

THE HERMENEUTICAL KEYS TO WILLIAM JAMES'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION: PROTESTANT IMPULSES, VITAL BELIEF

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Abstract. This essay argues that the American psychologist and philosopher William James should be viewed in the Lutheran Reformation's tradition because this viewpoint offers the hermeneutical key to his philosophy of religion. Though James obviously didn't ascribe to biblical authority, he expressed the following religious sensibilities made possible by Martin Luther and his contemporaries: 1) challenge of prevailing systems, 2) anti-rationalism, 3) being pro-religious experience and dynamic belief, 4) need for a personal, caring God, and also 5) a gospel of religious comfort. This essay asks, in one specific form, how religious concerns can hold steady over time but cause very different expressions of faith.

In his famous *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the American philosopher and psychologist William James offers a rather secularized version of the Protestant Reformation's central insight: a person is justified by faith apart from moral achievement. James writes of the tormented individual: „under these circumstances the way to success, as vouched for by innumerable authentic personal narrations, is by an anti-moralistic method, by the ‘surrender’ of which I spoke . . . This is salvation through self-despair, the dying to be truly born, of Lutheran theology, the passage into nothing of which Jacob Behmen writes” (1997a, p. 101; Shaw 1986, pp. 5–16). This salvation cannot be earned; it must somehow be experienced as a gift, a consequence of giving up. Possibly James found this „Gospel of Relaxation” (James 1958) from his research without recourse to a predisposing tradition, but this study argues the opposite—that sensibilities rooted in the Lutheran Reformation and its experiential concept of salvation drive his philosophy of religion.

James is famous for his contributions to psychology and philosophy, but he is rarely viewed in terms of a theological tradition. As this essay's title implies, this perspective is significant for unlocking the door to his entire religious philosophy. The claim is not obvious, given that he was not a practicing Lutheran, and whatever Reformed roots his family inherited had dried up and rotted before he was even born (Myers 1986, p. 386). However, he has inherent Protestant impulses from those who struggled with Enlightenment challenges to faith (be they pressures from empirical science or rationalism) much like Luther faced theological hardships in medieval Christianity. This struggle to blaze a new path for faith binds them in intellectual history because, in different ways, they both defended the individual's belief in a personal God. James's defense against the reductive materialism and Hegelian Idealism¹ of his day (as he perceived them) was a battle similar to Luther's attack against Catholic scholasticism and accrued tradition.

The similarities between James and the 16th century reformers appear in several tendencies, broadening the analogy. Reformers challenge (*pro-test*) a prevailing system directly impacting faith, just as Luther challenged Catholicism's authority or Kant limited reason and skepticism (Kant 1996, preface). Reformers challenge the idea of God built substantially out of logic, like the scholastic God, whose attributes are derived from the biblical symbols or the idea of infinity and filtered through syllogisms. Thus, the reformers are anti-speculative about God's nature, rejecting the scholasticism as they perceive it and its later manifestations from Descartes through Hegel. If sweeping speculation about God and proofs of his existence are detrimental to reformers, then they find their faith rooted elsewhere; rationally non-verifiable faith and experience are the true guides to reality. Because faith is much in vain if its object is a wrathful or indifferent God, the reformer seeks a personal God who cares for individuals' destinies within the world's whole fate. Finally, the compassionate God corresponds to a gospel of comfort or assurance of salvation that the reformer embraces (Wengert 2009). The success of this essay's thesis depends on the possibility of finding these theological sensibilities philosophically transformed in James's writings.

¹ Materialism is a greater category under which Darwinism falls and any metaphysic that denies supernatural dimensions of the universe. Hegelian Idealism is a highly speculative kind of theism that exalts its own brand of intellectualist (rationalist) logic as the key to reality. Both can be considered 'Baconian' in that they both try to conquer reality through reason and science.

Though a reformer, William James cannot be identified with evangelical Christianity except as its philosophical product. Although he referred to himself as a Christian, it was a „rather hopelessly non-evangelical” one (Hardwick 1993, p. 166), and the continuity between his own confession of faith and the 16th century Lutherans is quite limited despite his excessive praise for Luther.² But for the above reasons, he belongs with the Reformers, in spirit if not content, while struggling with diverse enemies.³ My task is to show how James was able to uphold a non-rational faith even as a Harvard professor with no sectarian wagons to hide behind, how he first criticized the authority of hard science, and, once science's grip loosened, argued for the significance of religion. For James, faith's life significance de-prioritized the need for universally defensible religion and opened up religion's self-authentication for the individual. If religion helps, its universal validation is of secondary concern. Much of James's writing on the subject approaches this basic thesis, bringing consistency to this thought. He saw false alternatives in materialism and Idealism's absolute claims that force either a rationally based religion or none at all. James felt that both movements reveal people's personalities more than timeless truths, and he devoted great energy to expound their general misunderstanding of faith. It is best, then, to start with his effort to contain these movements.

THE LIMITS OF SCIENCE

Throughout his career, James demanded humility in scientific inquiry. This call to modesty stemmed in part from his mammoth understanding of the universe's complexity and the extreme limitation of human minds to conquer nature through reason and science. He portrays dogs' and cats' understanding of humans as analogous to humans' understanding of the universe (James 1995, p. 116). Animals in a library can see books and listen to conversations, but they have only the thinnest understanding of a library. This

² E.g. see James 1927. He said: “Luther broke through the crust of all this naturalistic self-sufficiency. He thought (and possibly he was right) that Saint Paul had done it already. Religious experience of the Lutheran type brings all our naturalistic standards to bankruptcy. You are strong only by being weak, it shows. You can not live on pride or self-sufficiency. There is a light in which all the naturally founded and correctly accepted distinctions, excellences, and safeguards of our characters appear as absolute childishness. To give up one's conceit of being good is the only door to the Universe's deeper reaches.”

³ Other possible Protestant reformers in this line are Friedrich Schleiermacher, Søren Kierkegaard, and Karl Barth.

is how James felt about humans in a pluralistic universe, and he repudiated any attempts to deny the mysteries of existence through science.

Although a professional psychologist (or perhaps because of it), James had a sober sense of inductive inquiry's limitation. He identified himself as an *empiricist*—one who seeks knowledge through observation and experimentation—but unlike materialists such as William Clifford and Thomas Huxley, he believed science's objectivity to be tenuous. Objectivity, or 'objective truth' is a confusing term to postmoderns; here it simply denotes claims of supposed universal relevance, propositions that any reasonable individual should acknowledge. This was a time, similar to our 21st century contemporary one when one could say that: „one runs a better chance of being listened to to-day if one can quote Darwin and Helmholtz than if one can only quote Schleiermacher or Coleridge" (1956, p. 112). James was concerned that the West's passion for science, begun already in the early 17th century with Francis Bacon and Galileo, had gained too much unfavorable momentum. Darwin's fall from faith into a cold naturalism was symbolic of Christianity lapsing into secularism with increasing velocity, a turn striking James as depressing—if human life can be reduced to the causality of dead matter. Early in his career, he discovered a way to use science against itself, so to speak, by uncovering the psychological motivations behind claims to rationality. The essay „The Sentiment of Rationality" (published 1879) was an attempt to ask an unprecedented question of science: What does rationality feel like? (1956, pp. 63–66). Of course basic facts such as '7+7=14' or 'all known walruses have whiskers' have little affective import, but the way facts are built into great, moral-determining systems never lacks a non-rational impetus. James contended that rationality is „unimpeded mental function", unmasking the affective energy behind all philosophies (1956, p. 75). Rationality is what satisfies our minds. For instance, Arthur Schopenhauer, because of his pessimistic mood, discovered a gloomy philosophy; and Walt Whitman the optimist found a viewpoint of great enthusiasm for life. This same analysis applies to the rise of materialism. At root, materialists desire to conjure their own comfort by vanquishing all unpredictability from nature. Given the limitation of our knowledge, James had no problem acknowledging the possibility of *miracles*, but the materialists he faced had dismissed this anomaly a priori because it conflicted with their emotional need for control (1956, p. 80). As reformer, James hollowed out a place where faith in a personal God could thrive. He accomplished the task by exposing faith as *basic* to all human endeavors and especially to those pretending to have transcended the need for it. This strong conviction that „our science is a drop,

our ignorance a sea" is one that never left him (1956, p. 64). It set up his entire philosophy of 'Radical Empiricism', encouraging the idea of the dynamic nature of truth, which must always answer to experience (i.e. its significance for human life). Although James thought materialism could never become a satisfying worldview, he felt that it had already plagued England and France by 1880 and was gaining enough traction in America to warrant positive counteraction.

If atheistic materialism was James's first enemy, Hegelian Idealism was close behind. His attitude toward Idealism was somewhat complicated by his friendship with Idealist colleague Josiah Royce, but despite Royce's influence, James generally condemned the system and method. In a letter to French philosopher Charles Renouvier he expressed his view intriguingly: „My principal amusement this winter [December, 1880] has been resisting the inroads of Hegelism in our University [Harvard] . . . as a reaction against materialistic evolutionism it has its use, only this evolutionism is fertile while Hegelism is absolutely sterile”.⁴ Hegelianism is a good decoy to distract the atheists, but it is not a lasting power. An empiricist by temperament, James distrusted the ability of the mind's internal workings to grasp the nature of divine reality, because „God's being is sacred from ours”, and our task is to cooperate with him through our belief rather than any „speculative conquest of him” (1956, p. 141).

James viewed Hegelianism as a new rendition of the medieval Catholic scholasticism that Luther had so fully polemicized against (Kolb 2009, pp. 30–34). While James eventually relaxed his diatribe against materialism, his denunciation of Idealism only grew hotter from the early 1880's to his death in 1910. He found several problems with Hegel, and the need to emphasize them increased as he developed his own competing metaphysic in *A Pluralistic Universe*. As Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, he „inveighed against a 'Bloc Universe' and against any philosophy which identified the real with the actual” (James 1997a, introduction). James's distaste for scientific arrogance continued in similar form with Idealism with its reality conquering impulse, and his „aversion to metaphysical systems” as Niebuhr depicted it shows, again, his Protestant reformer impulse. Hegelian arrogance might have been forgivable had the philosophy produced positive results, but indeed it did not! The Bloc Universe had inspired thinkers to abstract upon

⁴ Hardwick 1993, p. 113. Additionally: „It is a strange thing, this resurrection of Hegel in England and here, after his burial in Germany. I think his philosophy will probably have an important influence on the development of our liberal form of Christianity. It gives a quasi-metaphysic backbone which this theology has always been in need of, but it is too fundamentally rotten and charlatanish to last long”.

abstractions to the point of unintelligibility (1997b)—anyone who has tried to read *The Phenomenology of Spirit* from start to finish might agree. James found its approach not only hermeneutically turbid but also disconnected from empirical honesty, sacrificing the gains of inductive research to castles in the sky. The problem, then, is not just that the ‘Bloc Universe’ proved itself contrary to concrete experience; its true deficiency was in excising God’s personality, immanence, and care. In calculating God’s identity like a lofty mathematical equation, Hegel had only resuscitated a more respectable *Zeus-Pantokrator* and killed any hope for religious belief having a meaning in individual lives. Instead of a pluralistic universe, where spontaneity and wonder remain, Hegelism was attempting to conquer individuality, freedom, and significance of religion in life (James 1909, lectures 2–3). With these objections unleashed, censuring materialism and Idealism, James was free to propose an alternative philosophy.

While his metaphysical alternative to materialism and Idealism is not the primary focus here, a short description will link these critiques to his positive view of religion. In 1896 James called his position “Radical Empiricism”, (1956, p. vi–vii) *empirical* in continually adjusting to new experiences and results, *radical* in denying monism (either Hegelian or material) dogmatic privilege. In sum, experience must be the measure of any philosophical system. If Radical Empiricism is the hardware of James’s thought, then surely *Pragmatism* (published 1907) is the software running it. The Pragmatism movement is infamous for creating confusion, both because of the term’s multifarious application and a general lack of clarity in its proponents (viz. John Dewey, F.S.C. Schiller, C.S. Peirce). Generally, Pragmatism is a method of finding practical consequences in ideas, but it can be broken down into about three functions. 1) As a theory of truth or cognition it evinces truth as a property of human thoughts, not something *in* things or independent of a mind. 2) As a theory of interpretation, it helps to discern between philosophical systems by determining which is most practically feasible. And, 3) when coupled with Radical Empiricism, it is a metaphysic that affirms the mind’s ability not only to discover truths about reality but to take an active role in shaping reality. This function follows Kant („Thoughts without content are void; intuitions without conceptions, blind”, 1999, p. 45) but it radicalizes thought’s ability to alter reality through time as experience changes. This aspect of Pragmatism is the most relevant to James’s defense of religion because it grants faith the power to establish its own truth ahead of any verifiable evidence.⁵

⁵ As a philosopher, James didn’t distinguish strictly between religious and non-reli-

BELIEF AND TRUTH

One occasion in James's young life set the key for his later confidence in the power of belief and optimistic thinking in general. He was 28, living hermitically in Berlin, and had sunk into despondency about moral values. If the universe really were a cold mechanism, he considered, and humans were determined by impersonal causes, then moral responsibility and an ultimate difference between good and evil are unfounded. That is, if free choice is an illusion, then so is everything else we hold dear, he reasoned. But the despairing young James found an answer in French philosopher Charles Renouvier's defense of free will based on the human ability to control thoughts.⁶ Renouvier's insight gave James the confidence to affirm moral reality and the significance of human choice. This altered way of thinking offered an exit from the depression he was suffering. The importance of this event lies in the nature of this conversion to free will. If Kant is right, both freedom and determinism are at bottom faith statements. Neither one can be proved conclusively (Kant 1999, p. 264ff.). Thus, Renouvier served to clear away the persuasion of determinism and allow James to embrace freedom without verification. Once he did, he discovered a wealth of benefits philosophically and existentially, making a lapse back to determinism, for him, irrational. Much of James's later work shows him trying to serve his audience as Renouvier served him.

This philosophy of belief was actually part of James's mindset even before he read Renouvier, making that experience more of a confirmation than an epiphany of faith's power. Already in 1868, he wrote to his friend Thomas Ward: „I am sure that one can, by merely thinking of these matters of fact [beauties of nature], limit the power of one's evil moods over one's way of looking at the Kosmos” (Hardwick 1993, p. 51). As the statement shows, this philosophy first appears as a call for optimism over pessimism. From his earliest publications, James was convinced that thinking can influence reality in these issues. Belief can authenticate itself. In Christian

gious faith. The practical weight of his thought (as he would have it) is a defense of *both*. Interestingly, here James proves himself, more than any other place, a prophet of postmodernism, which is acutely sensitized to the contextual nature of all truth claims and the lack of philosophical foundations for knowledge.

⁶ See Renouvier 1859, ch. 9, 11, also pp. 324–371. The quote from James: „I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will—‘the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts’—need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present—until next year—that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will” (Myers 1986, p. 46).

terms, only faith in Christ's reality finds salvation as an eschatological event: the reality of salvation is not a fact to be found objectively, but belief is a pre-condition of finding its truth (Bultmann 1965, pp. 128–137). As a philosopher, James never defended doctrinal particulars but rather offered an apology for the healthiness of faith in human life. While he later defended God's existence, his early work functioned largely in the context of optimism and its importance for a non-illusory morality (Myers 1986, p. 446).

Theism was slow to develop in his system, especially as the *Principles of Psychology* occupied the first ten years of his career with concerns pertaining to behavioral science. Even so, his essay „Reflex Action and Theism” (published 1881) appeared, showing the early link between psychology and theistic faith. Reflex action is a nineteenth century way of explaining human behavior in a triadic structure. It states that humans first receive *impressions* by sensing the external environment. Then they carry out a *reflective stage* by which these impressions are ordered within their sensibilities and oriented toward understanding. The consequence, then, is *reaction*, or fitting action based on the reflection of sense data (James 1956, p. 115). The essential statement of this behavioral analysis is that humans act with ends in mind; and without invoking a wide, teleological structure such as Darwinian evolution, it locates the significance of actions in their functions, responding to and mastering their environment.

While any 19th century psychologist might have affirmed a version of this structure, James offers a novel interpretation. The reflexive stage, he argues, functions most adequately if it presupposes the idea of God, defined as the deepest power in the universe and as a mental personality.⁷ In this early writing the implications of this claim are vague but firmly stated nonetheless. In order for healthy thought and action, people have to consider themselves in relation to a personal governor of the universe; only then will they live as rationally as possible. Any object of concern greater than God, James avers, would be impossible if God is the limit, and anything less than God would be irrational.⁸ This charge of irrationality for anyone neglecting the divine is important as a direct attack on eliminative materialism and logical positivisms with their anti-theistic bias. The argument is quite minimal. Being approached from a psychological standpoint, the most real estate it purchases for theism is a ‘theistic attitude of mind’

⁷ We should notice here the reformer's need for a personal, related God (James 1956, p. 122).

⁸ There might be a vestige of James's Calvinist roots here, where he implies that God is known through his power and universality (James 1956, p. 134).

as an essential characteristic of human life (without implying God's actual existence). It serves much less as a direct attack on materialism but a subtle way of undermining it and clearing ground for theism, showing James's lasting theistic commitment. The importance of the matter continually increased for him because he felt that any materialism or agnosticism would finally alienate humans from their own world, something that philosophy must continually eschew to be true and adequate. Whether or not we can justify theism according to general canons of logic, theism has an irreducible importance for human life, and its benefits far outweigh those of living solely on positive evidence (something James thought impossible anyway).

James sharpened these insights drastically over the years, finally publishing his most treasured essay about the subject 15 years later in „The Will to Believe”, which he delivered to the philosophical clubs of Yale and Brown Universities (June, 1896), as „something like a sermon on justification by faith” (1956, p. 1). He intended it really as a justification *of* faith, simple belief in God, to a crowd that had difficulty seeing past the anti-theism of his day. The address works with Pragmatism's claim that truth is not always a fixed set of propositions to be discovered but a dynamic reality to be revised continually and acted on even if sure-fire evidence is forthcoming. Sometimes, he argued, there are conditions where sober scientific inquiry demands that we believe ahead of the evidence.

James argued that if a certain faith statement such as ‘God exists for us’ is what he called *forced*, *live*, and *momentous*, then it is more rational to take it on faith than not. Theism is *forced* because we must decide whether or not we believe in God; there is not a middle ground where we can agnostically refuse to decide. If we do not actively believe in God and make that belief constitutive for our existence, then we have chosen unbelief. It is forced because not acting is essentially acting in the negative. Theism also can be *live* or *dead*. For most people raised in America, James says that the phrase ‘be a Christian’ is a live possibility because it is familiar enough to be inside the bounds of credulity. For many Arabs, he says, that wouldn't be true; to them Christianity would be too foreign, making the option dead. The phrase ‘be a Muslim’ would probably be live for them. The underlying assumption is that all people, being created for theism as we earlier witnessed in „Reflex Action and Theism” are able to believe in God, but the particulars are constrained by their psychology. Finally, theism is *momentous*, rather than *trivial*. This qualification intensifies rather than modifies the argument, showing that the stakes are high for believing in God or not. It adds urgency to the question of where our belief will rest.

The argument proper is an updated version of Pascal's wager, stating that reason cannot decide the question whether or not God exists; if we wager to believe, then we stand to gain eternal life if God exists. If he does not, then we have nothing to lose for having believed. James notes a fatal flaw in the wager in that for many people the decision to become Catholic or not wasn't a live option as it was for Pascal; additionally, he notes that it neglects religion's *immediate* significance for human life. But he acknowledges a basic truth in Pascal's argument and proposes a more pragmatic wager to his contemporaries. Science had operated on two basic principles: 'believe truth', and 'avoid error'. However, they are not mutual imperatives but rather separate commands. All scientists refusing to work by faith had made error avoidance supreme to a point where they refused to look outside of established evidence, a methodological problem for James. If science is really to believe truth, it can't always suspend judgment. If error avoidance is the guiding principle, science will inevitably suppress some truths that are important for human life now. The creed 'avoid error' will suffocate 'believe truth' unless we are willing to work ahead of the evidence and let the future eventually demonstrate which truths are lasting and which must be transcended as antiquated hypotheses. Thus: "*a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule*" (1956, p. 28).

The wager, so interpreted, concerns concrete human life. There are great benefits to be gained from believing in a personal *Thou* in the universe if faith is not excised by science's presuppositions. Given the limitation of human knowledge, the sentiment of rationality, and the nature of truth as an active product of the human mind, James carves out a place where faith in a personal God can thrive without the pressures of Idealism's logic or materialism's eliminations. In this effort, he appears as a Protestant reformer, and more so with his concern for the religious significance of living faith as opposed to the world of facts and intellectual assent to them. This faith is decidedly vague, but it entails the negations that abstract reason can never get to God, and science cannot impede religious belief.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF FAITH . . .

In „The Will to Believe” talk about faith's benefits is quite limited. James states that belief in God has a self-authenticating element, making God's existence true for everyone whose life is enriched and deepened through

this belief. James depicts the whole moral constitution of the universe as being at stake and therefore human comfort, but he didn't there elaborate on the fruits of religious belief. That same year, however, he appropriated his own work in a more focused essay: „Is Life Worth Living?“, an address to Harvard's YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association). Using the argument from „The Will to Believe“, he attempts to inspire comfort directly in young students whom he thought susceptible to depression and even suicide because of their prolonged studies in abstract ideas (1956, p. 38). The essay's argument need not be rehearsed in full because it follows much previous argumentation. It is noteworthy, though, for its therapeutic tone and James's effort to encourage religion as an active faith, something to live by, and a demand of human existence in general. Surely James's own experience of depression, with belief as an alleviator, is in the background. In „Is Life Worth Living?“ he simply encourages optimism as it coheres with faith in God, ultimately to show that life really is worth living, and the key to seeing it as worthwhile is to believe in a personal God, in its own way, the Reformation's very theme (James 1956, pp. 61–62).

By 1896, when these essays appeared, James wasn't optimally equipped to see all of religion's benefits. We could say that he took the proposition 'faith is significant for human life' on faith before he had researched all of the possibilities it had, and then confirmed it in practice. Such is the pragmatic method. The most thorough research he did on this topic was for Edinburgh's Gifford Lectures in 1902, eventually published as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. This work covers religious experience via a very biographical method, taking diverse individuals from many time periods and listening to their accounts of ecstasy, soul sickness, conversion, optimism, etc. For my purposes, it shows religion's significance for life and hence confirms James's defense of faith. In summing up the results of his study, he offers a list of benefits: zest for life, optimism, heroism, comfort, earnestness, loving affections, hope, peaceful temperament, and even miraculous healings (James 1997a, p. 337). As he argued long before, human nature is religious, making it obvious that life is healthier, saner, and more ethical when lived in faith (Myers 1986, pp. 451–56). *The Varieties* is really James's mature apology for the significance of religious belief, working on psychological grounds. He reaffirms much of his previous work, repudiating the classically abstract doctrine of God directly, limiting science's materialism, and thrashing Idealism as firmly as ever. As reformer, he exalted Luther's criticism of the righteousness of works:

Any God who, on the one hand, can care to keep a pedantically minute account of individual shortcomings, and on the other can feel such partialities, and

load particular creatures with such insipid marks of favor, is too small-minded a God for our credence. When Luther, in his immense manly way, swept off by a stroke of his hand the very notion of a debit and credit account kept with individuals by the Almighty, he stretched the soul's imagination and saved theology from puerility (1997a, p. 277).

James confessed that variety is important for a living faith because religion must speak to diverse peoples and circumstances, but the reformer impulse in him often won out over the pluralist in him. Any perceived childishness, superstition, sententiousness, or undue abstraction in religion felt the sharp edge of his critical appraisal. Religions must be judged by their adequacy for life—their ability to produce the above benefits—and James did not feel that all expressions of faith were equally suited for this task.

As Pragmatist, he judges all religion by its experiential value, implying that personal fulfillment and happiness are the ultimate criteria but also that religion must still answer to confirmed scientific evidence. If belief in leprechauns, Santa Claus, or the Loch Ness Monster makes us happy it still must pass the scrutiny of what can be known. This method of analysis shows that James never lost interest in religion's evidential *factuality*, and why, I think, his caring but inscrutable God resists the constraints of dogmatic particulars. Notwithstanding his childhood aversion to church authority, theological particulars are hard to defend in the ring of philosophical combat. If he were a postmodernist he might have compromised the truth question by opting for many religious narratives, none universally superior to the others; but the modernist James felt that even in religion there is one essential answer that experience could reveal in time.

The truth question also distances him from psychologist J.H. Leuba, who taught (similarly to Ludwig Feuerbach) that God need not exist to have religious value and that God's entire value lies in the usefulness of the concept of God (James 1997a, p. 392). Because James emphasizes the practical function of faith, he appears very close to Leuba at points; both would agree that religion's significance arises out of its experiential effects. But James's account finally demands God as an independent other, a wise governor. He shows affinities to theologian Rudolf Bultmann, whose existential New Testament interpretation demanded that language about God is always language about self. In contrast, Leuba required only a religion of projection, cutting off any honest 'language about God'. Such an outlook was too limiting for James's vision of religious truth.

... AND THE REALITY OF GOD

The truth question sets up our final theme: the reality of God. As the section headings show, the *significance of faith and the reality of God* are synthetically connected. Unlike the Idealist, who begins with logic or Kant's transcendental ego of apperception (viz. James Caird) and deduces God's existence, James begins with belief and leaves the question of God open and pragmatically true so long as future praxis confirms its validity. As a Protestant reformer, he started in *faith*, not the *sight* (or supposed certainty) of what he considered to be scholastic brands of logic.

James was not an absolute fideist, however, whose faith increases proportionally to absurdity (Tertullian). He thought religion reasonable (in his own sense of rationality) based on its moral function for humans. Because he also felt the fact question to be (secondarily) important, he offered his own minimal apology for God's existence, not to prove it for all time as, for instance, an ontological proof could be intended to do, but to show to a reasonable probability that God really is an independent other.

Because of his previous work to limit materialism's momentum, James was open to a universe of possibilities outside of matter, and he refused to let religion be reduced to biochemistry or neurology. The wide varieties of religion he felt were experiential markers of a deeper reality visible to psychology (James 1995, p. 115). Not all would find the argument (that *religion proves God*) convincing, but to a person in James's position who had experimented widely in psychical research, God's reality seemed the best interpretation of the data, his own string of pseudo-mystical experiences concurring (James 1969, pp. 504–12). In *The Varieties*, James even expresses the possibility that philosophical analysis of experience could one day assert religion's positive foundation by straining out its particulars to find the experiential core and thereafter gain religious studies equal respectability with physical science (1997a, p. 355). Because God actually inspires religion through humanity's sub-consciousness, and all creeds have a common experiential nucleus, all religions, then, have real objects of faith and address problems with solutions of essentially the same kind. Taken together, James postulates a meta-theory to explain these phenomena, but it is speculation that he doesn't accent as more than a future possibility. He contented himself, in contrast, with a basic kind of belief and never demanded a rational foundation for it even though God's existence seemed empirically probable based on his own sentiment of rationality.

The only other place where James's gives positive evidence of God's reality is an essay defending conscious immortality: „Human Immortality”

(published originally in 1893). Being a defense of the afterlife, the argument for God's existence is more an implication of the argument proper. The essay takes a characteristic tone in overturning popular materialistic assumptions. As many psychologists believed, the brain is the power of consciousness, meaning that the death of the brain is the death of personal existence. Obviously, then, no hope for an afterlife would remain, and whatever immortality existed could not transcend books and memories. Conversely, James argues that, based on his psychical research of conversions, providential leadings from prayer, instantaneous healings, premonitions, apparitions, and others, a new model might better explain consciousness (James 1956, p. 25.). In his view, the brain is only a transmitter (a radio rather than a CD player, analogously stated) of a deeper source or stream of consciousness ultimately related to God. When children are born they don't generate their own field of consciousness anew but rather pick up the stream of consciousness we all share. All the brains that transmit this natural stream stamp it and color it with their subjectivity so that personhood is not lost even after the brain dies. Because consciousness is so much larger than an individual brain, its power is not necessarily contingent on brain function.

It is telling of James's personality that he could use an argument so highly speculative and intend it for nothing more sublime than psychological comfort. At the outset he admits that the topic of immortality is ruled by personal feeling, and he made no attempt to claim transcendent objectivity. James, like all of us, had to deal with the horror of death in his life, and the hope for conscious immortality gave him comfort and helped him to comfort others. When his sister was on the verge of her premature death, he spoke to her with calm words about immortality, the wonder of her transition from this life to the next (Hardwick 1993, p. 134).

Thus, we see the Protestant reformer wavering from his predecessor's trail and somehow still remaining within shouting distance. James propounded a doctrine of comfort for a threatened existence—no longer for a troubled conscience. He affirmed life after death, but treated salvation as though it had no conditions! Ultimately he believed in a personal God, present in faith but did not escape the speculative nature of theism as inferred from experience, and though he repudiated rational foundations for faith, he still upheld a *pragmatic* foundation based in the mental health benefits of religion.

CONCLUSION

When I argue this thesis (that James is a Protestant reformer) before more traditionally-minded theologians, their knee-jerk reaction is to say 'ridiculous!', because to them doctrinal subscription alone distinguishes a theology or philosophy. But we've seen quite concretely that religious motives producing one doctrinal statement might serve a completely different expression of belief in new time periods under different pressures such as the rise of science. It is these motives that help us to understand where a philosophy of religion comes from and why it is important for the ever-changing forms of religious discourse that daily struggle for significance.

Though the traditionally-minded reformers would undoubtedly reject James as one of their own, I've tried to make room for him as something of a black sheep—still part of the family, but following a different course. This interpretation helps to explain James's entire religious philosophy,⁹ taking seriously his self-identification as a Protestant and a New England liberal Christian. Devoted to studying the sciences, he was unable to escape their rigid criteria for knowledge despite his best efforts to limit rationalism and materialism. It is evident because he never opened up to a transcendent word of revelation, having elevated religious experience (critically considered) as the highest knowledge of God. Saying with Luther 'faith alone', and maybe even 'grace alone', he couldn't confess 'scripture alone'. He never really took Pascal's wager without hedging the bet with his own safeguards.

James is a prime example of a Protestant philosophy that takes the virtues of Christianity and handles them in terms of pure experience. His contribution, given the opponents of his day, was to clear room for faith in a remarkably non-sectarian fashion by showing how the practical significance of religion eclipses the need for rational foundations. While many Protestants will recognize the limitations of this program and reject it as a whole, I think they can at least smile on James's apology as an expression of true Protestant spirit.

⁹ To repeat these affinities, they are: 1) challenge of prevailing systems, 2) anti-rationalism, 3) pro-religious experience and dynamic faith, 4) need for a personal, caring God, and also 5) a gospel of religious comfort.

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