James on Pragmatism and Religion

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1. Introduction

Critics and defenders of William James both acknowledge serious tensions in his thought, tensions perhaps nowhere more vexing to readers than in regard to his claim about an individual's intellectual right to their "faith ventures." Focusing especially on "Pragmatism and Religion," the final lecture in *Pragmatism* (1906), this chapter will explore certain problems James' pragmatic pluralism. Some of these problems are theoretical, but others are practical in the sense of bearing upon the real-world upshot of adopting James quite permissive ethics of belief.

The chief theoretical puzzlement we will explore is the tension constituted on the one side by James supporting the general function of religious "overbeliefs" as valuable for the meaning and moral motivation they afford to people, and on the other side by his insistence on the speculative and passion-driven nature of these beliefs. James wanted very much to "hold upright" the general function of religious overbeliefs: Defense of an intellectual and moral right to our various faith ventures, and to the particular doxastic and sub-doxastic commitments that constitute them, is an enduring theme of James' philosophical writings; he even claims to find a person's religious and philosophical overbeliefs "the most interesting thing" about them. Yet he also makes it a point to undercut their epistemic rationality, at least in the abstract evidentialist or synchronic sense of acceptance on the basis of the logical sufficiency of one's present evidence. We can, of

course, see some of this tension in various forms of religious fideism, but fideists typically claim to have a special access to truth, not conceding their beliefs to be speculative and uncertain. So how could James defend our having intellectual and moral right to them, while continually 'dissing' their epistemic credentials and emphasizing the primacy of the passions, moral sentiments, and personal temperament in their acquisition and maintenance? Interestingly, religious dogmatists and skeptics *both* take issue with James' stance, with dogmatists typically denying what James called the "riskiness" of their faith ventures, and skeptics denying the intellectual and moral right James claims individuals have to be choosers of their own risk. Among more skeptical critics of James, the tension in question helps motivate the standard objection that a 'pragmatic' defense of religious belief legitimizes wishful thinking and falls victim to the 'wrong-kind-of-reasons-for-belief' problem.

Primarily I want to defend James from such worries, as I think both that the Jamesian view that faith tendencies are 'extremely active psychological forces, constantly outstripping evidence'[1] is psychologically quite astute, and that the Jamesian rejection of an evidentialist epistemology and ethics of belief in favor of a more permissive account that does not take disagreement to imply error and irrationality, is philosophically best. While the connection between James' descriptive psychology and his normative defense of a permissive ethics of belief is of course indirect, that connection is nevertheless important. So this particular tension in James' thought is not as problematic as many critics of James have made it out to be (see Gale, 2002). I will argue that what in the epistemology of disagreement is called permissivism has philosophical advantages over the non-permissivist position associated with evidentialism. Being able to defend reasonable pluralism and the possibility of reasonable disagreement among evidence-sharing epistemic peers is arguably a big practical as well as theoretical advantage, because when we treat disagreement

as a sign of error and irrationality, as is necessarily the case with non-permissivist accounts that deny the possibility of reasonable disagreement, we treat others quite differently, and with less empathy or attempt at understanding. At the same time, it has the important practical advantage of supporting what John Rawls calls *reasonable pluralism,* something I have elsewhere argued that non-permissivist views that flow from the best-known versions of evidentialism cannot (Axtell, 2013).

But there are also *practical* problems with James' stance. My sharpest criticism of James in this chapter concerns one of them: the problem of whether his account of faith ventures is adequately *risk-aware.* As a prime example of this problem, in the Preface to *The Will to Believe and other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, James replies to critics who object that he is defending intellectual irresponsibility. He does so in part by conceding, "I quite agree that what mankind that large most lacks is criticism and caution, not faith."[2] Yet, he continues, he will speak primarily in defense of the legitimacy of religious faith because the needs of the particular audience he is addressing are not those of 'the common person or mankind at large.' The audience James addresses in his lectures he sees as highly educated and more sophisticated, yet as laboring under a materialist interpretation of science that James finds all-too-common in his time.

While it is true that different audiences have different biases, and that it is pragmatic to address the particular audience one is speaking to, I nevertheless find this apple-polishing reply by James very unsatisfying. James' relative lack of concern with the criticism and caution that he acknowledges is needed among less philosophically and scientifically sophisticated audiences is even more disconcerting in view of recent violence rationalized by religious and quasi-religious beliefs. As I write this chapter, news spreads of trials for hate crimes by Kansas white Supremicists against Jews, by a Charleston, South Carolina white supremacist for the shooting of nine members

of a historic Black church, and by radicalized Muslim-Americans both in Tennessee against U.S. Marines training there, and in California against their own neighbors. Contemporary neo-Jamesians, like Kierkegaardians, need to say more about the practical problem, and how fervent belief may lead to a 'teleological suspension the ethical.' For such suspension, and the end-justifies-the-means rationalization of harm to others, is another self-exemption, another way to give ourselves a moral holiday, sometimes demonstrably *worse* than the easy-going attitude that James spends much time criticizing.

Perhaps this is a matter of what I think philosophers and psychologists of religion should *today* be most centrally concerned with, topics including connections between various specific models of religious faith and the psychology of radicalization and terrorism. To be sure, James does at points try to "hedge the license to indulge in private over-beliefs," but rarely does he discuss the sway of *collective* beliefs, testimonial traditions replete with revered scriptures, and institutionalized or politicized religiosity. Partly due to this, the cautionary, risk-averse side of his account remains substantially underdeveloped relative to his council of courage with respect to faith ventures. James' lectures largely address themselves to one side of what I will want to insist today needs to be treated as a multi-sided but inter-connected set of issues. Contemporary pragmatist philosophers should continue to draw much from James' psychological insights and from his defense of the general function of religious overbeliefs as contributory to personal perfection and moral motivation. But they should definitely not set aside, as James on my view too easily allows himself to do in his lectures on pragmatism and religion, 'the common person or mankind at large.'

2. James' personal overbeliefs

"Pragmatism and Religion" largely describes and defends James' own religious overbeliefs, which he characterizes as pluralistic and melioristic. These *committed* positions James takes up are expressed more abstractly and philosophically than are the religious or spiritual beliefs of most people, but he definitely sees them as having practical implications for moral motivation. The use of the term "pluralism" by James is somewhat vexed, because it can have different moral, epistemic, and metaphysical associations. Although I will want to focus on James' pluralism *about overbeliefs* rather than just the views he found most congenial to his own spiritual and intellectual temperament, we might best approach our main topic by starting off with a brief discussion of the latter. These ideas are developed not just in *Pragmatism,* but also in the lectures that became *A Pluralistic Universe* (1908) and in the slightly earlier (but posthumously published) *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912).

James' philosophical method, he tells us, is "known sometimes as the pragmatic method, sometimes as humanism, sometimes as Deweyism, and in France, by some of the disciples of Bergson, as the *Philosophie nouvelle.*" But it was not transcendental idealism that James admired in the European humanists, and he admits that "I myself read humanism theistically and pluralistically."[3] If this means that he evaluated and appropriated it in terms of the moral philosopher and the moral life, then it is easy to see why he also says that, "Ethically the pluralistic form of it takes for me a stronger hold on reality than any other philosophy I know of – it being essentially a social philosophy, a philosophy of 'co,' in which conjunctions do the work."[4]

James contrasts his religious orientation with conventional theism, with its sharp division between the created and the Creator, as well as with the Absolute Idealism of his time, represented especially by the thought of Josiah Royce. Sometimes James describes himself as navigating

between a materialist empiricism that leaves no room for religion, and a rationalism like that of absolute idealism that leaves no room for experience. Ruth Anna Putnam writes that,

> James finds both views unacceptable because neither allows for the intimacy he seeks; neither, however, logical and even beautiful it may be, lets loose our moral energy; neither leaves room for free will. In contrast, an empiricism that includes religious experiences … leaves room for a religion that is compatible with free will.[5]

James claims that "the great religious difference" of his time lies between those "who insist that the world *must and shall be*, and those who are contented with believing that the world *may be*, saved." The monistic view tries to "transmute the entire category of possibility into categories more secure," making all good things certain, and all bad things impossible in the eternal.[6]

To go further, James thought that monism and absolute idealism whitewashed the problem of evil in ways that an empiricist attitude could not abide: The more "pluralistic and moralistic" attitude he recommends taking up is one in which the 'salvation' of the universe – the triumph of good over evil – was not the foregone conclusion that he thought it must be for absolute idealists. On the latter view, the absolute is perfect and does not suffer; suffering, he suggests, is not real for absolute idealists. James took such views as granting us a permanent moral holiday, meaning that we are under no obligation to alleviate suffering. But for James there *are* real evils and it is our task to battle to eliminate them as best we can. Here we come to James' melioristic theme: that our energies are needed, and that our future depends on what each of us contributes to the cause of ameliorating suffering and developing an increasingly inclusive moral community. Meliorism is

presented as a middle path between an optimism that thinks the world's salvation inevitable, and a pessimism that thinks its salvation impossible.[7]

The foregoing is nothing more than a brief description of James' religious overbeliefs. These were metaphysical views with moralistic presuppositions and implications. When James does allow himself to argue for the superiority of his melioristic overbeliefs in a comparative fashion, he first signals this by saying that he "cannot speak officially as a pragmatist" to support it, but can only say "that my own pragmatism offers no objection to my taking sides with this more moralistic view and giving up the claim of total reconciliation."[8] It is important for readers to note the significance of this distinction; James is telling us not to confuse his development of his personal overbeliefs with any claim that his own religious orientation is *exclusively* fit to promote the strenuous mood.

But wait—isn't James rather inconsistent on this score, running his multiples senses of pluralism together in ways that easily confuse his audience? Isn't this worry heightened by James repeatedly using pragmatist and radical empiricist standards to *adjudicate* between different moral conceptions of godhead?[9] James does argue repeatedly that his melioristic worldview is more supportive of the strenuous mood than objective idealism, and also that religious worldviews are more supportive of it than materialist. So there is a legitimate worry about how far can he go in this regard without impugning the kind of epistemic and moral pluralism that springs from his notion of temperament, or again, from his notion of the many valid experiments of living that help to 'build out' and to 'test' (in an experiential sense) a more generic *religious hypothesis*.[10]

As a religious personalist, James seems to acknowledge that atheism, agnosticism, pantheism, absolute idealism, conventional theism, etc. are different one from another, and that none is likely anytime soon to vanquish the others.[11] Gutowski (2015) rightly notes, "James

himself believed in the superiority of the religious position over atheism, and he gave some reasons for that; he did not just announce the preferences of his own emotional nature. He was, however, conscious that those reasons will not be counted as objective evidence by atheists or agnostics."[12] Beyond the description he gives to his own overbelief as a form of pluralism, the permissive, non-evidentialist ethic of belief James advocates is an account of doxastic responsibility that recognizes the active and passional nature of faith ventures. Let's now turn to this latter kind of pluralism, the kind James associates with the right to believe thesis and with a permissive ethics of belief allowing for divergent, legitimate ways of 'building out' more generic competing materialist and religious hypotheses.

3. Mill, James, and Experiments of Living

In describing the positive functions of faith ventures, James draws attention to John Stuart Mill's similar concept, "experiments of living." Indeed, one clear influence on James's philosophical writings is Mill's *On Liberty,* Chapter Three, "On Individuality, as One of the Elements of Well-Being":

> As it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, there should be different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when anyone thinks fit to try them.[13]

James found Mill's humanist philosophy to be a positive influence on his whole social milieu, and not just on himself. While Mill was not the religious believer James was, it was to Mill's influence that he attributes a welcome expansion in his own time of a "spirit of inner toleration."

Mill anticipates some of the ideas found in James' Will to Believe lecture when he claims that people "should be free to act upon their opinions—to carry these out in their lives, without hindrance, either physical or moral, from their fellow-men, so long as it is at their own risk and peril." Although James as I mentioned often seems one-sidedly focused on personal religiosity and individual moral motivation, he agreed with Mill on more than just his willingness to live and let live in speculative matters. James could agree strongly with Mill's arguments for the *social* benefits of diversity. With some important qualifications, diversity has epistemic benefits, aiding deliberation. James prefers the metaphor of Darwinian competition of ideas over any notion of an invisible hand leading the best ideas to prevail. These metaphors, like that of a "marketplace of ideas," have their problems, but neither Mill nor James would be surprised by recent psychological experiments showing that people display better critical reasoning and less bias when placed in situations where their opinions and decisions are openly challenged, than in situations where they are constantly re-enforced by a consensus of like-minded others.

James' mature position highlights methodological parallels with science such as the Comtean point that hypotheses and regulative assumptions serve a crucial role in scientific discovery despite having a provisional status, and not (yet) having received the preferred degree of supporting evidence.[14] Crucial tests are difficult to find even in hard science, and 'test' seems somewhat metaphorical when applied to how personal beliefs are found to well or ill-fit one's total experience. Still, this emphasis on methodological parallels between scientific and religious 'hypotheses' invites a dialogue between science and religion, and replaces the model of complete insulation from criticism, and well as the conflict-between-reason-and faith model that strong fideism can sometimes motivate. Indeed, invoking a Darwinian image of a survival of the fittest among religious and philosophical overbeliefs also served to bring James' account more in line

with Mill's stated view in *On Liberty,* that "Complete liberty of contradicting and disproving our opinion is the very condition which justifies us in assuming its truth for the purposes of action."[15]

James' defense of a right to believe is a normative position, a position about what our ethics of belief should be. But James would probably point us first to his more descriptive, psychological studies as a prelude to addressing these normative questions. Psychological profiles and a taxonomy of religious and non-religious *character-types* (again developing from Mill) come to be part of James' argument for the normative positions he takes. But the descriptive and prescriptive should not be confused. James correctly understood faith tendencies as 'extremely active psychological forces, constantly outstripping evidence.'[16] Jamesian *psychological fideism* states that coming to faith for people is no logical chain of inference; while faith tendencies utilize available evidence, they employ it in a series of leaps from ought to is. In these respects, where he describes the "faith ladder," James reflects a good deal of Kierkegaard's honesty in eschewing rationalism and in recognizing religious faith as a matter of subjective conviction in the face of *objective uncertainty*.

James' philosophical use of descriptive or psychological fideism is complex, but is plausibly interpreted as a defense of overbeliefs as personal answers to personal demands for intelligibility and meaning: 'the greeting of our whole nature to a kind of world conceived as well adapted to that nature.'[17] James takes psychological fideism as strong support for much of what he held in common with Millian pluralism. Mill held "that mankind are not infallible; that their truths, for the most part, are only half-truths; that unity of opinion, unless resulting from the fullest and freest comparison of opposite opinions, is not desirable, and a diversity not an evil, but a good."[18]

In one sense the Millian-Jamesian claim that "as it is useful that while mankind are imperfect there should be different opinions, so is it that there should be different experiments of living" goes only slightly beyond Locke's much earlier claim that since unity of religious belief is an unrealistic expectation, we should extend tolerance and civility to those whose religious views differ from our own. But in another sense the relationship between James' *descriptive* (psychological) and normative (pluralistic right to believe) projects is not easy to establish. As psychological fact, James held, "That theory will be most generally believed which, besides offering us objects able to account satisfactorily for our sensible experience, also offers those which are most interesting, those which appeal most urgently to our aesthetic, emotional, and active needs."[19] Critics might object that even if people often in fact let moral and practical factors influence what they allow themselves to believe, they don't *need to,* and indeed are only epistemically rational when they instead settle their beliefs on the basis of reason and evidence. Given especially that James associates the presence of belief with a disposition to act, shouldn't we re-inforce shared norms for doxastic responsibility, rather than making personal satisfaction the primary measure?

But James directly challenges the pretensions of evidentialism in both its skeptical (for example, William Clifford) and religious version (rational theology, or for another contemporary example, the Christian evidentialist apologetics of Richard Swinburne). Against the skeptical version, there are no *purely epistemic* proscriptions against believing beyond (James would say "ahead of") logically sufficient evidence. The norms that should govern doxastic responsibility are primarily diachronic, not synchronic. Even were we to allow the evidentialist's reduction of doxastic responsibility to the synchronic norm of limiting one's propositional attitude to the weight of evidence presently had, the kind of *worldview beliefs* in question are ones where multiple,

diverse forms of evidence vie. It will thus be a question of holistic *weighing,* not strict logical inference. There is no principle, James insists, that can tell us we must always value caution and avoiding holding a false belief, over courage and the embrace of beliefs that while speculative may yet be true, and one at least motivating of the strenuous mood.[20]

4. Risk-taking, Identity, and the Mood of Faith

Evidentialists like William Clifford were *moral* evidentialists. But Clifford's claim that people should adhere to an austere ethic of belief—one that deems it morally wrong to believe anything on logically insufficient evidence because society or humanity rightly demands such a sacrifice of all doxastic faith ventures (i.e., faith beliefs) — seems too strong a demand to be made on Clifford's moral grounds. James' and Mills' *personal moral rights* are at least as strong as are Clifford's supposed *social moral duti*es to withhold assent to a claim until presented with logically sufficient evidential support.[21] But on the other hand it should be recognized that adopting a position of *religious* rationalism/evidentialism is often little more than an apologetic strategy: It functions to rationalization belief originally taken on board for other reasons, which the apologist was never truly willing to submit to serious challenge or revision.

For James as an opponent of religious rationalism and as one who instead emphasized the role of personal experience, the right to believe is not premised on the ability of rational theology or authoritative scriptures to prove the existence of God, or of a moral order to the universe. Anyway, beyond some basic form of deism or monotheism, assenting to specific tenets of a religious faith tradition (especially one tied to testimonial traditions, and to miracle events or divine interventions into the natural order), intimately involves the will or passions. Religious rationalism/evidentialism tries to 'sink' the facts of the passional contributions and of 'riskiness'

in religious belief. But the fideist rejoins, if the tenets of faith could be proved, what is the value of faith? Following this thought, there seems to be a fideistic minimum in assent to any actual religious tradition. James I think would not only agree with this point, but would also side with psychologists who see risk-taking, both active and doxastic, as intimately connected with the development of identity. Risk-taking is bound to issues of self-experimentation, autonomy, personal identity, and group identity. Indeed for psychologists like Cynthia Lightfoot, risks are "avatars of a liminal self": "Risks are actively sought for their capacity to challenge, excite, and transform oneself and one's relationships with others. In this regard, risks are speculative, experimental, and oriented toward some uncertain and wished-for future."[22]

There are two perspectives on risk, both one-sided, that go far back in the history of ideas. One is of risk-taking-as-irresponsible-choice, and as inviting trouble; the other is of risk-taking-as-opportunity. Conceived of as opportunity —James' emphasis — emotional and intellectual satisfactions both count in the cognitive risks we take on. This is especially so since James refused to make hard distinctions between ethics and other branches of philosophy. So the evaluations we make of our own faith ventures are primarily prospective: they are diachronic not just synchronic; they intimately involve prospects for action, and hence practical and not just theoretical reason. At the end of "Pragmatism and Religion," James indeed urges his audience to indulge their diverse faith – ventures as "what are needed to bring the evidence in." James wants us to confirm that along with evidence at the ready, temperament and identity-shaping cognitive risk-taking are quite legitimate factors in giving shape to the answers we give ourselves to limit questions. But he wants us also to openly recognize the "mood of faith" that characterizes overbeliefs—beliefs taken aboard 'ahead' of logically sufficient evidence. This legitimacy of practical interests and moral concerns to affect our cognitive agency does not operate on everyday empirical claims, but neither

is it a matter of only a few exception cases. These psychological insights on risk-taking and identity cannot be overthrown simply by describing practical reasons as the normatively 'wrong kind' of reasons for belief, period.

5. Pluralist Permissivism and its Discontents

We are now in position to examine more directly James' pluralism at the level of religious and philosophical overbeliefs. The diversity of our experiences, the religious ambiguity of the world, the active role of the emotions in cognition, individual temperament, and descriptive or psychological fideism all contribute support to Jamesian pluralism. By extension, Jamesian pluralism seems to recognize that different religious worldviews are potentially equally valid at least from the perspective of spurring moral motivation, if not also in capturing different legitimate conceptions of godhead.[23] "Potentially" is an important qualifier here, since pluralism and relativism are to be distinguished. With understanding, we can learn to allow even a good deal of toleration towards the intolerant in thought—those who lack that spirit of inner toleration, and who care only of God's and not of empiricism's glory. Sami Pihlstrom writes,

> [I]n the case of religion, it is crucially important to take into account not just the *diverse religious experiences* that individuals have had, and may have, but also the diversity and plurality of conceptual, theological, and philosophical approaches to those experiences, that is, the richness of philosophical and theological traditions through which people have tried to understand and organize their religious lives and problems. What this means is that no single philosophy, religion, not even James' own pluralism or pragmatism, can offer us an overarching, privilege perspective on the deeply problematic phenomena of

religion. We really do need a plurality of perspectives. This is one of the key implications of Jamesian pragmatism: we must be prepared to employ conceptual frameworks…in order fully to account for the pragmatically relevant differences in people's religious options and problems.[24]

Pihlstrom thinks that it helps to recognize different senses in which James or others might be self-described pluralists. To understand James we need to be clear that there is a plurality of pluralisms operating in his thought, and we also need to own up to the uncomfortable implications of diversity itself: that while committing to a worldview of my own I must also recognize it as but one among many, one that, though seeming well-evidenced *to me*, most likely relies on grounds for which I can claim no special authority or universality.

James is not dogmatizing, Philstrom argues, because he recognizes both the diversity *and* the epistemic precariousness of religious overbeliefs, including his own. But neither does this religious pluralism (pluralism of religious overbeliefs), or this meta-level interpretive pluralism (the "liveness" in our age of both the religious hypothesis and its materialist rival)[25] entail 'anything goes' relativism. The moral implications of different conceptions of Godhead, and the moral implications of theistic, polytheistic, deistic, agnostic, or atheistic overbeliefs, are among the many topics we can study and discuss. For Pihlstrom's James, "reflexivity is responsibility. Even if no 'voice' is absolute and infallible in human affairs, we can intelligently inquire into the pragmatic acceptability of any particular perspective."[26]

Religious ambiguity, the temperament thesis, and psychological fideism are three sources of this Jamesian pluralism about overbeliefs. Perhaps this rejection of the notion of epistemic uniformity, and of the demand for consensus, can lead to a richer conception of human rationality.

As Ian Kidd (2013) writes, despite all the work on emotion and moral judgement in psychology in recent decades, we still need greater appreciation of the cooperation of sentiments and intellect in human cognition, and more specifically of "the existence, role, and plurality of temperaments, especially the role in shaping our epistemological and metaphysical predispositions and our existential needs":

> Understanding how temperaments regulate conviction, doubt, and other epistemic evaluations is essential to the project of critical inquiry, not least because it indicates that philosophical disagreements may reflect different 'ground-floor intuitions'… rather than necessarily indicating the obstinacy, dogmatism, or ignorance of one's interlocutors."[27]

If we placed James into contemporary debate in the so-called epistemology of disagreement, he would be a defender of what Thomas Kelly would call an epistemically permissive position. Permissivism, which allows for multiple interpretations of a disclosed body of evidence, has theoretical and practical advantages over non-permissivism and the "rational uniqueness thesis." This thesis is that for any given proposition and total body of evidence, there is only one single doxastic attitude (for instance, belief, suspension, or disbelief) that the evidence makes rational.

Some supporters of the rational uniqueness thesis see it as making rational disagreement impossible among evidence-sharing epistemic peers. But defenders of the latter view (Conee and Feldman, 2004; White, 2014) appear to equivocate between a weaker but more plausible version of uniqueness as a claim about there being one unique rational doxastic attitude that *one* person can take to a target proposition, given her total evidence that bears upon it, and a much stronger version of uniqueness as a claim with *interpersonal import.* The latter claim, which is what

supporters of the "equal weight view" (Feldman) need to maintain in order for their account to be normative for how one ought to respond to disagreement among evidence-sharing peers, is much less plausible. To show why, Kelly appeals to James' key point about how the truth goal can come apart. If one person may reasonably weigh avoiding false beliefs somewhat higher than gaining true beliefs, while another may reasonably vary in this balance of cognitive goals, then the argument for rational uniqueness as a thesis with interpersonal import is undercut:

> [T]he fact that they are different goals creates the need for trade-offs; the optimal strategy for the achievement of one is not the optimal strategy for the achievement of the other…[This] Jamesian route to vindicating a permissive epistemology…works just as well in a framework that employs credences [degrees] instead of all-or-nothing beliefs.[28]

I would go further than Kelly and maintain that reasonableness follows *from*, rather than determining permissibility, and that permissibility in turn follows virtue (responsible inquiry). Epistemic **e**videntialism, tied to the uniqueness thesis, tends to undermine the notion of reasonable philosophic or religious disagreement. The upshot of what I take to be the failure of various proposed forms of epistemic evidentialism is that it is misguided to seek universal norms in something like 'belief's own ethics.' The only philosophically plausible argument for wholesale principles of constraint on belief formation and revision is *moral* evidentialism, the kind we see instanced in William Clifford's argument that James famously responded to. Ironically, however, this form seems to have abandoned by contemporary evidentialists, who went out looking for a purely epistemic source of norms for doxastic responsibility, but came up only with a new 'reign of error.'

Some evidentialist critics like Scott Aiken distance themselves from the equal weight view, yet still adhere to a version of the uniqueness thesis by bemoaning the fact that with James' permissive epistemology "we will have lawful and interminable inconsistency."[29] My response is that lawful inconsistency is just the upshot of what John Rawls describes as *reasonable pluralism*, and bids us to see as the predictable outcome of freedom of opinion under conditions of democracy. The "interpersonal slack," to use Kelly's helpful phrase, that permissivists defend has both moral and intellectual support in the "burdens of judgment" arguments that Rawls uses to explain the grounds of *reasonable pluralism*.[30] The pragmatist's ability to make sense of reasonable disagreement among evidence-sharing peers, and its support for Rawlsian reasonable pluralism, are two key *advantages* of the approach, not disadvantages as their critics sometimes make them out to be.[31] Pragmatists should stand with Rawlsian reasonable pluralism and against the demand for consensus that the rational uniqueness thesis commits us to. Michael Eldridge (2013) correctly sees Talisse and Aiken as influenced by the non-permissivist approach of Cheryl Misak, on which "In order to engage others in conversation or dialogue, we have to see their disagreements as implying a mistake on someone's part. Otherwise we are merely talking past each other." But, Eldridge responds, this "get[s] things backwards. If we see disagreements exclusively in terms of mistakes, then we begin to talk past each other."[32]

Like Eldridge I think Talisse and Aiken have failed to recognize important differences between pluralism and relativism. But this response still does not address a potentially more difficult problem, first articulated by Russell and more recently developed by Talisse and Aiken (2005; 2011): In view of what does Jamesian pluralism really demand toleration? Certainly James *treats it* as doing so, and certainly he says many brave things about challenging one's own beliefs by confrontation with others, and revising or abandoning them if they are found wanting. But what

is it about James' account that actually demands this willingness to revise our own beliefs, or to tolerate those who disagree with us?[33]

The Jamesian commitment to inclusivity, to taking account of others' claims and demands, would be crucial to satisfactorily answering these questions, and to distinguishing Jamesian pluralism from relativism, on the one hand, and from dogmatic religiosity of the other. Todd Lekan for example tries to show how James qualifies the right to indulge in personal overbeliefs and to have them inform one's practical reasoning: "Strenuously pursue your first order ideals. However, be on guard lest this pursuit inhibit the ideals of others—especially when these ideals promote or at least do not threaten greater inclusivity. Take care to adopt first order ideals that promote inclusivity. When possible, strive to help others promote their ideals, especially when those ideals are themselves conducive to inclusivity."[34]

In a recent book, *William James and the Quest for the Ethical Republic,* Trygve Throntveit points out that James clearly wants to extend Mill's ideas about the role of deliberation and criticism in the positive social function of a "marketplace of ideas."[35] He writes,

Despite rejecting moral certainties and a fixed ethical code, James identified three virtues that human experience suggested were useful to moral reasoning and likely to remain so. First was experimentalism, the willingness to reflect critically on our values and change them if experience warranted. Second was historical wisdom, and awareness of the practical needs and contingent factors that had driven the ethical experiment in the past, which helped discipline experimentalism without discouraging it. Third was empathy, the recognition that others' values were facts of experience against which our own must be tested. All three virtues manifested the 'strenuous mood' that, for James, characterized

the highest ethical life. Strenuosity demanded commitment to ongoing reflections, deliberation, and reconciliation of conflicting values.[36]

6. Towards a Permissive yet Risk-Aware Ethics of Belief

Although I have largely defended James, I think it is useful for Talisse and Aiken to ask these hard questions about whether pluralism is a self-consistent philosophy, and more specifically whether James' account has the resources to provide censure of those who are dogmatic or intolerant, and to religious enthusiasts of the specific religions that we find have popular appeal historically, and in the modern world. I have argued that Clifford's moral evidentialism makes too strong a demand on persons, and that permissivism moreover wins out over the sort of non-permissivism we find based upon the rational uniqueness thesis. But in this final section I want switch tracks and come back to the "practical problem" with the Jamesian ethic of belief that I identified earlier: its lack of an adequately risk-aware treatment of faith ventures.

This worry connects to Talisse and Aiken's, in that I find it paradoxical for James to sharply criticize dogmatization, rationalization of prior belief, and institutionalization of religion, while defending and at times even seeming to make a necessity of people's "active religiosity," which for many people it should be obvious is inextricably bound up with just such factors. Jamesian religious personalists and some religious liberals in his audience may appreciate his experimentalism, but do rank-and-file adherents of the historical religions, especially the Abrahamic family, really believe that the faithful can be as "inclusive" and accepting of differences as Jamesian pluralism seems to suppose? Remember, James has studied *persons* by way of character-types, but he has directly studied neither collective and institutionalized religiosity, nor the character of different *models of faith* embraced by particular religions or religious sects. It is

arguably these, as much or more than the factors James focused on, that tend to supply directives for ways of treating outsiders to the 'home' religion. So I am afraid we are still left to ask whether *for this family of religions* or more likely, models of faith embraced by particular religious subgroups within it, mutual toleration and respect will not be perceived as 'impossible virtues.'

The experimental attitude James prefers might lead us to take every religious traditions as a "living" tradition in the sense of being open to, and even demanding re-interpretation by each new generation. But the fixed nature of religious teachings and models of faith for many religious adherents is a serious risk to the kind of marketplace of ideas that James envisioned. Perhaps President John F. Kennedy put these risks best in a speech in which he stated, "The great enemy of truth is very often not the lie—deliberate, contrived and dishonest—but the myth—persistent, persuasive and unrealistic. Too often we hold fast to the clichés of our forebears. We subject all facts to a prefabricated set of interpretations. We enjoy the comfort of opinion without the discomfort of thought."[37]

James would not like us to end on this dour note about the impossibility for 'the common person or mankind at large' to adopt the new religious virtues he discusses. But Kennedy's point perhaps feeds back to James a needed helping of the psychological insight into human behavior for which he himself is rightly famous. One concern about James when read as a moralist is that he does not well distinguish the benefits of living a morally strenuous life sustained by religious faith, from the problems either of religious 'enthusiasm,' or of a politicized religion imposing itself over the public sphere through paternalistic laws. James seems to have agreed with Thomas Jefferson in holding that "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god." But unfortunately he paid very little attention to the distinction Jefferson drew, and that many secularists and members of religious

minorities find so important, between religious commitments as contributing to personal perfection and as potentially leading to oppressive use of state power. If active religiosity and strenuous moral living means asking more from yourself than you do of others, who could argue? But secularist critics regularly point out injuries that a group's commitment to strenuous moral living can have upon fellow citizens. Granting the function of religion in many people's paths towards personal perfection, we should also grant that the beliefs of my neighbors *may* indeed do me harm: this depends largely not on *what* the true believers believe, but on *how* they think of and treat outsiders, and on how, if they could have their way, they would have their own beliefs impact the public sphere. [38]

So when it comes to how James use his descriptive account of faith tendencies to support the *right* to believe, I find myself wishing that his approach was substantially more risk aware, more geared towards censure of religious orientations that motivate moral and epistemic injustices towards outsiders to the faith. James' concern with motivating the strenuous mood might indeed be thought frightening in an age of growing Islamist ideology. When the risks involve moral harms and epistemic injustices to others, the actor may *not* be the best judge, after all. We need to substantially strengthen the "criticism and caution" side of James' ethics of belief, rather than emphasizing just one's personal right to be the chooser of one's risk. Pragmatist theory is especially well-suited to offer the needed blend of philosophy and moral psychology to examine the sources of intolerance in religious worldviews and secular ideologies. James is right that, "Our thoughts determine our acts, and our acts re-determine the previous nature of the world."[39] But we can little afford to ignore the responsibility of the faith ventures of the "common person," as James tended to, or for that matter the striking comparisons between *religious* intolerance and the intolerance of "militant" modern atheists.

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Endnotes

[1] James (1911), 111-113.

[2] James (1897), 7.

[3] James (1912), 156.

[4] James (1912), 194. James relatedly found that conventional theism, with its sharp division between the created and the Creator, allows for no genuine two–way relation between humans and the divine.

[5] Putnam (2013), 208.

[6] James (1907), 126.

[7] James (1907), 128.

[8] James (1907), 132.

[9] James (1907), 164-165 and 171-172. Radical empiricism upholds "a world imperfectly unified still, and perhaps always to remain so" (160-161). It "harmonizes best with a radical pluralism, with novelty and indeterminism, moralism and theism, and with the 'humanism' lately sprung upon us by the Oxford and the Chicago schools." (1912, 34).

[10] James would say the same thing about various forms of materialism as ways of building out the contrary Naturalistic Hypothesis. One wishes that he would have at least affirmed that these latter are not necessarily pessimistic but can share a melioristic spirit of improvability of the human lot—something humanists like Dewey and Mill would certainly insist upon.

[11] Eldridge (2007) writes, "Understanding James's argument for personalism begins with recognizing that for James ethics is first philosophy." But James is equally fallibilist and pluralist about ethical beliefs and systems. Uffelman notes, "James advocated working to bring about the very largest total universe of good because he did not believe it to be

practically possible to pin down a monistic theory of value or singular definition of the good. His meliorism is a response to his pluralism" (2012, 171).

[12] Gutowski (2015), 94.

[13] Mill, *On Liberty,* sec 4.1. James dedicated *Pragmatism* to Mill, "from whom I first learned the pragmatic openness of mind and whom my fancy likes to picture as our leader were he alive today" (18).

[14] According to Klein (2015, 72), James developed methodological parallels between science and religion in order to achieve "a therapeutic goal—to convince despairing Victorians that religious faith can be reconciled with a scientific epistemology. James argues that the prospective theist is in the same epistemic situation with respect to the 'religious hypothesis' as the scientist working in the context of discovery." For another account of James' thought about the relationship between science and religion, see Axtell (2013).

[15] Mill, *On Liberty,* (1978/1859), 24.

[16] James (1911), 111-113.

[17] James (1988), 414.

[18] Mill, *On Liberty,* 3.1

[19] James (1911), 312. In *Varieties,* James writes, "Our impulsive belief is here always what sets up the original body of truth, and our articulately verbalized philosophy is but its showy translation into formulas. The unreasoned and immediate assurance is the deep thing in us, the reasoned argument is but a surface exhibition. Instinct leads, intelligence does but follow" (1902, Lecture 3).

[20] Pluralists about rationality might also hold that where one's evidence set is large and diverse, and the evidential relations between that set and a target proposition are accordingly complex or opaque, there will not be single doxastic attitude (or degree of credence) that the evidence

makes rational. This is often the case with our philosophical, political, and religious beliefs. The complexity and opacity of evidential relations with these kinds of beliefs should lead us to a rejection of the uniqueness thesis and to a re-affirmation of reasonable disagreement.

[21] On James and Clifford, see Axtell (2001).

[22] Lightfoot (1997), 2, 163. See also Jennifer Welchman's (2006) defense of a Jamesian ethics of self-experimentation.

[23] Qualifications are also in order because we should not characterize Jamesian pluralism as akin to John Hick's version of religious pluralism, though it clearly does have some overlaps.

[24] Philstrom (2013), 90.

[25] "Hypothesis" is a term that to my knowledge James never uses with respect to particular detailed overbeliefs themselves. So to understand these epistemological senses of pluralism, James tells us not to confuse the overbeliefs that "fill out" either the materialist or the religious hypothesis with those more generic hypotheses themselves. I have elsewhere (2013) marked the two levels of Jamesian epistemic pluralism by distinguishing *experiments of living* from *living experiments.* Of course, James realizes that the materialist hypothesis is a "live option" in his social milieu, and among his audience. That it might not be a live option *for him,* and that his writings are more concerned with comparing monist and pluralist religiosity, does not mean he doesn't recognize reasonable disagreement at the level of competing materialist and religious research programs. Both are "live" until future experience falsifies one or the other — and again, don't hold your breath.

[26] Philstrom, (2013), 92.

[27] Kidd (2013), 393.

[28] Kelly (2013).

[29] Aiken (2014), 179.

[30] Rawls (1995), 249. The present, permissive account directly supports the Rawlsian 'burdens of reason,' which he defined as, "the sources of reasonable disagreement among reasonable persons, [that] are the many hazards involved in the correct (and conscientious) exercise of our powers of reason and judgment in the ordinary course of political life."

[31] Thomas Kelly (2014), 303, 305. For a development of the pragmatists' consistency and Feldman and Conee's inconsistency with a) the possibility of reasonable disagreement and b) Rawlsian reasonable pluralism, see Axtell (2011).

[32] Eldridge (2013) quoting from Misak (2004), 16.

[33] Russell (1910), 97. For comments see Talisse and Aiken (2005); also Aiken (2014), 179. For defenses of Jamesian pragmatic pluralism against these objections, see Eldridge (2013), Uffelman (2012), and Putnam (2011).

[34] Lekan (2007), 15.

[35] Throntveit (2014), 60. Thus Throntveit imputes to James the view that "individuals' beliefs in the *possible,* and not just the proven, served a necessary *social* function, not just private needs" (72).

[36] Throntveit (2014), 2-3.

[37] J.F. Kennedy, *Commencement Address at Yale University, June 11 1962,* http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/speech-3370

[38] Jefferson was concerned with the coercions of what he called religious establishment. "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others," so religious morality should not manifest as paternalistic laws or other strictures that compromise the principle of separation of church and state. Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, Query XVII, http://www.thefederalistpapers.org/founders/jefferson/thomas-jefferson-note-

on-the-state-of-virginia-query-xvii

[39] James (1909)*,* 774.