

WILLIAM JAMES AND THE WILL TO BELIEVE

by

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B.A. University of British Columbia, 1961

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF

M.A.

in the Department of

PHILOSOPHY

We accept this thesis as conforming to  
the required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

August, 1964

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Date August 19, 1964

The problem considered in this thesis is whether or not there is an ethics of belief. The notion that it could be right or wrong to believe something is examined.

William James, in The Will To Believe, advocated the right to believe, in certain cases, whatever most tempts one's will. William Kingdon Clifford had earlier argued in The Ethics Of Belief that it is always wrong to believe anything for which the evidence is insufficient.

I have argued that belief is not an action that can be executed or refrained from at will but is the acceptance of something as being true. As such, it is not possible for us to believe what most appeals to us unless we deem it true. If 'belief' is used in any other sense than 'deem true', the true-false distinction is vitiated.

Since belief is not an action and is therefore not voluntary, the ethics of belief cannot apply to what is believed. The right or wrong of belief applies to the attitude we adopt to a certain proposition or to the manner in which we acquire our beliefs. The distinction is made between belief-cultivation and inquiry.

A detailed analysis of The Will To Believe is then undertaken. The claim that religion is a hypothesis which we can verify is questioned. It seems that before one can 'test' the hypothesis, one must believe it already -- thus there is really no test at all. The contrasts between science and religion are presented -- explanation being the main concern of the former and consolation that of the latter.

The following six claims are called into question:

- 1) the decision regarding the truth or falsity of religion is forced and momentous,
- 2) no test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon,
- 3) there is a striking similarity between the potential religious believer and the scientific investigator,
- 4) the universe must have a purpose,
- 5) in religion, faith creates its own verification,
- 6) to believe in religion requires hope and courage while to doubt or disbelieve indicates fear and cowardice.

It is concluded that even if religious belief influences or changes our actions and reactions, this is proof not of the truth of religion but of its utility, which may be helpful or harmful to the individual and to society.

My thesis, in short, is that insofar as we attempt to proportion belief to our desires and not to the evidence, we risk losing the true-false distinction altogether. We thus risk loss of communication with others. And effective communication, I submit, is essential to the acquisition and transmission of knowledge -- the *raison d'etre* of philosophy.

I wish to express my deepest appreciation to Dr. D. G. Brown whose patience was phenomenal and whose assistance and criticisms were invaluable.

I also wish to thank my wife Toby for her inspiration and aid in completing this thesis.

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All page references to William James, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy, also referred to as TWTB.

All page references to other authors are from their book(s) as given in the bibliography, page 133.

It is only when people have given up the hope of proving that religion is true in a straightforward sense that they set out to prove that it is "true" in some newfangled sense.

Bertrand Russell

The statement that one is more likely to believe truly if one believes reasonably (that is, in accordance with the evidence) is an analytic statement which follows from the meaning of the expressions "evidence for" and "likely to be true".

H. H. Price

As a rule we believe as much as we can. We would believe everything if we only could.

William James

What is wanted is not the will to believe, but the wish to find out, which is the exact opposite.

Bertrand Russell

My position is that, other things equal, emotional satisfactions count for truth.

William James

It is notorious that the temporarily satisfactory is often false.

William James

In his essay The Will To Believe, William James argues that we have the "right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters." (p.1). He claims (p.29) that "we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will." He recommends belief in religion's two affirmations, viz., (p.25) 1: "the best things are the more eternal things" and (p.27) this eternal aspect of the universe has personal form; and (p.26) 2: "we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true."

William Kingdon Clifford, in his essay The Ethics Of Belief, had argued earlier that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." (p.175).

Both Clifford and James talk as though we could exercise our will in the effort to believe or disbelieve a proposition. If what James says makes sense and is true, then we could believe today what we did not (or could not) believe yesterday, as soon as we realized that it would be to our advantage to do so. If what Clifford says makes sense and is true, then we could blame and perhaps even punish people for believing something on what WE consider to be insufficient evidence.

'You have a right to believe', says James. 'It is always wrong to believe on insufficient evidence', says Clifford. Does either of these counsels make sense? Does it make sense



to speak of belief as a kind of action which, if we are tempted enough, we are free (have the right) to perform? Or -- if the evidence is insufficient -- from which we are free to abstain?

Insofar as Clifford and James require belief to be an action, for their positions to be tenable, I shall argue that they are misguided. I shall argue that belief is not an action; hence is not the sort of thing that can be exercised or withheld at will; or for which one could be blamed or punished, praised or rewarded.

# 1. BELIEF AND ACTION

Stuart Hampshire, in *Thought and Action*, characterizes an action as something that is done at will and at some particular time. He argues at length to show, I think successfully, that belief is not an action. That is, belief is not something done at will, such as raising an arm. It is more like falling down the stairs than climbing them. Hampshire says that "the distinction between what a man does and what happens to him might be explained through the distinction between trying and not trying on the one hand and failing and succeeding on the other." (p.112).

Would it make sense to say that someone is trying to believe something -- as opposed to, say, study or read something?

e.g. "Would you please cut down the noise."

"Why?"

"Harry is trying to believe so-and-so (e.g. that the place is quiet) and he finds it difficult what with all this noise going on."

OR

"Harry is pooped."

"Why?"

"He tried for two hours yesterday to believe that so-and-so and he just couldn't do it." (or, "He tried for two hours yesterday to believe so-and-so and he finally made it.")

Actions are done at particular times. They can be precisely timed. It may take three hours to walk from Vancouver to Burnaby. How long does it take to believe this sentence contains ten words? (It contains 12 words --- by any effort of will can you believe otherwise?) Could you state at what particular time yesterday you believed president Johnson was alive? While it may be true that we COME to believe something at a fairly precise time, and while it may be true that we can be said to believe something ALL the time, we still cannot be said to be engaged in believing something for a certain length of time. If one answered the question "What were you doing at 2 o'clock yesterday?" or "What did you do at 2 o'clock yesterday?" by saying "I was believing so-and-so" or "I believed so-and-so", one would not make sense. To believe is not to DO something.

I think it is evident that belief cannot be sensibly characterized as an action. It makes sense to decide to act in a certain way but does it make sense to decide to believe a certain proposition? In a certain way? It makes sense to regret doing something, even while you do it (e.g. spank your child), but does it make sense to say that someone regrets believing something, even while he believes it?

Suppose a father is confronted by his 14 year old unmarried daughter who announces that she is pregnant and has no idea whom to thank for her condition. Let us suppose that her father believes her when she tells him this. He may indeed regret WHAT he now believes, but could he be said to regret believing it? If belief were "a sort of feeling

more allied to the emotions than to anything else" as James thought (1890, p.283), then the father would be said to regret having a certain feeling. In other words, to say that the father regrets believing his daughter is pregnant amounts to saying that he regrets having a certain feeling. But that isn't at all what someone would mean who said that he regrets believing it. His regret is less likely to concern him than her.

One can regret or applaud WHAT one believes but one can neither be glad or sad THAT one believes something. Emotions may accompany a belief but they cannot constitute a belief. To regret believing something would be to regret that one accepts it as true. To be able to distinguish the true from the false is a function of the intellect, not of the emotions. To regret that one believes something is to regret that one is able to distinguish between what seems true to one and what seems false to one. To regret that one is able to tell the true from the false is to regret that one is able to think at all.

Nobody would claim that the father in our example regrets that he can tell the true from the false. If he were unable to do this, he wouldn't know that the girl was his daughter, let alone that ~~she~~ were pregnant --- or even that she was a GIRL. Thus, to say that he regrets that he believes something, is to say that he regrets that he can tell the true from the false. It should be obvious that this is not what we mean when we say "I'd hate to think that (i.e. believe) so-and-so" or "It would kill him to think (or believe) that she got her-

self pregnant."

To believe something is to accept it as true. As Hampshire says, (p.150), "The whole point and purpose (I would prefer 'function' to 'purpose' - J.O.) of a belief and of the kind of thought that leads up to it, is that it should be true..." When asked of a given proposition whether or not one believes it, one may reply, 'Yes, I believe it'. Does this mean that one has decided to accept the proposition as true? It represents a decision, says Hampshire, but not a decision to DO anything. He adds (p.158) "...nor can these words constitute an announcement that I have attempted to achieve anything. I have not decided to believe; I have decided that the statement in question is true. This deciding, which is a deciding that, is not naturally represented as an action, since there is no sense in which I could intend, or decide, to decide that a statement is true." We can intend or decide to act but not to believe something -- to accept it as true. And where we would say, "I decided to believe her" we would mean that we found what she said plausible or that we now deemed her trustworthy, etc. We would not mean that we actually decided to deem true what she said -- we mean that we DID deem true (i.e. believe) what she said.

## 2. BELIEF AND DESIRE

Would it make sense to say that one wills or wants to believe something? It makes good sense to say that we wish things were different, but is it sensible to wish that we believed differently? It is odd to say that "A" wants to believe "B" -- as opposed to, e.g., "A" wants it to be the case that "B" --- because belief is not the sort of thing we desire. We may wish that a certain statement were true -- e.g. Barry Goldwater may wish that the statement "Barry Goldwater will be President of the U.S.A." were true. But he will wish it true only in virtue of the fact that what it reports is true. He wants to be President -- he doesn't want merely to BELIEVE that he's President.

Suppose someone tells us that a girl we've <sup>been</sup> dating lately is fond of us. "I wish I could believe that" is our reply. What we mean here is clearly that we wish that it were true -- i.e. -- we hope that she **IS** fond of us.. We don't want merely to believe that she is. If we intend to do anything about it, if the belief could conceivably lead to any action, we realize that merely believing is not enough. In a crucial test we might be disillusioned. We ask her to marry us and she laughs in our face. We try to make love to her and she slaps our face. Anyone who continued believing in the face of all this would be said to have let his desire override his reason.

To "will to believe" something is to will to have that thing be the case, be true, be fact, be real -- it's not to will to merely believe it. Beliefs can be of what is true or false. Anyone who could be said to desire merely belief --

whether that belief was of what was true OR false -- does not understand what belief is. To believe is to accept as true and to will to believe is to will to accept (or to will that one could accept) as true. And this is to will, desire, want etc. that it BE true. How else could one accept it or believe it except as one deems it true?

If someone admits that he wants to believe something, then he does not already believe it. One may 'want what one believes' (i.e. want it to be the case, remain the case) but one cannot believe what one wants. Can one try to believe something? Says Hampshire (p.157), "a statement of a difficulty in the 'attempt' (to believe, J.O.) is already a statement that I do not believe and is not seriously meant."

But James seems quite serious when he urges us to allow our passional natures to influence (nay, determine) our choice between opinions (p.19). He seriously suggests that we can and should choose to believe whichever of two contradictory propositions most appeals to us, when our intellect alone cannot decide the issue. But if belief is not an action, it makes no sense to talk of choosing to believe. Also, it seems to make little sense to urge someone to let his passional nature or his emotions determine which proposition to believe. If belief were a function of emotion alone, or if it were left to emotion alone in any given case, it would not serve its proper function -- viz., to be of what is TRUE.

To say that we can, and should, choose to believe a proposition, is to say that we can, and should choose to accept a possible state of affairs as being existent or a given

statement as true. Truth must come into the picture somewhere because to believe MEANS to accept as being true. The question is, can we decide what we shall accept as being true or do we FIND ourselves accepting something as true? The volitional theory of belief is that we CAN decide to believe something and the Temptation Theory (a la James) is that we can and should believe something, if it's live enough to tempt our will.

I have claimed that the function of belief is to enable us to 'range in'; so to speak, on reality. The words 'to be true' in the statement 'He believes X to be true' are redundant. To say that he believes X IS to say that he takes it to be the case or the actual state of affairs. Of course one may believe mistakenly -- deem something true that is false -- but by definition, the believer himself cannot be aware of this. Else he should believe differently. The person who believes something takes it to be true. This is the meaning of belief.

The question was posed above whether we can decide to deem something true -- i.e., decide or choose to believe it. If our description of belief is correct, we must answer "No" to this question. If belief were subject to decision, then we could choose to believe one thing today and another (i.e. its denial) tomorrow. This would mean that we deem true today what we deem false tomorrow. But we would do this -- we would decide THAT what was true one day had become false the next -- only if we believed that the situation had changed from one day to the next. And it is patently absurd to say



that we can choose to believe that the situation has reversed itself -- we either believe this or we don't.

It is absurd to suppose that we could wake up one morning and decide to alter one of our beliefs for no reason at all. If wanting to believe something is a sensible notion, and if wanting to believe it could be counted as a REASON for believing it, and if belief were volitional; in this case we could, and perhaps should decide to believe what most tempted our will (i.e. what most tempted us). But belief is not volitional and wanting to believe something (which really means wanting something TO BE TRUE) may be a causal factor but never a justification in regard to belief. To believe what one most wants to believe is to accept as being true what one most wants to accept as being true. This would make truth a subjective thing -- subject to the deepest desires of any given person. Strange things follow from the notion that we should (or could) believe (deem true) what most tempts our will.

To believe means to accept as true -- it does not mean to dictate as true. Our beliefs are our major hold on reality and hence on the possibility of communication with others. If we could dictate as true what most tempted our will, then reality vanishes into 'real for me.' Communication between people might become impossible if their deepest desires were not identical. What others accept as true may be utterly unlike what I accept -- yet on the Temptation Theory they have every right to contradict me as I have every right to contradict them. James says that each of us can accept this

fact without straining our intellectual consciences. "True" for James meant no more than true for me or true for us, therefore what's true (for me) may be false (for you) at the same time. But the words 'true' and 'real' lose all meaning if A is justified in asserting X in any circumstances and B is justified in asserting not-X in any circumstances. If X can be said to be true (or true for A) and at the same time not-X can be said to be true (or true for B), then the true-false distinction is vitiated. This is so because to be justified in asserting X means that according to all the evidence that one has at the time of assertion, X is true. A statement may be doubtful -- either true or false -- but it cannot at the same time be true and false in exactly the same respects. This is a logical impossibility. James does not consider other people in The Will to Believe -- he addresses the individual and treats him as though he were alone in the universe.

If the true-false distinction is to be saved, if these words are to have any meaning, then we must bring in the notion of evidence. According to the Temptation Theory of belief, one could believe X today and not-X tomorrow without one's estimation of the evidence having changed at all. One's will or deepest needs or wishes may have changed, thus 'justifying' the change in belief. But why restrict it to a day? Why couldn't we sincerely assert X at 8 o'clock and sincerely assert not-X at 9 o'clock? And then perhaps switch again at 10 and 11? "Make up your mind!", you may impatiently demand. But your demand implies that I am

indecisive, whereas I am most decisive. I am so decisive, in fact, that I can deem X true or false almost at will.

"My will be done in heaven as it is on earth".

Not only have we lost the true-false distinction, on the volitional and temptation theories of belief, but also we have lost the very meaning of BELIEF itself. And this is disastrous for theories which are supposed to be about belief. As A. P. Griffiths says (p. 184), "...the concept of belief is only possible at all -- since it is a concept in the public language -- if we presuppose standards of appropriateness which link belief with what is believed." He adds, (p.185-6), "...one can speak of people as believing only so far as they can be conceived as thinking things true, and as accepting criteria which enable them to distinguish the false from the true. But one could speak of people as accepting these criteria of truth only insofar as in general they are willing to assert..what these criteria demand, on occasions when assertion is in place. And this means that there could not be said to be such a thing as belief, unless there were publicly intelligible standards of evidence and an actual tendency to use them: something like common sense so to speak."

As Griffiths says, Tertullian may have believed because it was absurd -- but he could do this only because the standard case of belief was just the opposite. In other words, if people generally believed things because they seemed absurd, belief would be a far different thing from 'what I deem true'. It would mean 'what I deem absurd.' As Findlay says (p.104)

"It is only because I have practised the art of building belief on a genuine basis and in a regular manner that... perverse performances are possible."

If people generally believed things to fulfill the function of being needed, wanted or willed, then belief would MEAN 'what I deem satisfying.' or 'what I deem required for my peace of mind' etc. rather than 'what I deem true'.

There must be some stability to belief or it ceases to be belief at all. If people exhibit no consistency in their assertions or actions we consider them deranged. In a sense, they are unable to 'range in' on reality. Perhaps my phrase 'range in' was most apt -- one who cannot 'range in' is DERanged. The poor creatures obviously do not know what to believe (what they believe). If one claims to believe everything (and James says that we would LIKE to) (1890, p.297), then one really believes nothing -- since for every statement 'X' there is a statement 'not-X'. If it were possible to believe both X and its negation at the same time (which it is not), then one might as well be described as believing neither as believing both. Belief in one automatically cancels belief in the other. Believing X entails disbelieving not-X. It MEANS disbelieving not-X. We conclude with Hampshire's remark (p.150) that "...beliefs generally (there are exceptions) must be to some degree stable if they are to count as beliefs at all."

The function of a belief is to be of what is true. To believe MEANS to accept as, or deem, true. If we are to believe what is most likely to be true, then we must believe

rationally (i.e. as reason dictates -- not desire or need or will -- or with reasons). But of course someone may believe X on what we deem insufficient grounds or none at all, yet X may happen to be true.

This is just the point. We don't want to have to rely on good luck to believe what is true. The odds are very slight that we would believe much that is true unless there were certain established procedures or rules to follow in the quest for truth. The first rule to obey in the search for truth is to make every attempt not to disregard any available evidence. A reliable way to get at the truth is to pay as much attention as possible to evidence and as little as possible to what we would LIKE to be the case. As Grant says (p.14-15), "It is part of the definition of rational belief that <sup>it</sup> is determined not by the will but by the available evidence. To the extent to which we ourselves control our beliefs, to that extent they are non-rational. If it is possible to decide or choose what one believes, then that belief is determined not by the evidence but by the decision of the individual. This makes inevitable what is commonly called "wishful thinking" -- and this is not a kind of thinking but the abdication of thought, in a similar fashion to that in which a forged pound note is not a kind of currency but its travesty."

In conversation, a person (let us call him 'A') claimed that he could choose to believe something. I asked him whether he could choose to believe that the green shoes I was wearing were brown (or any other colour). He said that

he could not. He explained that the only kind of beliefs which could be chosen were those concerning matters which are in principle empirically unverifiable -- e.g. that there is a God. I asked him if he could choose to believe that there is a God, and if so, why he didn't do so. He replied, "Because I find it (i.e. the assertion 'God exists') implausible."

A said that the reason he could not choose to believe that my shoes were brown was that he KNEW that they were green. I take it that he knew this on the basis of overwhelming evidence -- viz., he could SEE that my shoes were not brown. It would seem, then, that when the evidence is overwhelming, it really IS overwhelming. That is, we cannot help but believe what we see (with the exception of such cases as the 'bent' oar in the water -- but in this case we cannot help but believe what we touch). The only reason we could say that A knew that my shoes were green was that he believed it with justified confidence. And what justifies confidence is evidence.

A said that he did not believe that there was a God because he found it implausible. Presumably this means that he did not find it reasonable -- i.e. there weren't any (or enough) reasons for it. It seems that our friend A did not choose to believe anything that he didn't see enough reasons to warrant belief. But once he realized that there were enough reasons for believing something, he wouldn't need also to decide or choose to believe it -- he would already believe it.

A could not really choose to believe anything at all. He said that he didn't believe that there is a God because he found it implausible. But to find something plausible is to find it believable. In other words, A could not believe that there is a God because he could not believe that there is a God.

Whatever A meant, he just could not choose to believe that there is a God. But what this came to, was that he just could not believe that there is a God.

I have claimed that belief is involuntary. This means that we are not free to believe whatever we want or whatever would be of most benefit to us. We cannot believe at will. I do not think that people want merely to believe that there is a God. They want it to be the case that God exists. I think that William James is in such a position. He claims (p.27) that he has a "passional need of taking the world religiously". But instead of arguing the case for the existence of God or for the view that the best things are the eternal things, he urges us to believe these things.

If James is urging us to believe the 'religious hypothesis' on the grounds that it will be of benefit to us, and if he expects us to be able to do this at will, then he is forgetting what he himself says about belief; (1890, p.320) "...will consists in nothing but a manner of attending to certain objects, of consenting to their stable presence before the mind. The objects, in the case of will, are those whose existence depends on our thought, movements of our own body for example, or facts which such movements executed in

the future may make real. Objects of belief on the contrary are those which do not change according as we think regarding them. I will to get up early tomorrow morning; I believe that I got up late yesterday morning..." He adds (p.321) "...so the great practical distinction between objects which we may will or unwill, and objects which we can merely believe or disbelieve, grows up, and is of course one of the most important distinctions in the world..Truly enough, a man cannot believe at will abruptly."

As important as this distinction is, James himself in *The Will to Believe* seems at times to forget it.

James says (p.1) that his essay is "a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters". He adds on the next page that he has "long defended....the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith". This does not sound the same as his preaching "the liberty of believing" (Preface, 1956, p.x) which we have shown to embody a mistaken view of the nature of belief. But if we are not at "liberty to believe", perhaps we are at liberty to "adopt a believing attitude." (It is uncertain whether he wants us to believe the religious affirmations 'even now' or to adopt a believing attitude toward religion.)

If we interpret the argument between James and Clifford as involving the question of the morality (and therefore the possibility) of believing at will, then we have already shown that they are both misguided. You cannot condemn or reward a man for what he believes. But we can attend to other things James says, such as the adoption of a believing



attitude, and see whether the argument might not center about the legitimacy of adopting a believing attitude.

James defends the right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters. We shall see whether it is EVER right to adopt a believing attitude and what the implications of this would be, regarding such things as truth and reality.

James does not make it clear exactly what he means by the phrase 'adopt a believing attitude'. It may mean 1) get into the mood of acceptance with regard to a given proposition -- e.g. as we might do if we were told unofficially by someone that he 'thinks' he saw our grade for the year in the professor's little black book and we got 90%. The proposition here is "You received 90% as your mark for the year". Our desire would put us into a mood of acceptance. Or the phrase 'adopt a believing attitude' may mean 2) cultivate belief in a given proposition -- e.g. by looking only for signs that we have received a very high mark and avoiding opportunities to consider claims of disconfirmation (e.g. we're too afraid to ask the professor directly).

I suspect that James would subscribe to the second interpretation above though his actual working would seem to suggest something like the first one. A look at two examples of our first interpretation, viz., 'belief-attitude-adoption' may help clarify this issue. Later we shall consider our second interpretation (see p.24).

### 3. BELIEF-ATTITUDE-ADOPTION

I: A. Example one: Here is a case where I would deem it understandable, forgiveable, perhaps even legitimate in some sense, to adopt a believing attitude. Suppose that you have a son and that he is kidnapped. You are instructed to leave a sum of money at a certain place and you are told to expect your son's delivery 24 hours after the payment. Surely one would, under these circumstances, adopt a believing attitude in regard to the boy's safety -- assuming that one loved one's son and that one intended to follow the kidnapper's instructions. In this case, one might not know at all what to think -- one would likely be 'at one's wits' end' -- but one would want the boy to be alive. One would not want merely to BELIEVE that the boy was alive. One would likely take any hint at all as confirmation that he was safe -- even the kidnapper's assurance.

In such a case, it would be understandable that desire to have something be the case might blind one to the truth of the matter. The truth of the matter is that you just don't KNOW how the boy is faring. And would we blame a parent who let desire override his reason? No -- we would even say that we would not understand the parent who did NOT let desire colour his opinion.

Here the parent would seek only corroborating evidence. I do not think we would blame him for seeking only positive evidence here. We would be more likely to wonder at, or even blame, a parent who sought as ardently for negative as for

positive evidence. And we surely would not approve of the parent who sought ONLY disconfirmation.

We would not blame a parent for wanting to find only positive evidence but we might blame him for disregarding negative evidence. He would be disregarding the first rule in the search for truth (see page 14 ). We would even try to intervene if we thought that the parent's voluntary blindness might itself lead to the boy's death. For example, the police might know that many kidnappers kill their victim after delivery of the ransom money. The police may try to convince the parent to allow them to watch the ransom delivery so that they can catch the kidnappers redhanded when they try to collect it. The parent may have adopted a believing attitude so strong that nothing could persuade him to do other than what the kidnapper ordered. This would be an example of a case where to adopt too strong a believing attitude, or to adopt one too readily, may lead to just the UNdesired result. Blinding oneself to an undesirable possible event in the future can actually help bring about that event. (On faith and verification see p. 104 ).

I think this kidnapping case shows that the adoption of a believing attitude -- wanting one thing to be the case rather than another (when you don't know what the case is) -- is sometimes understandable, forgiveable or even legitimate. It is at any rate expected in such cases. But where does the question of TRUTH come in? If we wanted to know how in truth the boy was faring, how he was really faring, would we be wise to ask the parent? We would be unlikely to go to

the one source where desire or hope may have utterly blinded an interested party. We would no doubt ask the police, if they were involved, rather than rely on the parent who so wants the boy to be safe or the kidnapper who so wants everyone to think that he is safe. Where someone stands to gain or lose, in regard to the answer to any given question, then one isn't likely to be the best possible guide to the correct answer. A realistic appraisal in this case is more likely to lead to the desired result than is blind faith or mere adoption of a believing attitude. Desire for a certain thing to be true or blind faith in that thing's being true can lead to just the opposite result.

James might say that the parent should adopt a believing attitude to the boy's safety in the sense that he should believe that it is POSSIBLE that the boy is still alive. He shouldn't give up too early, but should pay the ransom and hope that it'll come out in the end. And of course we would not want to argue with James here. But it is not realistic to say that James would argue in this way. In all likelihood, a parent would pay the ransom, if he were able to do so, only if he were not sure the boy was dead. That is, he would do practically anything to see the boy alive and safe again so would refuse to pay the ransom only if he had sufficient evidence or were sure that the boy was dead already. One would argue unrealistically because only when the boy's body is presented to the parent, will he say that it's not possible for him to be alive. We may conclude that the sort

of argument James would make here is not just that the parent should think it possible that the boy is alive but that he should actually believe that the boy is alive. And this, as we said above, could be very dangerous for the boy. We would say that he should want the boy to be alive -- not that he should believe that the boy is alive.

I: B. In our second case of adoption of a believing attitude, it is not understandable or forgiveable to do so. It is RECOMMENDED or APPROPRIATE to do so. It is a well known maxim of the theater that one should willingly suspend disbelief -- nay, be willing to believe -- so that one takes what occurs on the stage as really happening. Notice that is just where we DO willingly believe, and are well advised to, that we KNOW what transpires on the stage or screen is NOT real. It may have some connection with reality, e.g. the emotions displayed on stage may be realistic, but they won't be (or at least are not intended to be, or are not necessarily) real. Hamlet will perhaps be Laurence Olivier and Cleopatra may be Elizabeth Taylor, but Hamlet never lived and Cleopatra is long dead.

I deem it most significant that where we are well advised to adopt a believing attitude, it is acknowledged that we are adopting a different world, so to speak -- the play world of unreality -- of drama. We have sometimes to make an effort to believe because it IS so unreal -- e.g., we try to ignore the prompter's whisper at an amateur production. The more unreal or unbelievable the production is, the more willing we must be to believe, if it is to seem at all real

to us.

It seems, then, that the further we get from reality, (the less plausible something seems to us), the more need there is for suspension of disbelief of adoption of a believing attitude. When we see things as they really are, there is no need to TRY to see them in a certain way -- e.g., as we wish they were or as they MIGHT be. Thus, where it is expected or understandable that one will adopt a believing attitude, we are well advised to seek truth elsewhere than from him who adopts this attitude. Where it is appropriate or well advised to adopt a believing attitude, it is a foregone conclusion that what is believed is not of this world but of a make-believe world. (One Wills to Make Believe. Miller, p.187).

I do not think that the Clifford-James dispute is one about whether or not we should get ourselves into the mood of acceptance with regard to a proposition. I think that it is about the way we COME BY our beliefs.

The most likely interpretation in our view of 'adopt a believing attitude' is our second one (see p.18), viz., 'cultivate the belief'. This is likely what James refers to when he uses the phrase 'voluntarily adopted faith' (p.2).

#### 4. BELIEF-CULTIVATION

II: As Price says, (p.16-17), "Beliefs can be gradually cultivated though they cannot be instantaneously produced, or abolished, at will." And he adds, (p.17), "The crucial point here is that the direction of our attention is to a large extent in our own power". James argued that if something tempts our will enough -- if we really want (or feel we need) to believe something enough -- we are able and should COME TO believe it. As we said earlier, what this amounts to is this: if we really want something to be the case (really 'want to believe it'), then we should come to believe it (i.e., deem it to be the case). Then for US, it will BE the case ---- because WE WILL BELIEVE IT.

It is true that we can come to believe something largely by directing our attention only in certain directions. Grant discusses the formation of beliefs (p.19). "... rational belief is based on collecting and attending to the appropriate evidence." Such activities ARE within our control, he rightly says. And he adds "...it is within our power not to trouble to amass the evidence...Now since we are at liberty to choose on what basis to form our beliefs, these procedures, being actions, are proper subjects of moral appraisal."

We shall assume henceforward that the issue between Clifford and James is one regarding methods of belief cultivation, or of 'inquiry'.

Would it ever be right to say that someone ought to

cultivate a particular belief? I think that it would be.

One may argue that there are some Southerners (and others too) in the U.S.A. who ought to cultivate the belief that Negroes are not necessarily inferior to them because they are of a different hue. The same could be said for people anywhere (e.g. South Africa, Canada) whose beliefs are not dictated by, or proportioned to, the available evidence.

Recall the case of the father with the 14 year old, unmarried, expectant daughter. Suppose that he is so shocked when she tells him her story, that he cannot believe her. In this case, we would say that he should cultivate belief in this news, provided of course that it is accurate (and let us suppose that it is accurate). It is significant that in the cases where we would say that one ought deliberately to cultivate a particular belief, one is in a state of NOT wanting (or 'willing') to do so. We think that people ought to cultivate beliefs on the grounds that the things in question are TRUE. And we would probably say that these people should cultivate belief in the propositions in question FOR THEIR OWN GOOD.

But is truth an 'ultimate value'? That is, can we think of a case where it would be better to (where we should) deceive someone? Of course we can. We all know the standard Philosophy 100 example of the armed madman who comes to the door looking for your brother (who IS home) and whom you ought to deceive. Another example is the case of an old, dying man who in his final breaths inquires after his son



who has failed to show up at his death bed. Suppose the son had been killed on his way to the hospital -- should we tell the old man the truth or should we let him die in peace thinking that his son is alive and well? It is quite clear that in some cases we do right to hide the truth.

We excuse or justify lying when (case 1 above) it will prevent unnecessary harm or when (case 2) it could not possibly cause any harm. We deem it right to deceive the old man because he is in no position to overtly ACT on his belief and thereby influence or change the world in any significant way. Since belief is a guide to action, we generally want to believe only what is true -- else our actions will be misguided.

If we deem effective action unlikely unless undertaken on the basis of warranted belief, then we would surely reserve belief for that which is true -- not that which satisfies us. There is little hope of being able to act effectively -- i.e., accomplish our purposes -- if we allow ourselves to be guided by beliefs which misconstrue the facts. If we practised what Grant called "wishful thinking" (see p.14) in our everyday lives, when decisions regarding actions ~~must~~ be constantly made, the results would be ludicrous -- or tragic. We may wish we are Napoleon and act on this belief -- and people (the other people we mentioned on page 11) would soon restrict our activity. We may wish that our rival in love is dying of some incurable disease and 'mercifully' kill him. Others would soon restrict, or end our activity.

If it is nonsense to advocate wishful thinking in everyday life, then it is nonsense to advocate it anywhere where

action on the basis of such belief could be undertaken.

Yet James says (p.29, footnote) that "The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action." We will see later how vague this "defence" really is. For now, the topic is belief-cultivation, and we will see how James thinks we should cultivate a belief.

On pages 321-322 of his Principles of Psychology, James says that "we need only in cold blood ACT as if the thing in question were real, and it will infallibly end by growing into such a connection with our life that it will become real. It will become so knit with habit and emotion that our interests in it will be those which characterize belief. Those to whom 'God' and 'Duty' are now mere names can make them much more than that, if they make a little sacrifice to them each day."

I suggest that the sacrifice here is our reason. Only if God were an evil demon would He desire (or exact) such a sacrifice from us. We would also be sacrificing our honesty -- to act on what we would like to believe and not on what we DO believe is to self-deceive. And he who advocates self-deception also advocates deceiving others. As Clifford said, (p.174) "Men speak the truth to one another when each reveres the truth in his own mind and in the other's mind; but how shall my friend revere the truth in my mind when I myself am careless about it, when I believe things because I want to believe them, and because they are comforting and pleasant?"

Where would we be if every**body** had listened to James and had taken his advice to believe what most tempted their will --

what made them happiest to believe? As A. M. MacIver says (pp.20-21), "If our only reason for thinking anything were that we ourselves found the thought agreeable, then the odds against our thoughts happening to represent things as they really are would be astronomical.... The world of men would be nothing but a vast lunatic asylum in which all the patients suffered from total delusion." He adds that "It is...because beliefs are 'about' things --- are designed to represent them -- that we can speak of their representing or failing to represent...."

Suppose we take steps to come to a belief about something -- e.g. that there is a God -- by ignoring adverse evidence or arguments and seeking only confirming evidence or arguments. Rather than read Hume, Kant, Kaufmann and Russell we read Plotinus, the Christian Bible, Aquinas, Newman and Pascal. We attend only to what we think will lead to a confirmation of the proposition that we desire confirmed. When we have convinced ourselves (an interesting locution) that all the evidence (i.e. all that WE have looked at) confirms the proposition, we naturally will be led to believe the proposition. (Or do we just feel less guilty about embracing the proposition?).

We have cultivated a 'belief-flower', or field of them, by planting only 'confirmation - seeds'. But to our minds, we have been impartial. For we have read widely and have seen our proposition confirmed in various ways and in different degrees by many different (though not opposed) men. This is the type of belief-cultivation to which evidence is

regarded as relevant or essential -- though as we have seen, when you are cultivating a particular belief, you must plant only a particular seed, else you may end up with a different 'belief-flower' than you intended to grow.

Then there is the case where one cultivates a belief without regard to evidence. (Price distinguished these two methods of belief cultivation in his paper Belief and Will.) One does not seek even corroborating evidence. Price sums this method up by saying (p.19), "one fixes one's attention repeatedly on what it would be like if the proposition were true". He adds that one commits himself to the proposition one wants to believe (to be TRUE). One acts as though one believes it (as though it were TRUE). And soon one actually DOES believe it. This sounds like what James had in mind with regard to 'God' and 'Duty'. (see page 27)

I would not deny that we could cure a case of insomnia by a form of self-hypnosis -- by convincing ourselves repeatedly that we were going to have a relaxed sleep and wake refreshed. However, we have not yet devised a method whereby we can hypnotise the world and thereby alter it. Notice in the insomnia case that one has not merely cultivated a belief. One has actually changed the world -- i.e., one-self. It's not that we want to believe that we are cured of insomnia -- we want actually to be cured of insomnia. It is the same in the case of the person who wishes that there were a God. We shall see that James goes so far as to say that even if there were no God, we would postulate one because we need Him so badly. (It is doubtful that anyone who knew that

God was merely a postulate would find 'Him' an adequate object of worship.)

When we set out to cultivate a particular belief, we are not inquiring into the nature of reality. We are not discovering things about the world -- we are setting out to believe that it is constituted in some particular way. A successful inquiry will result in we know not exactly what beliefs -- if we knew already, there would be no need for inquiry. To inquire is to ask a question or questions. To cultivate a belief is to impose your own choice of an 'answer' -- it is really to ask no question at all. Scientific investigation requires that proposed solutions or answers be subjected to tests. This is how we discover that we have a solution or answer at all.

In the preceding sections, we have attempted to show that belief is not an action which can be engaged in or refrained from at will. If we are correct, then any interpretation of the Clifford-James dispute which requires belief to be an action will render both positions untenable.

We have also seen that the phrase 'will to believe' is misleading. It turns out that people do not desire belief -- they desire some particular thing to be believed in or some particular state of affairs to come into existence. We also saw that if people generally believed according to their deepest desires, belief would not be what it now is, viz., acceptance of what seems true to one. It would be perhaps 'acceptance of what seems most desirable to me'. Also, the

true-false and real-imaginary distinctions would be completely vitiated if belief were attendant upon the desires of individuals. It became obvious that if 'belief' is interpreted as anything other than 'acceptance of something as true', then James, or anyone else who so misinterprets belief, is not talking about belief in the only way we can understand it. Nowhere does James tell us that he is using the word 'belief' in an abnormal way. In fact, he knew very well what 'belief' meant when he defined it in The Principles of Psychology (p.283) as being "the sense of reality". To sum up: the concept of belief is linked to the concept of truth or reality -- concepts which we have seen to be altered completely if 'belief' is used to mean anything other than "acceptance of something as true (or real)".

We then showed in two examples how adopting a belief-attitude may be justified or even recommended. It was evident, however, that though adopting a belief-attitude in some circumstances may be satisfying to the individual, it either tends to mislead one as to the truth or it presupposes that what is accepted as fact is accepted only temporarily as such. (Only in childhood does one leave the theater with hands on one's guns, searching all the while for the 'bad guys'). It seems that the more we must TRY to believe (or WILL to believe), the less contact we will have with reality.

We then saw that cultivating a particular belief is not the same thing as inquiring into the actual nature of the world. When there is NO possibility of being surprised at the results one gets when investigating nature, then some-

thing other than investigation or inquiry is going on.

We shall now analyze in more detail the actual essay  
The Will to Believe.

## 5. THE WILL TO BELIEVE

James says that he assumes an attitude which he calls 'radical empiricism.' He says 'empiricism' because "it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience." (Preface to TWTB, p.vii). He says further that (Preface, p.xi-xii) "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. The truest scientific hypothesis is that which... 'works' best; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses."

When James calls religion a hypothesis, one may be tempted to inquire which religion is under consideration. James knows that there are different religions making different claims. If religions are genuine hypotheses, then there should be some way to distinguish between them, some way to see which one 'works' best. But according to James all religions are on an equal footing and there is no way to tell which one is better (or IF one is better than the rest), because "no two of us have identical difficulties, nor should we be expected to work out identical solutions." (James, 1929, p.477) He adds "The divine ... must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions." And "a god of



battles' must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace and heaven, and home, the god for another."

(Heaven help the believers in the peace god should they ever war with the believers of the war god.) It seems that one's religious hypothesis is determined by the 'kind of person' one is. This sounds very unlike what occurs in the case of scientific hypotheses. If these hypotheses are regarded as 'gods of battle', they are made to war upon EACH OTHER, the victor assuming, until further notice, the mantle of truth. In science, the attempt is made to discover which hypothesis is the best one -- they are not on an equal footing by any means. Not so in religion, according to James. But, as Macintyre says (p.196), "where there are possible a number of hypotheses between which there can be no way of deciding, we are not in fact dealing with genuine hypotheses." Religious hypotheses are not genuine ones, if any of them will do.

It is our contention that no religion qualifies, or is even intended to qualify, as a genuine hypothesis about the world. Religions are, among other things, interpretations of the universe as a WHOLE. They do not subject their claims about particular events or things to tests. Rather, as Macintyre says, (p.202), "we justify a religious belief by referring to authority."

In calling religion a hypothesis, James misconstrues the function of religion or of a hypothesis. As he himself says (1929, p.508), only when "remote objective consequences are predicted, does religion ... bring a real hypothesis into play. ...The world interpreted religiously must be such

that different events can be expected in it... ." But we may have to wait until we DIE before we can 'test' the religious 'hypothesis' to see if it works (or has worked). It is a strange 'science' whose only laboratory is the coffin.

What are the 'events' which may be expected if we interpret the world religiously? Nowhere do I find reference to any particular event which James could predict on the basis of a religious hypothesis. Again and again, however, James says that one will feel differently upon believing the religious hypothesis. He tells us (1929, pp.476-477) that religion gives one a new zest, an assurance of safety, a temper of peace and a preponderance of loving affections for others. On page 496 he adds that "Their stimulant and anaesthetic effect is.....great....." To believe in God is to let "higher energies filter in" (p.509).

The 'events' which James says we can forecast by adopting the religious hypothesis are psychological or subjective in character. The 'vital good' we are to gain from believing that there is a God, is a personal sort of good. We have not learned anything new about the world by adopting the religious hypothesis and we do not test it by the usual means. If we receive the 'vital good', if our actions and reactions are influenced in such a way that they can be attributed to our new belief, then according to James, the hypothesis has 'worked' for us and is thereby true (for us). As James says, the truest scientific hypothesis is that which 'works' best. But what exactly is meant by 'works'?

By 'works' James means that it satisfies us, gives us

peace, safety, energy and/or makes life worth living. When it does enough of these things, we see that it works and we deem it true. Of course we must believe it BEFORE we can get the effects, so actually we have deemed it true all along. It is difficult to see, therefore, how we could wait to see the effects of believing (deeming true) the religious hypothesis before we deem it true (believe it). It seems we must already believe it before we can test it. In believing it, we have already deemed it true. What James says, then, amounts to this: if we deem the religious hypothesis true and receive thereby a vital good, then we can deem the religious hypothesis true. Some test!

To sum up; James says that the test of the religious belief's truth is whether or not it works. But before it can work, one must already subscribe to its truth. Thus there is really no test at all. Since the 'test' cannot be conducted unless one accepts the religious hypothesis as being true (believes it), nobody who does not already believe the hypothesis can 'test' it. The 'test', therefore, does not concern the truth of the hypothesis but only the subjective utility of it -- i.e., its effect upon the believing individual. If it 'works', then the test has been successful, and the hypothesis is 'true' (for the individual upon whom the 'test' has been successful).

James' position comes to this: only those who ALREADY deem the religious hypothesis true can judge whether or not it is true. And this, I submit, is a clear cut case of begging the question.

In claiming truth for any religious hypothesis, James means by 'truth' not what is usually meant but something different -- viz., it 'works' or satisfies one.

It cannot be denied that some religious beliefs have 'worked' for some people. But this does not mean that these beliefs are thereby of what is true --- particularly when different religious beliefs conflict. 'X' may work for me but 'not-X' may work for you. This may be possible in the field of religion, but it is not possible in science. Insofar as a hypothesis works in science, it works for all observers, not just those who favor it.

Bertrand Russell says (p.106)

"What science requires of a working hypothesis is that it shall work theoretically, i.e., that all its verifiable consequences shall be true and none false. The law of gravitation enables us to calculate the motions of the heavenly bodies: so far as these motions can be observed, they are found to agree with our calculations. It is true that the heavenly bodies have such and such apparent positions at such and such times, and the law of gravitation agrees with this truth. This is what we mean when we say that the law "works". We do not mean that gives us emotional satisfaction, that it satisfies our aspirations, that it is a help in navigation, or that it facilitates a virtuous life."

When a hypothesis works in science, it can be used to explain and/or predict observed phenomena. It works insofar

as it serves these purposes. The fruits of a successful scientific hypothesis are available for all to enjoy -- not just those who first proposed or adopted it.

A genuine hypothesis, if adopted, will lead to different publicly observable consequences than another genuine hypothesis. The situation, as James himself admits, is different in religion. There, any number of differing and even conflicting 'hypotheses' may 'work' for different individuals. James goes further and claims truth for all the hypotheses that work, even if they do contradict each other. But aside from the question of truth, we have the problem of being unable to separate the better from the worse religious hypotheses. Could they all be as good as each other even though they make conflicting claims about the world? Perhaps they are NOT 'about the world' at all.

If there were no way to tell if a hypothesis is better than any other hypothesis, then in what sense could it be 'about the world'? Either it would make a difference, if true, or it would not. If the former case, then it is a genuine hypothesis -- one which may or may not work. If the latter -- if its being false makes no difference in the publicly observable world, then it fails to qualify as a genuine hypothesis. What Toulmin says about ideas is true of hypotheses -- (pp. 101-102): "We are justified in placing the trust in them that we do, only because - and to the extent that - they have proved their worth in competition with alternatives: if earlier men had never thought in other terms than we do, then we ourselves would simply be carrying on a traditional habit."

A "traditional habit". This sounds much more like religion than does 'hypothesis'. To spend Friday evening in the synagogue is not to test a hypothesis. It is to repeat, often in unison with others - what has been said millions of times before. One may gain solace or peace thereby. And when the rabbi blesses his congregation with arms raised and asks that 'God's light be caused to shine down upon them', he does not take the lack of change in the room's lighting as evidence that the religious hypothesis does not work. He would be hard put to say just WHAT would count as evidence that the religious hypothesis does not work --- because evidence is NOT relevant to religion. The predictions made by religions are usually general (e.g., there will be a second coming) and/or concern an after life (if you don't believe X, then you will be eternally punished, etc.) That is why we cannot disprove religions by appeal to particular facts. Religions have traditionally served as CON solation, not Explanation.

James defines 'hypothesis' as "anything that may be proposed to our belief" (p.2). According to this definition, the following could be hypotheses: "This picture is nicer than that one": "It is wrong to kill anything at any time": "God has three natures but is only one Person". The meaning of 'hypothesis', according to Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1956) is "A tentative theory or supposition provisionally adopted to explain certain facts and to guide in the investigation of others." The three 'hypotheses' above would hardly qualify as explanations. The last statement in particular, along with such statements as "God is

His Essence", "God is His being" and "God is goodness itself" seem to require rather than provide, an explanation. Also, it is difficult to see how any of these 'hypotheses' could, or is even intended to, lead to any further investigation.

It seems that the religious "hypothesis" is NOT intended to explain anything. To repeat an earlier quotation, "The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action." (see page 27). James adds in a footnote on page 30: "the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief".

It would seem, then, that the test of a religious hypothesis is whether it changes our action and/or reactions. If it does, then it is true (for us). If not, then it is false (for us).

What exactly IS the religious hypothesis which James invites us to adopt or believe? He explains it on pages 25-28 in The Will to Believe.

The first affirmation of religion is that "The best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word." (p.25) He adds (p.27-28) that "The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having a personal form. The universe is no longer an It to us, but a Thou, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person may be possible here." On page 26 he tells

us that "The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true."

Death would seem to "throw the last stone" and "say the final word", as far as we mortals are concerned. On this interpretation, the Thou would be Death. But we would not likely consider death the best thing in the universe. If we did, we would likely advocate suicide as the supreme religious sacrifice.

James seems ambivalent as to whether there are 'things' or only one thing that is the best in the universe. He says that the more eternal and perfect aspect of the universe has personal form. Presumably he means that God is the object of religious belief. Henceforward we shall use 'God' rather than 'Thou' or "The more eternal and perfect aspect of the universe".

The religious 'hypothesis' seems to come to this: We are better off if we believe that the universe is (or has) an eternal and perfect personality (i.e. a God) with whom we might communicate. James says that we are (p.26) "supposed to gain even now by (our) belief....a certain vital good." **The test of the 'hypothesis' is whether or not we gain a vital good in believing it.** Exactly what sort of good we gain, James here does not specify, though he does claim that we will receive benefit (vital good) immediately. (He likely is referring to zest, security, peace, etc.)

We have seen that it is not within our power to believe something at will -- we cannot just decide to accept something as true. But if it is wrong (meaningless) to say that we can



and should believe at will, it is even less meaningful to say that we should believe a hypothesis at will.

A hypothesis is not the sort of thing we believe. If we accept something as true (believe it), we do not regard it as a hypothesis requiring tests in order that it be confirmed. It would seem that James is guilty of what has been called 'persuasive definition' when he calls religion a hypothesis.

As Macintyre says (p.196), "if religious beliefs are explanatory hypotheses, (or are supposed to be thus. J.O.) there can be no justification whatever for continuing to hold them... to treat religious beliefs as such is to falsify both the kind of beliefs they are and the way in which they are characteristically held." He says that if "we presented the concept of deity as part of a theoretical explanation (then) such a concept would... be justifiable if it were theoretically fruitful, as for example the concept of an electron is".

Is the concept of God theoretically fruitful? Does it explain or make sense of anything for us? James thinks that it does. He thinks that religious faith means essentially (p.51) "faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained." It is difficult to see how an "unseen order of some kind" could possibly explain anything. When we explain something, we relate it to something else -- a cause or a purpose perhaps -- but to refer it to an 'unseen order' and to consider this somehow an explanation, is a move itself requiring explanation.

Perhaps James would argue that if we could SEE the unseen order (or WHEN we see it), we would understand why we were born and why we die, etc. But this would be to presuppose what he is trying to show -- viz., that there will be a time, presumably after death, when things will be explained to us. To say that we must wait until we die to 'test' a hypothesis is to presuppose that we will be conscious after death -- that is, to presuppose that we do not really die -- and this is just what bothers those who require an explanation for the seeming necessity of dying. In other words, James presupposes what he asks us to suppose.

In The Will to Believe, James seems to presuppose that the universe is, or has, personality. On page 28, he says "this feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods...we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis."

In regard to this "feeling forced on us we know not whence", Vetter says (p.305): "Can it be that James knew nothing of the role played by early indoctrination of the child in the family and the culture generally that he pleads that we know not whence the feeling that it is virtuous to believe in the gods?" The phrase "do the universe a service" indicates that James already believes that the universe is or has personality. We may use the expression 'service a car' but we never speak of 'doing a car a service'. James is again guilty of the fallacy of begging the question when he talks of doing the universe a service. We can do a service

only to sentient beings, particularly human beings. James presupposes that the universe is sentient -- and suggests that it would somehow be better off if we believed.

Hobhouse says that (p.94) "the point of the whole argument is that we do our duty in the world by suppressing logical criticism and accepting the belief to which emotional impulse prompts. And when we are asked to do this deliberately we are in effect being invited to believe without regard to the truth of what we believe."

It is difficult to see how, if we presuppose what we set out to prove true, we can learn anything or explain anything.

Says James (p.52) "we have a right to supplement it (i.e. the physical order, J.O.) by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living. "It turns out that for James CONSOLATION or inspiration, rather than explanation, is what justifies belief in God. To believe that there is a God is to satisfy our (p.56) "inner need of believing". If our needs "outrun the visible universe, why may not that be a sign that an invisible universe is there?", asks James.

To assume something on trust, as James says that we should do regarding the existence of God, is a far cry from putting a hypothesis to the test. But James assumes something other than the mere existence of a God. He goes so far as to suggest (p.61) that "God himself...may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity." In

other words, God would only exist partially if we did not encourage Him by putting our faith in Him. I do not see how this is different from saying that we CREATE God by believing in Him -- or at least we assist in His creation. James is talking no longer of the God of any religion but of a god of our vivid imagination. To suggest that we create Him and not vice versa is not to advocate religious belief -- it is to advocate heresy or blasphemy. But James will have his belief in God, not because he is persuaded by any evidence or because he is overawed at the thought of a good, wise and powerful Creator of the universe -- but because he NEEDS such a belief. (That is, he NEEDS a God and will even go so far as to suggest that he would postulate one if He did not already exist; or that we could help bring Him into existence by believing in Him before He fully exists.)

James admits that (p.61), "For my own part, I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this. (That is, that God comes into existence as we believe in Him - J.O.) If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a private game of theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. And it feels like a real fight..."

As we mentioned before, James goes so far as to say that were there not a shred of evidence that there is a God, man needs Him so much that he would postulate Him. In The Moral Philosopher and Moral Life <sup>(CWT6)</sup>, he says (p.213) "even if there were no metaphysical or traditional grounds for believing

in a God, men would postulate one simply as a pretext for living hard and getting out of the game of existence its keenest possibilities of zest".

We will return later to the suggestion that men could actually worship a God whom they acknowledge is but a postulate. We turn back now to the essay, The Will to Believe in order to more systematically examine the position taken by William James.

## 6. THE OPTION

James calls the decision between two hypotheses an option. When an option is live, forced and momentous, says James, it is a genuine one. A genuine option, then, will be between live hypotheses -- i.e. -- both hypotheses make some appeal, however small, to our belief. It will be a decision that is forced or unavoidable, i.e., you cannot escape choosing between one hypothesis and the other. Finally, a genuine option or decision is momentous, i.e., the decision is unique, important and irreversible. We see on page 26 of his essay that James considers the option (decision) to accept or reject the religious hypothesis a genuine one.

He at one point says that a live hypothesis is one which makes some appeal, however small, to one's belief (p.3) or that it is one which we have some tendency to act upon (p.6). At another point (p.26), he implies that a live hypothesis is one which we regard as possibly true. These are not the same thing. We may regard it as possibly true that Barry Goldwater shall be elected president of the United States in 1964, yet we may find that this hypothesis makes absolutely no appeal to our belief. The distinction should be made between 1) hypotheses that appeal to our belief in the sense that we would like them to be true and 2) those that appeal to our belief in the sense that we have not discounted the possibility of their being true. The expression 'appeals to our belief' must mean that the hypothesis is considered by us to be capable of being true, else a live option would be between two hypotheses, each a negation of

the other, and both of which we would like to be true. This would mean that we would like both A and not-A to be true. Since this is impossible, we must interpret James as meaning number two above.

We concede that the decision regarding the truth or falsehood of the religious 'hypothesis' may be a 'live' one -- in the sense that one could consider religion possibly true or its negation possibly true -- but not in the sense that BOTH APPEAL to us.

In what sense is the option between religious belief and disbelief a forced one? There is "no possibility of not choosing", where the decision is forced, says James (p.3). One cannot be an agnostic, he says, because to suspend belief in God or religion is not to avoid the option -- it is to opt for the negation of religion or God. If the religious hypothesis be true, then we lose the good by suspending belief just as surely as we would if we "positively chose to disbelieve" (p.26). James thinks that nothing is lost by believing in God except perhaps that one may be in error, and (p.19) "Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things." "But presumably even if we are in error, we shall never know it -- at least until we die. The point is, that even if there is but the least possibility that there is a God, we do better to believe in Him, else we lose the good derived from such belief. To deny that there is a God or to remain in doubt concerning his existence amounts to precisely the same thing, according to James -- viz., one loses the good enjoyed by believers IF religion is true (p.26). It is

uncertain whether James means that we receive the vital good merely by believing or by believing what is true. He says both of these things on page 26.

In effect, James says that we lose the good if religion be true yet we disbelieve it, but we gain the good if we believe it, even though it is not true. It may satisfy us, but as we have seen, this does not mean that it will be true in the ordinary sense of the word. In other words, James' position comes to this: If God existed but nobody believed that He did, nobody would receive benefit; if God did not exist but we believed that He did, we would receive benefit. That is, whether or not there is a God is really of no importance -- we may not know about it until we die. However, God or no God, belief that He exists will benefit us immediately. The question remains whether anyone could believe that God exists while remaining indifferent to the question whether there is indeed a God or not. As we saw earlier, belief in something is incompatible with being unconcerned about the existence of the thing believed in.

To believe the statement "X exists" is to commit oneself to the existence of X. To believe in a statement's truth is to believe that something makes the statement true, viz., that there really is an X. When James makes the benefit of religion to man dependent merely on what he believes rather than on something making his belief (or statements expressing it) true, he forgets or ignores the fact that no religious person would admit to belief in God without subscribing to His actual existence. To believe in God (or that there is a



God) is to subscribe to His existence. We must distinguish between the benefit derived from mere belief in God and benefit derived from believing what turns out to be true. Presumably in the former case, the believer may live easier thinking that he may "go to heaven" while in the latter case, the believer would "go to heaven".

Is the decision regarding the religious hypothesis a forced one? I do not think so. If the decision is really unavoidable (and remember that according to James, to suspend belief is as good as to decide that there is no God) then how can I later reverse the decision I made long ago that I am in DOUBT about God's existence? In other words, if I have already been in doubt regarding His existence, then according to James, I cannot reverse this 'decision'. Yet he is urging me to do just this -- to quell my doubts and to believe. Why does he try to convince those who have already made their (forced) decision? The problem here is: WHEN must I "decide to believe" that there is a God? In my infancy, childhood, teens, maturity, old age or death bed? It seems that as soon as one is told that there is a God, (or that there may be one), one must believe it. To doubt or to deny is, according to James, to thereby make an unavoidable and irreversible decision. (On page 4 he clearly implies that the religious decision, being unique, is not reversible.)

But this is patently absurd. Many devout people have struggled with profound doubts to emerge more passionately religious than before these doubts beset them. When they found themselves doubting or disbelieving, they made no

irreversible or unavoidable decision. In fact, they could make no decision regarding the truth of religion. They were UNdecided about it.

To doubt that God exists is not to make an unavoidable decision. It is to hesitate to make any decision. True, to remain sceptical regarding religion may entail acting as though religion were untrue (e.g., one does not pray or go to church), but this is only to act as one believes. One who would encourage anything else is a prophet of insincerity. And insincerity is not recognized as a virtue by any known religion.

It seems that James is engaged in a self-defeating argument. He urges those who doubt or deny the truth of religion to believe -- yet he claims that his audience has already made their unavoidable and irreversible decision. That is, they have been "acting ... as if religion were not true" (p.29). If, as James says, to deny or doubt the truth of religion is to make an unavoidable and irreversible decision, then his argument in favor of belief must apply only to those who have never before encountered the religious 'hypotheses' or to those who already believe. To try to convince those who already believe is ludicrous. And the only other people -- those who have never before heard of the religious 'hypothesis' -- are also in the class of those who have been acting as if religion were not true. (James does not specify what he means when he says that nonbelievers act as if religion were not true -- I can only assume he refers to such things as praying, church-going etc.) It

turns out that by James' own argument, there is nobody he can convince to accept the religious hypothesis.

James says that one is forced to decide when one is faced with the challenge to "accept this truth or go without it" (p.3). As we have seen, if the person challenged acknowledged the hypothesis or statement as a 'truth', he would already accept it. The problem in his mind is not whether he can accept as true what he acknowledges already as a 'truth', but whether the proposition put before him is or is not a 'truth'. In putting the challenge in the form "accept this truth or go without it", James presents a tautology to the individual -- "accept as true what you see is a 'truth' and thereby accept as true" -- or he ignores the fact that there may be genuine doubt regarding the truth of the proposition under consideration, i.e., doubt about whether it IS a 'truth'.

James argues as though one must accept his 'truth' or go empty-handed. We get the impression that to go without the 'truth' we are offered is to leave an empty file in our knowledge-cabinet. But James himself (1890, p.284) said that "we never disbelieve anything except for the reason that we believe something else which contradicts the first thing." If James is correct here, then one who disbelieves the religious 'hypothesis' must already believe something which is contradicted by it. If James is incorrect here, then, as Schiller said (p.15), we can disbelieve a proposition "just because it strikes us as intolerable or incredible."

Thus the decision regarding the truth of religion is NOT unavoidable. It is NOT a case of "accept this truth or go without it". One may well believe something else which is contradicted by the claims of religion or one may just find religion senseless and reject it for this reason. One may find the notion of God senseless because one may not know "what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve -- what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare" (James, on meaning, 1961, p. 200). One may deem the word 'God' meaningless and all of religion an incredible superstructure built upon a 'meta-physical monster' (James, on God, 1929, p.427).

We reject, then, the claim that the decision regarding the truth of religion is a forced one on the following grounds. All atheists, agnostics and persons hearing about religion for the first time have acted as if religion "were not true", hence, according to James, they belong to the class of those who have already made their decision. There is nobody left to be persuaded by James. (Perhaps he is left attempting to convince himself that it is good to believe what you believe would be good.) There is a well known state of indecision which many religious people undergo and conquer. It is ludicrous to suggest that this period of serious doubt is equivalent to making an unavoidable decision that religion is false -- particularly when the individual later embraces religion more passionately than ever. It is a serious question at what age one is no longer eligible for a change of heart -- must a decision in adolescence determine one's

whole life? One's eternity? Lastly, one may already believe something which religion contradicts, in which case one can and should reject the so-called 'truth' offered. Or, one may simply find the notion of God and/or religion senseless and reject it for this reason.

One may suspend belief regarding the existence of God indefinitely. Those who are undecided about the existence of God and who take seriously the claim that they may suffer later for their indecision may decide to act as though religion were true. But to act deliberately as though something were true is not to believe it, else there would be no need to 'act' as though it were true. And of course one may decide to act or to continue to act as though the religious 'hypothesis' were not true, while remaining undecided about it. One may act on a hypothesis in either of two ways and in both cases may remain in doubt about it. Of course if the gates of heaven are open only to believers, then it will do no good merely to act as though one believed, unless one held also that God could be deceived by man. The point is that the distinction between believing something and merely acting upon it is neglected here by James. In his Philosophical Essays (p.93), Russell gives the example of one who encounters a fork in the road upon which he is walking. If he is ever to reach his destination, he must take one road or the other. When he chooses one of the two roads, he may be said to act on the hypothesis that it is the right one -- he does not necessarily believe that it is the right one. If we let the destination be death, then one of the forks may lead to heaven and the other may lead to hell,

emptiness, purgatory, etc. The difference here is that the road of life is replete with signposts at every step. There are several roads leading off in different directions, each with its signpost saying "Proceed with haste along this road. It alone leads to salvation. All other roads lead nowhere (or to hell)." James urges us to take any of these roads leading away from atheism or agnosticism -- so long as it 'works' for us (satisfies us). At any rate, be there one fork or several, one may strike out on any of them without fear that his decision is irreversible. One can always turn back if one becomes discouraged. It is much easier to stop acting on a hypothesis than to stop believing one.

James asserts that the decision regarding the truth of religion is momentous, i.e., that it is unique, important and irreversible (p.4). Most of the arguments used regarding the claim that the decision is forced apply also to the claim that it is momentous. James compares the religious decision to one about a chance to join a North Pole expedition. But the problem is not whether one should affirm or deny the existence of God -- as though it were a fact that there is a God, as it is a fact that there is a North Pole. The problem is whether or not there IS a God. That is, the decision is momentous only if there IS indeed a God. This is just the point at issue. The problem is whether there IS a momentous decision to be made, not whether one should refuse to acknowledge the presence of an object (or person) whose existence nobody would deny.

James says that the religious decision is one's "only similar opportunity". (p.4). I take it he means here that

this is one's ONLY opportunity and that there IS no 'similar opportunity'. Again the question arises as to WHEN I must make the decision. Is there any particular age that we reach beyond which there is no turning back? Christians hold that sincere repentance at any time enables one to escape the sinner's just deserts. This would seem to be denied by James who says that the decision is unique -- that it is one's ONLY opportunity. Presumably one who had sinned -- i.e., acted not only as though religion were untrue, but also as if he did not care if it were true -- presumably he would already have made his decision. Finally, regarding the uniqueness of the opportunity, we are confronted with the prospect of numerous Gods and religions. Is EACH of these unique or is only one of them? It seems that there are as many opportunities as there are religions. And they are legion.

We conclude that the decision regarding the truth of religion is neither forced nor momentous. The option, therefore, is NOT a 'genuine' one as defined by James.

## 7. BELIEF AND KNOWLEDGE

James says that we are unable to voluntarily believe things which contradict any one of "the whole fabric of the truths that we do believe in" (p.5). He then claims that "It is only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature is unable to bring to life again. But what has made them dead for us is for the most part a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind" (pp,8-9). This introduces a section in which James argues that (p.10) "As a rule we disbelieve all facts (1) and theories for which we have no use." As an instance where we could not choose to believe otherwise, James had used our belief that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a fact and not a myth. (p.4). Yet a few pages later, he says that what has made our dead hypotheses dead (i.e., not appealing to our belief), is for the most part a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind. If we take the example of Lincoln's non-existence as a dead hypothesis -- i.e., it is a dead hypothesis for us that Lincoln never existed -- then it seems absurd to claim that this 'hypothesis' was 'killed' by our willing nature. James seems to imply that we cannot disbelieve that Lincoln (or Hitler) existed, largely because we have previously willed to believe in his existence. In trying to show that our beliefs ARE a function of our willing nature, James uses such examples as belief in democracy and necessary progress (does he really mean 'faith' or 'conviction' here?) but not his previous example of Lincoln's existence. My point is this: when it suits him, James uses examples



where our needs and interests and culture may indeed influence our beliefs, but he neglects to mention the sort of belief which in the preceding section he used to show that we are UNABLE to choose our beliefs. I submit that what has made our dead hypotheses dead for us, i.e., what makes them unappealing to our belief (which is what James seems to mean by 'dead' here), is not a "previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind" (p.9), but our judgment based on evidence that they could not possibly be true. James seems to use the word 'dead' in two different senses (as he did with 'live', see p.47). These senses must be kept distinct to avoid the sort of absurdity that results in claiming that we have previously willed that Lincoln's existence (or Hitler's) should not have been a myth and THAT is why we find the hypothesis that he never existed a dead one. (Many will that Hitler's existence WERE a myth). (In previous sections we have dealt more thoroughly with the notion that belief is voluntary. The above paragraph was included to show that inconsistency in types of example can lead to contradictory results, viz., beliefs are voluntary and involuntary.)

James says that as a rule "we find ourselves believing we hardly know how or why" (p.9) and he adds on the same page that "Our faith is faith in someone else's faith, and in the greatest matters this is most the case." It would seem that religion itself is the best example of this -- where faith has been made a virtue of necessity. The last refuge of many religious apologists seems always to be faith in something -- in someone else's revelation, in someone else's

authority or in God Himself.

As to how we have come to hold the beliefs we have, we can often to a great extent trace the belief from the time and circumstances in which we first entertained the proposition expressed by it, through the reasons for which we assented, or came to assent to it. There is a difference between 'finding' oneself believing something and slowly amassing enough evidence to convince oneself of the truth about something. One may 'believe in' democracy merely because one's parents do and one may believe in it because years of research have led one to believe that no other form of political association works better or is more just. The causes of, and reasons for, the views about democracy held by a professional political scientist and by a six year old child may be considerably different. The distinctions between them should not be blurred by the claim that NOBODY knows how or why he believes what he does.

On page 10, James says that "As a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use." It is difficult to envisage somebody disbelieving what he acknowledges is a FACT. To acknowledge something as a fact -- to admit that a statement faithfully reports a fact -- is to believe the statement expressing it. And one does not believe a fact in any case -- one either is aware of it or one is ignorant of it. To be aware of a fact is to know that the statement expressing it is true.

I disagree that we disbelieve theories (or facts) for which we have no use. One may not find that he can use the theory of relativity yet one may not disbelieve it. One may

be aware of several facts for which one has no use (e.g., that this is a declarative statement) yet one need not deny that they ARE facts. The 'leading biologist now dead' (p.19) to whom James refers might have found that others could use telepathy but that he could not. He would doubtless have believed the claims about telepathy had he seen that it could be used, regardless of whether or not HE could use it. The truth of things and our desire or ability to use them are not as a rule the same thing. While reading a history book, we may encounter countless facts which we shall never use, yet not deny them on this score. And how do we come to believe that a certain fact is useful? Do we find out what it would be useful to believe useful and then believe it?

James says that Clifford found no use for Christianity and so denied it on that score. It is actually the case that Clifford deemed the claims of Christianity untrue and in "The Ethics of Religion" (from Lectures and Essays, vol. II), Clifford says that the uses (effects) of religion are largely deleterious. We have already discussed the notion that something is true insofar as it 'works' (or satisfies). The utility of a belief is clearly distinguishable from its being of what is true or of what is false. James tactly admits (p.11) that ideally pure insight and logic ought to produce our creeds -- and not our ability to use them. It is obvious that while men's needs may change from time to time, the statements expressing beliefs which were true at one time do not suddenly become false as the needs change. As we showed earlier, if truth and falsity were a function of needs and

desires alone, then they would lose their present meanings altogether. There would be no way to distinguish the true from the false.

On page 11 James defends the thesis that our passional nature (i.e., our desires, J.O.) must decide which of two hypotheses is true whenever it is a genuine option "that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds." James includes religion among these options. But we have seen that religion is NOT a genuine option as defined by James. And if it were, then religion could hardly be a 'hypothesis' since the truth or workability of hypotheses is never decided by our passions, emotions, etc., but by objective tests. James only confuses the issue when he implies that scientific verification of the religious hypothesis may 'yet' be produced (p.25). Either religion is like morality where evidence alone cannot show what is right or wrong (and James seems confused about this too, as we shall see), or it is like a scientific hypothesis which can be tested and either confirmed or falsified -- but it cannot be BOTH, as James would seem to have it.

In regard to making decisions on the basis of emotion where our intellect fails us, Laird says (p.154) that "This qualified defense of passional decision is, in itself, a frank admission that passion may be, and frequently is, irrelevant in these affairs." And he adds that "Passion ... packs the jury and prevents a fair trial." In other words, James inadvertently contradicts what he has been saying previously, viz., that our beliefs, and presumably our decisions, are ALL influenced or caused by our non-intellectual nature --

i.e., we cannot make a decision or assent to a proposition without being prejudiced in some sense.

## 8. CERTAINTY

James devotes a considerable portion of his essay to disparage the notion that we can never be certain of anything but trivial, abstract propositions which by themselves tell us nothing about concrete reality (p.15). He says that though we may attain knowledge, we cannot infallibly know when we have done so (p.12). We may know something, but we cannot know for certain THAT we know it, he says. He even goes so far as to say that "no concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon." (p.15). He continues with a long list of things which, though deemed absolutely false by someone, were considered absolutely true by others. All this is part of a general campaign undertaken here by James to dethrone reason and to place the crown of Truth-Finder upon the head (or heart) of emotion. Throughout this essay, James tries to show that anyone who relies solely upon his intellect to decide what is true and what is false, will be left waiting for the fair.

James has claimed that no concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon. If he means here that no single criterion or test of what is true has ever been agreed upon, then he may be right. That is, there may be no single test or criterion which in every case will be an infallible guide to the truth. But though there may be no single test which will work in all cases, there are SEVERAL concrete tests which men use to successfully distinguish the true from the false. The test or criterion depends on the

question or problem that one is trying to answer or solve.

Suppose I am phoned by a friend who invites me (and my wife) for Saturday night to a party at his home. He has recently moved and therefore must give me his address and directions which will hopefully get me there. Comes Saturday night my wife and myself faithfully follow the directions and eventually knock at a door behind which we hear the tinkling of glasses and the laughter and voices of friends whom we know were also invited. Suppose our friend comes to the door, congratulates us on finding his place, welcomes us in, takes our coats and leaves us to mingle with our friends. If my wife claimed to be in doubt as to whether we had found the party, I would not quote from The Will to Believe to the effect that "no concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon". I would seriously question her sanity. Any sane person in the position of my wife would have no need to question whether we had found the party. Several 'tests' or criteria had been evident to indicate that we had found our party. We had both seen the address above the front door and heard our friends' voices from within. When admitted (another criterion that we had found our party), we had both seen and heard the host and our friends. All the evidence of our senses indicated that we had truly found our party. The most concrete test of all is when everyone of our senses, and every one of the senses of all other observers in the same situation, report precisely the same thing.

But the evidence of our senses is only one of the many tests or criteria that have been agreed upon as the surest path to truth. What we remember from the past can also be a test of the truth. Particularly when others recall things as we do, can we be sure that truth is in our grasp. And there are tests for what none of us could possibly recall since we were not present. For example, the fact that Lincoln existed cannot now be attested to by our senses nor by our memories, except perhaps indirectly. James himself cannot believe that Lincoln's existence is a myth. References in enough respected books, newspapers, letters, etc. can serve as criteria of the occurrence of many events in centuries past. It is false that "no concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon". Several tests are acknowledged by sane adults to be sufficient to prove things true.

It seems that James is denying that we can justify, on intellectual grounds alone, any belief. He argues at length to show that most, if not all, of our beliefs, are caused by our desires or needs. We do not believe with reason(s) -- "we find ourselves believing we hardly know how or why" (p.9). He seems to think that if he can discredit reason, then he can argue effectively that we should feel free to believe that which most satisfies us. If desire or need were the sole cause of belief -- and its sole 'justification' too -- then would we not be fools to believe anything other than what we most desire? But if our desires or needs WERE the sole cause of belief, then we WOULD believe only what we most desired.



Just as we would believe only what we deemed most supported by evidence (or what was self-evident), if reason were the sole cause of belief. Whatever may influence people to believe as they do, they cannot justify their beliefs by appeal to desires or needs but to reasons with which any sane person would concur. Desire or need may influence people to believe as they do but these can never serve as justification of beliefs -- justification means justifiable for anyone, not just those with certain desires or needs.

There ARE ways in which we can "know that we know" -- there ARE concrete tests of what is really true.

To invite contradiction from others, but to receive only confirmation, is one sign that we are in possession of the truth. Rogers says (p.399) that "when we see that two independent beliefs corroborate one another, the confidence we have in both is increased; and this is what we mean by their intellectual justification." Other peoples' beliefs or other beliefs of our own can serve to substantiate a belief. For example, if I believe that a certain individual in my class is consistently cheating, I would place more confidence in this belief if another teacher (or teachers) told me that he too had reasons to believe that the individual was cheating -- particularly if this opinion was unsolicited by me.

It is not necessary that one have a closed 'system' as described by James on page 13. But most of our beliefs, to be rational, must be connected in some way with OTHER beliefs. As Hampshire says (p.144), "In the domain of opinion,

rationality is simply the opposite of disconnectedness, the opposite of holding my opinion's apart without forcing myself to range them in a decided order of dependence." He adds (p.149): "The idea of a rational action requires the doing of something within the penumbra of a larger intention, as the idea of a rational belief requires an acceptance of some statement within an environment of other statements accepted." In other words, few beliefs are orphans and will belong to one of the many families of belief we are housing. Even if it be true that we do not always proportion belief exactly to the evidence available, even if our desires and needs DO play a part in the formation of our beliefs -- this does not mean that we should feel free to believe whatever most tempts us if we deem it important enough. Hobhouse interprets James (p.187) as saying something like this: "As soon as the lights of reason are turned down, we may help ourselves in the dark to what we can lay hands on."

James had earlier written that understanding ceases with lack of experience. He said (1890, p.301) that "Sensible objects are thus our realities or the tests of our realities. Conceived objects must show sensible effects or else be disbelieved." Things unexperienced or unexperiencable by us will be unreal for us. If we believe in them, we do not really know what it is that we believe, thus we believe irrationally. And James had written in a letter to Lovejoy in 1907 (Perry, 1948, p.481) that "we can imagine, as coexisting with our experience, myriads of entities absolutely isolated from it. In that case, however, we can not only not verify

which of them truly exists, but apart from some possibility of coming into touch with ourselves, we cannot even conceive what ... the real existence of any one of them would mean."

In view of these quotations, it is surprising that James did not find it necessary to clarify such propositions as (p.25)

"the best things are the more eternal things" and (p.27)

"The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe...

(has) personal form." Rational beliefs, then, are of those

things which are in some way connected with what we have

experienced or with other beliefs of ours which are of things

connected in some way with our experience. Those beliefs

which meet this requirement are not necessarily rational.

But for a belief to be rational, it must at least be about

things which we can conceive -- i.e., things which, as James

says, we could come into touch.

James argues (p.12) that we cannot know for certain

that we know something, though we can know things. But it

makes no sense to say that one doubts that one knows some-

thing, therefore it makes no sense to say that one knows

that one knows something. To know "A" is to be certain that "A".

We are all familiar with Ryle's dispositional analysis of

'knowing that' (see his book The Concept of Mind) and with

the problems that arise when one argues that we know that we

know and we know that we know that we know, etc. When I am

asked for my telephone number, I just give it. Assuming

that I give it correctly every time, we would say that I

know my number. To reply "Of course I do" if asked "Do you

know that you know your number?" is to assert emphatically

that I do know my number. (I would be more likely to ask what the questioner meant.) To show that the question makes no sense if interpreted literally, think of how inappropriate the replies "no" or "I'm not sure" would be.

I do not think that James shows successfully that we never know anything with certainty. He admits that we can call mathematical propositions true with certainty but as we have seen, there are other cases where we are completely justified in claiming certainty -- e.g., we can know with certainty that we HAVE found the right party.

The sorts of things listed by James on page 17 which have been branded as certain and as certainly false by different people are all examples of abstract philosophical problems. This sort of problem is notoriously insoluble by the ordinary means of empirical test. Things which have been thought absolutely false by some and absolutely true by others, to which empirical tests are not applicable (and could not be applicable), may well be meaningless 'metaphysical monsters' which could not possibly touch us. If James had dealt with less grand examples and used instead such examples as Lincoln's existence (and, e.g., one's telephone number,) he might have had more difficulty arguing that nothing informative of concrete reality could be known with certainty.

I agree with James (p.17) that where a hypothesis comes from is less important than where it leads to. A scientist may dream of a hypothesis, yet it may prove useful and lead to interesting results. But James' phrase 'thinking' (p.17 --

'total drift of thinking') must not be overlooked. If by 'the total drift of thinking' James means that all sorts of tests continue to confirm the hypothesis, then we may continue to call the hypothesis a 'true' one. But if James means only continued satisfaction by this phrase, then the hypothesis is not confirmed. It is adhered to for subjective gratification, not because it leads to interesting results of an objective (publicly observable) sort.

To sum up: certainty IS possible; there are cases where no sane person would or should have any doubts (e.g., the party example); desires or needs may influence one to believe but only reason can justify it (to the world at large); even if we could prove nothing true, this would be no reason for licence to believe what most tempts us and is deemed important -- it is all the more reason for cherishing belief as our only guide to reality; confirmation is gained by testing, as opposed to consolation or gratification gained by believing that which is too vague to test or is claimed to be beyond testing.

9. BELIEF AND TRUTH

In the next section (17-19), James distinguishes two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion --- 'know truth' and 'avoid error'. He argues that it makes more sense to believe, when in doubt, than to disbelieve. He says that if one believes A, then there is a chance that one will gain the truth. If one disbelieves A, then even if one escapes error, it is unlikely in so doing, that one will believe B (the truth). In escaping the error A, says James, we may believe other falsehoods C or D, or we may not believe anything at all in the matter. Therefore, says James, better to believe than to disbelieve.

James says that 'Believe truth' and 'Shun error' are two separable laws (pp.17 and 18). He says that (p.27) it is better to yield to one's hope that A may be true than to yield to one's fear that A may be wrong. "To believe is to be brave, to disbelieve is cowardly", is what, in effect, James says. He is saying that if one disbelieves, one has gained nothing but perhaps freedom from error --- and "Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things." (p.19) ---- but if one believes, then one has a chance to gain truth and the blessings of real knowledge. Caveat emptor!

Suppose a man went to a used car lot and a salesman tried to pressure him into buying what looked as if it could be a dud, though the chances looked about 50-50 that it was. The salesman argues that only if he buys the car will he have the chance to see if it is a peach (and not a lemon),

whereas not to buy it will cut him off forever from the opportunity. One might lose one's temper and say to the salesman "Even if this were the last car on earth...etc.". And this is just the point. There are thousands of used cars (beliefs) available and to choose the first one you encounter indiscriminately would be utter folly. You would eliminate the possibility, for the present at least, of trying another car, and even from scrutinizing the other cars. You will be so busy driving (or repairing) that first car (belief) that you will likely have no time or interest in investigating further.

But we do not choose beliefs as we do cars. As we saw earlier, belief is not voluntary. We cannot choose to believe whatever most tempts us, as we could buy the car. So in one sense, James' advice to believe rather than disbelieve is nonsense. It also turns out that he utters only a tautology.

"Believe truth! Shun error!" Nobody would argue with either of these, nor even with James' emphasis on the former 'rule'. But nobody would argue with him because, as we saw, belief and what we deem to be the truth are one and the same thing. Thus what James actually urges us to do when he says "know truth!" or "believe truth!" is "deem true what is deemed true!". That is, James urges us to believe -- to deem true -- what is true, which is what most of us think we are doing anyways. But James does not merely urge us to believe what is true -- he urges us to believe rather than disbelieve in the hope that we will believe truly. If we disbelieve, he says, we may believe nothing or we may believe

something else that is false. So the best thing to do is to believe! The only problem is, WHAT should we believe?

James accuses Clifford of exhorting us to believe nothing and to keep our minds in suspense forever (p.18). Nowhere do we find Clifford advocating such nonsense. In The Ethics of Belief, he cautioned us to attempt to proportion belief to the evidence and not to our desires. He said nothing about whether it is better in general to believe, disbelieve or suspend judgment. He said only that to believe on anything but sufficient evidence is to misuse belief. We encourage the spread of self-deception and deception in general when we do not respect the truth enough, he said.

James argues that it is better as a rule to believe than to disbelieve because one can rarely, if ever, believe truly just by disbelieving. That is, to believe truly, one must believe, therefore disbelief alone, will rarely, if ever, lead one to the truth. Also, one is a coward to yield to the fear of being in error rather than yield to the hope of gaining truth.

In the pursuit of truth, it is more prudent to be careful to avoid errors than to believe merely in the HOPE that you will believe what is true. For everything true, there are an infinite number of falsehoods. While it is true that I have one wife, it is false that I have two, three, four, etc. etc. If what James says is true, viz., that "our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity" (p.18), then I would really be hard put to say how many wives I have.



I realize that my example is clear-cut -- I know for certain that I have no more than one wife. But the case is even stronger against James when we go to cases where the truth is not so obvious. In trying to learn how nature is constituted, man has believed many falsehoods. He believed that he was at the center of a finite universe, and that he was situated on a flat earth. If men had continued to believe these and countless other things in the hope that they believed truly, rather than to doubt and disbelieve as a few of them dared to, we might STILL believe that our world is flat, at the center of the universe and that dancing around fires will encourage the gods to give forth water. If a policy of belief such as James advocated had been followed, man would be where he was. There would be no trial and error, no doubt or disbelief, no change or progress or enlargement of knowledge.

On page 18 James says that "we may escape B by not believing anything at all, even A." Yet in The Principles of Psychology, (p.284), he had stated that "we never disbelieve anything except for the reason that we believe something else which contradicts the first thing." He stated further that "all propositions...are believed through the very fact of being conceived, unless they clash with other propositions believed at the same time." If we take what he said in The Principles of Psychology seriously, then we must reject the possibility that one could reject or 'escape' a proposition B by not believing anything at all. To disbelieve B, one must believe something else which contradicts it, if James

was correct in his book The Principles of Psychology.

We quoted Schiller earlier (page 52) to the effect that one can reject a proposition B just because it strikes one as being intolerable. For example, I could reject the notion that there are 100 gods, not just on the grounds that I have already believed that there are only three gods or that there is only one. I can reject it simply because it strikes me as intolerable or patently false or even ridiculous or meaningless. I may 'escape' one proposition not by believing nothing regarding the matter, but by believing that it is patently false, absurd, intolerable or meaningless. If it is a proposition which I understand but see no evidence for, I may suspend judgement or declare it false until some evidence is found -- if it is a matter amenable to evidence. James seems to think that we have to maintain a certain number of beliefs or we will go empty-handed. But we would not disbelieve a proposition B that we understood unless we believed the proposition not-B, and we may have every reason to reject B. He seems also to think that we are unable to act unless we believe, but since disbelief of any proposition B entails belief in not-B, we are able to act on our 'disbelief.'. One might say that there is no such state of mind as disbelief. All cases of disbelief are really cases of belief that 'not-X'. That is, we believe that the proposition before us is false.

James says (p.18) that it is better to be duped many times in one's investigation rather than postpone indefinitely "the chance of guessing true". This is a most curious

phrase. If one makes a guess, then how does one determine that the conclusion is the correct one? Usually one waits until the evidence is in, or if possible, one tests the conclusion guessed at in order to determine its worth. As Russell says (p.95), even if we believe truly, if we have no reason to believe it, then in what sense do we 'gain' a truth -- 'know truth!' -- or acquire knowledge? If we want the "blessings of real knowledge", as James puts it, then to merely guess (believe) will never do. As Russell says (p.96), where we guess and by chance hit on the truth, we may believe what happens to be true but we cannot know the truth. As we said earlier, to know is to believe with justified confidence (what is true), and one rarely has justified confidence (a product of being convinced by evidence) when one merely guesses that something is true. Only reason to believe can give one knowledge, never belief alone. To know that something is so enables one to act much more expeditiously than merely to believe or guess, and happen to be right.

If one is to "know truth", then, it is not enough to guess at or believe a conclusion which you do not know to be true (i.e. which happens to be true). As Kaufmann says (p.109) "The mere fact that I feel certain and happen to be right does not mean I know". I believe with Kaufmann that there is a crucial connection between knowledge and evidence. To say "I know" advisedly, is to say that one has "evidence sufficient to compel the assent of every reasonable person" (Kaufmann, p.113). (Of course we can know without evidence --

but only in cases where no evidence is required. For example, "I know I have a headache" or "I know I love her").

When one makes a guess and the conclusion is confirmed immediately by someone who really does know (e.g. "You're right! Mary did have twins!"), one might say "I'm clever eh?!" or "Pretty smart eh!". But one is unlikely to say (and be justified in saying) "I knew it all the time". If one knows, then there is no need to guess. And if one wants to find out, one asks those who know (and asks how they know) or one puts the question to nature in the form of experiments -- one does not find out by guessing and believing.

As we have seen, there is a difference between believing what happens to be true and really knowing what is true. The difference lies in the reasons one has for believing when one knows. One is entitled to say one knows only if one has reasons. It is part of the meaning of the word 'know' that one has reason(s) to believe something, except in its uses where reasons are inappropriate, e.g., "I know I have a headache". Security of mind comes when enough reasons are deposited in one's 'belief-bank'. There is a difference between believing the truth ("Believe truth!") and knowing it ("Know the truth"). James ignores this difference.

It is a waste of time to argue that we should believe or know what is true. It is not silly, however, to argue that we should believe what the evidence indicates is true. In Belief and Constraint, Mayo points out (p.149) that "it is often false that a person ought to believe something which, though it happens to be true, yet he actually has convincing evidence against it". It is a waste of time to

try to convince people that they ought to believe or to know what is true because to believe or to know means to deem something true. It is not silly to argue that we should make every attempt to proportion our belief to the evidence because there is no better guide to the truth than evidence -- though often people make less effort than they should to examine it or to search for more.

There is much more chance that one will believe truly, if one tries to cultivate the habit of doubting and demanding evidence rather than that of believing. It is less a matter of bravery or cowardice than of wisdom. If men practised what James preached in The Will to Believe, viz., that it is better to believe than to doubt or deny because one is more likely to gain the truth by believing, then they would never have emerged from savagery. As James himself said (1890, p.308) "The greatest proof that a man is sui compos is his ability to suspend belief in presence of an emotionally exciting idea. To give this power is the highest result of education. In untutored minds the power does not exist." It would seem from this quotation that in his later work The Will to Believe James advocates that we should act in an uneducated and untutored way, i.e., we should believe rather than disbelieve or suspend judgement, and that this will give us more chance of gaining truth.

James advocated belief as opposed to suspense of judgement because he thought that in the state of doubt and inquiry, "The content of our mind is in unrest." (1890, p.284)

In the first place, he held that to believe is the natural thing. "Any object which remains uncontradicted is ipso facto believed and posited as absolute reality." (1890, p.289) Secondly, he held that one can act with purpose and vigor only when one believes with confidence. He felt that one was paralyzed when in doubt and that belief of any sort was better than doing nothing but wait until all the evidence is in.

James may be correct when he says that belief comes naturally to man but this seems to apply to the childhood of man and of men. When the human race became educated, or when a small portion of it did, it learned not to believe upon mere encounter but to believe only what was indicated by evidence. Or, rather, as he learned to doubt and question, man became educated. If no man questioned what his father believed, then he would believe exactly as his father did -- the same applies to the generations of men. Many members of our race now naturally question what they are taught or told, hence it is no longer true, if indeed it ever was, that man naturally believes everything that he is told or that he conceives of <sup>or</sup> encounters -- if it is not contradicted. Even if all men did believe that which they conceived or encountered that was not contradicted, this would not mean that they should do so. (As Hume reminded us, it may be an indefinite -- nay impossible -- journey from 'is' to 'ought').

Does doubt or suspense of judgement render one inactive? On the contrary, there may be no more effective intellectual

energizer than a serious doubt. Science in the past few centuries could hardly be called 'inactive' yet it progressed by men doubting or disbelieving what their predecessors taught. It did not progress by having men believe in the hope that they might be true. It progressed because men tried to find evidence to justify their doubt. In the sphere of physical action, e.g. doing a broad jump, what is wanted is not necessarily belief that one will succeed but hope and/or confidence that one can succeed. What is wanted is a happy medium between belief that one will succeed (which can easily change to overconfidence or foolhardiness), and belief that one will not succeed (which can easily change to timidity or cowardice). (We shall soon deal with the claim that belief or faith is sometimes required to create its own verification.)

James says (p.19) that our errors are not such awfully solemn things. I submit that they can be the most solemn things imaginable. If those who perpetrated the Inquisition had not been in error about the fate of the souls of those who did not acquiesce, then it might never have occurred. If enough people had not been in error when they thought Hitler merely laughable or when they thought he would cease demanding more territory when he acquired Czechoslovakia, the Second World War with all its atrocities might have been prevented, or at least mitigated. Errors and miscalculations can be awfully solemn. "Lightness of heart" (p.19) must never become lightness of head. It seems that the greater the error is, the greater is the ensuing tragedy.

Errors that make no difference are of things that make no difference. Errors that misrepresent reality to us, i.e., errors that are of things that do make a difference (e.g. 'This ice is not thin') are errors that do make a difference.

In the next section James argues that in most scientific and everyday matters, it is wiser to suspend judgement or to doubt than to believe precipitously because (p.20) "The need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to action is better than no belief at all". But, he says, there are some matters in which passion must influence and should influence (another virtue of necessity?) us in our opinions. Here the option is forced and momentous -- here we cannot "always wait with impunity till the coercive evidence shall have arrived" (p.22). He goes on to use morality and religion as examples where the option is momentous and forced.

James implies that one cannot act unless one believes and that therefore, if action is necessary, it is better to believe falsely than not at all. I disagree that action is impossible without belief. Recall the fork-in-the road example (page 54). One need not believe that one has chosen the right road in order to take it. One may be completely in the dark, suspect that the road is the right one, hope that it is the right one or act on the hypothesis -- (or guess) -- that it is the right one. Belief is not a requisite to action. On the contrary in cases where one doubts, action is requisite to belief. That is, doubt can only be quelled by action which leads to discovery thus



dispelling it. We must reject the notion implied by James that action requires belief -- particularly when he suggests that a false belief is better than none at all. Our errors can be solemn.

James says that a learned judge once told him that "few cases are worth spending much time over: the great thing is to have them decided on any acceptable principle and got out of the way" (p.20). Over his court the judge must have inscribed "All hope abandon ye who enter here". To operate on this principle would be a gross miscarriage of justice. Particularly when a judge is making law, he must not settle for "any acceptable principle". The judgement he makes will serve as a precedent which in future courts will hold much weight. An error on his part could lead to countless injustices in the future and not merely in the case before him. This seems to be a very poor example to support the claim that any belief is better than no belief or suspense of judgement until "objective evidence has come" (p.20).

James says that "in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place" (p.20). It seems from this quotation that James held morality and religion to be things apart from "objective nature" since he goes on to argue that decisions in regard to morality and religion are forced and momentous, i.e., they **MUST** be made. Further evidence that James considered religion to be

independent of "objective nature", is found in this quotation from his essay "Is Life Worth Living?" in The Will to Believe (p.52): "the physical order of nature, taken simply as science knows it, cannot be held to reveal any one harmonious spiritual intent. It is mere .... doing and undoing without end."

But we are left in doubt whether or not James deemed religion independent of 'objective nature'. In Reflex Action and Theism (TWTB, p.122) he says "God's personality is to be regarded .... as something lying outside of my own and other than me, and whose existence I simply come upon and find." This seems to mean that God is encountered in a similar manner to that of other men or perhaps as we encounter the wind --- invisible to our eyes but felt by our bodies. We get this impression too from something he says later in the same essay (p.135): "I simply come upon him (i.e., God. J.O.) and find his existence given to me." James says here that he finds God's existence given to him. Would not God's existence be a 'fact quite independent of us'? (p.20).

Is objective evidence appropriate to religion? James at times speaks as though it is (p.25): religion's first affirmation, or the religious hypothesis "obviously cannot yet be verified scientifically at all." But when he describes religion as a matter that (p.11) "cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds" (emphasis mine J.O.), then he seems to hold two incompatible views about the nature of religion. On the one hand we simply come upon God and find Him, find His existence given to us; and on the other hand,

(p.11) religion cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds, our emotions must and should make the decision for us (p.19), and it concerns a decision "which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve" (p.29). Perhaps James thought that since we simply come upon God and find Him, we need no evidence to persuade us of His existence. But this view could be held only by one who had come upon God and found Him, a class of people who require neither evidence nor decision. That is, if James is correct that we simply FIND God, then there is no need for objective evidence. But if he is correct that religion is NOT evident in objective nature and that our emotions MUST decide for us, then again objective evidence is inappropriate. We may assume that James did NOT deem religion amenable to objective evidence, i.e., religion is not a hypothesis capable of confirmation or disconfirmation by objective evidence of the scientific sort. James must be interpreted as taking the position that experiments, tests, observations and predictions, in the scientific meaning of these words, are NOT applicable to religion. Religion is a matter of the heart, not the head.

## 10. RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND SCIENCE

On page 21, James lays the groundwork for his "faith-creates-its-own-verification" argument on pages 23 to 25. He has stated that it is almost always the case in scientific matters that we should not make up our minds at all "till objective evidence has come" (p.20). He adds that "The attitude of sceptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes." (p.20). Decisions or options in scientific matters are not usually momentous or forced, he says. But on the next page (p.21), he says that "For purposes of discovery such indifference is less highly to be recommended, and science would be far less advanced than she is if the passionate desires of individuals to get their own faiths confirmed had been kept out of the game." James attempts to equate religion and science as both being areas where discovery is made by men who have a 'pet hypothesis' (p.22) or a pet 'live hypothesis' (p.21) and who search for confirmation of this hypothesis. In religion, James argues, faith creates its own verification. In science, he says, the man who has "no interest whatever in ... results ... is the warranted incapable, the positive fool" (p.21). He maintains, in other words, that the scientist and the potential religious believer are no different in their belief in a 'pet hypothesis' which they make every attempt to verify -- and verification and discovery would be impossible without the pet hypothesis and the faith (or belief) invested in it.

Does science resemble religion in that discovery is

made possible only if one has 'passionate desires' to get his own 'faiths' confirmed? I do not think that there is ANY analogy here whatsoever.

On page 21 James blurs the distinction between UNinterest, indifference or apathy and DISinterest or impartiality. One can desire greatly that a certain hypothesis be confirmed, i.e., be most interested and concerned in the result, yet remain impartial or DISinterested in the result. James uses the curious phrase "get their own faiths confirmed" (p.21). The point is, if a hypothesis or faith is confirmed, then faith is no longer required. Faith is belief beyond the evidence, accompanied by the desire that the belief be a correct one. If a faith or pet hypothesis is confirmed, then it is no longer faith but a justified belief. We must distinguish between 'passionate desires' to get one's faith confirmed and an interest in verifying a hypothesis that strikes one as being plausible.

Scientists know only too well that truth is not usually found by those who have passionate desires to get their ideas confirmed. They have systematized the 'nervousness' (lest they become deceived) (p.21), into efforts to disconfirm their pet hypotheses. They see whether or not it can be falsified and if enough experiments fail (to disconfirm their hypothesis), they are confident that it can withstand investigation and test by anyone. Then its truth will be a PUBLIC one believable by any sane and reasonable person -- not a private faith that nobody could disconfirm because tests and experiments are irrelevant.

Findlay writes (p.120) "As Popper would put the matter, that belief is most approvable which most risks falsification by adverse experience and which best survives and triumphs over that risk." Of course just exposing a belief to the possibility of being falsified or disconfirmed is not enough to render the belief approvable. Findlay adds (p.120): "It is ... because belief is loyal to ... experience that it risks greater falsification ... and it is this positive loyalty which grounds its approvability rather than its exposure to falsification." And he adds on the next page that belief "will also be approvable insofar as it goes positively in quest of such experience, insofar as, in other words, it constantly invites and courts refutation ... this sustained, gratuitous gallantry constitutes the heart and soul of scientific method."

If a scientist did what a person desirous of believing in God did (i.e., did what an individual who wishes that there WERE a God did), then he would not expose the belief or hypothesis to every possible disconfirmation. Rather, he would, if he took the advice of William James in Some Problems of Philosophy (p.224), climb upon the 'faith-ladder' and try to convince himself that:

- "1. There is nothing absurd in a certain view of the world being true, nothing self-contradictory;
2. It might have been true under certain circumstances;
3. It may be true, even now;
4. It is fit to be true;
5. It ought to be true;

6. It must be true;

7. It shall be true, at any rate for me."

The last five words give the game away. The 'truths' of religion are private. As James says, (1929, p.422), "feeling is the deeper source of religion." and a few pages on he adds (p.447): "In the religious sphere, in particular, belief that formulas are true can never wholly take the place of personal experience."

The truths or probablities of science are available to all who can understand them. Not so with religion. As James says, (1929, p.445): "the attempt to demonstrate by purely intellectual processes the truth of the deliverances of direct religious experience is absolutely hopeless." In science, experiences (or observations) are such that they can be shared, in principle, by any trained person having the normal faculties. There is a vast difference between confirming one's own 'pet hypothesis' or 'private faith' by incantations and confirming a hypothesis by producing publicly observable phenomena under specified conditions. If a scientist tried to confirm a hypothesis by climbing on James' faith-ladder, he would be quickly "pulled down" by other scientists who search for the truth as normally understood -- that which ALL men can share. Anyone who would admit that something were true FOR HIM, would be tacitly admitting an overwhelming desire, need or even compulsion to believe as he does. (Recall the discussion about 'true for me', pp.10-11).

Scientists must be cautious about being deceived because

they know how easily this can happen. The man with a passionate desire to get his faith confirmed is much less likely to be impartial than if he were merely interested or concerned to get certain results. As Russell says (p.94), "The actual belief that the hypothesis is true ... is apt to be a hindrance, since it retards the abandonment of false hypotheses when the evidence goes against them, and if the belief is general, it makes people regard experimental verification as unnecessary."

Belief or faith in a hypothesis can influence one's interpretation of experiments <sup>and</sup>/or observations to a great degree. Stephen Toulmin writes in Foresight and Understanding (pp.100-101):

"If a man enters the observatory or laboratory with preconceived ideas about what he will find, this (scientists feel) will prejudice his investigation. If he has already made up his mind (say) that pigs can fly, that will disqualify him as an observer: he will go around the world looking for evidence to support his prior belief, and may end by hailing some porker leaping off the roof of his sty as proof of his contention. ... when it comes to interrogating Nature, in the laboratory or in the field, we must leave her to answer for herself - and answer without any prompting."

We must distinguish, he says, between prejudiced beliefs (e.g., pigs fly) and preformed concepts (e.g. a body's motion



is self-explanatory only when free from all forces, including its own weight.)

The desire for the truth cannot be equated with the passion to get a certain belief, faith or hypothesis confirmed. There is a difference between hoping that a certain hypothesis shall be confirmed and being determined that it shall be confirmed, come hell or high water. The difference is between asking a question of nature and having an answer which one merely tries to impose on nature -- between SEEING whether pigs fly and doing everything in one's power to confirm one's belief that they do.

The functions and purposes of religion and science are not the same. Comparing the scientist's task to that of one who seeks confirmation of a particular proposition is not fruitful. Where decision is applicable to religion, it is not so with science. Talk of empirical proof, evidence, tests, hypotheses, etc., in regard to religion is unrealistic. It is, as Macintyre says, (p.197), "alien to the whole spirit of religious belief. Having made our decision, we adhere to belief unconditionally, we commit ourselves as completely as one can ever commit oneself to anything." The religious believer commits himself to a way of life and to a set of fundamental attitudes regarding himself and others. James says (1931, p.223) that "Philosophy and Religion have to interpret the total character of the world." For instance, he adds, "It may be true all the while (even though the evidence (!) be still imperfect) that ... 'the natural order is at bottom a moral order'". As James says, religion is con-

cerned with the universe as a WHOLE -- with whether or not it has a purpose, a meaning and whether man is a part of this meaning or purpose. Notice that James thinks EVIDENCE might be relevant to the question of whether the universe as a whole is moral.

Science makes no judgements concerning the universe as a whole, in regard to meaning, purpose or moral order. The concern of science is to understand the observed and observable, not to speculate about the worth of things, as James himself said (p.22). Would it make sense to say that the universe is good? I do not think so. The word 'good' is a comparative term and we have no OTHER universe (the word 'universe' meaning what it does) as a basis of comparison. If we are pleased with the universe we might say it is good but then we must grant those who are not pleased, to call it bad or evil. As Rogers says (p.404) "the belief that the world is good starts from our naive faith in our emotional preferences... ." (It may be said that this universe could be considered good compared to possible alternative universes. This may be true, but the fact still remains that though religions may decide that this or that universe would be better or worse, science's concern is with the universe as it is, not as it might have been or might be.)

Science 'preaches' that doubt is a duty and blind faith a sin. As Schiller says (p.19), doubt is "the condition of spiritual progress. So long as what appears is accepted without question, there can be no progress in knowledge,

because there is no cause for investigation. Thus the stimulus that incites us to new truth always comes from doubt about the old." Many religions have traditionally regarded blind faith as being preferable to doubt.

Science submits new hypotheses to tests, religion has revised her dogma because of social pressures and scientific advancement. Science advances because new discoveries are made (or better interpretations are made). Religion changes as its doctrines are reinterpreted to meet man's changing NEEDS. A scientist adopts new hypotheses as older ones seem disconfirmed; a man embraces a new religion, not usually because the older one seems disconfirmed but because it no longer satisfies him emotionally. He may admit that for others the religion is still fine because it answers their needs or desires. No scientist would say the same of a hypothesis that he had discarded -- because objective evidence would persuade anyone. One may embrace another religion because it seems to be the 'true' one, but in the main, a change of religion comes from a change of heart, not of 'head', so to speak.

Toulmin says (p.99) that science is mainly "concerned with a search for understanding - a desire to make the course of Nature not just predictable but intelligible - and this has meant looking for rational patterns of connections in terms of which we can make sense of the flux of events." Scientists attempt to explain phenomena by appealing to something more basic, more self-explanatory. What they appeal

to are described by Toulmin as 'ideals of natural order' which are regarded, for the time being at least, as being self-explanatory. For example one may explain the phenomena of the tides (or of some other motion) by appealing to the principle of inertia. The point is, one explains some phenomenon or phenomena in nature only by appealing to something ELSE, unless of course it is already regarded as self-explanatory -- in which case it will require no explanation. But when we turn to religion, the story is different -- appeal to something else explains nothing.

## 11. PURPOSE, GOD AND MORALITY

Religion, as we said before, attempts to explain the universe as a WHOLE. It may refer to a God, a purpose, a moral character or all of these things. It attempts, among other things, to explain why man is here and why the universe is 'here' -- i.e., why it exists. James puts it thus (1890, p.317): "What is beyond the crude experiences is not an alternative to them, but something that means them for me here and now." James requires a meaning for the totality of things -- he asks what he calls the ultimate "Why?" (TWITB p.73). He is willing, he says, to supplement the visible universe with an unseen spiritual order "if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again" (p.52); he says that men would postulate a God, even if there were no grounds for believing in one, "simply as a pretext for living hard" (p.213). Does it make sense to ask why the universe is 'here'? Is it possible to find something that gives meaning to the totality of our experiences (and possible experiences), i.e., to everything? I think that both questions must be answered in the negative.

We ascribe purpose only to conscious beings -- and usually only to humans. To ask the purpose of an inanimate object is to ask its USE, e.g., "What is the purpose of this instrument?" We do not consider nonconscious things capable of intention or goal-seeking activity because they do not exhibit the typical purposeful behavior -- if we can say that they 'behave' at all. It is true that some of the other

living things, even protozoans, react to stimuli in their environment, and obtain food. But mere reaction to stimuli and instinctive procurement of food does not qualify as purposeful behavior -- else we would not call it 'reaction' and 'instinct'. The sine qua non of purposeful conduct is that the agent be aware (conscious) of the goal and that he deliberately act to achieve his end.

To ask of a hammer what purpose it has, is to ask what use can be made of it. The human who uses it will (or could) do so for a purpose. One who asks this question knows that the hammer is not conscious. He really means to ask to what purpose a human would use it. Those who ask what purpose the universe has, either believe that it is itself conscious or presuppose that there is some conscious agent who can or does USE the universe for some purpose. Pantheists -- those who hold the universe as a whole to be God -- would deem the first interpretation of the question sensible. That is, they consider the universe a conscious agent with a purpose of its own. Those who believe that God is not the whole of the universe think that it could be, or is, used by Him. But this leaves atheists, agnostics and sceptics etc. in the dark as to what the question could mean.

The question being asked is sometimes called 'the ultimate Why'. Only those who presuppose that the universe could have a purpose (i.e., that it is or contains God), would ask what that purpose is. The point is, that if as James says, religion tries to answer the question, then it presupposes, quite naturally, that there is a God. But those to whom

James speaks in The Will to Believe, need NOT presuppose this. When James says that God or an 'unseen spiritual order' can give meaning to life or to the universe, one must believe (in God) before one can understand what he is saying. It seems utter nonsense to ascribe purpose to the totality of things unless one already believes that the universe is a living, conscious being or that it was created or inhabits such a being. In other words, the problem of the purpose of the universe arises only with the concept of -- and particularly the belief in -- a God. Those who believe that there is a purpose will try to discover what it is. Non-believers should not be bothered by the 'problem' because they should deny that there IS any problem. There can be no problem, they should say, where there can be no purpose.

In other words, those who do not already believe in God will not feel the need to ask the ultimate Why in the first place. The question will make no sense to them. It makes no sense to me. What function or purpose could the universe possibly serve? It is true that we 'use' it (or a tiny part of it) as 'home' for a while, but this only means that WE put it to 'use', it is our purpose and not the universe's. Though minute parts of the universe, viz., we humans, engage in purposeful conduct, it does not seem that much else does or can. And it certainly does not seem that the WHOLE of the universe conducts itself, with purpose.

It makes no sense for believers to condemn nonbelievers for not seeing the necessity for asking the ultimate Why.

Nonbelievers cannot make SENSE of the question. They see that it would make sense only if one presupposes that the universe is God or contains God. One who fails to see how the universe could ACT as a whole, let alone act purposefully, or how it could be USED has the right, nay the duty, to deny that the ultimate Why could possibly be answered. For nonbelievers, there is, and can be, no ultimate Why.

James says that (p.21) "It is only truth as technically verified that interests her (science). The truth of truths might come in merely affirmative form and she would decline to touch it." This is nonsense. Though scientists generally are concerned only with matters which are at least theoretically amenable to confirmation, phenomena occurring but once are accepted if observed by reliable witnesses (or just one reliable witness). Science cannot be blamed for not doing what it was never meant to do. Scientists try to understand kinds of phenomena, such as what makes anything move the way it does or what makes certain types of psychopaths behave the way they do. That is, we usually use the scientific method to discover general laws which will explain types of phenomena, not unique events or entities. Science does not ignore certain events that occur only once (e.g., the rocket sent to the moon which sent back thousands of photographs), but her main concern is to explain classes of events, since these are the things usually requiring explanation. Scientists asked "Why do stones fall?", not "Why did this particular stone fall?". Science does not have to investigate every stone's fall before it can give the causes. It makes general



laws of the hypothetical sort, e.g., "if such and such conditions prevail, then a stone (ANY stone) will fall".

James does not elucidate his phrase "the truth of truths" but he implies that there might be a truth which is more important than all other truths or a truth which makes all other truths true. If there were such a truth, I am sure that scientists would gladly accept it, providing of course that they could be made to understand this 'truth of truths' and how it rates so highly. If a loud voice came out of the sky and spoke to all men in their several languages, it would be ignored or stilled unless it 1) made sense, 2) reported things which reasonable men could see were true or at least verifiable and 3) explained how and why it itself came to be.

I suspect that James had in mind something like this voice when he used the phrase 'truth of truths'. Perhaps he believed that only if God shouted to us would we believe that He exists. The trouble is, even were 'the voice' to be heard, many would remain reluctant to call it holy or 'the voice of God'. They would insist on engaging it in lengthy and involved conversations regarding the existence of evil, pain, disease, diverse religions etc. etc., until the cluster of problems surrounding the concept of God were solved to their satisfaction. In other words, 'God' might get more than he bargained for if He ever effects communication with sceptics, agnostics, atheists, logical positivists, etc. (assuming there were a God, that is).

James then turns (p.22) to moral questions. He calls them "speculative questions" and suggests that if we did wait long enough, "coercive evidence" might arrive. Yet he adds (p.22) that questions of morality are "questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof." At one point he suggests that moral questions are 'speculative' and that 'coercive evidence' is at least relevant to them. At another, he says that though there is a 'solution', we 'cannot wait' for sensible proof. It is not clear whether he deemed empirical evidence relevant or not. It is also not clear whether he thought that a long enough wait for 'sensible proof' might result in a 'solution'. On one hand the option (or decision) is 'forced' yet he says that it is a 'speculative' question and suggests that empirical evidence might eventually answer the question.

I shall interpret James as meaning that questions of morality are NOT susceptible of empirical confirmation or proof. He

He cannot at one and the same time have moral questions regarded as speculative or scientific ones amenable to empirical verification and as forced decisions for which the HEART must answer. My interpretation of him is warranted by what he says (p.22) when he contrasts science to morality: "Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the worths, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart." He says that (p.22-23) "The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will."

When making a moral decision, then, according to James, we are forced to decide. If someone were drowning and only we could save him, we MUST act if he is to be saved. To wait, or to fail to decide whether it is right or wrong to save him, (or morally neutral), IS to decide. If we LET him drown when we COULD have saved him, then we have, in a sense, decided the issue already. To decide after he drowns that we should save him would be self-contradictory. We may, of course, decide after he has drowned that we should have saved him, but we can no longer decide TO save him. In other words, one of our three options (right? wrong? neutral?), viz., that it is right to save him, has been lost forever. I agree with James that moral decisions are in a sense forced. To fail to act can be tantamount to deciding NOT to act. One can be held responsible for failing to act. For example, if I do not warn someone that his life is threatened and if he is killed unnecessarily, then I am to blame for his death. (Assuming I could have warned him in time).

James admits that moral decisions ARE made. He does not say that we must believe in God in order to make our moral decisions or to answer our moral questions. We consult, instead, our heart and will, he says. James apparently did not think that morality depended on religion. He says that the proposal that goodness be defined as the following of God's will must be rejected because this characteristic is "unascertainable and vague" (p.201). It seems, then, that for James there is no logical or necessary connection between moral decisions (or beliefs) and religion (or God).

In view of this, it is difficult to see why James later claims that "The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action." (p.29 footnote). That is, if we do not need religion in order to make moral decisions, just why DO we need it? Is there some other class of decisions or actions which require religious belief before they can be made or engaged in? If so, James does not elucidate -- at least in this essay. James (1929, p.476-477) thought that religious belief gives one zest, peace, safety, etc., but nowhere do we find him saying that moral decisions or actions are impossible without religious belief. In other words, religion for James had subjective or psychological value but logically speaking, it is irrelevant to morality.

James compares the decision that something is wrong or right to the decision that there is or is not a God. As James puts it, the decision in these cases is forced. He says that one must decide without waiting for 'coercive evidence' to arrive. But if morality and religion are areas where empirical evidence is irrelevant (to their final solution), then there is no USE waiting. It would be like waiting for the Bowen Island Ferry Boat in B.C. on Portage Avenue in Winnipeg, Manitoba. One would be doomed to disappointment -- the schedules just aren't MADE that way.

As Macintyre says (p.197), "where proof is in place, decision is not." He adds that "free decision is the essence of the Christian religion." **Free decision is the essence of all religions.** No religion that I know of would, or could, subject its claims about men's souls or morality or salvation to empirical verification. In saying that religious decision

is like moral decision, James admits that religion is no hypothesis in the ordinary sense of that word and that empirical 'proof' is just not RELEVANT to religious commitment. Though nothing may be more important in making a moral or religious decision, than becoming aware of all relevant facts, these facts alone cannot tell us which decision is the correct one. As James says, here we must consult our heart.

Of course there are reasonable decisions and unreasonable ones. An unreasonable decision would be, e.g., to phone the police that a murder had been committed merely on the grounds that a loud noise had been heard in the street. A reasonable decision is one that is grounded upon as much investigation and consultation as time permits. James defines the reasonable type of decision as being (1890, p.531) "that of those cases in which the arguments for and against a given course seem gradually and almost insensibly to settle themselves in the mind and to end by leaving a clear balance in favor of one alternative, which alternative we then adopt without effort or constraint."

Where we must consciously expend effort to decide, then we decide unreasonably, says James. It would seem that the 'forced' decision of religion where we must let our heart or passions decide for us is an unreasonable one. When one must attempt (will) to believe (or to decide), one does so unreasonably. In this essay, James does not say that the religious decision is unreasonable, but according to his own definition of 'reasonable decision', and of the nature of the religious decision, it would appear that this is the case.

One might try to defend James by saying that the religious decision may be nonreasonable and not UN reasonable. I think, however, that this is clearly a case where to find it necessary to will to believe is to believe IRRATIONALLY. As we saw earlier, to the extent that belief is voluntary, it is irrational (see p.14). Wishful thinking is a notable example of finding it necessary to believe what one wants to believe.

James says (p.22) that "science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man." Though we have found the scientific method best in ascertaining the facts and correcting false beliefs, this does not mean that these things are regarded by scientists as 'the supreme goods for man'. It seems that James implies that ultimately all intellectual disciplines must resort to the heart in order to justify their existence. Science need NOT be regarded as claiming that there is any supreme good for man. It is a discipline employing a method of discovery which thus far has proven by far the most effective in the search for truth. Only MEN can deem something their supreme good -- never an activity or discipline such as 'science' (Also, James SAW that science cannot tell us the worth of things. (p.22)

## 12. FAITH AND VERIFICATION

James then turns to a certain class of questions of fact, questions concerning personal relations, states of mind between one man and another (p.23-25). These are cases where (p.24) "The desire for a certain kind of truth...brings about that special truth's existence" and (P.25) "In truths dependent on our personal action,....faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing". He uses the sample of one who wonders whether another person likes him or not. He suggests that if an individual A remains aloof and does nothing about establishing a relationship with B until he ~~has~~ objective evidence that B likes him, then it is probable that B never will like him. A should meet B half way, says James. A should be willing to assume that B must like him, and show B trust and expectation. Only by having faith that B likes him, can **A** ever make B like him. Since James words the question "Do you like me or not" and not "Will you like me or not", I take it that A is supposed to believe even now that B likes him, or is disposed to like him.

I agree with James that people who remain aloof and refuse to "budge an inch" unless they are sure that they are liked, are much less likely to be liked than those who meet people half-way and show them trust and expectation. Most of us are unwilling to give of ourselves to a relationship if the other person plays 'hard to get' or treats us as though we were on trial. Of course there are exceptions. There is a certain fascination engendered by some women who

give the impression that they are completely 'unavailable'. But by and large it is true that "if you like other people they will like you".

However, there are limits to what our faith or trust or confidence (or desire or action) can do. We may be able to effect certain changes in other peoples' emotions and we may be able to get the job for which others may be better qualified, by having confidence. But we cannot bring into existence certain entities simply by having confidence or even by our actions. As James himself says (p.20), "Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and in our dealing with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth."

There are limits to what we can do by faith, desire or action with respect to time also. We cannot alter the past no matter how much we would like to. Believing or desiring that there had been no Second World War will not change the fact that there was one. No matter what we do now, we can never bring it about that the Second World War did not occur.

The expression "bring it about" is a crucial one here. We can "bring things about" but we cannot alter the past. In a sense, we can change the way things are in the present, but the change will be effected only in the future. That is, as we look about us and wish that certain things were different, the differences are not, of course, present already -- if they were there would be no need for them. The point is, our faith, desire and action can be a factor in changing things or even creating some things, but only in the future,



not the past. That is why James should have phrased it "Will you like me?" instead of "Do you like me?" If I am introduced to someone and immediately wonder if he does like me, this is a sign that I lack confidence. If I am to get people to like me, I hope that they will and act on the premise that they will do so. I do not need to believe that they like me now. We may have just met -- and if they like everyone they meet instantly, I may take this as a sign that their affection, even if it is genuine, is not worth very much.

We may change things only in a very limited sphere of time and space. But James seems to think that faith can not only move mountains -- it can produce them. He says (p.28) that one should not "try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly" and compares our reluctance to have faith in God to our reluctance to have faith in our fellow man.

But if God did not exist in the past and does not exist now, could anything that we do bring about his existence? James seems to think so. He says in "Is Life Worth Living?" (The Will to Believe, p.61), "God himself...may draw vital strength and increase of very being from our fidelity". I do not know what "increase of very being" means. Perhaps it means that we are a sort of midwife who assists in the birth of God or that He exists 'in idea', so to speak and requires our fidelity to become a reality. Or perhaps we are not the midwife but actually the creators of God. On every interpretation of this phrase, it seems that it is we who could create God. If this is true, then surely He should worship

us and not vice versa. Without us, He would be nowhere.

Whatever James means by saying that faith in God can bring Him about, I think he is mistaken. On page 24 James says that faith can create "its own verification". This turns out to be a tautology, if interpreted literally. We shall use the example of faith in God (meaning faith that He exists, not faith in His liking us).

To have faith in God is to believe in God. To verify something means to 1) test the truth of it, or 2) to find the truth of it. Thus, to say that faith creates its own verification is to say that belief (that something is true) produces belief (that something is true) -- i.e. -- "belief in God produces belief in God". The trouble with faith is that one is likely only to verify in sense two above. As we said before, one does not really try to test or verify something in the sense that one really wants to find the truth -- one wants to find the truth congenial and seeks only confirmation. To believe something, as we stated before, is to deem it true. And, as D.S. Miller says (p.184) "Belief and admission of falsity are, whether absolutely or in degrees, mutually exclusive". In other words, if one really has faith in or believes in God, (i.e. deems it true that there is a God) then one will not bother to verify the statement that there is a God. So on one interpretation of "faith creates its own verification", what James really says amounts to the tautology that "to believe in God one must believe in God" or "if one believes in God, then one will believe in God."

We must distinguish between belief and faith. Belief

is the intellectual assent to a proposition -- the acceptance of something as being true. Faith is belief, usually on little or no evidence (or even in the face of adverse evidence) with the addition of desire that the thing be true. (One does not, as Kaufmann says (p.113) have faith that one's x-ray will show evidence of cancer -- desire for the truth of something is a necessary part of faith.) One can desire that others will like him and even act on the basis that they will like him without believing that they will or do. If a person believes that others already do like him, then he is not likely to make great efforts to make them like him. He may believe that others may like him or could like him, i.e. that it is possible that others will like him, without necessarily believing that they will for sure. That is, what James seems to be talking about here is not belief but rather confidence or hope and the actions these things make possible. What this has to do with the existence of a supreme being is not easy to see.

Those who believe in God, believe not only that He exists, but also, in all probability, that He could make His presence known to all if He so desired. This would be accepted by nonbelievers as proof that there is a God, (i.e. His making His presence known). James seems to think that only by believing could we have evidence or proof of God -- but who needs evidence then? And even if one does have faith, there are limits to what one can do. As Vetter says (p.302), "The only faith that can help create a fact is a faith that stimulates concrete action in an area where at least something

can be tried or observed." God is not observed by non-believers, nor by most believers either, so the verification James refers to is not scientific, publicly observable verification, but only subjective satisfaction. We earlier dealt with satisfaction as the criterion of truth (see p. 134).

It seems preposterous to claim that faith or desire or action on our part could cause or help God to exist. The idea seems irreligious and even sacrilegious. It seems also sacrilegious to suggest that God is like a man whose favour we can win by showing Him that we trust Him. James seems to forget that God's existence is what is in question, not his approval.

The question is whether there are "powers above" (p.24), not whether we should remain aloof, trust them or try to win their favour. James seems to evade the whole issue in suggesting that religion is like questions of "personal relations, states of mind between one man and another" (p.23). We know that there are other men but we do not know there is a God. How then can any analogy be made here? He seems to forget that important distinction he made in The Principles of Psychology between objects of will and objects of belief. The latter, he says (p.320, Vol. II) "are those which do not change according as we think regarding them."

In a letter to H. K. Kallen (Perry 1948, p.249) James says "It is usually poor policy to believe what isn't verified; but sometimes the belief produces verification -- as when it produces activity creative of the fact believed". James did not elucidate what he meant by 'activity' here,

but it seems ludicrous to think that anything that man could create would be deemed an adequate object of worship -- i.e. God. And even James saw that, "Conceptual processes can class facts, define them, interpret them, but they do not produce them". (The Varieties of Religious Experience, p.445)

No religious person could worship a God he knew he had created or helped create. If he could create one god, then why not another? And another? The suggestion that God's existence depends on our belief -- i.e. He exists if we believe but He does not exist if we do not -- is a reversal of the truth. The truth is, our belief depends on His existence -- if He existed, we would believe in Him (not if we believed in Him, he would exist.)

There seems to be no analogy then, between the facts about personal relations cited by James and the issue about religion that concerns us. If we knew of God's existence, then it may be true that His liking us would depend on our attitude and actions. The fact is, however, that God's existence is what is being considered, not his relationship to us. And even in the case of personal relations not belief or faith in another's approval is required, because this could easily cause overconfidence or apathy, but desire and action based on the belief that his approval may be forthcoming (i.e. that it is possible) is what is wanted. The truth is not that "faith creates its own verification" but that desire plus action can bring about changes in the world, within limits of course.

On page 26 James says that "We cannot escape the issue

by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way, if religion be untrue, we lose 'the good, if it be true, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve". "Scepticism is not avoidance of option", he adds, "it is option of a particular kind of risk. Better risk loss of truth than chance of error, that is your faith vetoer's exact position." We saw earlier that the option is not forced (see pp. 48-55). One may reject the religious hypothesis because it strikes one as intolerable or meaningless or one may already believe things which the religious 'hypothesis' contradicts.

Or, one may simply see no evidence for the religious hypothesis and reject it for this reason. Also, one might regard religion as a matter of the heart. One might see that empirical evidence is therefore not relevant and discover that one has no emotional need for religious belief. Finally, one may deem the religious 'hypothesis' false because there seems far more evidence against it than for it, and reject it in toto for this reason.

There are many nonreligious stands possible and I do not think that James can condemn them all for not "accepting this truth". Some regard the whole issue as meaningless (logical positivists) and others see religion's value only as art (Kaufmann).

I think that scepticism or agnosticism with regard to religion is possible and that it can be respectable. James

equates agnostics to atheists in that both lose the good of religion if it be true -- one must believe in religion in order to benefit, says James. Yet, it would seem that James really did not believe agnosticism to be possible in the first place. He said, as we saw earlier (1890, pp. 288-9), that "any object which remains uncontradicted is ipso facto believed and posited as absolute reality." If this were true, then there could be no agnostics. Since they do not believe in God and posit him as absolute reality then they must believe something which contradicts the religious hypothesis -- else they would believe in God, according to James. That is, according to this quotation, one could not deny God's existence unless one already believed something which contradicted it, but then all nonbelievers would be atheists and there would be no agnostics. Yet in The Will to Believe James tells the agnostics that they are no better than atheists. His position here is not clear.

As we have mentioned before, the attempt is often made to make a virtue of necessity. For instance, religion has traditionally deemed it a virtue to believe without regard to the evidence. It has even admitted that empirical evidence is not relevant. James speaks of his "passional need of taking the world religiously" (p.27), and in the entire essay he gives the impression that it is virtuous to believe, e.g. (p.28) we do the universe a service by obstinately believing). As Kaufmann says (p.114) "The impression given is sometimes....that there is a virtue in believing, without evidence as such. But this would open the floodgate to every

superstition, prejudice and madness." I suggest that the courageous and virtuous thing to do in such cases is to suspend judgement or, if appropriate, declare the proposition false (i.e. disbelieve it) -- particularly when the desire 'to believe' seems overwhelming. As James himself said, the power to suspend belief in the presence of an emotionally exciting idea is "the highest result of education". In untutored minds the power does not exist" (1890, p.308). Could it be that the idea of God so excited James that he did not know whether to suspend belief or not? In 1898 James wrote: "I believe in a finite God, if in any." (Ferry: 1948, p.213). It would seem that James himself was sceptical or uncertain in regard to religious belief. It is strange that he should call the decision forced when it seems he himself spent years trying to make it.

Scepticism with respect to the existence of something is both possible and advisable because only proof or evidence can indicate to us a thing's existence. Scepticism with respect to an attribute of something (e.g. Will she love me? Will she prove to be an angel? (p.26), Will he like me?) -- scepticism about an attribute of something we know already to exist can be an entirely different matter. These are two entirely different things and must not be confused. In one case, we may be powerless to create the thing, and in the other, we may indeed effect a change in the thing (or person). Where it is possible for us to create or change something, then scepticism can be a deterrent to action. Where we are obviously powerless to create something, e.g. God, scepticism



seems to be a generous stance with regard to that thing's existence. Generous, because to suggest that WE could or must help create God is to acknowledge that He does not NOW exist, and this is just what sceptics believe.

13. BELIEF AND FEAR

James seems to think that his life is at stake when he makes his decision regarding religion. He says (p.27) that "My own stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk." He thinks that if religion be true, then for him to disbelieve is "to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side." He thinks that if we wait to decide (p.30) "We do so at our peril", and that "we act, taking our life in our hands." He uses the phrases "my own stake", "sole chance of getting upon the winning side", "our peril", and "taking our life in our hands". It seems more likely that James encourages belief through FEAR that we may suffer (eternally perhaps?) if religion be true yet we doubt it. He says (p.27) that we should believe through hope that religion may be true and not yield to our fear of it being untrue, but from his use of the above phrases it seems clear that the believer yields to the fear of what might happen if he should disbelieve.

This not only reminds us of Pascal, it sounds exactly like him. James seems to be saying that it is better to believe because 1) if you do so and are wrong, then you have made an error but have really lost nothing; 2) if you do not believe, then you have taken your life in your hands, you have acted at your peril, and you have forfeited your sole chance of getting on the winning side. Since the evidence is as yet insufficient, James seems to say, it is safer to believe than to disbelieve. The believers at least have a

chance to get on the winning side, the disbelievers may suffer forever. As James says about Pascal (p.6), "If we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward".

"Fear of life in one form or the other is the great thing to exorcise; but it isn't reason that will ever do it. Impulse without reason is enough, and reason without impulse is a poor makeshift."

William James, in a letter to B. P. Blood (1896)

"No man is ever liberated from fear who dare not see his place in the world as it is."

Bertrand Russell, Sceptical Essays

"To endure uncertainty is difficult, but so are most of the other virtues."

Bertrand Russell, Unpopular Essays

Is belief so personal that we risk only ourselves in believing something? If we really believed that we had gotten on the "winning side", would we not try to persuade our loved ones to do the same? Would we not warn others of their "peril" and encourage them to believe as we do in order to save them? Surely we would. But of course we must realize that in encouraging this belief we could be encouraging people to believe erroneously. As far as the belief itself is concerned, James seems to think that there is as much

chance that it is false as there is that it is true. In view of this, we are taking a 50-50 chance that we are encouraging people to make an error.

As Clifford argued (p.169) "No one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone." To believe something puts us in the frame of mind to assent to others associated with it, or like it, and of course significant beliefs affect our actions directly or indirectly. Our action more often than not affects other people, particularly those near and dear to us. We set an example for our children and to believe and act in certain ways is to influence them for better or worse. If we make ourselves credulous by believing and acting through fear, we encourage the same thing in others. A general policy of such belief and action could easily lead, as Clifford warns us, back to savagery in which, as James says, (1890, p.319) "The primitive impulse is to affirm immediately the reality of all that is conceived."

Clifford says that the road from credulity to dishonesty is well paved. To lose the habit of doubting and testing things is to lose respect for truth in one's own mind. To lose respect for truth in one's own mind easily leads to loss of respect for it in the minds of others. If I am careless about what I believe then why should others bother to tell me the truth, if it should be to their advantage not to do so. In other words, the risk one takes in believing something is not altogether personal. Our beliefs influence our desires, intentions and actions, hence are less personal

than they are public. Though we do not hold people responsible for what they believe we do try to alter their beliefs if these have led, or may lead, to harmful actions. The right to believe may be a precious one but it is not licence to believe. This will lead only to credulity, dishonesty and perhaps even savagery.

It is a liberty which irresponsible abuse can lead to irresponsible action. As Russell says (p.95) "Complete belief, if the issue is sufficiently momentous, will justify persecution." As James himself says in regard to the Inquisition (pp.16-17), certainty should be discouraged if it leads to injustices. We have seen to what limits men will go when they are convinced that all nonbelievers are forfeiting their sole chance of getting on the winning side.

As we said before, it is James who seems to be motivated by fear. He says (1931, p.228) this in regard to our metaphysical and religious alternatives: "We have but one life in which to take up our attitude towards them, no insurance company is there to cover us, and if we are wrong, our error, though it be not as great as the old hell-fire theology pretended, may yet be momentous." But it is not just fear of what may occur in the next life that worries James. There is the fear to expose the belief to any sort of test just in case it may be proved faulty. One grasps at an invisible straw. (There is nothing for us to squeeze and then release to show that the "religious sundae" or soda is an empty one.)

As A. K. Rogers says (p.401), "beliefs influenced by feeling or strong desire have, where it is possible to verify

them, so often been proved to be in the wrong; and....there is the tendency which emotion shows to attach itself to matters where proof and disproof are alike impossible or very difficult, and so to evade the tests that elsewhere have been found useful in keeping belief within safe bounds." One feels safe with a religious belief -- both in the sense that one feels saved from the possibility of eternal suffering and that one's belief is safe from disconfirmation or disproof because it is not susceptible of empirical verification.

It is not a case of "dupery through hope" that religion be true or "dupery through fear" that it is false, as James says. It is a case of 1) believing through fear for one's personal safety and with the security that one's belief is safe from disconfirmation or 2) suspending judgement upon or denying the religious hypothesis with the courage required to challenge the majority (who do believe) and to face the prospect of eternal punishment for believing upon the evidence. There is more courage required, it seems to me, to face the possibility of eternal punishment than to submit to one's fears of it. As D. S. Miller says (p.185), "in the exact measure in which faith is present, courage is not needed." He who has faith believes what he wants to believe, he who has courage believes despite what he may want to believe.

We have argued that it is more courageous to suspend judgement upon, or to deny, the religious hypothesis than to believe it through fear. We have also argued that religious belief is not merely a personal matter.

"If religion were an altogether private affair, the problem of the relation of the church to the secular authorities would be comparatively simple. The fact that it embraces a moral creed, and that it is even today after the notable decline of its influence, a major instrument of moral education, gives it an important role in public affairs."

Perry (1954, p.474)

Most religion is organized religion and, as such, it may make pronouncements on birth control, mercy killing, abortion and racial prejudice -- or it may fail to make pronouncements on these.

Religion is not just a personal affair -- it can and does attempt to influence public opinion on important matters. Adherence to it can and does affect one's intellectual and physical conduct -- which in turn affects that of others. The risk taken is not merely personal. We owe it not only to ourselves but also to others to treat belief with respect and not embrace it upon every flirtation.

In a footnote, (p.29), James says that "The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action." On the next page, he adds in the footnote that "the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief."

Here again James seems to operate in reverse. We usually defend an action by adducing arguments (or beliefs) or reasons for doing it. That is, we justify action by our

beliefs. But James says that religious belief is justified by the actions (or reactions) which follow from it. Usually a belief is justified by appeal to evidence. The TRUTH of what is believed is shown by proof, arguments or evidence. To attempt to defend a belief by appeal to actions or reactions which follow from holding it, is to attempt to show the UTILITY of that belief, not the truth of what is believed. The value or use of what is believed is shown by how it affects us and our actions -- not the truth of what is believed in.

One can act either on a falsehood or a truth; it is believing it (deeming it true) which enables one to act in a certain way. Even if the actions or reactions could be effected in no other way than by believing A, this does not mean that A is true --- only that it is necessary for these actions or reactions. The only way we can show that a belief is of what is true, is to adduce proof, evidence or arguments -- there IS no other way ( if 'belief' and 'true' are to retain any of their meaning ).

We have already seen that moral decisions or actions are not logically linked to religion. People can and do decide (and act) on moral issues without believing that there is a God. James himself says that to follow the will of God would be difficult, if not impossible, since it is a 'vague and unascertainable' criterion of goodness (p.201). James does not elaborate on this statement about actions and reactions but we suspect that he has in mind the increase in zest, peace, security and affections which religious belief



is supposed to effect.

Macintyre suggests (p.210) that "To believe is to behave differently because it is to see the whole of one's life in a new and different light. ...It is to live by a morality, not of rules, but of examples." When one adopts a religion, one usually adopts a whole set of beliefs, not just belief in God. One may find the new desire to live as Jesus did or as one of the saints did, etc. I think that this is probably what James has in mind when he talks about actions and reactions being different with religious belief. But even if we grant that some people need religious belief in order to behave morally -- to aim higher -- this still does not mean that religious belief is JUSTIFIED -- only that it is useful in certain cases. And even if it is useful in certain cases, it may be useless in most cases, or even harmful (to oneself OR others). It may have been a distraction from our real problems. It may have retarded scientific or moral progress. It may be that the time, effort and money spent in the name of religion would have been more wisely spent aiding 'under-developed' nations, etc. That is, what little good the belief may have done might be greatly outweighed by the evil it produces -- hence it may be rejected on grounds of its disutility.

As we said earlier (pp.19-20), when a person cannot possibly act on the belief, it does not matter so much what he believes. Otherwise it does. We argued that actions based on misconceptions are more likely to thwart us than to enable us to achieve our goals. Beliefs which result in certain reactions, emotional states etc. may not be susceptible

of empirical verification. We will call these, with W. R. Wells (pp.654-655), 'metaphysical beliefs'.

Wells distinguishes between scientific beliefs which, if true, will make an objective difference and metaphysical beliefs where (p.655) "the effect is of a subjective sort, and is independent of the objective truth." Scientific beliefs must be of what is true if they are to be useful, he says, but metaphysical beliefs can be useful even when false (subjectively useful or satisfying).

Let us examine the view that religious belief, whether true or not, possesses subjective value. Just what sort of effect does it have?

James says (1929, p.498) that "there is a certain uniform deliverance in which religions all appear to meet. ... 1. the uneasiness...that there is something wrong about us as we naturally stand. 2. The solution is a sense that we are saved from the wrongness by making proper connection with the highest powers." Much is made, in the Christian religion at any rate, of the need to 'save one's soul'. It is difficult, I find, to determine exactly what we need to be saved FROM and what we are to be saved FOR. It may be said that we require salvation from 'sin'. But then we are told that this sin is inherited from people living centuries ago who passed it on from generation to generation. We may regard this view as both ludicrous and unhealthy. Then we may be told that we need to be saved for eternal life in heaven. But, as Perry says (1954, p.476-477) "the pleasures of heaven are so exalted above the pleasures of earth as to be meaningless. ...There are mansions in heaven, but what does one do

there? ... In short, a heaven in heaven has less to offer than a heaven on earth." It is not so easy, therefore, to see what this 'wrongness' is and how we are 'saved' from it.

The promise of heaven could create more problems than it solves. As Perry says (1954, p.470), "a way of salvation adopted as a relief from worldly anxieties may beget another and more intense anxiety, namely, anxiety concerning the salvation of one's soul." One may be better off worrying about the hell on this earth than an abode of eternal punishment. As Perry says (1954, p.475), "Religion may be the projection of a morbid conscience which tortures man with a sense of guilt and impending doom."

Let us suppose that the religious believer thinks that with God, all things are possible -- all man's ideals will be realized -- all our efforts are not in vain. Says Perry (1954, p.479), "assuming that God's power guarantees the successful pursuit of man's ideals, it may be argued that it is better for man not to know it, for he may then be disposed to relax his efforts." We must not assume that religious belief has only positive subjective value. It may affect men in numerous ways. In many cases the individual might be healthier and happier not believing, than he is believing. Belief in God is no guarantee of a successful, happy and moral life. One who leads such a life through what he claims is his religious belief may well have done better without it.

We see that it is not easy to say whether religious belief is useful or not and even more difficult to say whether it will help or harm the individual in the long run, assuming

that it does affect his reactions and actions. It may be more difficult to determine whether a belief is useful (and what direction this use will take), then it ~~would~~ be to determine if the belief is of what is true. (See Russell, p.139)

Even were we sure that individuals were usually helped rather than harmed by their religious belief, this would mean only that it was useful on the level of the individual. Whether it is useful on a social level could be another story. It could be said that religion encourages 'togetherness' of people. But this turns out to be a togetherness of separate groups, not of all people, (or even all religious people). It could be said that religion has generally caused dissension among various groups -- a war of each religion against all other religions and of all religions against the nonreligious. It may be that religion produces more prejudice among people than it dissolves. It may be said that religion retarded scientific progress for many years. I am not trying to show that religious belief is more harmful than any other. I am merely trying to show that there is a great deal of ground covered by such words as 'action' and 'reactions', as used by James. It cannot be accepted without argument that all or most actions (and reactions) due to religious belief are good ones. Since James does not offer any arguments, nor even clarify what he means by 'action' and 'reactions', and since I have shown that many of the effects of religious belief may not be good, I think we can reject the defence of religious faith that James says hinges upon action.

Throughout The Will to Believe and others of James'

works, as we have seen, he seems to think that unless people believe, they are powerless to act. He seems to think that action is not possible when one is in doubt or is not certain of success. I think that James is wrong here. "It is a widespread fallacy that the alternative to the firm faith that we possess the truth must be weak indecision. It is quite possible to act with vigor, realizing that one might be wrong." (Kaufmann, p.117) People can and do act decisively, even though they have a strong suspicion that they are mistaken. As Laird says (p.152), "doubt and inquiry may be very live things indeed....They may also be emotionally most disturbing. In short, the opposite of belief, regarded as the 'live' part of us, is indifference and not doubt." In other words, to care about the outcome is the important thing. One need not believe that one will succeed, one need only be concerned that one will. As we have said before, belief that one will succeed can easily lead to overconfidence and thus failure. Successful action is based on desire and effort, not necessarily on belief.

If James sees value in reacting or acting in certain ways, then why should there be a need for unsupported beliefs to effect them? If the reactions and actions are truly valuable then people will desire them in their own right and will need no 'metaphysical beliefs' to motivate them.

For my own part, I do not see how religious belief helps us solve important moral problems. Catholics are told that artificial birth control is wrong and non-Catholic Christians that it is not wrong. How do we decide this issue?

Could they both be right? Which one of their authorities carries more weight? Such problems cannot be solved by appeals to any authority.

As Perry (1954, p.488) puts it, "There are two ways in which an authority can be justified; either by trust, which is equivalent to accepting it without authority; or by proving it trustworthy. An authority is proved trustworthy, when there is reason to believe that its utterances are true; but then the authority is tested by the dogma, and not the dogma by the authority, and the dogma, having been proved true, is no longer a dogma." Plato put it more succinctly in his dialogue Euthyphro. To paraphrase his question: "Are the laws just because the gods approve them, or do the gods approve them because they are just?" It turns out that we do not need the gods to support morality because the argument from authority is a fallacy. If morality is identified with the will of God, then that will must not be "vague and unascertainable". If the standard of morality is independent of God or His will, then we do not need Him to show us the way. In either case, whether God's will is made the standard of morality or whether He is supposed only to recognize morality when He sees it, man himself must decide 'which' God to follow or which system of ethics is the best one. In the last analysis, man is left with only his conscience to guide him. But at least it is not usually "vague and unascertainable" -- when it is heard, it is heard loud and clear.

James concludes his essay by quoting Fitz James Stephen

thus (p.31): "What must we do? 'Be strong and of good courage'. Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes... If death ends all, we cannot meet death better." I have argued that the course of courage is to face reality rather than pretend it is something other than it is, to realize that we have limitations and that our belief and will and actions can influence only a limited sphere of things, to suspend judgement upon or flatly deny any 'hypothesis' which seems more calculated to satisfy our needs than to correspond to reality. James seems at times to have swallowed the hell-fire theology, despite the fact that he implies disbelief. I have argued that it takes more courage to believe what seems true but may disappoint, than to believe what seems false yet satisfies. It is not courage but naivete to suggest that we could create God.

I am one of those who believe, with Wells (p.658), that "The truth of a belief in God is tested by seeking the object denoted by the word 'God' ".

**In** a letter to H. K. Kallen (Perry: 1948, p.249), James wrote that "In any case the verification of the individual's will to believe may first occur long after he is dead -- yet for him it may be the best policy". I do not think that we can count on the possibility of verification after death to justify believing something while we are alive. If verification were to occur long after death, then we would be justified in believing (i.e. after death). At any rate, verification would only be possible after death if there were an after-life, and as we have stated, this is the point at

issue, where the religious 'hypothesis' is concerned. Any belief might be regarded as justifiable if verification were possible after death. This would open the floodgates to superstition and propaganda of the most heinous sort. The only sort of verification which means anything to living men is the sort which they could see. Any other sort of verification is not verification but the mere hope of verification. This is not enough to justify belief. To believe (i.e. to deem true) on the mere chance that one may be right would be to pervert belief and render the words 'true' and 'false' meaningless.

In The Varieties of Religious Experience, James says that "God is real since he produces real effects". I think that James really means here that belief in God produces real effects. Belief in many things produces real effects -- e.g. the devil, supremacy of the white race, etc. -- but they are no more real or true for this. We must drive a wedge between what is believed and what actually exists --- a distinction James all too often ignores. It is a distinction which he was loath to acknowledge. In the Principles of Psychology (p.294) James says "in the strict and ultimate sense of the word existence, everything which can be thought of at all exists as some sort of object, whether mythical object, individual thinker's object, or object in outer space and for intelligence at large. Errors, fictions, tribal beliefs, are parts of the whole great Universe which God has made, and He must have meant all these things to be in it, each in its respective place."



To vary the quotation from Russell at the beginning of this paper, "It is only when people have given up the hope of proving that an object exists in a straightforward sense that they set to work to prove that it "exists" in some new-fangled sense". Even if we use words so carelessly as to say that everything exists (in some sense), we would still say that they 'exist' in vastly different ways. The cashier's cheque for a million dollars written out to me, which I now envisage, exists in a vastly different way from the few dollars in my wallet. We usually make the distinction by saying that my few dollars really exists and the cheque really does not really exist. People who seek God will never be satisfied that they have found only the idea (or 'mythical' object' or 'individual thinker's object') of God -- they will never feel security, peace and zest from belief in what they know is but an idea or concept. If there is no object denoted by the word 'God', then there is no God. And if James really believed that God must have meant every error to exist, then for James, God must have meant that there be agnostics, atheists and sceptics. But I do not think that James always knew what he believed.

He seems at times to be almost sceptical himself. He says (1929, pp. 435-6) that, "If...we apply the principle of pragmatism to God's metaphysical attributes...I think that, even were we forced by coercive logic to believe them, we still should have to confess them to be destitute of all intelligible significance." It is possible, of course, for a man to alter his views during his lifetime, but I do not

think that James changed his mind as often as his writings seem to suggest. If a man radically alters his views and is aware of this, he usually explains why this happened when he expounds his new views. I have often quoted James from various of his works to show that he held incompatible views. I think that this was a case of one not being sure what he believed rather than one who alters his views without explanation. I make this judgement on the basis of a general survey of his writings and not any specific work. I admit that it is no more than speculation. But I think that this speculation is justified because James was so often vague about whether or not he believed something (which I can only interpret as a sign that he did not really know what it was he believed). For example, Perry says (1948, p.356) that "as James grew older he came to believe in immortality. In 1904 he had acquired a feeling of its 'probability'. Although he did not feel a 'rational need' of it, he felt a growing 'practical need'." I cannot tell from this whether in 1904 James believed in immortality or merely felt the need for it. The lack of a 'rational need' would seem to be lack of reasons for the belief. Perhaps James could believe what he needed without reasons -- or perhaps he felt that need to believe (i.e. overwhelming desire or need to deem something as true, i.e., have it be the case) was reason enough.

Perry describes James (1948, p.359) as having "sympathy with every personal belief which brought to an individual the consolation or the incentive that he needed". It would be nice if every man could believe what consoled him or gave

him incentive. I do not wish to destroy incentive or undermine consolation. But to make it a general rule that everyone should be free to believe what consoles him or/and gives him incentive, is to open those familiar floodgates and to lose completely the meaning of the word 'belief'. It would open the floodgates because some people take consolation in the fact that, e.g. Negroes are inferior to them and because people have found incentive in other beliefs pernicious to others. Unfortunately, it seems that some people's consolation and incentive are incompatible with that of others. This is why belief must be proportioned to the evidence, not to one's needs.

-the end-

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