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William James's "The Will to Believe" and the Ethics of Self-Experimentation

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*Abstract*

William James's "The Will to Believe" has been criticized for offering untenable arguments in support of belief in unvalidated hypotheses. Although James is no longer accused of suggesting we can create belief *ex nihilo*, critics continue to charge that James's defense of belief in what he called the "religious hypothesis" confuses belief with hypothesis adoption and endorses willful persistence in unvalidated beliefs—not, as he claimed, in pursuit of truth, but merely to avoid the emotional stress of abandoning them. I argue that James's position in "The Will to Believe" can be defended provided we give up thinking of it as ethics of belief and think of it instead as an ethics of self-experimentation. Subjective data (including wants, needs, and desires) are relevant to rational consent to participation in research.

Three years after the first appearance of William James "The Will to Believe,"<sup>1</sup> James complained to C. S. Peirce that he had "been in much hot water lately" over the essay.<sup>2</sup> More than a century later, James is still in hot water. Though "The Will to Believe" is one of James's most frequently reprinted essays, nearly all the objections and queries raised by its earliest respondents remain in play. While no one now seriously imagines James was advocating the voluntary creation of belief *ex nihilo*, critics continue to charge that James's defense of belief in what he called the 'religious hypothesis' confused belief with hypothesis adoption and endorsed willful persistence in non-validated beliefs—not, as he claimed, in pursuit of truth, but merely to avoid the emotional stress of abandoning them. Defenders have not been lacking. But none of the defenses mounted to date have persuaded James's critics that these objections are defeasible. It might be argued that the time has come to admit defeat, to grant

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that James's position simply is not justifiable. Yet, as even James Wernham, one of James' sterner critics, concedes, there is something undeniably attractive about James' attempt to defend persistence in non-validated beliefs from the charge of intellectual sinfulness—for if it is a sin, we are all guilty. As Wernham puts it “it would be nice to get it right—especially if it has something worthwhile to tell us about religion.”<sup>3</sup>

I shall argue that James' position in “The Will to Believe” is on the whole defensible if we think of it not as an ethics of *belief* but rather as a species of *research ethics*, more specifically as an account of rational consent to self-experimentation. This approach has not previously been explored,<sup>4</sup> possibly because until recently few philosophers were active participants in research ethics review, let alone human subject research, the kind of research with which James was himself most directly familiar. Indeed we are today probably in a better position than James himself (who wrote when research ethics was in its infancy), to see how his position is defensible and why it has so often been misunderstood.

But first a brief review of what his position is. “The Will to Believe” focuses on the predicament of a reflective theist considering how to respond to the realization that she lacks conclusive evidence in favor of what (James believes to be) the two central tenets of her religious belief: “First . . . that the best things are the more eternal things . . . [and] the second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.”<sup>5</sup> This inquirer, James says, is now faced with an unavoidable dilemma, or in James's terms “a genuine option,” because the dilemma is *live*, *forced*, and *momentous*. It is *live* because James's inquirer is inclined to believe the religious hypothesis but recognizes that the publicly verifiable empirical evidence equally favors its negation.<sup>6</sup> She is to some degree willing to act upon either, and James tells us, “practically, that means belief . . . there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.”<sup>7</sup> The option is *forced*, because “based on a complete logical disjunction.”<sup>8</sup> Only the religious hypothesis or its negation can be true. The option is *momentous* because discovering the truth is not a ‘trivial’ matter to *this* inquirer. In such dilemmas, James says:

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, “do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing truth.<sup>9</sup>

Because she must proceed upon some hypothesis if she is to learn the truth, James holds, she is entitled to proceed upon the hypothesis she prefers, unless or until the results prove it false.

Bertrand Russell provides the locus classicus for the three most commonly repeated objections to James's position: (I) it confuses hypothesis

adoption with belief, (2) it licenses us to believe theism is true if we find it subjectively satisfying and (3) it encourages belief in different and incompatible propositions and is thus a recipe for intellectual chaos.<sup>10</sup> Given the influence of Russell's objections, it makes sense historically as well as critically, to consider these objections in the form in which he raised them. But there is a further reason to do so—Russell quite inadvertently put a fourth obstacle in James's path, one which has proved as great a challenge to understanding and acceptance of James's paper as Russell's three formal objections. For this reason, I think it advisable to focus on Russell's treatment.<sup>11</sup>

Russell's first objection is that James is mistakenly supposing that belief in a hypothesis is necessary for undertaking its experimental confirmation, a mistake he traced to James's talk of a "willingness to act" as indicating 'belief'. He writes, "our actions are constantly based upon probabilities, and . . . in all such cases, we neither accept a truth nor go without it, but entertain it as an hypothesis. This applies," he continues:

in particular to the working hypotheses of science. A man of science who considers it worth while to devise experimental tests of an hypothesis, and to construct elaborate theories which use the hypothesis, is not on that account to be regarded as *believing* the hypothesis . . . all that is required, and all that occurs among careful investigators, is the belief that the hypothesis has a greater or smaller chance of being true . . .<sup>12</sup>

As we need not *believe* a hypothesis in order to entertain or test it, James cannot claim that belief in advance of evidence is justifiable as necessary to the discovery of its truth or falsehood. The only thing for which religious belief is a necessary means, Russell argues, is the emotional satisfaction the belief offers.

This leads Russell to his second objection. If belief is to be justified by such appeals, then any hypothesis whose belief is necessary for our happiness is justified. This was a particularly worrying implication to Russell, because unlike James, Russell *did* believe that people could will to believe *ex nihilo*. Russell claimed that under the right conditions, even willing oneself to believe that the law of excluded middle is false is "a feat which is by no means as difficult as it is often supposed to be."<sup>13</sup> Thus it was perverse and utterly wrongheaded to offer people an argument to justify indulging irrational preferences in regard to their beliefs about matters of fact.

Finally, Russell objected to the practical consequences of licensing people to privilege whatever beliefs happen to be *live* to them due to their cultural and familial upbringings. Since these beliefs will often be incompatible, he argues, James's position invites intellectual chaos.

Some of James's defenders have responded by attacking Russell's distinction between adopting a hypothesis and believing, arguing that for a hypothesis to be "live" enough to be adopted, the researcher must have some belief in it or she would not judge it worth acting upon. But this line of argument

too obviously ignores basic facts about scientific methodology. Of course, the researcher must believe something in order to act, but she need not believe the hypothesis itself nor even the theory or data that entailed the hypothesis. There can be good methodological reasons to test hypotheses—i.e., to eliminate them as blind allies—that do not entail active belief in those hypotheses. Not surprisingly, this line of attack has done little to diminish the acceptance of Russell's critique.<sup>14</sup>

Let us consider a more promising line of attack. If we re-examine Russell's critique, it becomes obvious that it rests upon a very imperfect grasp of the practices to which Russell so confidently appeals. For example, Russell presumes that it was *always* a matter of indifference what an individual's reasons for testing a hypothesis might be. But his presumption is simply false. While it is sometimes true that an individual's reasons for testing a hypothesis are a matter of indifference, it is true only of investigations in the natural sciences, such as physics, astronomy, & chemistry. For Russell, of course, that was enough to say that it was true of science proper. In his mind, natural science *was* science. Other fields of inquiry were to be considered sciences just to the extent that their practices replicated those of the natural sciences. Such was his influence that most 20<sup>th</sup> century analytic philosophers have implicitly or explicitly concurred.<sup>15</sup> But his presumption is not true of the human sciences with which James was himself most involved, medicine and psychology, sciences in which acting upon a hypothesis regularly entails acting upon the mind or body of a living human subject who must consent to participation. By overlooking this, Russell inadvertently created a fourth obstacle to understanding of James's position.

I am not suggesting either that investigators engaged in human-subject research have special obligations to believe hypotheses they choose to test not possessed by investigators in other fields or that James ever held such a position. On the contrary, provided the hypothesis is warranted by the relevant background knowledge and the methods adopted for testing it are appropriate, it can be a matter of total indifference, scientifically, what motivates a particular investigator to test a particular hypothesis. And anyone who has served on research ethics review boards will know that such bodies neither know nor care how investigators have come to choose to test particular hypotheses. One investigator may be motivated by a belief that the hypothesis to be tested is true, a second by mere curiosity, a third by an obsessive desire to disprove a hated rival's hypothesis. Any one of these attitudes may serve the purpose of discovery of new and important truths. So investigator-belief is not viewed as necessary for the rational or moral justification of a particular research protocol, however invasive it may be.

What I am suggesting is that investigators are *not* the only parties to human subject research and that "The Will to Believe" operates upon this understanding. Experimental subjects who consent to research are also participants. Since research subjects face risks investigators do not, for the sake of benefits in which they will not share, the consent of research subjects is

always open to question. Respect for individual autonomy together with concern for subjects' well-being dictate that human subject research will only be justifiably ethically if fully informed, autonomous individuals could in principle be rationally justified in consenting to participation.<sup>16</sup> When the procedures involved are minimally invasive and long-term risks to health or well-being are few, the test is not hard to pass. Curiosity about the research, an altruistic desire to help humanity, the hope that one's participation will disprove a hated theory, or a desire to curry favor with the investigator who is also one's professor or boss could each provide sufficient reason to consent to a research study. Belief in the truth of the hypothesis would not be necessary or even especially desirable. But as the procedures grow more invasive, the risks of irreversible harm to the subject greater, meeting the test of rationally justifiable consent becomes more difficult. It becomes a matter of increasing concern that there be no inducements that might undermine rational consent. So if, for example, a new surgical procedure posing serious risks of paralysis or death is to be tried upon subjects who are unlikely to benefit medically, consent motivated by the prospect of currying favor with one's boss (the investigator) or alternately receiving a large cash payment, will no longer be justifiable—not because the individual subjects had not consented but because their consent cannot be considered free and rational. When experimentation presents subjects with substantial and irreversible risks, their motivations become *directly relevant* to the rational justifiability of their consent. The poorer the ratio of probable benefits to risks of harm, the more important that the subjects (or their guardians) give consent on the basis of non-coercive motivations such as the expectation that the knowledge to be gained is important for their own or others' well-being.<sup>17</sup> Or to put it in more Jamesian language, they must have faith, in advance of evidence, in the importance of learning whether or not the hypothesis is true.

Presumably at some point it also becomes relevant to the ethical justifiability of the *investigator's* decision to try to test a given hypothesis, specifically when the procedures are extremely invasive and the risks of irreparable harm very substantial. This is most obviously the case with investigators who are also caregivers with special professional obligations to avoid putting their clients at avoidable risk. But presumably it would also apply to any human scientist in a position to put her subjects at risk whether or not a professional-client relationship exists between them (for example, a cultural anthropologist whose research might put her subjects at risk of irreparable loss of some kind, confidentiality, perhaps, or other legal or financial harm.) At some point, it may no longer seem ethically acceptable for an investigator to put human subjects at great risk to satisfy idle curiosity or to disprove a hated rival's hypothesis unless she also *believes* the hypothesis (or in the latter case: the negation of another's hypothesis) is likely to be true and *believes* the benefits of answering the question are likely to outweigh the risks involved for the subjects—beliefs she must hold in advance of the obtaining the evidence to confirm them.<sup>18</sup>

In the late nineteenth century, the ethics of human subject research had not been codified by any of the reigning medical bodies of North America or Europe. The obligations of the physician's role were generally agreed to prohibit physicians from subjecting patients to drugs or procedures unlikely to benefit them. But these bodies did not explicitly require clinicians to respect client autonomy or to obtain consent either for medical experimentation or even for routine medical practice. While these were not accepted by the medical community as professional obligations, they were none the less imposed by courts in Europe and North America, if sporadically, when unwitting subjects or patients subsequently sued their physicians and physician-researchers. To avoid charges of battery, physicians were obliged by the courts to ensure they had consent to medical or experimental procedures.<sup>19</sup> No uniform standards for informed consent emerged from the courts, however, until the twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> In the nineteenth century, the task of deciding when and from whom to get consent and how much information should be disclosed in the process was left to practitioners and researchers to decide. Thus the same sorts of ethical issues in play today were in play in nineteenth century debates about human subject research, although there was much less consensus about just what the rights and duties of all participants should be.

Now the individual whose actions James defends in "The Will to Believe" is neither simply an investigator nor simply a research subject, but both simultaneously. The project proposed, of living as if the religious hypothesis were true (or false) is one of self-experimentation (or "auto-experimentation.") The ethics of this sort of research were and are today still highly controversial. It is often objected that investigators proposing self-experimentation may not be able to meet the ethical requirement of rational consent to the risks involved in the experiments they wish to perform upon themselves. Human nature being what it is, it seems reasonable to fear that such individuals may be too prone to 'believe' in themselves. Others may simply be poor judges of their own motivations, unable to fully appreciate the influence of professional pressures to make publishable discoveries or beat rivals to new results, and thus too vulnerable to the attractions of the time-saving strategy of running a 'pilot-study' on themselves.

This is not to say that consent to self-experimentation is never rationally justifiable—only that the fact one person fulfills two roles, investigator and experimental subject, does not diminish the ethical requirements to be met for the research to be justifiable. Common deontological normative theories, whether focused on respect for autonomy, human value, or human rights, typically require agents to follow the same principles of right action to their conduct towards themselves that they follow in conduct towards others. Common forms of egalitarian consequentialism require individuals to give as much and the same sort of consideration to their own welfare as they do to others. Increasingly medical and governmental bodies are doing the same; requiring self-experimentation to meet the same standards of ethical and

scientific adequacy that all other human subject research must meet.<sup>21</sup> But unease about self-experimentation has not been unique to recent decades. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, investigators engaging in self-experimentation were not infrequently subject to criticism by others in the clinical and research communities.<sup>22</sup> Thus for self-experimentation to be clearly rationally justifiable where significant risks of irreversible harm exist, it appears it is not sufficient that the investigator simply establish that her hypothesis warrants testing and that the tests planned are appropriate in the circumstances. She must also show that her own consent to participate is rational, i.e., the benefits she stands to gain (knowledge) as a *subject* outweigh the risks she must accept.

This is just the situation James's religious believer<sup>23</sup> finds herself in when she realizes that the publicly verifiable evidence for and against her religious convictions are roughly equivalent. If she wants to discover the truth, her only option is to *treat her belief as a hypothesis* and to the extent it is testable, to test it *on herself*. To be justified in proceeding James believer must fulfill two distinct sets of criteria.

First, as an *investigator*, she must determine what discoverable difference it would make in her life if the religious hypothesis were true or false and then look for evidence to confirm or disconfirm it. Presumably she will predict ways in which she would be better or worse for believing and then by observation try to determine whether experience seems to validate her predictions. James says "If the action required by or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, the religious faith is a pure superfluity, . . . and the controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds."<sup>24</sup> He takes the same position in the Preface to *The Will to Believe*, where he writes: "If religious hypotheses about the universe be in order at all, then the active faiths of individuals in them, freely expressing themselves in life, are the experimental tests by which they are verified, and the only means by which their truth or falsehood can be wrought out."<sup>25</sup> Of the two sets of criteria James's religious believer has to meet to be rationally justified in acting as if her religious hypothesis were true, James apparently considered this one the easier to explain and to satisfy—hence its relegation to a footnote, while discussion of the second, the criteria for rational consent by the investigator in the role of research subject are explained at greater length in the body of the essay. James was perhaps optimistic in thinking an explanatory footnote would be sufficient, however, his judgment that of the two jobs, the job of the investigator stood least in need of explanation or justification seems to have been born out by events.

Second, as the experimental subject, she must believe the knowledge she expects to gain will outweigh the risks involved in a life-long trial of the truth of the religious hypothesis.<sup>26</sup> Subjects of biomedical experimentation can rationally consent to risky research when they *believe* the knowledge to be gained is of very great importance and they have some grounds for this



belief. The grounds will not be decisive—it may be no more than faith in the investigator's expertise. And no experiment is a sure thing, it is always possible that the results will be indeterminate. Still there must be some belief and some grounds for it. Similarly, for the religious believer, consent is rational only if she believes the knowledge to be gained is of very great importance and has some grounds for this belief. So far, the criteria seems easily met; historically the question has been anything but trivial, so there is nothing odd or improbable in her believing the knowledge of its truth important. But she must also decide to *what sort of test* she should consent. To live by the belief that it is true and risk discovering that any sacrifices she has made were in vain, or to live by the belief that it is false, and risk the possibility that its benefits were real. How can she rationally justify her consent to one or the other hypothesis?

This is where James's proviso about our right to appeal to non-public, subjective data comes in. As there is no decisive, publicly verifiable evidence, we may—indeed must—fall back on the only data available to us, that of our private, personal experience. In James's case, this private data took the form of personal experiences, including “a passionate need of taking the world religiously,” the feeling that “evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half way,” and “the feeling . . . that by believing that there are gods . . . we are doing the universe the deepest service we can.”<sup>27</sup>

Once we get past the impediment created by too ready acceptance of Russell's impoverished picture of science and scientific practice, we can see how and why Russell's objections miss their mark. To begin with, Russell's first objection is clearly off the mark. James does not hold that personal experiences justify the believer in holding that the religious hypothesis is true. He holds instead that they justify her in *consenting* to what may prove a futile or even disastrous life-long experiment to experimentally confirm—to the extent possible—the hypothesis that her belief that it is true as opposed to the hypothesis that her belief is false. Moreover his permitting the use of personal experience in this way is not inconsistent with good scientific practice in the human sciences, but just the reverse. That such situations do not for the most part arise in other natural sciences is simply irrelevant.

Russell's second and third objections are as easily dismissed. Regarding the second objection, it is apparent that James's approach to religious belief does not entail that we are justified in believing the religious hypothesis true because it is the source or means to subjectively significant experiences. Subjectively significant experiences count, but only in so far as they can be taken as grounds for justifying consent to one sort of experiment in living, as Mill would put it, versus another. Russell's third objection, that James encourages us to believe different and contradictory things to the detriment of human understanding, turns out to be equally misguided. Since James's appeal to private experience is only for grounds for choosing which of opposing hypotheses to consent to test—not *which to hold demonstrably true or certain*. It does not license to us to assert whatever custom has taught us as absolute

truths. Encouraging us to adopt experimental attitudes to inherited beliefs hardly seems a recipe for intellectual chaos. In the Preface to *The Will to Believe*, James argues that we need not fear that evidence-based science will be imperiled by encouraging religious theorizing and practice to attempt to rise to the same bar. He writes:

The freest competition of the various faiths with one another, and their openest application to life by their several champions, are the most favorable conditions under which the survival of the fittest can proceed. They ought therefore not to lie hid each under its bushel, indulged-in quietly with friends. They ought to live in publicity, vying with each other; and it seems to me that (the regime of tolerance once granted, and a fair field shown) the scientist has nothing to fear for his own interests from the liveliest possible state of fermentation in the religious world of his time. Those faiths will best stand the test which adopt also his hypotheses, and make them integral elements of their own.<sup>28</sup>

Each objection arises from Russell's failure to appreciate the nature of human subject research and the two research roles that James's worried believer must adopt if she is to respond rationally to the dilemma she confronts. Thus the import of James's discussion of a believer's grounds for consent to self-experimentation entirely escaped Russell. To Russell, James's appeal to the subjective data of our passional natures was at best irrelevant, at worst detrimental to the experimental investigator's role. Russell did not connect it to the requirements of the self-experimenter's second role, because he never recognized its existence. To be fair, James was less than perfectly clear about this, both in his text, and very likely in his own mind. Research ethics was not well developed in James's day, so he was, to a certain extent, writing in a vacuum. Add the fact that he is discussing self-experimentation, where the roles of researcher and subject merge, it is no wonder he had trouble making his ideas clear.

Now someone might object that I am being too charitable, either to James's or to my own position, when I suggest he was merely unclear in his exposition of the dual roles of the self-experimentalist. Perhaps he was no more aware of them than Russell himself, in which case the account I am offering could at most be called Jamesian and not James's own. In support of this view, an objector might point to James's discussion of the Alpine Climber case in "The Sentiment of Rationality and "Is Life Worth Living," where he remarks that "faith beforehand in the uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true."<sup>29</sup> Such remarks seem to make just the assertion that I have been at pains to deny, that James held prior belief in a hypothesis was necessary and so justified for scientific investigators. Let's look at the case more closely.

James's Alpine Climber has discovered that a crevasse crosses the only route by which he can descend a peak. To cross it he must make a leap greater than any he has ever made before (though apparently not so great as to be

beyond human strength). The Climber must decide, in advance of sufficient evidence, what attitude to take towards the crevasse: that he can or cannot get across. Interestingly, James notes, whatever happens is apt to be, at least in part, an artifact of this accidental experiment's design. Climbers who doubt their ability to succeed despite a supreme effort, will be averse to making an embarrassing as well as fatal effort to save themselves. Thus they will opt for the hypothesis—"I will fall to my death"—and do so. Climbers who are disposed to the hypothesis—"I can make it with a supreme effort"—will not be put off by thoughts of how silly a hopeless effort will look, and so more likely to make the supreme effort that carries them to safety. In a sense, each will 'prove' his own hypothesis, but James highlights a significant asymmetry in the status of the evidence each can expect to obtain. A Climber who fails in part because he doubts himself, might have succeeded had he been more optimistic. His death lends his hypothesis support, but does not prove it conclusively. The Climber who succeeds because he was optimistic, on the other hand, will learn conclusively, one way or the other, whether his hypothesis was correct. No doubt will remain. Given the asymmetry of evidence obtainable in such cases, James is warranted in going on to say that here (1) faith contributes to its own justification in a way that doubt does not and (2) the fact that it does so makes the choice of the optimistic hypothesis that much more rationally justifiable *for those already inclined to it*. But note: here again the situation is depicted as one of assenting to undertake an experiment in hopes of obtaining evidence to justify belief. And in contrast to the Alpine Climber who will get his answer in a matter of minutes, the inquirers in "Is Life Worth Living" and "The Sentiment of Rationality" are told they must accept that "the 'scientific proof' that you are right may not be clear before the day of judgment"<sup>30</sup> and that it may turn out that "the co-operation of generations is needed to educe it."<sup>31</sup> These qualifications show clearly that for James, the faith that warrants an experimental subject in opting to test one hypothesis or its contrary, however personally satisfying, does not settle the question of its truth. His treatment of the Alpine Climber case does not suggest any confusion on his part about the different epistemic and moral responsibilities of the two roles self-experimentalists enact. Consequently, there seems no good reason to conclude that the interpretation I am proposing is merely Jamesian rather than true to James's own view.

If the foregoing is correct, then reading "The Will to Believe" as a discussion of the ethics of self-experimentation on potentially life-altering beliefs, may be the way, as Wernham puts it, "to get it right." It shows how James successfully captures our sense that acceptance and action upon beliefs prior to evidence can be justifiable in the right circumstances. And if correct, it suggests a plausible explanation of how earlier commentators were inadvertently misled about James's intentions by his severest and most influential critic, Bertrand Russell. Whether it meets Wernham's further challenge—of showing that the essay has something important to say about religion—must be left to others to decide.

But whether or not it does, however, reading "The Will to Believe" as an ethics of self-experimentation has a certain philosophical import beyond the question of how far James's position is ultimately defensible. In highlighting James's experimentalism, it may serve to remind us of the interesting and philosophically significant common ground between James's and Kant's philosophies of religion, common ground too often overlooked. James stated more than once that he wished he had called his essay, "A Critique of Pure Faith."<sup>32</sup> Despite his criticism of absolutisms generally, James's philosophy of religion has much in common with Kant's. Both insist we conduct our religious inquiries within the bounds of rational faculties they consider adequate only to the phenomenal world. Both find grounds in our anthropology, our 'passional needs,' to justify our acting on religious beliefs in advance of evidence while also imposing rational constraints that forbid our asserting them as demonstrably true or certain.

And to both, religious believers may make the same objection—we ask you for bread and you give us a stone. The bread we want is a defense of our faith in the truth of the religious hypothesis. The stone given in its place is merely permission to act as if the hypothesis were true. While outwardly they are the same—both warrant the substantially same outward behavior—inwardly these are two entirely different things. A defense would nourish the soul as mere permission cannot. It may be that in the end nothing either man can say about religion and religious belief will satisfy the demands of the religious believers who look to them for more than their theories of knowledge, mind, and metaphysics can to deliver. However this question is decided, the many convergences between James's and Kant's theories provide fertile ground for further exploration.<sup>33</sup>

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#### NOTES

1. William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, edited by Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, & Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976) pp. 13–33.

2. Quoted in Patrick K. Dooley, "The Nature of Belief: The Proper Context for James' 'The Will to Believe,'" *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 8 (1972): 141–51, 141–42.

3. James Wernham, *James's Will to Believe Doctrine: A Heretical View* (Kingston & Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1987), p. 7.

4. To say the approach is novel is not to say its conclusions will turn out to be unprecedented. To take just one recent example, the authors of *On James*, Robert B. Talise and D. Micah Hester, arrive at a not dissimilar conclusion about the essay to mine—although by different means—when they suggest that "religious belief is for James not belief *that* God exists or that hell awaits the wicked; it is rather belief *in* a certain moral project." (See *On James* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002), p. 90.) And they are

certainly not alone in holding such a view. The novelty in this approach lives chiefly in the argument offered to support such conclusions.

5. James, "The Will to Believe," p. 29–30.

6. The believers to whom the argument is directed are necessarily believers sufficiently disturbed by the absence of evidence in favor of their religious beliefs to view them as hypotheses in need of support. Believers whose belief has not been disturbed in this way will not experience the question of believing or not believing as 'live' in the first place. Consequently, James' arguments are not directed to them.

7. James, "The Will to Believe," p. 14.

8. James, "The Will to Believe," p. 15.

9. James, "The Will to Believe," p. 20.

10. Bertrand Russell, "Pragmatism," reprinted in *Philosophical Essays* (New York: George Allen & Unwin, 1966) 79–111.

11. Essentially similar criticisms are to be found in the work of more recent commentators such as Wernham and T. L. S. Sprigge, (*James and Bradley: American Truth and British Reality*, (Chicago: Open Court: 1993)), and have been conceded to have force even by defenders, such as Ellen Kappy Suckiel (see *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982)), and Gerald E. Myers (see *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986).

12. Russell, "Pragmatism," p. 84.

13. Russell, "Pragmatism," p. 82.

14. A related line of defense is to argue that James need not accept Russell's distinction between belief and other propositional attitudes, because it presumes a difference in essence or kind, at odds with James's psychology. This objection is persuasive only if it can be shown that there is no functional value to folk psychological notions about belief and its relation to other propositional attitudes. If we concede there is (as surely James would), then Russell has all he needs to launch his critique.

15. Note that in the essay James depicts natural sciences as largely engaged in solving 'trivial' questions. None of his examples of trivial scientific questions are questions about human physiology, anthropology or other social and life sciences which would require human-subject research to settle.

16. For an overview of contemporary views and debates focused on the North America, see Robert J. Levine, *Ethics and Regulation of Clinical Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baltimore: Urban and Schwarzenberg, 1986) and Ezekiel J. Emanuel *et al.*, eds., *Ethical and Regulatory Aspects of Clinical Research: Readings and Commentary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

17. Robert J. Levine, *Ethics and Regulation of Clinical Research*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1988); and see Allan Buchanan and Daniel Brock, *Deciding for Others: The Ethics of Surrogate Decision Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

18. E.g., It has been argued that medical investigators, because they are also clinicians with professional obligations to avoid harming their patients, should never withhold a standard therapy as part of a placebo trial of a novel therapy, unless they believe the evidence in favor of the novel therapy is as good as the evidence in favor of standard therapies. Only if the clinician is in such a state of "clinical equipoise" (equal belief), is such experimentation ethically permissible. See Benjamin Freedman, "Equipoise and the Ethics of Clinical Research," *New England Journal of Medicine* 317 (1987): 141–45, reprinted in Ekezial *et al.*

19. For background on legal and ethical developments in Europe and North America, see Ulrich Trohler, "Human Research: From Ethos to Law, From National to International Regulations" in Andreas-Holger Maehle and Johanna Geyer-Kordesch, eds., *Historical and Philosophical Perspectives on Biomedical Ethics* (Aldershot: Ashgate: 2002), 95–117.

20. See, e.g., George J. Annas and M. A. Grodin, eds. *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code: Human Rights in Human Experimentation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

21. See Teodoro Forcht Dagi, "Autoexperimentation," in Warren Thomas Reich, ed., *Encyclopedia of Bioethics*, rev. ed., 5 vols., (New York: Macmillan, 1995), I:211–15.

22. For an entertaining if somewhat unsystematic history, see Lawrence K Altman, *Who goes first? The Story of Self-Experimentation in Medicine* (New York: Random House, 1987).

23. Or non-believer—the same situation would arise for a non-believer for whom the religious hypothesis unexpectedly becomes live.

24. James, "The Will to Believe," p. 32.

25. James, Preface, *The Will to Believe*, p. 8.

26. Or, of course, its negation—esp., in the case of the atheist for whom the religious hypothesis has unexpectedly become live.

27. James, "The Will to Believe," p. 31.

28. James, Preface, *The Will to Believe*, p. 8–9.

29. See, "The Sentiment of Rationality," and "Is Life Worth Living," in *The Will to Believe*, 57–89, and 34–56. The quote is from "Is life Worth Living," p. 53.

30. "Is Life Worth Living," p. 56.

31. "Sentiment of Rationality," p. 88.

32. He says this in the letter to Peirce cited above and repeats it in a letter to Mark Baldwin of 1901: "Would God I have never thought of that unhappy title for my essay, but had called it a 'Critique of Pure Faith!'" See R. B. Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*, vol. 2 (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1935) p. 244–25. It was not his only alternate title; another was "The Right to Believe."

33. Meaning ground that is 'under exploited' rather than wholly 'unexploited'—for a helpful review see, Thomas Carlson, "James and the Kantian Tradition," in Ruth Anna Putnam, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 363–83.