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Review

Reviewed Work(s): William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion by Hunter Brown

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Source: *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 40, No. 3 (Summer, 2004), pp. 543-546

Published by: Indiana University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40321012>

Accessed: 02-08-2017 16:29 UTC

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Book Reviews

William James on Radical Empiricism and Religion

Hunter Brown

Toronto: University of Toronto Press

185 pp.

The title of Hunter Brown's book, while not wholly inaccurate, barely hints at the book's real object: defense of William James' famous paper, "The Will to Believe." For clarity's sake, a better title might have been "*The Will to Believe*" as an Introduction to James on Radical Empiricism and Religion. Because Brown sees objections to "The Will to Believe" as grounded in what he considers misreadings of James' epistemology and philosophy of religion, Brown's apologia introduces his readers to some of the broader issues the essay raises for James' empiricism and theism. It is an introduction one can heartily recommend to readers whose prior acquaintance with James is limited to the few essays most often reprinted in philosophical anthologies. There is more in James' radical empiricism and philosophy of religion than is dreamt of in "The Will to Believe" and the chief merit of Brown's book is how effectively this is conveyed.

"The Will to Believe" emerges as the central and guiding theme of the book from its earliest pages. In his introduction, Brown notes that James' defense of his 'religious hypothesis' has long been criticized for (1) advocating willful creation of or continuance in a belief for the sake for subjective satisfaction it provides the believer and/or (2) confusing belief with the purely tentative adoption of hypotheses as instruments of investigation. Brown attributes these criticisms to inattention to the text and to the role of crucial conceptions within it, especially the notions of 'liveness' and of the chief consequence of adopting the religious hypothesis — what James elsewhere calls "the strenuous mood." To rebut these charges, then, Brown argues, we must reexamine them in the context of James' epistemology and philosophy of religion.

Chapter 1 opens with a brief sketch of James' theism and the methodology he adopts for studying religious phenomena in texts such as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *The Will to Believe*. Brown emphasizes the anti-dogmatic character of James' approach, arguing that James' main concern throughout is to determine what would constitute intellectually responsible behavior towards the

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religious beliefs and experiences people report, not to exhort readers either to will into existence beliefs they do not possess nor to endorse the willful dismissal of evidence against religious belief. James' object, Brown argues, is not to combat atheism but dogmatism. He was as opposed to dogmatism allied with theism as its opposite.

In chapter 2, Brown begins his critical defense of "The Will to Believe" and the constraints it imposes upon wishful thinking. The true topic of this essay, as Brown rightly points out, is our *right* to stand by beliefs we hold but cannot prove true — a right James holds that we may legitimately exercise only in situations where specific conditions obtain: the belief is 'live;' our choice is 'forced;' and the significance of retaining or rejecting the belief 'momentous.' 'Liveness,' Brown argues, has too often been seen as a confession of relativism — the acceptance of belief on the basis of such irrational and non-evidential considerations as custom or congeniality. Brown argues that neither the essay properly understood nor James' 'radical empiricist' insistence upon faithful consideration of every presentation of experience, however apparently 'subjective' or 'idiosyncratic,' supports this view. Live hypotheses for James are not those we accept on the basis of custom or congeniality, but are instead those that remain intellectually plausible to us *all* things considered — including any and all doubts that can be raised against it.

But critics have charged that the account of immediate experience that underlies James' radical empiricism undercuts his ability to claim that liveness constrains wishful thinking, because we cannot readily discern where in immediate experience or its analysis the subjective leaves off and the objective begins. In his third chapter, Brown digresses from his examination of the argument of "The Will to Believe" to respond to these worries. He offers a brief characterization of James' treatment of immediate experience, the upshot of which is that the difficulty, though real, is no greater in the case of a religious hypothesis than a scientific one. Brown argues that the same problem of disentangling the origins of their respective intellectual appeals arises and thus does not peculiarly impugn James' religious hypothesis.

In chapter 4, Brown returns to the specific charges that James advocates wishful thinking for subjective personal benefit and confuses belief with hypothesis adoption. Here Brown notes that the chief 'benefit' James anticipates from religious belief — the strenuous mood — is a life devoted to proving the truth of one's belief in a higher reality, a life of devotion and service that is more likely to repel than attract prudent seekers of the subjective satisfactions which the religious hypothesis is usually supposed to offer; effortless peace of mind and reassurance that all is already right with the world. To accept James' religious hypothesis is to accept that one's life is subject to universal forces of good and evil and that the success of one's efforts to cope are in doubt. The believer may personally benefit (and will if the hypothesis is true) but at the cost of much effort, anxiety, and the sacrifice of many subjective satisfactions.

Still James himself seems to lend some credence to the charge that he confused hypothesis adoption with belief when he declared that 'there is some believing tendency' where ever one is willing to act, since it seems to entail the obviously false conclusion that any one who tests a hypothesis believes it. Brown is cautious about reading more into the initial sketchy treatment of 'belief' in the essay than is fair or reasonable. When James first introduces the term, 'belief' seems to cover what we might broadly call 'pro attitudes,' a category including many propositional attitudes besides belief in a proposition's truth. Further, in what follows, it is undeniably a *belief* in the religious hypothesis, not some vague pro-attitude towards it, that is at issue. Thus the charge that James confused hypothesis adoption and belief seems beside the point.

Brown's discussion is lucid throughout, his explications of the relevant texts generally sound and informative. Whether his defense will seem as satisfactory to critics as admirers of James is questionable. Brown expertly marshals historical evidence to rebut the charge that James advocated creating belief *ex nihilo*. But the defense of the criterion of 'liveness' from charges of relativism (being relative to the believer's personal character or cultural indoctrination) as innocuous because non-religious hypotheses arise from and are adopted for test by persons equally affected by personal tastes and/or cultural prejudices is apt to be dismissed by critics as a *tu quoque* response that does not adequately address their concerns.

Moreover, one might argue that Brown's apology is in any case unnecessary. If we follow James' suggestion in his introduction to *The Will to Believe*, that the subject of the essay is an individual's rational justification for making her life an experimental test (of at least some aspects) of her religious hypothesis, then what the essay is really about is the rationality of consent to participation in what we now call 'human-subject research.' If so, the charge that James advocated consent for subjective satisfaction is innocuous (subjective satisfactions just *are* what motivate people to consent to research) and the charge that he confused belief with hypothesis adoption beside the point because it mistakes the point of view James was taking — not that of the research scientist who risks little or nothing in opting to test a hypothesis (any old 'pro-attitude' will do, rationally speaking), but of the potential research subject for whom consent to risky experimentation cannot rationally be motivated by just any old 'pro-attitude' one might happen to have toward the hypothesis.

But whether or not critics or admirers of William James agree or disagree over the success of Brown's defense of the essay, as a pedagogical device for readers new to James' work generally or new to his philosophy of religion specifically, I think it works extremely well. Brown is to be complimented on the ingenious use he makes of the controversy to open up for his reader the wider issues that James' empiricism and theism attempt to address while at the same time providing the reader with a helpful key for interpreting those issues without which she might easily lose her way. As such, it is a reference work of

considerable value.

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