

5 Religious faith, intellectual responsibility, and romance

In thinking about William James, it helps to remember that James not only dedicated *Pragmatism* to John Stuart Mill, but reiterated some of Mill's most controversial claims. In "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," James says that "The only possible reason there can be why any phenomenon ought to exist is that such a phenomenon actually is desired" (WB, 149). This echo of the most ridiculed sentence in Mill's *Utilitarianism* is, I suspect, deliberate. One of James's most heartfelt convictions was that to know whether a claim should be met, we need *only* ask which other claims – "claims actually made by some concrete person" – it runs athwart. We need not also ask whether it is a "valid" claim. He deplored the fact that philosophers still followed Kant rather than Mill, still thought of validity as raining down upon a claim "from some sublime dimension of being, which the moral law inhabits, much as upon the steel of the compass-needle the influence of the Pole rains down from out of the starry heavens" (WB, 148).

The view that there is no source of obligation save the claims of individual sentient beings entails that we have no responsibility to anything other than such beings. Most of the relevant sentient individuals are our fellow humans. So talk about our responsibility to truth, or to reason, must be replaced by talk about our responsibility to our fellow human beings. James's account of truth and knowledge is a utilitarian ethics of belief designed to facilitate such replacement.¹ Its point of departure is Peirce's treatment of a belief as a habit of action, rather than as a representation. A utilitarian philosophy of religion must treat being religious as a habit of action. So its principal concern must be the extent to which the actions of reli-

gious believers frustrate the needs of other human beings, rather than the extent to which religion gets something right.

Our responsibility to truth is not, for James, a responsibility to get things right. Rather, it is a responsibility to ourselves to make our beliefs cohere with one another, and to our fellow humans to make them cohere with theirs. As in Habermas's account of "communicative rationality," our obligation to be rational is exhausted by our obligation to take account of other people's doubts and objections to our beliefs.² This view of rationality makes it natural to say, as James does, that the true is "what would be better for us to believe" (*P*, 42).

But of course what is good for one person or group to believe will not be good for another person or group. James never was sure how to avoid the counterintuitive consequence that what is true for one person or group may not be true for another. He fluctuated between Peirce's identification of truth with what will be believed under ideal conditions, and Dewey's strategy of avoiding the topic of truth and talking instead about justification. But for my present purpose – evaluating James's argument in "The Will to Believe" – it is not necessary to decide between these strategies.³ For that purpose, I can duck questions about what pragmatists should say about truth. I need consider only the question of whether the religious believer has a right to her faith – whether this faith conflicts with her intellectual responsibilities.

It is a consequence of James's utilitarian view of the nature of obligation that *the obligation to justify one's beliefs arises only when one's habits of action interfere with the fulfillment of others' needs*. Insofar as one is engaged in a private project, that obligation lapses. The underlying strategy of James's utilitarian/pragmatist philosophy of religion is to *privatize* religion. This privatization allows him to construe the supposed tension between science and religion as the illusion of opposition between cooperative endeavours and private projects.⁴

On a pragmatist account, scientific inquiry is best viewed as the attempt to find a single, unified, coherent description of the world – the description which makes it easiest to predict the consequences of events and actions, and thus easiest to gratify certain human desires. When pragmatists say that "creationist science" is *bad* science their point is that it subordinates these desires to other, less widespread desires. But since religion has aims other than gratifica-

tion of our need to predict and control, it is not clear that there need be a quarrel between religion and orthodox, atoms-and-void science, any more than between literature and science. Further, if a private relation to God is not accompanied with the claim to knowledge of the divine will, there may be no conflict between religion and utilitarian ethics. A suitably privatized form of religious belief might dictate neither one's scientific beliefs nor anybody's moral choices save one's own. That form of belief would be able to gratify a need without threatening to thwart any needs of any others and would thus meet the utilitarian test.

W. K. Clifford, James's chosen opponent in "The Will to Believe," thinks that we have a duty to seek the truth, distinct from our duty to seek happiness. His way of describing this duty is not as a duty to get reality right but rather as a duty not to believe without evidence. James quotes him as saying "if a belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure is a stolen one. . . . It is sinful, because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind. . . . It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (*WB*, 18).

Clifford asks us to be responsive to "evidence," as well as to human needs. So the question between James and Clifford comes down to this: is evidence something which floats free of human projects or is the demand for evidence simply a demand from other human beings for cooperation on such projects?

The view that evidential relations have a kind of existence independent of human projects takes various forms, of which the most prominent are realism and foundationalism. Realist philosophers say that the only true source of evidence is the world as it is in itself.⁵ The pragmatist objections to realism start from the claim that "it is impossible to strip the human element from even our most abstract theorizing. All our mental categories without exception have been evolved because of their fruitfulness for life, and owe their being to historic circumstances, just as much as do the nouns and verbs and adjectives in which our languages clothe them" (*ECR*, 552).⁶ If pragmatists are right about this, the only question at issue between them and realists is whether the notion of "the world as it is in itself" can be made fruitful for life. James's criticisms of correspondence theories of truth boil down to the argument that a belief's purported "fit" with the intrinsic nature of reality adds nothing

which makes any practical difference to the fact that it is universally agreed to lead to successful action.

Foundationalism is an epistemological view which can be adopted by those who suspend judgment on the realist's claim that reality has an intrinsic nature. A foundationalist need only claim that every belief occupies a place in a natural, transcultural, transhistorical order of reasons – an order which eventually leads the inquirer back to one or another "ultimate source of evidence."⁷ Different foundationalists offer different candidates for such sources: for example, Scripture, tradition, clear and distinct ideas, sense-experience, and common sense. Pragmatists object to foundationalism for the same reasons they object to realism. They think that the question of whether my inquiries trace a natural order of reasons or merely respond to the demands for justification prevalent in my culture is, like the question whether the physical world is found or made, one to which the answer can make no practical difference.

Clifford's demand for evidence can, however, be put in a minimalist form – one which avoids both realism and foundationalism, and which concedes to James that intellectual responsibility is no more and no less than responsibility to people with whom one is joined in shared endeavor. In its minimalist form, this demand presupposes only that the meaning of a statement consists in the inferential relations which it bears to other statements. To use the language in which the sentence is phrased commits one, on this view, to believing that a statement *S* is true if and only if one also believes that certain other statements which permit an inference to *S*, and still others which can be inferred from *S*, are true. The wrongness of believing without evidence is, therefore, the wrongness of pretending to participate in a common project while refusing to play by the rules.

This view of language was encapsulated in the positivist slogan that the meaning of a statement is its method of verification. The positivists argued that the sentences used to express religious belief are typically not hooked-up to the rest of the language in the right inferential way and hence can express only pseudo-beliefs. The positivists, being empiricist foundationalists, equated "the right inferential way" with eventual appeal to sense experience. But a nonfoundationalist neopositivist might still put forward the following dilemma: If there are inferential connections, then there is a

duty to argue; if there are not, then we are not dealing with a belief at all.

Even if we drop the foundationalist notion of “evidence,” Clifford’s point can still be restated in terms of the responsibility to *argue*. A minimal Clifford-like view can be summed up in the claim that, although your emotions are your own business, your beliefs are everybody’s business. There is no way in which the religious person can claim a right to believe as part of an overall right to privacy. For believing is inherently a public project: all we language users are in it together. We all have a responsibility to each other not to believe anything which cannot be justified to the rest of us. To be rational is to submit one’s beliefs – all one’s beliefs – to the judgment of one’s peers.

James resists this view. In “The Will to Believe” he gave an argument for doing so. Most readers of that essay have thought it a failure, and that in it James offers an unconvincing excuse for intellectual irresponsibility. James argues that there are live, momentous, and forced options which cannot be decided by evidence – cannot, as James put it, “be decided on intellectual grounds.” But people who side with Clifford typically rejoin that, where evidence and argument are unavailable, intellectual responsibility requires that options *cease* to be either live or forced. The responsible inquirer, they say, does not *let* herself be confronted by options of the sort James describes. When evidence and argument are unavailable, so, they think, is belief, or at least *responsible* belief. Desire, hope, and other noncognitive states can legitimately be had without evidence – can legitimately be turned over to what James calls “our *passional nature*” – but *belief* cannot. In the realm of belief, which options are live and forced is not a private matter. The same options face us all; the same truth-candidates are proposed to everyone. It is intellectually irresponsible either to disregard these options or decide between these truth-candidates except by argument from the sort of evidence which the very meanings of our words tell us is required for their support.

This nice sharp distinction between the cognitive and the noncognitive, between belief and desire, is, however, just the sort of dualism which James needs to blur. On the traditional account, desire should play no role in the fixation of belief. On a pragmatist account, the only point of having beliefs in the first place is to gratify desires.

James's claim that thinking is "only there for behavior's sake" (*WB*, 92) is his version of Hume's claim that "reason is, and ought to be, the slave of the passions."

If one accepts either claim, one will have reason to be as dubious as James was of the purportedly necessary antagonism between science and religion. For, as I said earlier, these two areas of culture seem to fulfill two different sets of desires. Science enables us to predict and control, whereas religion offers us a larger hope, and thereby something to live for. To ask "which of their two accounts of the universe is true?" may be as pointless as asking "is the carpenter's or the particle physicist's account of tables the true one?" For neither question needs to be answered if we can figure out a strategy for keeping the two accounts from getting in each other's way.⁸

Consider James's characterization of the "religious hypothesis" as (1) that "the best things are the more eternal things . . ." and (2) "that we are better off even now if we believe [1]" (*WB*, 29–30).⁹ Many people have said, when they reached this point in "The Will to Believe," that if that hypothesis exhausts what James means by "religion," then he is not talking about what they, or Clifford, are interested in. I shall return to this objection shortly. For now I merely remark that if you had asked James to specify the difference between accepting this hypothesis (a "cognitive" state) and simply trusting the larger hope (a "noncognitive" state) – or the difference between believing that the best things are the eternal things and relishing the thought that they are – he might well have replied that such differences do not make much difference.¹⁰ What does it matter, one can imagine him asking, whether you call it a belief, a desire, a hope, a mood, or some complex of these, so long as it has the same cash-value in directing action? We know what religious faith is, we know what it does for people. People have a right to have such faith, just as they have a right to fall in love, marry in haste, and persist in love despite endless sorrow and disappointment. In all such cases, "our passional nature" asserts its rights.

I suggested earlier that a utilitarian ethics of belief will reinterpret James's intellect/passion distinction so as to make it coincide with a distinction between what needs justification to other human beings and what does not. A business proposal, for example, needs such justification, but a marriage proposal (in our romantic and democratic culture) does not. Such an ethics will defend religious belief by

saying, with Mill, that our right to happiness is limited only by others' rights not to have their own pursuits of happiness interfered with. This right to happiness includes the rights to faith, hope, and love – intentional states which can rarely be justified, and typically should not have to be justified, to our peers. Our intellectual responsibilities are responsibilities to cooperate with others on common projects designed to promote the general welfare (projects such as constructing a unified science or a uniform commercial code) and not to interfere with their private projects. For the latter projects – such as getting married or getting religion – the question of intellectual responsibility does not arise.

James's critics will hear this riposte as an admission that religion is not a cognitive matter, and that his "right to believe" is a misnomer for "the right to yearn" or "the right to hope" or "the right to take comfort in the thought that. . . ." But James is not making, and should not make, such an admission. He is, rather, insisting that the impulse to draw a sharp line between the cognitive and the noncognitive, and between beliefs and desires, even when this explanation is relevant neither to the explanation nor the justification of behavior, is a residue of the false (because useless) belief that we should engage in two distinct quests – one for truth and the other for happiness. Only that belief could persuade us to say *amici socii, sed magis amica veritas*.

The philosophy of religion I have just sketched is one which is shadowed forth in much of James's work and is the one he *should* have invoked when replying to Clifford. Unfortunately, in "The Will to Believe" he attempts a different strategy and gets off on the wrong foot. Rather than fuzzing up the distinction between the cognitive and the noncognitive, as he should have, James here takes it for granted and thus yields the crucial terrain to his opponent. The italicized thesis of "The Will to Believe" reads: "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" (*WB*, 20). Here, as in his highly unpragmatic claim that "in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers of the truth" (*WB*, 26),¹¹ James accepts exactly what he should reject: the idea that the mind is divided neatly down the middle into intellect and passion, and

that possible topics of discussion are divided neatly into the cognitive and the noncognitive ones.

When philosophy goes antifoundationalist, the notion of "source of evidence" gets replaced by that of "consensus about what would count as evidence." So objectivity as intersubjectivity replaces objectivity as fidelity to something nonhuman. The question "Is there any evidence for p ?" gets replaced by the question "Is there any way of getting a consensus on what would count in favor of p ?" The distinction between settling the question of p on intellectual grounds and turning it over to one's passional nature thus turns into the question: "Am I going to be able to justify p to other people?" So James should have rephrased the issue between Clifford and himself as "What sort of belief, if any, can I have in good conscience, even after I realize that I cannot justify this belief to others?" The stark Cliffordian position says: no beliefs, only hopes, desires, yearnings, and the like. The quasi-Jamesean position I want to defend says: do not worry too much about whether what you have is a belief, a desire, or a mood. Just insofar as such states as hope, love, and faith promote only such private projects, you need not worry about whether you have a right to have them.

Still, to suggest that the tension between science and religion can be resolved merely by saying that the two serve different purposes may sound absurd. But it is no more nor less absurd than the attempt of liberal (mostly Protestant) theologians to demythologize Christianity, and more generally to immunize religious belief from criticism based on accounts of the universe which trace the origin of human beings, and of their intellectual faculties, to the unplanned movements of elementary particles.¹²

For some people, such as Alasdair MacIntyre, the effect of this latter attempt is to drain all the interest out of religion. Theologies which require no *sacrificium intellectus* are, these people think, hardly worth discussing. MacIntyre disdainfully remarks of Tillich that his "definition of God in terms of ultimate human concern in effect makes of God no more than an interest of human nature" (MacIntyre and Ricoeur 1969, 53). A pragmatist however, can reply that Tillich did nothing worse to God than pragmatist philosophy of science had already done to the elementary particles. Pragmatists think that those particles are not the very joints at which things as they are in themselves divide but are objects which we should not

have come across unless we had devoted ourselves to one of the many interests of human nature – the interest in predicting and controlling our environment.

Pragmatists are not instrumentalists, in the sense of people who believe that quarks are “mere heuristic fictions.” They think that quarks are as real as tables, but that quark-talk and table-talk need not get in each other’s way, since they need not compete for the role of *What Is There Anyway*, apart from human needs and interests. Similarly, pragmatist theists are not anthropocentrists, in the sense of believing that God is a “mere posit.” They believe that God is as real as sense-impressions, tables, quarks, and human rights. But, they add, stories about our relations to God do not necessarily run athwart stories about our relations to these other things.

Pragmatist theists, however, do have to get along without personal immortality, providential intervention, the efficacy of sacraments, the virgin birth, the risen Christ, the covenant with Abraham, the authority of the Koran, and a lot of other things which many theists are loath to do without. Or, if they want them, they will have to interpret them “symbolically” in a way which MacIntyre will regard as disingenuous, for they must prevent them from providing premises for practical reasoning. But demythologizing is, pragmatist theists think, a small price to pay for insulating these doctrines from “scientific” criticism. Demythologizing amounts to saying that, whatever theism is good for, it is not a device for predicting or controlling our environment.

From a utilitarian point of view, both MacIntyre and “scientific realists” (philosophers who insist that, in Sellars’s words, “science is the measure of the things that are, that they are”) are unfairly privileging some human interests, and therefore some areas of culture, over others.¹³ To insist on the “literal reality” of the Resurrection is of a piece with insisting, in the manner of David Lewis, that the only non-“gerrymandered” objects in the universe – the only objects that have not been shaped by human interests – are those of which particle physics speaks (Lewis 1984, 226–8). Pragmatists think that we shall only see religion and science as in conflict if we are unwilling to admit that each is just one more attempt to gratify human needs and admit also that there is no way to gratify both sets of needs simultaneously.

Scientific realism and religious fundamentalism are products of

the same urge. The attempt to convince people that they have a duty to develop what Bernard Williams calls an "absolute conception of reality" is, from a Tillichian or Jamesian point of view, of a piece with the attempt to live "for God only," and to insist that others do so also. Both scientific realism and religious fundamentalism are private projects which have gotten out of hand. They are attempts to make one's own private way of giving meaning to one's life – a way which romanticizes one's relation to something starkly and magnificently nonhuman, something ultimately true and real – obligatory for the general public.

I said earlier that many readers of "The Will to Believe" feel let down when they discover that the only sort of religion James has been discussing is something as wimpy as the belief that "perfection is eternal." They have a point. For when Clifford raged against the intellectual irresponsibility of the theists, what he really had in mind was the moral irresponsibility of fundamentalists – the people who burnt people at the stake, forbade divorce and dancing, and found various other ways of making their neighbors miserable for the greater glory of God (Clifford 1879, 2:244–52). Once "the religious hypothesis" is disengaged from the opportunity to inflict humiliation and pain on people who do not profess the correct creed, it loses interest for many people. It loses interest for many more once it is disengaged from the promise that we shall see our loved ones after death. Similarly, once science is disengaged from the claim to know reality as it is in itself, it loses its appeal for the sort of person who sees pragmatism as a frivolous, or treasonous, dereliction of our duty to truth.

A pragmatist philosophy of religion must follow Tillich and others in distinguishing quite sharply between faith and belief. Liberal Protestants to whom Tillich sounds plausible are quite willing to talk about their faith in God but demur at spelling out just what beliefs that faith includes. Fundamentalist Catholics to whom Tillich sounds blasphemous are happy to enumerate their beliefs by reciting the Creed and identify their faith with those beliefs. The reason the Tillichians think they can get along either without creeds, or with a blessedly vague symbolic interpretation of credal statements, is that they think the point of religion is not to produce any *specific* habit of action but rather to make the sort of

difference to a human life which is made by the presence or absence of love.

The best way to make Tillich and fuzziness look good, and to make creeds look bad, is to emphasize the similarity between having faith in God and being in love with another human being. People often say that they would not be able to go on if it were not for their love for their spouse or their children. This love is often not capable of being spelled out in beliefs about the character, or the actions, of these beloved people. Furthermore, this love often seems inexplicable to people acquainted with those spouses and children – just as inexplicable as faith in God seems to those who contemplate the extent of seemingly unnecessary human misery. But we do not mock a mother who believes in her sociopathic child's essential goodness, even when that goodness is visible to no one else. James urges us not to mock those who accept what he calls "the religious hypothesis" – the hypothesis that says "the best things are the more eternal things" (*WB*, 29) – merely because we see no evidence for this hypothesis, and a lot of evidence against it.

The loving mother is not attempting to predict and control the behavior of her child, and James's assent to the religious hypothesis is not part of an attempt to predict and control anything at all. Concentration on the latter attempt, the attempt to which most of common sense and science is devoted, gives rise to the idea that all intentional states are either beliefs or desires, for the actions we take on the basis of prediction and in the hope of control are the results of practical syllogisms, and such syllogisms must include both a desire that a given state of affairs obtain and the belief that a certain action will help it do so. The same concentration gives rise to the idea that anything that counts as a belief – as a cognitive state – must be capable of being cashed out in terms of specific practical consequences, and to the related idea that we must be able to spell out the inferential relations between any belief and other beliefs in considerable, and quite specific, detail.

These two ideas have often led commentators to see a tension between James's pragmatism and his trust in his own religious experiences, and between the Dewey of *Reconstruction in Philosophy* and the Dewey of *A Common Faith*. The question of whether the tension seen in James and Dewey's work is real or apparent boils

down to the question: can we disengage religious belief from inferential links with other beliefs by making them too vague to be caught in a creed – by fuzzing them up in Tillichian ways – and still be faithful to the familiar pragmatist doctrine that beliefs have content only by virtue of inferential relations to other beliefs?¹⁴

To give up this latter claim would be to abandon the heart of both classical and contemporary pragmatism, for it would be to abandon the holistic view of intentional content which permits pragmatists to substitute objectivity as intersubjectivity for objectivity as correspondence to the intrinsic nature of reality. But what becomes of intersubjectivity once we admit that there is no communal practice of justification – no shared language-game – which gives religious statements their content? The question of whether James and Dewey are inconsistent now becomes the question: Is there some practice other than justification of beliefs by beliefs which can give content to utterances?

Yes, there is. Contemporary externalists in the philosophy of mind insist, and James and Dewey could heartily agree, that the only reason we attribute intentional states to human beings at all is that doing so enables us to explain what they are doing and helps us figure out what they might do next. When we encounter paradigmatic cases of unjustifiable beliefs – Kierkegaard's belief in the Incarnation, the mother's belief in the essential goodness of her sociopathic child – we can still use the attribution of such beliefs to explain what is going on: why Kierkegaard, or the mother, is doing what he is doing. We can give content to an utterance like "I love him" or "I have faith in Him" by correlating such utterances with patterns of behavior, even when we cannot do so by fixing the place of such utterances in a network of inferential relations.

The fact that Kierkegaard is not about to explain how Christ can be both mortal and immortal, nor the mother to say how a good person could have done what her child has done, is irrelevant to the utility of ascribing those beliefs to them. Just as we can often answer the question "Why did she do that?" by attributing a practical syllogism to the agent, so we can often answer it simply by saying "She loves him" or "She hopes against hope that he . . ." or "She has faith in him." The "him" here may be either her son, her lover, or her God. We thereby give an explanation of action which is not capable

of being broken down into beliefs and desires – into individual sentential attitudes connected with other such attitudes by familiar inferential links – but which is nonetheless genuinely explanatory.

So far I have been content to accept James's own description of the religious hypothesis. But it is, I think, an unfortunate one. Just as I think James took the wrong tack, and partially betrayed his own pragmatism, in his reply to Clifford, so I think that he betrayed his own better instincts when he chose this definition of religion.¹⁵ For that definition associates religion with the conviction that a power not ourselves will do unimaginably vast good rather than with the hope that we ourselves will do such good. Such a definition of religion stays at the second of Dewey's three stages of the development of the religious consciousness – the one Dewey called "the point now reached by religious theologians" – by retaining the notion of something nonhuman which is nevertheless on the side of human beings.¹⁶

The kind of religious faith which seems to me to lie behind the attractions of both utilitarianism and pragmatism is, instead, a faith in the future possibilities of mortal humans, a faith which is hard to distinguish from love for, and hope for, the human community. I shall call this fuzzy overlap of faith, hope, and love "romance." Romance, in this sense, may crystallize around a labor union as easily as around a congregation, around a novel as easily as around a sacrament, around a God as easily as around a child.

There is a passage in the work of the contemporary novelist Dorothy Allison which may help explain what I have in mind. Toward the beginning of a remarkable essay called "Believing in Literature," Allison says that "literature, and my own dream of writing, has shaped my own system of belief – a kind of atheist's religion . . . the backbone of my convictions has been a belief in the progress of human society as demonstrated in its fiction" (Allison 1994, 166). She ends the essay as follows:

There is a place where we are always alone with our own mortality, where we must simply have something greater than ourselves to hold onto – God or history or politics or literature or a belief in the healing power of love, or even righteous anger. Sometimes I think they are all the same. A reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat and insist that there is more to this life than we have ever imagined. (181)

What I like best about this passage is Allison's suggestion that all these may be the same, that it does not greatly matter whether we state our reason to believe – our insistence that some or all finite, mortal humans can be far more than they have yet become – in religious, political, philosophical, literary, sexual, or familial terms. What matters is the insistence itself – the romance, the ability to experience overpowering hope or faith or love (or, sometimes, rage).

What is distinctive about this state is that it carries us beyond argument, because beyond presently used language. It thereby carries us beyond the imagination of the present age of the world. I take this state to be the one described (in italics) by James as “a positive content of experience which is literally and objectively true as far as it goes [namely] the fact that the conscious person is continuous with a wider self through which saving experiences come” (*VRE*, 405). The images and tropes which connect one with this wider self may be, as Allison suggests, political or familial, literary or credal. I think James would have liked Allison's pluralism, and would have thought that what she says in the above passage harmonizes with his own praise of polytheism in the final pages of *Varieties* and with his insistence that “The divine can mean no single quality, it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions” (*VRE*, 384).

In past ages of the world, things were so bad that “a reason to believe, a way to take the world by the throat” was hard to get except by looking to a power not ourselves. In those days, there was little choice but to sacrifice the intellect in order to grasp hold of the premises of practical syllogisms – premises concerning the after-death consequences of baptism, pilgrimage, or participation in holy wars. To be imaginative and to be religious, in those dark times, came to almost the same thing – for this world was too wretched to lift up the heart. But things are different now, because of human beings' gradual success in making their lives, and their world, less wretched. Nonreligious forms of romance have flourished – if only in those lucky parts of the world where wealth, leisure, literacy, and democracy have worked together to prolong our lives and fill our libraries.¹⁷ Now the things of this world are, for some lucky people, so welcome that they do not have to look beyond nature to the supernatural and beyond life to an afterlife, but only beyond the human past to the human future.

James fluctuated between two states of mind, two ways of dealing with the panic which both he and his father had experienced, and the return of which he always dreaded.¹⁸ In one of these the Whitmanesque dream of plural, democratic vistas stretching far away into the future was enough.¹⁹ Then he would respond to the possibility of panic by saying, as in the quotation from Fitzjames Stephen which ends "The Will to Believe": "Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better" (*WB*, 33). In those moods, James could find this bravura as appropriate for the death of the species as for that of an individual.

But in other moods James was unable to shrug off panic in the name of healthy-mindedness, unable to rid himself of a panic-inducing picture of mankind as

in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature's portion. (*VRE*, 120)

In such moods he is driven to adopt the "religious hypothesis" that somewhere, somehow, perfection is eternal and to identify "the notion of God" with the "guarantee" of "an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved" (*P*, 55). In such moods he demanded, at a minimum, what Whitehead called objective immortality – the memory of human achievements in the mind of a "fellow-sufferer who understands" (Whitehead 1929, 532–3). At the maximum, he hoped that in his own best moments he had made contact with that mind.

All of us, I think, fluctuate between such moods. We fluctuate between God as a perhaps obsolete name for a possible human future and God as an external guarantor of some such future. Those who, like Dewey, would like to link their days each to each by transmuting their early religious belief into a belief in the human future, come to think of God as Friend rather than as Judge and Savior. Those who, like me, were raised atheist and now find it merely confusing to talk about God, nevertheless fluctuate between moods in which we are content with utility and moods in which we hanker after validity as well. So we waver between what I have called "romance" and needy, chastened humility. Sometimes it suffices to trust the human community, thought of as part of what Dewey

called "the community of causes and consequences in which we, together with those not born, are enmeshed . . . the widest and deepest symbol of the mysterious totality of being the imagination calls the universe" (Dewey 1934, 85). Sometimes it does not.

James was not always content to identify the "wider self through which saving experiences come" with Dewey's "widest and deepest symbol" of the universe. In Whitmanesque moods he could identify this wider self with an Americanized humanity at the farthest reach of the democratic vistas. Then he could (to paraphrase the title of his father's book) think of Democracy as the Redeemed Form of God. But in Wordsworthian moods he held what he called an "over-belief" in something far more deeply interfused with nature than the transitory glory of democratic fellowship. Then he thought of the self from which saving experiences come as standing to even a utopian human community as the latter stands to the consciousness of our dogs and cats (*VRE*, 518–19).

We can, I think, learn two lessons from recapitulating what Henry Levinson calls "the religious investigations of William James." The first is that we latest heirs of time are lucky enough to have considerable discretion about which options will be live for us and which will not. Unlike our less fortunate ancestors, we are in a position to put aside the unromantic, foundationalist view that all the truth-candidates, and thus all the momentous options, have always already been available, live, and forced – because they are built into a language always and inevitably spoken by common sense. We can, with James, relish the thought that our descendants may face live and forced options which we shall never imagine. The second lesson is that letting his liveliest option be the choice between Whitman and Wordsworth – between two romantic poets rather than between an atheistic creed and a theistic one – was enough to satisfy William James's own religious needs.

James combined, to an extent of which most of us are incapable, honesty about his own needs with concern for those of others. So the upshot of his investigations is worth bearing in mind.

NOTES

- 1 Ruth Anna Putnam has suggested that I might wish to use "consequentialist" in place of "utilitarian" in this description of James. On reflec-

- tion, I have retained the latter term. This is because I think that, for James, J. S. Mill was the paradigm utilitarian, and that Mill was as aware as James and Dewey that there can be no Benthamite measuring of context-free quantities of need-satisfaction, and that consequently there will always be agonizing moral dilemmas. I find "consequentialist" a rather flexible and pallid term, whereas "utilitarian" has a sharp-edged polemical force, thanks to its associations with the tough-minded Huxleyite suggestion that human beings be thought of as complex, needy animals. There seem to me to be Huxleyite overtones throughout James's work, and my use of "utilitarian" is intended to bring these out.
- 2 But Habermas, unlike James and Dewey, still believes in a "transcendent moment of universal validity." I have argued against Habermas's retention of this Kantian doctrine in Rorty 1994a.
 - 3 In fact I prefer a third strategy, that of Davidson, who cuts truth off from justification by making it a nonepistemic notion. I defend the counterintuitive implications of this strategy in Rorty 1995.
 - 4 Many people would agree with Stephen Carter's claim that this reduces religion to a "hobby," and would accept his invidious contrast between a mere "individual metaphysic" and a "tradition of group worship." (See Carter 1993, esp. chapter 2.) I argue against Carter's views in Rorty 1994.
 - 5 See, for example, John McDowell's claim that without "direct confrontation by a worldly state of affairs itself" thought's "bearing on the world" will remain inexplicable (1994, 142–3).
 - 6 Cf. Nietzsche, *The Will to Power*, § 514.
 - 7 See Williams 1993, 116: ". . . we can characterize foundationalism as the view that our beliefs, simply in virtue of certain elements in their contents, stand in *natural epistemological relations* and thus fall into *natural epistemological kinds*."
 - 8 Although I have no proof text to cite, I am convinced that James's theory of truth as "the good in the way of belief" originated in the need to reconcile his admiration for his father with his admiration for such scientific friends as Peirce and Chauncey Wright.
 - 9 Note that for a pragmatist (2) is superfluous. "P" and "we are better off even now if we believe p" come pretty close, for pragmatists, to saying the same thing.
 - 10 Pragmatists can, of course, make a distinction between hope and knowledge in cases where knowledge of causal mechanisms is available. The quack hopes, but the medical scientist knows, that the pills will cure. But in other cases, such as marriage, the distinction often cannot usefully be drawn. Does the groom know, or merely hope, that he is marrying the right person? Either description will explain his actions equally well.

- 11 Here James buys in on a dualism between objective nature (The Way the World Is) and something else – a dualism which critics of the correspondence theory of truth, such as the future author of *Pragmatism*, must eventually abjure.
- 12 Paul Tillich claimed that his existentialist, symbolic theology was an expression of “the Protestant Principle” – the impulse that led Luther to despise scholastic proofs of God’s existence and to label Reason “a whore.” James said that “as, to papal minds, protestantism has often seemed a mere mess of anarchy and confusion, such, no doubt will pragmatism often seem to ultra-rationalist minds in philosophy” (*P*, 62; see also *VRE*, 396).
- 13 My fellow-pragmatist Barry Allen remarks that Hume saw no need to proclaim himself an atheist (Allen 1994). Holbach and Diderot, by contrast, did see a need, for, unlike Hume, they substituted a duty to truth for a duty to God, a duty explained in terms of what Allen elsewhere (1993) has called an “onto-logical,” specifically antipragmatic account of truth. Holbach would, today, proclaim himself a scientific realist and *therefore* an atheist. Hume would proclaim himself neither.
- 14 Davidson and other externalists have emphasized that this claim is compatible with saying that we can attribute content to intentional states only if we are able to correlate utterances with their extramental causes. They have, I think, thereby shown us how to be radically holistic and coherentist without running the danger of “losing touch” with the world. Realist philosophers such as McDowell, however, have doubted whether Davidson’s view allows “cognitive” as opposed to merely “causal” connections with the world. I attempt to reply to these doubts in Rorty forthcoming.
- 15 Acceptance of the claim that “perfection is eternal” was not, of course, James’s only definition of religion. He had as many conflicting quasi-definatory things to say about religions as he did about truth.
- 16 See Dewey 1934, 73. Dewey’s own conception of “the human abode” is not of something nonhuman but friendly, but rather of a Wordsworthian community with nonhuman nature, with Spinoza’s “face of the whole universe.”
- 17 James said that there is reason to think that “the coarser religions, revivalistic, orgiastic, with blood and miracles and supernatural operations, may possibly never be displaced. Some constitutions need them too much” (*VRE*, 136). He could have added that people placed in some circumstances (no wealth, no literacy, no luck) also need them too much.
- 18 “Not the conception or intellectual perception of evil, but the grisly blood-freezing heart-palsying sensation of it close upon one. . . . How

irrelevantly remote seem all our usual refined optimisms and intellectual and moral consolations in presence of a need of help like this! Here is the real core of the religious problem: Help! help!" (VRE, 135).

- 19 See James's "pluralistic way of interpreting" Whitman's "To You" (P, 133), and his account of "the great religious difference," the one "between the men who insist that the world *must and shall be*, and those who are contented with believing that the world *may be*, saved" (P, 135).