

The Will to Believe

and other essays

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August 6 - 12, 2006

Russell once remarked that people have things wrong. It is not the case that in Science we know but in Religion we merely believe. On the contrary, it is in Religion we are offered certitude, while in Science we are asked to doubt.

William James noted for his American type pragmatism and common-sense, both as a scientist and philosopher, nevertheless has a sympathetic, some would say soft spot, for religion and especially religious experience. Some may chastise him for his credulity in matters super-natural, others on the other hand may commend his open-mindedness.

His title-essay concerns 'faith'. His point is that science rests on some principles of faith, namely the uniformity of nature, its mechanical aspects, and its propensity for rational explanation. However, he is not so sure that science will be able to account for everything, such a faith in its omnipotence is not amenable to a scientific proof. He inweighs against the sceptic, arguing that in certain momentous choices we are confronted with, there is no opportunity to defer judgement until all the evidence is in for a seasoned decision. There is no middle ground, either you are for or against. If Nansen invites you to join in an expedition to the North Pole, it is most likely to be the one opportunity you will get to go there, and dawdling only will mean that you lose it, and hence would be equivalent to refusing it outright. In the same way the opportunity to believe in God might be of the same character. You cannot ask for evidence, you have to, as all religious thinkers have always urged, take the leap of faith¹. On a more pragmatic level, James notes that faith actually is self-serving. In social matters if you have faith in the good opinion others have of you, this good opinion will materialize as a consequence of the faith, but if the faith is lacking, more likely than not, others will not form a good opinion of you. In the same way a small gang of bandits might rob an entire train, secure in their faith that all will support the others, while the passengers, enjoying no such faith in the fidelity of their fellow travellers, are thus unable to put up any effective resistance, which however would have been forthcoming had they been assured that any action of defence they would have undertaken would have been supported by others. Finally, if stranded on a high mountain, and forced to take a leap in order to escape your doomed predicament, only faith in your ability to take the jump and land securely on your feet, will allow you do to so. Once you doubt your ability, you will most certainly founder (and hence perish).

As usual James is at his best and most original when discussing the concrete detail with a pragmatic view, but rather tedious and unconvincing, when reiterating common pieties of his age. Thus most of the essays in the collection read tediously, they are wordy

¹ It is noteworthy that the gravest sin that can be committed is not in the nature of a transgression, but the simple refusal to believe

and somewhat pompous, expressing many a respectable and unobjectionable sentiment, but somehow never getting to the point. In particular this concerns his moral essays, one of which addresses whether life is worth living. His conclusion seems to be that only religion can offer a meaning to existence, and hence provide a reason for living at all. And even if religion does not resolve the problem of the existence of evil in the world, the solution is to ignore its cosmic aspects of evil, of which the individual can do nothing, and instead concentrate on the innocent joys of the individual life. As a sermon this is what to be expected, but as the pronouncements of a distinguished philosopher and psychologist somehow below expectation. Similarly his 'sentiments of rationality' is but an elaboration of the first essay on the irrational premises that underlie rationality itself, producing many a pious remark. His discussion of theism and gnosticism is hard to follow, to put a charitable spin on it, and his essay on the dilemma of determinism promises more than it is able to deliver. James professes to believe in free will, although admitting that he has no real hard argument for it. Thus his essay turns into a discussion of the moral implications of a determined world, in which it is impossible to imagine for each horrible fact an alternative, in which it is being excised. Intimately connected with free will is the notion of regret. Regret that existence did not take another path in a bifurcation, that things could as well have been otherwise. One does tend to agree with him on many of the specific issues he brings about, but to what avail when none seems to lead anywhere. Instead the reader is left with the feeling of being led around a plate filled with hot porridge, without the author ever daring to get him any closer. It might be symptomatic that those essays are in the nature of lectures delivered to various audiences. It is hard to dispel the suspicion that James has been saddled with the obligation of coming up with something to say without really having much to say, and what he had to say further subjected to restrictions imposed by the particular composition of the audiences, as far as sentiments and sensitivities as well as lack of intellectual sophistication go.

Thus when we come to James published writings, even in rather popular issues, his essays pick up. The most interesting one is his essay on why individual matters in the development of societies taking exception to the views of Herbert Spencer and his disciples. He starts out with a general philosophical remark, namely that it is pointless to take everything into account when treating the occurrence of a single fact, especially when it comes to culpability. This ties up with determinism, James conceding that the death of a sparrow by being hit by a stone thrown by a mischievous boy may only treat the latter as the proximate cause, that it by itself maybe the outcome of a myriad subsidiary causes that placed that boy and sparrow simultaneously at that particular time and place imposing on the boy his particular impulse and enabling his nervous system to excite his muscles to perform the necessary co-ordinated response to successfully implement it. To this everything more or less, with emphasis on less, would contribute, like the geometry of distant parts of the Milky Way, or the rules of medieval guilds in Sicily. For an intellect with an almost infinite capacity of retention and conclusion, which might keep everything together and following all the casual chains immediately, this might be a reasonable approach, but not to us humans, who must simplify the world into independent units with no casual relationships to each other. James points out that it was the particular genius of Darwin to realise that there were two different processes, one producing variability and the other

its retention, none having anything to do with the other. Previous evolutionary theories had somehow conflated them, assuming that variability was produced by the imposition of the environment, not only its various survivals. Variability is somehow generated by strange and unknown molecular processes, which we need not know², while the retention is simply the test whether it is compatible with the environment. Thus James had, unlike I believe most vocal Darwinists at the time, a clear understanding of the fundamental difference between Lamarck and Darwin.

James in his essay 'Great men and their Environment' wants to present an evolutionary description of how societies change. His main thesis is that the individual makes a difference, and that while individual differences may be small, their effects nevertheless may be momentous. He compares with a drop of rain falling on the continental divide. The most minute change of position of impact may have a huge difference as to whether it will flow out to the Pacific or the Atlantic. He takes exception to Spencer who argues that the individual does not matter, and arguments to the contrary are based on vague reasonings. Individuals cannot be miracles, that would go against the principles of our scientific understanding, so the argument goes, and thus they have to be normal people, and as normal people they are the effects of natural causes, like traditions, climate, and thus their effects in their turns, will simply be translations of the same. Thus with seemingly impeccable logic Spencer seems to prove that the individual can simply be factored out, James notes that the fallacy of the argument is the same as the one that contributes to any event the most arcane and extensive causes. Speak about being vague! It is the author instead that provides the specific explanation, pointing out that ideas presented by exceptional men, never mind how they did arise, have decisive impacts on the historical development of societies. On one hand one may argue that this is the butterfly effect, but with the difference that it is hard, not to say impossible, to actually manifest a casual chain starting from the fluttering of tiny wings, while it is far easier to do so with ideas promulgated and pondered.

It is true that a genius has to be born at the right time, a time ready for his contribution. Not too early, when the right circumstances are not yet present, what would a Watt, or any modern genius for that matter, have accomplished if born into a stone-age society; nor too late, when the discoveries for which the individual is primed, have already been made³. On the other hand genius can manifest itself differently and the particular form it takes might be forced by circumstances⁴. Sometimes by pure chance, many geniuses may come upon each other so closely in time as not to allow the ferment and excitation

² And indeed in the time of Darwin there was no known mechanism that could explain how variability of progeny could come about, that would have to wait for the rediscovery of Mendel and the later biochemical synthesis that occurred during the later half of the 20th century

³ It is a common experience for those that study the history of thought, that had they only been born earlier, they would have had the opportunity to make the very same discoveries that now accords such retroactive praise. While in exceptional circumstances this might be true, the sobering fact is that most of our insights are due to education and without it we would have been as barren as those we fancy ourselves to have risen above

⁴ This is a more romantic idea of genius, a propensity to do great things, no matter what. As usual the truth lies somewhere in the middle between extremes.

they cause to wane or cool down, producing a great flowering, like that of the pre-Hellenic Greeks. Such are the explanations, not those affected by say climate alone. True, climate does provide constraints, but there is a fundamental distinction between necessary and sufficient conditions.

James is an avowed opponent of Hegel and the metaphysical tradition he represents. In his 'Principles of Psychology'⁵, he notes that sentences that make grammatical sense not necessarily implies real content, remarking, somewhat sarcastically, that there are people who nevertheless are encouraged to try to find the latter in the writings of Hegel. James as a pragmatist takes exception to any grand and systematic metaphysical theory, which he sees as an intellectual tyranny. He prefers the universe to be a banquet in which we all can partake with our own various views only partially connected to each other; while somebody like Hegel, wants everything or nothing, intent upon imposing on us all, the same iron-clad principles. James then enters upon a long denouncement of Hegels philosophy, noting that it is usually presented in such alluring garbs to entice the unwary to enter, but that it is in the nature of a mouse-trap, from which no one will escape once they find themselves inside. His point is to show that Hegel can be demolished without having to enter into all of his thought, simply by undercutting the premises that provide its foundations⁶. James goes through the many idiosyncracies of Hegelian logic and its strange claims that equality is really the same as difference, and difference is equality, and the basis for everything is self-contradiction. He notes in particular that an assertive sentence about something existing is a commentary on the real world, while its negation is not, but is instead a commentary on the sentence it negates. To say that the table does not exists, does not mean to say that some mysterious non-table exists. In the end he refers to the experimental effects of nitro-oxygen intoxication to which he had willingly subjected himself. Those induced an exhilarating sense of everything fitting together, an exhilaration that quickly turned into nausea. But nevertheless while the intoxication lasted, Hegelian philosophy made sense to him. Concomitant with the duration of the experiment he jotted down his thoughts, which on recovery looked as so much nonsense, but which to a mind schooled in Hegelian philosophy, would make perfect sense. So much for Hegel...

The final essay is a somewhat tedious and appreciative account of a British Society for Psychic research, devoted to the project of critically assessing all claims to super-natural phenomena. The academic scientist does naturally discount all of this out of hand as not fitting into the scientific world-view. While James is critical to such a high-minded view, remarking that all major scientific advances have been based on the inconvenient fact, whose accomodation has necessitated rethinkings and reformulations, nevertheless he cannot but maintain a sympathy for such an attitude, because the totality of anecdotal evidence, makes no corroboration sense, none seems connected to any other, all are hard, not to say impossible, to try and verify, and without patterns science gets no purchase. On the other hand a single verification of anyone of those experiences of the super-natural

⁵ Volume I

⁶ This is reminiscent of the claim of many pseudo-sciences to the effect that one needs to master their disciplines before one is entitled to criticise them. In many human endeavours, this may have a point, but not in science, when ramifications can be tested and when found wanting cast severe asperations on the entire enterprise

(often in the form of hallucinatory visions, with an informational content, impervious to a standard scientific explanation) would topple established scientific dogma, just as the discovery of a single white crow would demolish the theory that all crows are black⁷ James has an open mind and confesses that he has been sufficiently convinced of the genuine nature of one of those cases, and thus, one presumes, his faith in present science is shaken. However, this does not mean that his faith in science as such is perturbed, on the contrary, science like life, feeds on its own decay, and thus it simply needs to accomodate itself again, just as it has done in the past. The science of yesterday strikes us now as limited and old-fashioned, James muses, and what gurantees are there that the science of today will evade a smiliarly harsh verdict of our own posterity.

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⁷ This is of course very reminiscent of Popper, written more than a decade before Popper was born.