for many hypotheses our only way “of doubting, or refusing to believe, that a certain thing *is*, is continuing to act as if it were *not*.” (ILWL 50) With this link between belief and action, James can claim that there will be cases where we must adopt one of the two beliefs that correspond to our forced practical option. The climber’s attempting the leap is tantamount to believing that he can make it; his remaining to freeze on the ledge is tantamount to believing that he can’t. The connection between belief and action ensures that the genuine options we face at the practical level often extend to the theoretical as well.

Of course it might be suggested when we follow a course of action, we need not actually form the belief associated with it. To use Russell’s example, if I face a fork in the road and do not know which of the two paths lead to my destination, I must choose one, but I need not actually *believe* that the path I chose leads to my destination. I merely act *as if* it does and treat its purported leading to it as a *working hypothesis*.²⁴ Even Clifford doesn’t recommend that we do *nothing* until we can conclusively settle a practical question; he only suggests that we refrain from actually *believing* the hypothesis we chose to act upon.²⁵

Russell and Clifford, however, seem to presuppose that beliefs and working hypotheses are mental attitudes of completely different *kinds*. For James, on the other hand, given the way both beliefs and working hypotheses must be connected to action, the difference between the two can be, at best, one of *degree* rather than *kind*. Clifford and Russell occasionally write as if one could act exactly as if one believed something, but as long as one withheld some mental “yes” from one’s heart, one would not be a believer. This picture of belief is clearly unacceptable to James, who writes as much as a psychologist as an epistemologist. If there is a difference between believing something and adopting it as a working hypothesis, then that difference must be manifestable in the

²³ WB 32, ILWL 50, SR 76. A similar connection between belief and action is, of course, found in Peirce, (see, for instance Peirce 1877, p. 247)

²⁴ See Russell 1909 p. 84. See also Russell 1945 p. 815.

²⁵ Clifford claims that “there are many cases in which it is our duty to act upon probabilities, although the evidence is not such as to justify present belief” and so “we have no reason to fear lest habit of conscientious inquiry should paralyze the actions of our everyday life” (Clifford 1877, p. 79). For a fuller discussion of this aspect of Clifford’s position, see Hollinger, 1997, p. 71.

behavior of the person adopting the attitude towards the hypothesis. One possible difference is put forth by Russell as follows: “We habitually act upon hypotheses, but not precisely as we act upon what we consider certainties; for when we act upon hypotheses we keep our eyes open for fresh evidence.”²⁶ However, this account of the distinction presupposes that we don’t ever look for new evidence relating to our beliefs because we take their contents to be “certainties” whose truth has been conclusively settled. Given James’ fallibilism neither of these presuppositions would be accepted: our beliefs are not certainties and we should remain open to evidence both for and against even our most entrenched beliefs (WB 22). Because of this, there is little reason to think that one can create a difference of kind between beliefs and working hypotheses.²⁷ Both are manifested in our behavior, and the only difference between the two is in the degree of commitment to the hypothesis that our behavior manifests. As James puts it, “there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.” (WB 14) Indeed, once one gives up on absolute certainty, all beliefs are, in some sense, working hypotheses.

Consequently, while James is willing to admit that we can act on working hypotheses, and recognizes the important role they play in science, he would deny that forming a mere ‘working hypothesis’ is possible when faced with a genuine option. This is because genuine options are “momentous”, and the manifested degree of commitment to the hypothesis is at its highest with momentous options. An option is momentous if the opportunity is unique, the stake is significant, and the decision is irreversible (WB 15). With a momentous option, the forced choice is “irrevocable”, and for James a “willingness to act irrevocably” constitutes no mere working hypothesis, but a full fledged belief.²⁸ In Russell’s example, it is easy to treat my taking the path I choose as a mere working hypothesis because I stake little on it. If my decision turns out to be wrong, I can just go back and take the other path. I will probably have lost nothing more than a

²⁶ Russell 1945, p. 815.

²⁷ The close connection James saw between beliefs and working hypotheses can be seen in the fact that his earlier defenses of faith were often described by him as defenses of our right to form working hypotheses (SM 337, SR 79).

²⁸ “The maximum of liveliness in a hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief.” (WB 14) This may be the weakest link in James’ argument. One might think that a willingness to act irrevocably in all situations would be the same as belief, but a willingness to act in such crisis situations, where any action is irrevocable, can less clearly be equated with belief.

few minutes of my time.²⁹ However, if the option is momentous we do not have the luxury of trying the other alternative should the first one not work out. If I make a desperate leap across a mountain gorge, my commitment to my ability to make the jump is no mere ‘working hypothesis’ that I can revise if it turns out to be mistaken. If it is false, my life is over. In much the same way, if I refused to make the jump, and simply allows myself to freeze to death, my conviction that I cannot make the jump embodies a more robust commitment than any working hypothesis. For James, one can’t play it safe with forced and momentous options: either way one ends up committing oneself to a belief, and thus runs the risk of being in error. Of course, given the momentousness of these genuine options, it would be best to make as informed a decision about them as possible. Unfortunately, we must frequently decide whether or not to commit ourselves to a particular hypothesis before there is time for adequate evidence to arrive. There is, after all, no reason to think that the world must be constructed so that the class of pressing practical questions is entirely contained within the class of questions that are currently conclusively decideable. Indeed, “It seems *a priori* improbable that the truth should be so nicely adjusted to our needs and powers as that” (WB 27). There is, for instance, no reason to think that we will have any adequate evidence on the subject of religious beliefs during our lifetime. Note that the very same point can apply to the prudential status of these beliefs. With some forced and momentous options, we will have no way of telling which alternative would be in our interest to believe.

For a disembodied intellect, there might be *no* forced and momentous practical options, and thus no reason why such an intellect could not adopt a ‘wait and see’ attitude towards any proposition. However, *we* often have no choice but to take an epistemic stand with respect to certain practically connected hypotheses. Our situation in the world frequently demands that we act (since inaction is a type of action), and we often must count as having the beliefs associated with

²⁹ Most scientific hypotheses would be of such a trivial nature (WB 15) though some, especially in times of crisis, may not be.

³⁰ As James puts it, “neutrality is not only inwardly difficult, it is also outwardly unrealizable, where our relations to an alternative are practical and vital.” (ILWL 50). Consequently, it seems (*pace* Hare & Madden 1968, p. 127) unlikely that James was also defending our right to suspend judgment in these cases.

such actions. We are thus, like the mountain climber, ‘forced’ to form one belief or another, and so at least *some* non-evidential contribution will be inevitable.³⁰

The contribution of our passional nature is thus inevitable when faced with such genuine and undecidable options, because (1) the available evidence cannot decide the question, and (2) agnosticism about the issue is not an option because one cannot avoid forming a potentially false belief when faced with such forced and momentous options.

4.3. The Normative Claim: The passional contribution is justified

We have seen, then, why James thinks that the contribution of our passional nature is inevitable in some cases. Furthermore, if, as James believes, ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, then the contribution is ‘lawful’ precisely because of its inevitability. However, James gives further arguments supporting the legitimacy of our passional contribution. These arguments can extend beyond the comparatively narrow range of genuine options, which would, after all, account for a small fraction of the beliefs arising from our “intellectual climate” (WB 18) that James’ initially lists as involving our passional nature.

4.31. Conflicting Epistemic Imperatives.

Since most cases where we are influenced by our passional nature won’t involve genuine options, the question arises of whether or not we should accept the contribution of our passional nature in these cases as well. The evidentialist response to the realization that a belief of ours is at least partially the product of our ‘passional nature’ is to suggest that, if at all possible, we adopt an agnostic attitude towards the hypothesis in question. For the evidentialist, our ‘epistemic duty’ is to withhold belief until such passional contributions can be replaced with adequate evidence. Nevertheless, such a response relies on a particular conception of our epistemic duty. Namely, we should do everything possible to avoid being in error. James point out, however, that this is not the only way to understand our epistemic duty:

There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion -- ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must know the*

truth; and *we must avoid error* -- these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. . . . Believe truth! Shun error! -- these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. (WB 24)

While both imperatives are ‘truth-sensitive’ and agree that we should try to put ourselves in as strong an evidential position as possible, they give conflicting advice about what to do in conditions of uncertainty.³¹ James was perhaps the first to realize that ‘epistemic’ rationality might involve finding the best trade-off between these sometimes conflicting demands, and that our practical situation as engaged inquirers should be taken into account when determining what this trade-off should be.

Once both of the epistemic norms are clearly in view, the evidentialist’s insistence that we should believe nothing rather than “incur the awful risk of believing lies”³² can be recognized for what it is, an ultimately passional commitment -- one that expresses a devotion to one of the two epistemic norms at the expense of the other. With respect to any given uncertain proposition, such agnosticism is “only expressions of our passional life” (WB 25), and represents a victory of our “fear of its being error” over our “hope that it may be true.” (WB 30) It is not a victory of our intellect over our passions; rather it is a case of “one passion laying down the law” (WB 30).

4.32 Against extreme conservatism: revealed and created truth.

The crucial epistemological question becomes, just how should we trade off these two epistemic imperatives when they conflict? When the choice can be made on intellectual grounds, there will be no conflict between the epistemic imperatives. If one has intellectual grounds for the truth of a hypothesis, one can maximize truth and avoid error at the same time. In much the same way, when one is faced with a genuine option, there will be no conflict, since agnosticism is not possible in such cases. Still, what should we do when faced, as we frequently are, with an option that is both non-genuine and undecidable ?

³¹ Provided, of course, that the option one is faced with is not genuine. Agnosticism is not an issue with genuine options, and it is only when agnosticism is possible that one can choose to follow one maxim at the expense of the other.

³² WB 24. (This is James’ characterization of Clifford’s position.)

Even when the two epistemic imperatives are recognized, the evidentialist could still insist that, when they conflict, one should always try to avoid error rather than seek truth, and such a position will be here referred to as “epistemic conservatism.” Even if the evidentialist’s commitment to epistemic conservatism is ultimately based upon a “private horror of becoming a dupe” (WB 25), does James have any reason to actually reject it? By pointing out the two imperatives James may show that conservatism isn’t epistemically mandatory, but does he give any reason why we shouldn’t find it the most appealing position anyway? Or, perhaps more crucially, does he leave us with any *rational* way to evaluate the various ways of balancing the imperatives? If not, one will be left with a sort of subjectivism about epistemic rationality, with each inquirer being able to arbitrarily choose a way to balance the imperatives, and there being reason to prefer one account over any of the others. Fortunately, James does have reasons for preferring his attempt to balance the imperatives over the evidentialist’s, and his reasons for rejecting such conservatism are both practical and epistemic.

James famously provides two truth-directed reasons for rejecting epistemic conservatism: the necessity of faith to *discover* some facts, and the necessity of faith to *create* some others. Still, while these cases are very important to James, one invites a serious misreading of his argument if one puts too much emphasis on them. The main point of James’ discussion is *not* simply that *these* are the cases where our right to believe is justified. (Though he claims at least this.)³³ They are part of a more general argument against hard-line epistemic conservatism. If it turned out that, say, the truth of the religious hypothesis was independent of our faith in it, or that its truth could be discovered by an initially skeptical inquirer, neither fact would ultimately undermine James’ argument for our right to believe it.

The first of the two epistemic reasons in favor of faith over agnosticism in matters of uncertainty is that there may be truths for which we could not discover adequate evidence without prior faith in them (and such truths are by no means restricted to genuine options). As a result, the agnostic’s ‘wait and see’ strategy would *never* allow him to discover these truths. The agnostic’s

³³ WB 29, SR, 84, 89.

strategy is not ‘slow but sure’ in these cases. Rather, it positively *prevents* the discovery of the truths in question. While James has our religious faith most prominently in mind during this discussion, he makes it clear that the same point holds for our knowledge of science as well. Our faith in what ‘must’ be true about the structure of the physical world, the “imperious inner demand on our part for ideal logical and mathematical harmonies,” has often led to our eventual verification of the scientific conception of the world, and James claims that there is no reason to think that the same may not be true of religion.³⁴

However, James’ defense of religious belief needn’t presuppose that the religious hypothesis is one that *requires* such initial faith to be confirmed. James certainly thought that it was *possible* that the religious hypothesis was such a case,³⁵ but since there is no compelling reason to think that it *must* be, any defense of faith that presupposed this assumption would be a weak one. If one had the right to believe only when such preliminary faith was needed to acquire the required evidence, then (barring a method of determining when such initial faith was necessary) one would be unable to tell when one had such a right.³⁶ Fortunately, James’ argument does not require being able to tell when such preliminary faith is necessary. The mere fact that such cases are *possible* is enough to suggest that, as a *general* maxim, epistemic conservatism is undesirable. Unless one is certain that the case is *not* one of those that requires preliminary faith, one has at least *prima facie* reason not to be an epistemic conservative when investigating it. A trade-off between epistemic imperatives that could actually frustrate inquiry in this fashion is clearly unacceptable to James, because any rule “*which would absolutely prevent [him] from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule*” (WB 31-2). Consequently, James only requires that it be *possible* that preliminary faith is needed to acquire evidence for the religious hypothesis, not that one have any reason to believe that it is *actually* needed.

³⁴ ILWL 51.

³⁵ “One who should shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition ... might cut himself forever from his only opportunity of making the gods’ acquaintance” (WB 31)

³⁶ Hence Suckiel’s objection “How is the subject to know, in advance of believing on faith, that faith would be justified in his situation, because it is, in fact, a case in which faith is necessary for the evidence?” (Suckiel 1982, p. 164.)

The second range of hypotheses for which there are truth-directed reasons for preferring the strategy of maximizing truth to that of minimizing error are those which “cannot become true till our faith has made them so.” (SR 80) That is to say, there are cases “where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming” and thus “*where faith in a fact can help create the fact.*” (WB 29) James illustrates this point with his famous “mountain climber” example:³⁷

Suppose, for example, that I am climbing in the Alps, and have the ill-luck to work myself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Being without similar experience, I have no evidence of my ability to perform it successfully; but hope and confidence in myself make me sure I shall not miss my aim, and nerve my feet to execute what without those subjective emotions would perhaps have been impossible. But suppose that, on the contrary, the emotions of fear and mistrust preponderate; or suppose that, having just read the “Ethics of Belief,” I feel it would be sinful to act upon an assumption unverified by previous experience -- why, then I shall hesitate so long that at last, exhausted and trembling, and launching myself in a moment of despair, I miss my foothold and roll into the abyss. In this case (and it is one of an immense class) the part of wisdom clearly is to believe what one desires; for the belief is one of the indispensable preliminary conditions of the realization of its object. *There are then cases where faith creates its own verification.* Believe, and you shall be right, for you shall save yourself; doubt, and you shall again be right, for you shall perish. (SR 80).

For those truths “dependent on our personal action”, then, “faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing,” and it would be an “insane logic” that forbid our passionate contribution in such cases (WB 29).³⁸

James believed himself to be the first to notice this range of cases (SR 80), and it would not be surprising if he was. The traditional subject of modern epistemology, the abstract knower with no practical concerns, has no effect on the environment that it investigates, and it is only for those facts into which there enters an element of “personal contribution” on the knower’s part that James’ point holds.³⁹ Nevertheless, like the earlier point about the relation between faith and evidence, this claim about the relation between faith and truth need not actually be satisfied by the religious

³⁷ The mountain climber also appears in WB 33 and is used to make a similar point about the contribution of belief to truth in ILWL 53-4 and SM 332. Note that while this particular example is one, there is little reason to think that such cases are entirely, or are even largely, instances of genuine options.

³⁸ It should also be noted that when James talks here of “faith based on desire” he has in mind not any sort of conscious prudential reasoning and voluntaristic belief formation, but the much more mundane fact that we are often inclined to believe what we want to be true. A couple’s faith in the talents of their child, or a fan’s confidence in the quality of his favorite team are both cases of faith based on desire, but neither are the result of any sort of prudential reasoning.

³⁹ SR 81-4.

hypothesis for James' defense of our right to believe to apply to it.⁴⁰ If it were, James' argument would, once again, be very poor.⁴¹ There is, after all, little reason to think that the religious hypothesis is one of those which can be made true by our belief in it. Of course James is willing to allow that the religious hypothesis *might* be part of the class of truths dependent upon our personal action,⁴² but he never treated it as more than a mere possibility, and he did not take this possibility to be important enough to mention in the text of "The Will to Believe" itself. If faith's helping to create a fact were a necessary condition for the legitimate exercise of our right to believe, then we would face the problem of how to tell when we are in such a fact-creating situation.⁴³ However, once again, no such awareness of the necessity of faith for the creation of the fact is necessary for James' argument. The mere fact that such cases are *possible* is enough to show that one should not to adopt epistemic conservatism as a *general* maxim. If one simply *doesn't know* the responsive status of the religious hypothesis, that alone will be enough to justify rejecting an epistemically conservative attitude with respect to it.

Consequently, while these points about the relation of faith to truth and evidence are of considerable interest (and are certainly dear to James' heart), neither need actually be satisfied by the religious hypothesis. The existence of *any* such cases is enough to show that epistemic conservatism is undesirable as a general policy, and thus opens the way for our right to believe even in those hypotheses that may be epistemically and ontologically independent of our belief in them.

⁴⁰ And so one should not, (like Gale 1980, forthcoming), claim that the believer's faith being able to help create the fact is one of the necessary conditions which James requires for one to be able to exercise the right to believe. Indeed, as Gale (forthcoming p. 106) himself notes, the particular version of the mountain climber scenario discussed in "The Will to Believe" is not a make-true scenario.

⁴¹ And he is criticized for this purported claim about the religious hypothesis in Miller 1975 p. 301, and O'Connell 1997, p.74.

⁴² "I confess that I do not see why the very existence of the invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any one of us may make to the religious appeal. God himself, in short, may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity." (ILWL 55.)

⁴³ Suckiel, for instance, takes James to task for leaving "unspecified any criteria by which the subject can ascertain, in advance of belief, whether he actually is in a situation where faith is necessary for the fact" and thus leaving the individual with "no reliable method of determining when it is appropriate to go about the task of balancing the relevant epistemic and practical considerations" (Suckiel, p. 90).

4.4 Naturalized Epistemology and Sophisticated Pragmatism

If extreme epistemic conservatism is rejected, then, we need a way to balance the demands that we seek truth and avoid error. As mentioned above, the nature of the conflicting imperatives raises the possibility of a type of extreme cognitive relativism about which trade-off one should adopt. However, while such cognitive relativism may seem unavoidable if epistemic inquiry is left at an entirely *theoretical* level, it seems far less so once the *practical* import of epistemic inquiry is taken into account. That is to say, one can look for an ‘optimal’ balance of the imperatives that allow one to function best in one’s environment. On this sort of ‘pragmatic’ account, ‘prudential’ factors, rather than being completely isolated from epistemic rationality, are part of what determines just what epistemic rationality should be. Prudential concerns do not come up in particular instances of reasoning about what to believe, but they help determine what the general norms of epistemic reasoning are. While crude pragmatism introduces prudential considerations as an alternative to epistemic ones, this more sophisticated type of pragmatism allows prudential considerations to shape the epistemic norms themselves. There is a connection between epistemic justification and utility, but it is the utility of belief-forming *processes* and not actual *beliefs* that is important. As a result, the possible benefits of holding any belief needn’t serve as *inputs* to any belief forming process (as they would in a prudential argument), rather it is the long-term benefits of certain styles of reasoning that justify them.

It is hard to tell precisely which trade-off between the two epistemic imperatives will be ‘optimal’ in this way, but it certainly won’t be the one at the extreme conservative end of the spectrum. In addition to its epistemic faults, a general policy of epistemic conservatism would be *practically* disastrous. Epistemic conservatism would prevent one from forming any beliefs at all unless one could be absolutely certain of them. James, however, considers doubt at least “theoretically possible” for *any* proposition,⁴⁴ and so his characterization of faith as “belief in

⁴⁴ WB 20-22

⁴⁵ See also ILWL 53. The contribution of our passional nature is unavoidable with genuine options, but even for non-genuine options it is at least conditionally unavoidable: *if* we are to believe anything at all, we must accept its contribution. With genuine options the passional contribution determines *what* we believe, with non-genuine options, our passional nature determines *whether* we believe anything at all.

something concerning which doubt is theoretically possible” (SR 76), would entail that some degree of faith is necessary if we are to believe *anything* at all. As James puts it, “we cannot live or think at all without some degree of faith” (SR 79), and “the only escape from faith is mental nullity” (SR 78).⁴⁵ Faith, then, moves far beyond the purely religious context; it is an essential part of our epistemic life.⁴⁶ Given the connection between belief and action, the epistemically conservative position would thus prevent us from acting in our environment at all. It would seem, then, that on a practical level, one could not live as an epistemic conservative. Thinking that it could be rational to follow such an epistemically conservative strategy, stems from divorcing our epistemic concerns from our actual lives. A disembodied knower, freed from any practical concerns, could afford to minimize error at all costs, even if such costs involved a refusal to believe anything.⁴⁷ But for embodied agents who must actually act, such a position isn’t available.

Indeed, it often must do so even when we are a good deal short of anything like absolute certainty, and a comparatively extreme conservatism would be comparatively crippling. Practically, we must frequently be willing to form beliefs for which we have less than certain evidence, otherwise, large tracts of our beliefs would have to go by the boards.⁴⁸ A huge number of our beliefs are not derived from actual investigations of the facts, but rather our trusting the testimony of those (friends, parents, teachers, newspapers) who may themselves be relying on the testimony of others. In short, “our faith is faith in someone else’s faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case.” (WB 19) We must accept the testimony of others as a matter of course in our daily lives, even if such testimony is hardly close to being absolutely certain.

⁴⁶ Science is no exception to the influence of faith on our beliefs. According to James, the scientific method itself relies ultimately on our *faith* in nature’s uniformity (SR 76). Indeed, even the belief that there are any truths that can be known rests on faith. The decision not to be a complete skeptic is, at bottom, a *passional* one (WB 19, 28).

⁴⁷ “If a thinker had no stake in the unknown, no vital needs, to live or languish according to what the unseen world contained, a philosophic neutrality and refusal to believe either one way or the other would be his wisest cue.” (ILWL 50)

⁴⁸ Since “pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds” (WB 20). As James puts it: “As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why. . . . Here in this room, we all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for “the doctrine of the immortal Monroe,” all for no reasons worthy of the name.” (WB 18.)

While there is a comparatively conservative thread running through the discussion of genuine options, James seems at times to be making room for a more forgiving conception of epistemic norms.⁴⁹ After all James shares his fallibilism with Peirce, and with fallibilism comes a more relaxed attitude towards the beliefs one currently holds. One cannot begin inquiry with a clean slate,⁵⁰ and this initially entitles us to believe whatever happens to be on our slate at the time. An anti-foundationalist streak associated with fallibilism itself provides a justification for our passional believing. These initial beliefs can be revised, but since we must start with something, we are entitled to start with the beliefs that are the product of our ‘intellectual climate’.⁵¹ Our initial position must then start with a marked preference for attaining truth, and the imperative to shun error can come with later revisions. James’ position, as presented here, thus turns out to bear a noticeable resemblance to certain contemporary strains of ‘naturalized epistemology.’ It has been claimed that an approach to epistemology is “naturalistic” if it takes the question “how *ought* we to arrive at our beliefs?” to be unanswerable independently of the question “How *do* we arrive at our beliefs?”⁵² and on such a characterization, it would be fair to characterize James’ epistemology as naturalistic. James’ psychological work led to his concern with *actual* belief formation, and his account of when our beliefs are justified is clearly influenced by these interests.⁵³ Such a concern with actual inquiry can at least partially explain the fallibilism and anti-foundationalist streak that is

⁴⁹ James himself suggests that the more cautious strategy is preferable when faced with an option that is not both forced and momentous (WB 25-7), even though (unless on treats being forced and momentousness in a very generous fashion) this would rule out most of the beliefs James lists as having a contribution to our passional nature. The claim that James can be very generous about what counts as forced and momentous has, however, some appeal, and James claims later in the paper that we have the right to believe any hypothesis “live enough to tempt our will” (WB 32).

⁵⁰ “We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy..... A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim.” (Peirce 1868, p. 212)

⁵¹ Consequently, one should not understand James doctrine as applying only as a ‘tie breaker’, when epistemic considerations are the same on either side of a question. This would require that our passional contribution should only come in after the purely epistemic aspect of inquiry is over, while the account above suggests that the passional contribution must be felt even as inquiry begins. (For a discussion of this, see O’Connell 1997.)

⁵² Kornblith 1994. p.3.

⁵³ This connection between belief and action and its relation to the contribution of our passional nature is, for instance also found in the chapter on “The Perception of Reality” in James’ *Principles of Psychology*.

shared by both James and the naturalized epistemologist, and it noteworthy that both have considerable faith in the ‘evolutionary fit’ between our cognitive capacities and their environment.⁵⁴

Indeed, the suggestion that epistemic rationality involves finding a trade-off between the two imperatives has found its way into many contemporary naturalistic accounts of epistemic rationality. Herbert Simon suggested in the 50’s that, since reasoning about practically relevant matters must take place in real time, epistemic rationality should be understood in terms of a type of ‘satisficing’: finding the optimal trade-off between accuracy and computational speed.⁵⁵ This ‘Jamesian’ insight of Simon’s has been picked up by contemporary philosophers, some of whom explicitly identify their position as a ‘neo-pragmatist’ one.⁵⁶ On such accounts, epistemic rationality is determined by the optimal trade-off between the speed (maximizing true beliefs) and accuracy (minimizing false ones) of our belief-forming processes. Which trade off is ‘optimal’ is, on such accounts, determined by our the ability of the trade-off in question to allow us to thrive in our environment.⁵⁷

5. Advantages of this interpretation of James

The interpretation suggested above makes sense of a number of important threads running through James’ text, and James’ philosophical position has, on this reading, a number of advantages over what it would be if it really were limited to a defense of Crude Pragmatism. Among these advantages are the following.

⁵⁴ “[The] richer insights of modern days perceives that our inner faculties are *adapted* in advance to the features of the world in which we dwell, adapted, I mean, so as to secure our safety and prosperity in its midst.” (James 1984, p. 11.)

⁵⁵ Simon 1957.

⁵⁶ Stich 1990. See also Dennett 1987 and Cherniak 1986.

⁵⁷ This trade-off could thus turn out to be context sensitive. Some contexts where the consequences of error are great (such as Clifford’s ship owner) or the need for speed minimal (Science) requiring a more error-avoiding trade-off than others.

5.1 No problems with voluntarism

James has frequently been criticized for relying upon an unrealistic voluntarism about belief. Such criticisms might seem legitimate if James really were just a Crude Pragmatist. While belief formation based upon the possession of compelling evidence is relatively unremarkable, the transition from recognizing that holding a belief is in one's interest to actually holding it is much more problematic. If faced with the aforementioned fanatic, I might recognize that it would be prudentially rational for me to believe that the moon was made of cheese, but I doubt that I could bring myself to believe it. Prudential arguments, if they are to be of any interest at all, require there to be *some* connection between belief formation and recognition of value, and this usually is taken to involve *some* sort of voluntary control. If one had *no* control over one's beliefs, it is difficult to see what the *point* of reasoning prudentially about them would be. As a result, the issue of voluntarism, the question of the extent to which we can simply decide to believe something, independently of how we take the world to be, becomes pressing for the Crude Pragmatist.

The reading of James suggested above requires no voluntaristic commitments on James' part, and thus allows him to avoid the problems about belief formation associated with prudential arguments.⁵⁸ It thus allows one to accept his subsequent claim that the essay would have been better titled "The *Right* to Believe," a title that removes much of the unintended voluntarism suggested by the old one.⁵⁹ It is not part of the theory that we can, or should, simply decide to believe things we are not inclined to think to be true, and so James argument does not presuppose the availability of "belief inducing technologies" such as self-deception and hypnosis.⁶⁰ Quite the contrary, it is the evidentialist, and not James, who is unrealistically voluntaristic about belief. The suggestion that we can withhold belief at will implies a type of voluntarism just as much as the claim that we can decide to hold beliefs at will, and the evidentialists suggest just this when he insists that through an act of self-restraint, we can refrain from believing any hypothesis. James'

⁵⁸ For a discussion of these problems, see Williams 1973, Miller 1975, Gale 1980, Meiland 1980, Bird 1986, Pojman 1993, and Jordan 1996.

⁵⁹ In his letter to Hobhouse quoted in Perry 1935 p. 245. The original title of his essay undoubtedly encourage a voluntaristic readings. (James 1907, p. 124.)

⁶⁰ Jordan 1996, p. 416. A particularly vivid technology of this sort is the "belief inducing pill" discussed in Gale 1980, p. 6, forthcoming, p. 93.

position is that there are cases where we *cannot help* but form beliefs on various topics, and this does quite the opposite of putting belief under voluntary control.

5.2 Intellectual laziness

The reading of “The Will to Believe” as merely arguing that we can reason about our beliefs prudentially (like the reading of his *Pragmatism* as arguing that the truth is whatever is most immediately expedient for us to believe) not only misses much of what is philosophically interesting in James’ paper, but also contributes to a view of James as a philosopher who advocates wishful thinking and intellectual laziness.⁶¹ Such criticisms are not justified on the reading presented above.

One can initially accept the ‘passional’ beliefs that are the product of one’s temperament and intellectual environment, and still be scrupulous. While one is justified in one’s initial acceptance of one’s current beliefs, one is not justified in refusing to revise them. There is, of course, the danger that not adopting complete neutrality towards an hypothesis will prevent one from impartially acquiring further evidence with respect to it.⁶² However, James points out that the agnostic attitude may itself have the same dangers. Given that the contribution of our passional nature is unavoidable if we are to believe anything at all, one should not endorse an epistemic ideal that enjoins one to pursue the chimerical goal of not forming any beliefs until one has certain evidence for them. Rather than promoting intellectual rigor, such an ideal can encourage a type of intellectual laziness. If one could never achieve the type of certainty that entitles one to belief, one would lose one’s motive for inquiry. If one does not take oneself to have reached any type of absolute certainty with respect to one’s beliefs (as no fallibilist does), then one should make room for the passional contribution that can fill the gap and remain open to new evidence leading one to revise one’s beliefs.

⁶¹ See, for instance, Miller 1898-9, 1975, Hick 1966.

⁶² This was, of course, a concern of Clifford’s (see Clifford 1877, p. 73) and the issue arises again in Dickinson Miller’s objections to James’ view (see Madden 1979, p. xxi).

James would argue that intellectual rigor can make room for the contribution of our passional nature to our beliefs provided that it is coupled with a strong sense that *any* belief is subject to revision.⁶³ Intellectual laziness has as much to do with complacency with respect to the beliefs one has already formed, as it does with one's willingness to form new beliefs. This can be seen by reexamining Clifford's example of a wealthy ship owner who allowed himself to believe that an old ship of his was seaworthy in spite of his lack of evidence for this belief. He refused to inspect the ship, and so, believing it to be seaworthy, let it take a shipload of passengers, all of whom drowned when it sank. Clifford is rightly critical of the ship owner's behavior, but just what was wrong with it? Was it his believing that the ship was seaworthy? or was it his active avoidance of evidence that would suggest otherwise? After all, if the ship owner, being a good evidentialist, had merely adopted it as a 'working hypothesis' that his ship was safe, and then avoided any chance of disconfirming his hypothesis, his passengers would still have died. On the other hand, if he had believed the ship to be safe, but gone on to inspect it because of the lives at stake, he would have discovered that the ship was unsafe and avoided the tragedy. What is relevant is not whether a proposition is adopted as a 'working hypothesis' or a belief. Rather what counts is the attitude one takes towards investigating and revising it. Someone who is overly protective of, or complacent about, their working hypotheses may be considerably lazier intellectually than someone who is willing to test their beliefs. It is only if one, like Russell,⁶⁴ thinks of beliefs as conclusively settled and absolutely certain that a James' account of belief leads to intellectual laziness. James makes no such assumptions about our beliefs, and insists that to hold any belief "as if it never could be re-interpretable or corrigible" would be "a tremendously mistaken attitude" (WB 22).

⁶³ One could compare this to Bayesian theories which admit that one must start with some set of prior probabilities but attempt to argue that, as inquiry progresses, differences between subjects' initial beliefs will 'wash out' as inquiry proceeds.

⁶⁴ Russell obviously didn't think our *actual* beliefs were up to this standard. Nevertheless he still worked with a conception of beliefs where that's what they would be if they were justified. This is, of course, a fine ideal to have for belief if one's only concern is collecting true propositions for a foundational epistemology. It is less so if one needs actually act upon them.

5.3 More penetrating critique of evidentialism

Because of the possibility of constant revision and lack of any voluntaristic and prudential belief formation, the account presented above makes room for the legitimate contributions of our passionate nature to what we believe without entailing the type of subjectivism that it has so often been accused of leading to.⁶⁵ Furthermore, it avoids what I will here refer to as “bifurcationist” attempts to defend James from charges of subjectivism. Such accounts try to defend James by restricting the scope of his theory and leaving evidentialist conceptions of inquiry in place wherever subjectivism seemed threatening, but in doing so strip his theory of its revisionary potential.⁶⁶

For instance, those who read James as a Crude Pragmatist leave epistemic rationality entirely to his intellectualist opponents and merely argues that believing what is in our interest can still be *prudentially* rational. Rather than challenging traditional conceptions of epistemic rationality, then, James is instead treated as arguing that epistemic rationality is not the only game in town, and that other factors can contribute to what is rational to believe. Unfortunately, James’ “The Will to Believe” is of interest precisely because it suggests how our ‘passional’ nature can contribute to what is *epistemically* rational for us to believe. The temptation to read James as leaving unchallenged traditional conceptions of epistemic and cognitive matters thus deprives his writings on belief justification of much of their interest. Crude Pragmatists view themselves as critics of evidentialism, but they still make a number of crucial concessions to their evidentialist opponents. The defender of prudential arguments allows that the evidentialist has *epistemic* rationality basically right, and simply withdraws to a different sort of rationality which is outside of the evidentialist’s domain.

This becomes clear when we consider another sense of the term “evidentialism.” In this second sense, “evidentialism” involves the claim that one’s *epistemic* justification is limited to evidential grounds only: a belief is epistemically justified only to the extent that there is compelling

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Miller 1989-9, Russell 1909. Such criticisms come in the face, of course, of clear denials of subjectivism on James’ part such as that “in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place” (WB 26).

⁶⁶ Similar dangers are presented by many readings of his account of truth. For a discussion of these, see Jackman 1998.

evidence for it.⁶⁷ Crude Pragmatism has nothing to say against this sort of evidentialism, and the Crude Pragmatist could agree that one's believing a proposition is *epistemically* unjustified if one does not have compelling evidence for it. On the reading presented above, James can be understood as challenging even this weaker form of evidentialism, one can turn out to be *epistemically* justified in believing a proposition even if one does not have compelling evidence for it.

It should also be noted that the challenge of Crude Pragmatism to the traditional evidentialist paradigm is also limited because prudential reasoning can only take place against a background of epistemic reasoning. Prudential reasoning presupposes that the reasoner be knowledgeable about the world in evidential terms. The Crude Pragmatist reasons that, say, she should believe that the moon was made of cheese only if she takes there to be good *evidence* that she will be much better off from the belief. One must have good evidence for believing that benefits will result from forming the belief that lacks good evidence. The question, "is it to my advantage to believe that *P*" must be subject to epistemic reasoning in order to decide that *P* should be believed for prudential reasons.⁶⁸

Another way to restrict the scope of James' theory is to treat the helping to make-true possibility as a requirement for its application.⁶⁹ If the belief helps create its own subject matter, then it should be no surprise that more leeway would be allowed in our belief formation. However, once James' thesis is restricted in this way, it has nothing to say about the vast range of beliefs about facts that are independent of our actions. The cases James would have left would not be without their significance, but to hand all of the 'independent' cases over to the evidentialist would make James' account of comparatively little interest to the epistemologist. It would

⁶⁷ For such a use of the term, and defense of the position, see Feldman and Conee 1984.

⁶⁸ As a result, the position that Gale (forthcoming) ultimately attributes to James, in which all justification is prudential requires that James treat justification in an *externalist* fashion. If one is an externalist and takes believing to be justified by its effects, irregardless of whether the believer expected those effects to come about, then one can understand all beliefs as justified in this prudential fashion. However, if one takes believing to be ultimately justified in terms of the *expected* effects, one cannot treat all justification as being prudential.

⁶⁹ See Gale 1980, forthcoming, and Campbell 1992, pp.87-9.

essentially require that, with respect to questions whose answers are independent of our actions, one should treat one's investigations in an evidentialist fashion.⁷⁰

Others try to restrict James' account by limiting its application to subjects that are only tentatively 'cognitive'. Ayer, for instance, tries to defend James from the charge of subjectivism by arguing that James' claims about our right to believe were meant to be limited to morals and theology.⁷¹ Subjectivism is, presumably, meant to be comparatively harmless here because one's intuition (or at least Ayer's intuition) that there are 'objective' facts in these areas is considerably weaker than it is about, say, the world's physical structure.⁷² Ayer's account thus leaves James with nothing new to say about our entitlement to most of our beliefs about the world around us. Any attempt to preserve James' account from subjectivism by arguing that it was not, after all, meant to apply to 'factual' beliefs about the world seriously compromises its potential to challenge what James considered the "vicious intellectualism" in philosophical thought about cognition.

On the other hand, the reading presented here does not restrict the range of cases that James has in mind and presents James as challenging the evidentialist conception of epistemic rationality itself. James is treated as arguing that our psychological make-up, practical position and epistemic situation are such that the traditional picture of our epistemic duties is deeply flawed. In its place he offers a picture that attempts to reintegrate our epistemic duties with the fact that they are duties not of disembodied intellects but of embodied inquirers who need to act in real time, and must trade-off the sometimes conflicting demands of maximizing truth and minimizing error.

⁷⁰ And while these questions may be independent of our actions, our actions need not be independent of them. For instance, the question of whether the plane I am flying in has enough gas to make it to the nearest airport may be of vital importance to me, and whether I try to fly it home or jump out with a parachute will depend on what I take to be its answer.

⁷¹ See Ayer 1968, p. 186. See also Hollinger 1997, p.79 (O'Connell makes a similar restriction of James account by limiting its application only to various 'over beliefs' (O'Connell 1997)).

⁷² That James clearly thought that scientists relied heavily on their passional nature, is, of course, a problem for Ayer's account.

6. Conclusion

There are undoubtedly a number of strands of thought running through James' "The Will To Believe", and while a defense of explicitly prudential reasoning about what to believe may be one of them, it is, at best, a minor one. The majority of James' paper (both those elements having to do with inevitability of our passional nature's contribution, and those having to do with its justification) is concerned with developing a more sophisticated pragmatism about belief and its justification. The central thesis is restricted to genuine options, but the generally non-evidentialist mode of thinking about belief developed in the paper has a much wider application. Rather than merely defending prudential reasoning, James stresses the inevitable and justified contribution of our passional nature to epistemic reasoning itself. James should not be understood as arguing that what is rational to believe can be independently determined by either epistemic or prudential rationality. Rather, he is concerned with giving a more realistic account of epistemic rationality, an account that helps bridge the purported gulf between truth- and benefit-directed reasoning.

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