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Practical Grounds for Belief: KANT AND JAMES ON RELIGION¹

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(PENULTIMATE DRAFT. FINAL VERSION NOW AVAILABLE AT THE [EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY](#))

Abstract: Both Kant and James claim to limit the role of knowledge in order to make room for faith. In this paper, we argue that despite some similarities, their attempts to do this come apart. Our main claim is that, while both Kant and James justify our adopting religious beliefs on practical grounds, James believes that we can - and should - subsequently assess such beliefs on the basis of evidence. We offer our own account of this evidence, and discuss what this difference means for their accounts of religious belief.

¹ We would like to thank Bob Stern, Charlie Crerar, Chris Hookway, and especially Jeremy Dunham for reading earlier versions of this paper. We are also very grateful to an anonymous referee at the EJP, who helped with this paper.

Thus I had to deny **knowledge** in order to make room for **faith** [*Glauben*²] (Kant: B xxx).

Adopt your hypothesis, and see how it agrees with life – That is faith. As Kant says I have swept away knowledge in order to make room for Faith; and that seems to me an absolutely sound and healthy position (James: Letter to Henry William Rankin, 12th June 1897, WB: 252).

INTRODUCTION

Theoretical reason can leave certain questions unsettled. Faced with the incapacity of theoretical reason to decide some matter, some thinkers argue that there are *practical* grounds to believe. This paper contrasts two such approaches, looking at how Kant and James defend religious belief on practical grounds.

On the face of it, Kant and James appear to hold similar positions on religious belief. Both limit the claims of theoretical knowledge, while admitting practical grounds for belief (and specifically moral grounds for religious belief). For this reason, many scholars have commented on the connections between Kant and James's positions.³ However, there is an important difference between their two accounts, which this paper aims to bring to light. Though both Kant and James allow us to adopt beliefs without evidence, James holds that these beliefs are open to subsequent revision in light of evidence in a way that Kant does not.⁴

The structure of the paper is as follows. We begin by outlining Kant's treatment of God in *The Critique of Practical Reason* (§I). We show that for Kant, belief in God is an *a priori* postulate of practical reason. We then lay out James's account of religious belief from 'The Will to Believe' and other places (§II). We offer a reading of James, where he is neither a fideist nor an evidentialist; while he thinks we can be justified in adopting beliefs without evidence, he maintains that some of these beliefs remain responsive to subsequent evidence. With Kant and James' accounts on the table, we turn to lay out what we take to be the key differences between them (§III): We claim that James allows more of a role for evidence when assessing religious belief, and argue that for James whether or not a (religious) belief *works* counts in favour of its *truth*. We end by saying something about the upshot of these differences.

² 'Glauben' can be translated as either 'faith' or 'belief'. In this paper, we will use all three terms interchangeably.

³ Kuklick, for instance, sees pragmatism as a form of neo-Kantianism, and labels James as the most neo-Kantian of the pragmatists (Kuklick 1977: 334). Carlson claims that James, like Kant, both postulates the existence of God for the sake of morality, and that he legitimates this belief on practical grounds which are immune to empirical evidence (Carlson 1997: 381). Slater holds that, like Kant, James sees religion as practically necessary to morality (Slater 2009: 13), and Pihlström builds his interpretation of James around his similarity to Kant (cf. Pihlström 2014 for a recent outline). James himself rarely compared himself to Kant or connected his philosophy with Kantianism. Some eight years after the epitaph quote, in a letter to his Kantian colleague, James writes: '[Pragmatism] is irreconcilable with anything in Kant [...] only the most superficial resemblances obtaining' (Letter to Munsterberg, 16th March 1905, quoted in Perry, vol. II: 469).

⁴ In the final section of this paper, we will see that Kant does allow for us to revise – what he calls – *pragmatic* beliefs in light of subsequent evidence. However, this does not apply to either moral nor religious beliefs.

§ I: KANT ON GOD AS A PRACTICAL POSTULATE

In the first *Critique*, Kant claims that theoretical reason cannot settle the issue of whether or not there is a God. According to Kant, the traditional arguments for the existence of God fail (A 591-630/B 619-658). Moreover, he claims that:

[...] all attempts of a merely speculative use of reason in regard to theology are entirely fruitless and by their internal constitution null and nugatory, [...] For all synthetic principles of understanding are of immanent use; but for the cognition of a highest being a transcendent use of them would be required, for which our understanding is not equipped at all (A 636/B 664).

Transcendental idealism confines our knowledge to the world of experience, and the concept of God transcends this. For instance, Kant claims that God – as the *original* author of the world – must be *unconditioned*. Thus, he argues that God cannot show up in any possible experience, as if God did, God would then be subject to the empirical law of causality and thereby conditioned (A 636-7/B 664-5). God is an example of a concept which concerns an object that lies beyond the limits of all possible experience.⁵ As such, experience can provide neither evidence for or against the existence of God, and the question of God's existence lies beyond the scope of theoretical reason.

Having argued that *theoretical* reason cannot settle the issue of God's existence, Kant proposes that *practical* reason can provide grounds for religious belief. Kant's argument here is notoriously hard to pin down. In what follows, we lay out the basics of his argument as it occurs in the second *Critique*.⁶ Though we will attempt to bring some clarity to Kant's argument, our primary aim is simply to illuminate his general account of the practical grounds for belief, before turning to James in the next section.

Famously, Kant insists that we ought to do the right thing for its own sake. However, as we are sensibly affected rational beings – rational *animals* – we also seek and require happiness. According to Kant, doing the right thing for its own sake makes us *worthy* of happiness, but in no way guarantees that we will actually be happy. This tension worries Kant. Kant argues not only that the moral person is worthy of happiness, but that happiness:

[...] is also required, and [...] not merely in the partial eyes of a person who makes himself an end but even in the judgement of an impartial reason (V: I 10.24-6).

This is to say that, it is not just that we want to be both worthy of happiness and happy (in proportion to worthiness), but that God would also want this. To require happiness, and to be worthy of it, but not to receive it, would be inconsistent with the perfect volition of an all-powerful being (V: I 10.22-31).

⁵ Kant calls such concepts 'transcendental ideas'. Another example is the soul; see for instance, Kant's discussion at A 399-402 in the Paralogisms.

⁶ Kant provides an alternative account of the highest good in the first *Critique*; see A 633-4/B 661-2; A 806-19/B 834-47.

It is through these thoughts that Kant is led to the idea of the highest good, which he defines as:

Happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) (V: 110.33-4).⁷

Kant then makes the claim that practical reason requires that we seek this highest good. Were it impossible to attain the highest good, according to Kant, then practical reason – and the moral law along with it – would be false:

Now, since the promotion of the highest good, which contains this connection in its concept, is an a priori necessary object of our will and inseparably bound up with the moral law, the impossibility of the first must prove the falsity of the second. If, therefore, the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false (V: 114.1-9).

The exact relationship between the highest good and practical reason is notoriously difficult to determine. In this account of the highest good, we have tried to stay relatively close to the text of the second *Critique*. It is worth noting though, that not everyone agrees with this interpretation. There are several different plausible readings of Kant's argument for the highest good, and we do not seek to adjudicate between them here (either textually or philosophically).⁸ Here, our concern is primarily with how Kant goes about solving an apparent tension in his account of the highest good.

Kant sets up morality and happiness as “quite heterogeneous” [*ganz ungleichartig*] (V: 112.29); we are meant to do the right thing for its own sake, with no guarantee that it will make us happy. In fact, as Kant conceives it, there is:

[...] not the least ground in the moral law for a necessary connection between the morality and the proportionate happiness of a being belonging to the world (V: 124. 30-2).

This is in part due to Kant's conception of nature, which he views as operating independently of the moral law:

[Virtue being the efficient cause of happiness is] *impossible* because any practical connection of causes and effects in the world, as a result of the determination of the will, does not depend upon the moral dispositions of the will but upon knowledge of the laws of nature and the physical ability to use them for one's purposes; consequently, no necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of moral laws. (V. 113.30 – 114.1)

⁷ Kant notes that the concept of the highest good contains an ambiguity: the *supreme* highest good is virtue, whereas the *complete* highest good is happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (V: 110.12-111.5). Following Kant, we will continue to refer to the complete highest good as the highest good.

⁸ For what it is worth, we follow Fugate in thinking that the text itself is ambiguous: “the sheer number of attempts Kant made to clarify the argument renders it likely that several different strategies were employed at different times” (2014: 140). See Beck (1960) and Wood (1970) for two classic competing interpretations of the highest good, and Fugate (2014) for a new interpretation of the highest good, which sees it as a way of striving for virtue.

Given this set up, the possibility of the highest good (happiness in *exact proportion* to moral worthiness) is problematic. Nonetheless, Kant holds that we have a *duty* to promote the highest good (V: 125.25) and – because ought implies can – this means that the highest good must be possible (V: 125.3-4).

How then is the highest good possible? Kant's solution involves God.⁹ God makes it possible that we receive happiness in proportion to our worthiness (V: 124.7 – 125.30). As Kant puts it, the highest good is only 'possible insofar as a supreme cause of nature having a causality in keeping with moral disposition is assumed' (V: 125.27-9).¹⁰ Otherwise expressed, Kant's claim is that while *nature* cannot make it possible that we will be happy in exact proportion to worth, *God* can.¹¹ In order to conceive of the highest good as possible then, we have to believe in God.

There are two key issues which need to be clarified here. The first concerns the way in which Kant considers the highest good *possible*. From what we have seen, it is clear that Kant thinks that we have a *duty* to promote the highest good, and that belief in God makes this possible. But it is not yet clear what this possibility refers to.¹² The ambiguity arises when we look closer, for instance, at the following claim:

[...] we *ought* to strive to promote the highest good (which must therefore be possible) (V. 125.3-4).

The ambiguity is as follows: Is Kant's claim that it must be possible to *strive* to promote the highest good; or that must be possible to actually *attain* or *realise* it?¹³ The text is slightly ambiguous on this, but we think that Kant's discussion of the immortality of the soul provides some illumination.

Kant claims that the highest good requires the complete conformity of our dispositions with the moral law (V: 122.5-7). The complete conformity of the will with the moral law is what Kant calls *holiness*, and Kant is quite clear that sensible rational beings like us cannot attain such a state (V: 122.9-12). Nevertheless, striving towards holiness is practically required, and thus Kant claims that it is 'necessary to assume such a practical progress [towards holiness] as the real object of our will' (V: 122.15-16). This endless progress, he argues, is only possible on the presupposition of the immortality of the soul (V: 122.17-20). Kant concludes that practical reason not only gives us grounds to believe in the existence of God, but also grounds for believing in the immortality of the soul.

⁹ It also involves an assumption of the immortality of the soul, which we shall discuss shortly.

¹⁰ Kant claims that we cannot think of God as grounding our obligation to follow the moral law (V: 125.34-126.1), but instead that God is required in order to make the highest good practically possible (V: 126.1-13).

¹¹ There is a possible challenge to Kant here. Though it might be clear that nature cannot *guarantee* happiness in exact proportion to virtue, it is not clear that this would be *impossible*. We might, for instance, find historical occasions in which happiness *does* exist in exact proportion to worth. To fully consider this challenge, we would have to look in much more detail at Kant's conception of nature, and so we leave this challenge aside here.

¹² We are grateful to an anonymous referee for prompting us to clarify this.

¹³ Willashek (2010: 180n15) draws attention to a similar ambiguity in the text.

How does this help with the issue at hand? While it is thus relatively clear that we must strive towards realising the highest good, it is unclear whether, and in what sense, we should regard the *realisation* of the highest good as possible. The fact that the highest good requires the assumption of immortality indicates that it is unlikely to ever be realised in the *empirical* world (which occurs in space and time).¹⁴ As Kant notes, a person:

[...] may hope for a further uninterrupted continuance of this progress [towards holiness], however long his existence may last, even beyond this life; and thus he cannot hope, either here or in any foreseeable future moment of his existence, to be fully adequate to God's will [...] he can hope to be so only in the endlessness of his duration (V: 123.17 – 124.3).

This passage suggests that the realisation of the highest good might not be possible, but that we can strive towards it and *hope*, in the endlessness of our duration, that we might achieve it.¹⁵

In sum then, we have a duty to strive to promote the highest good, and as such are entitled to regard this striving as possible, but it is not clear that we must regard the realisation of the highest good as possible.

The second issue which needs to be clarified concerns the relationship between the highest good and the belief in God.¹⁶ It is clear that Kant does not think that we *first* have to believe in the existence of God, and that the need to promote the highest good follows from this. But neither does Kant seem to believe that the opposite is the case, and that belief in God follows from our duty to promote the highest good. This would make the relation sound too temporal. Instead, Kant seems to argue that we have a duty to promote the highest good, and this is *inseparably* caught up with the belief in the existence of God. This inseparability is clear in the following passage:

Now, it was a duty for us to promote the highest good; hence there is in us not merely the warrant but also the necessity, as a need connected with duty, to presuppose the possibility of this highest good, which since it is possible only under the condition of the existence of God, connects the presupposition of the existence of God inseparably with duty; that is, it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God (V: 125.25-30).

Here, Kant suggests that our duty to promote the highest good requires us to believe in its possibility, and that this in turn is inseparably linked with belief in the existence of God.

¹⁴ Another option would be to realise the highest good in the noumenal world, but this comes with difficulties of its own. For one, it is not clear that we are individual selves with sensible desires in the noumenal world, and as such, it is not clear that the highest good – happiness in exact proportion to virtue – could be realised there.

¹⁵ For an alternative treatment of this, which recommends against using *hope* as the relevant doxastic state, see Willaschek (2010: 180-1). One question that arises from our reading is that, if we can only *hope* that the highest good can be realised, then perhaps we can only hope – rather than believe – that God exists or that the soul is immortal. However, this does not seem to follow. Whether or not the highest good is fully realisable, we still need God and the immortality of the soul to make striving towards it possible. Otherwise expressed, it seems possible to *believe* that we ought to promote the highest good, *believe* in God (who makes this possible), but only *hope* that the highest good can be fully realised. See also Gardner (2006: 266-7), who notes that Kant himself claims that hope is insufficient here, but that this “assertion is not explained or justified” (Gardner 2006: 267).

¹⁶ Again, we are grateful to an anonymous referee for asking us to clarify this issue.

In summary then, Kant thinks that we have practical – rather than theoretical – grounds for belief in the existence of God. Kant calls this special kind of belief a *postulate of practical reason*, where a postulate is:

[...] a *theoretical* proposition, though one not demonstrable as such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditionally valid *practical* law (V: 122. 23-5).

Theoretical reason leaves open whether or not there is a God, as Kant contends that neither pure reason nor experience can settle the issue either way. The existence of God thus remains possible, and our duty to promote the highest good makes belief in God necessary, on practical grounds. Of course, there is much more that can be said here. And there is a lot which remains opaque in Kant's account of the highest good and its connection to the postulates. For our purposes though, the key point is as follows: according to Kant, belief in God is an *a priori* postulate of practical reason.¹⁷

One of the potential benefits of Kant's position is that religious belief is insulated from the world of experience. This relates to a general feature of Kant's philosophy. Kant was worried about the threat that a deterministic efficient causal conception of nature posed to morality. One key aspect of this problem concerns our freedom. If *everything* is determined in an efficient causal way, then our freedom (and morality along with it) might be an illusion. Transcendental idealism offers a solution to this, in that it accepts that the *empirical* world is governed by deterministic natural laws, but maintains a space for freedom in the *noumenal*.¹⁸ We can see a similar line of thought elsewhere in Kant. In his famous discussion at the start of *Groundwork* II, he claims that even if we have never experienced an action done from pure duty, that this does not call into question the correctness of morality (IV: 406.5 – 408.11).

In this way, Kant hopes to secure the possibility of moral action, no matter how the world of experience might be. And through making belief in God a practical postulate, he does something similar concerning religion. To promote the highest good is a duty. Fulfilling this duty requires the possibility of progress towards holiness, and of happiness in exact proportion to virtue. While neither of these are found in the empirical world, our duty to promote the highest good makes belief in them necessary, which gives us practical grounds to believe in the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. This is related to Kant's claim to have denied knowledge to make room for faith: Theoretical reason left open whether or not there is a God, and practical reason shows that God is an *a priori* practically necessary belief.¹⁹

However, there are aspects of this strategy which will concern the pragmatist. Pragmatists typically hold that all beliefs are habits of action which are revisable in the light of appropriate

¹⁷ For a fuller account of belief in Kant, see Chignell (2007).

¹⁸ See: A 557/B 585; IV: 457.16-19; V: 99.12-19.

¹⁹ There is one empirical element to Kant's discussion of the highest good, namely the fact that we are sensible creatures that seek happiness.

experience.²⁰ As we shall see in the next section, though James is similar to Kant in arguing that we can adopt beliefs on practical grounds, he wants these beliefs to remain responsive to experience in a way that Kant does not.²¹

§II: JAMES ON RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND EVIDENCE

James appears similar to Kant in that he also claims to “make room for faith” by limiting knowledge (1897, WB: 252). For Kant, practical reason provides us with grounds to hold religious belief when theoretical reason cannot, and we shall see that James makes the same kind of move. But alongside these similarities, there are some important differences in their accounts.

Whereas Kant contends that belief in God is a necessary and *a priori* postulate of practical reason, James’s picture is – unsurprisingly – more pragmatic. The practical defence of religious belief that James mounts centres on the notion that certain beliefs, which are vitally important to our practical lives, must be adopted and acted under before they can be assessed as true or false. Religious belief is an obvious example of such a case, and this can be seen most clearly in James’s will-to-believe argument, which this section will outline.

James’s will-to-believe thesis was aimed at combatting the influence of strictly materialistic thinkers, such as W. K. Clifford. Such thinkers dismissed the legitimacy of religious belief on the grounds that there was – and could be no – theoretical or empirical evidence for adopting it. Clifford’s evidentialism is encapsulated nicely in his famous quote that ‘it is wrong, always and for everyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence’. For Clifford, in fact, this injunction was not just of epistemic importance, but was also morally and practically important. By letting ourselves believe what we want without sufficient evidence, we are not only doing a disservice to ourselves, but weakening the epistemic norms of the whole race. We make ourselves, and those around us, more credulous, and more likely to adopt false beliefs in the future (Clifford, 1886: 169-175).

James’s rejection of Clifford’s evidentialism might tempt us to think of him as a *fideist* – someone who thinks that religious belief has no connection to evidence.²² In actual fact, James

²⁰ There are additional issues here about whether the necessity of a belief *justifies* it; see, for instance Stern (2000: 85-6; 2015: 221), Strawson (2010: 64), and Peirce (1902, CP 2:113). We think that this is an interesting topic, but one that is beyond the scope of this paper.

²¹ It is worth noting that even though the pragmatists reject that any belief can be said to be indubitable, they are not sceptics. If we do not have sufficient reason to doubt a belief, then we should continue to hold it as true, and act accordingly. But we retain a healthy fallibilism about our beliefs, and know that they could be revised in the future. According to Putnam, this fallibilism combined with anti-skepticism is one of pragmatism’s most defining characteristics (Putnam, 1994: 152) Cf. Peirce (1898, CP5.589; 1905, CP5.416), and James (1896, WB: 20-24; 33)

²² Cf. Kuklick (1997: xx), who sees James’s pragmatism as a form of fideism. Dooley (1972) suggests that James’s argument shows that we can believe on passional rather than evidential grounds, in part because such beliefs have the potential to alter reality (Dooley 1972: 143, 149). Nathanson (1982) goes further, holding that James gives us non-evidential reasons to adopt certain beliefs even when there is evidence to suggest that they are false

is sensitive to many of Clifford's concerns, and wants our religious beliefs to be subject to the same epistemic norms as our other beliefs.²³ Nonetheless, James does hold that certain practically important beliefs can be legitimately adopted without evidence. Moreover, James holds that in some of these cases, the adoption of the belief in question is what allows evidence of its truth or falsity to become accessible. It is for this reason that James accuses Cliffordian evidentialism of demonstrating an 'insane logic', which would not only prevent us from believing on faith things which are practically vital to our lives, but would also prevent us from accessing the evidence required to assess these beliefs (1896, WB: 29).²⁴

We will now run through the core of James's will-to-believe argument. For our purposes, the central point is that there are certain beliefs which we can legitimately adopt on practical – rather than theoretical – grounds. James places a great deal of restrictions on what sort of beliefs can be so adopted, and in what contexts. Firstly, he is clear that beliefs which *can* be decided on intellectual or empirical grounds should *not* be adopted on practical grounds. We cannot become climate change deniers just because we don't want to worry ourselves about climate change. We should not believe $2 + 2 = 5$, no matter how much personal satisfaction it may bring us. Such matters of fact, and relations between ideas, we are 'impotent' not to believe (1896, WB: 16). It is solely in cases in which our theoretical reason is insufficient for deciding between two (or more) equally plausible beliefs that James permits us to adopt a belief on practical grounds.²⁵

(Nathanson 1982: 577). Gale (1999) seems to agree, suggesting that, according to James, we can be justified in believing metaphysical or religious hypotheses due to the "beneficial consequences of so believing" (1999: 93), even in "the teeth of quite powerful contrary evidence" (1999: 100). If Nathanson and Gale are correct, the will-to-believe doctrine would allow us to believe whatever we wanted, regardless of evidence, if it was sufficiently beneficial to us to so believe. This position would be disastrous, not only because it is a very problematic view, but also because this is precisely the interpretation of the will-to-believe thesis which James vehemently denied.²³ Klein (2015) has recently argued that there are two distinctions at play in James's paper: the first concerns evidentialism and anti-evidentialism, whereas the second concerns whether the epistemology adopted in cases such as religious belief is the same as that adopted in other cases, such as science. Klein holds that James argues for the position that religious beliefs must be subject to the same epistemic norms as other beliefs, but suggests that James is silent on the evidentialism issue (see Klein 2015: 81n20). Dunham (2014) agrees with Klein on this point. We are sympathetic towards what Klein calls a unitary reading of James, in which religious and scientific belief share a similar epistemology, but we will not make that case here. Instead we focus our efforts to argue, *pace* Klein, that James does have something to say about the way evidence relates to beliefs adopted on practical grounds.

²⁴ There is thus a sense in which James holds a sort of evidentialism. Though he holds that religious beliefs can be adopted without evidence, he also holds that they are open to revision or rejection in the face of evidence which is brought to light later. Others have defended a stronger evidentialist reading of James. Weintraub (2003) also thinks that, despite James's stance against Clifford, he ought not be thought of as a fideist, but as a kind of evidentialist (Weintraub 2003: 108). However, Weintraub holds that James's evidentialism fails because it requires that we alter our criteria for evidence for certain important beliefs, such as religious beliefs (2003: 115). Welchman argues that James should be read as advocating a form of auto-experimentation, where the agent is both the test-subject and the researcher (2006: 234). This is perhaps closest to our reading of James, as will be shown in the final section. Aikin (2014) rejects both kinds of evidentialist approach, though he is not fully clear why (2014: 198n8). Aikin himself holds that James's argument supports a kind of evidentialist reading, but against James's own intentions. James, on Aikin's reading, is supposed to be defending faith against evidentialism, and thus James's evidentialism is taken to be accidental, and a critical failure of his account (Aikin 2014: 153).

²⁵ This is not restricted to religious or moral cases, however. James is quite clear that in scientific inquiry we often adopt beliefs as regulative assumptions, or as hypotheses, in much the same way as we do in moral or religious case. Thus, James accuses Clifford of being such a strict evidentialist that he goes against his own stated

Once it is clear that a belief cannot be settled on theoretical grounds, there are three more criteria which it must meet for it to be legitimately adoptable on practical grounds: the option must be *live, forced, and momentous*. An option is *live* if it is salient or relevant in a given context, such that someone would be willing to act on it. This means that the belief must be coherent with our collection of already held beliefs, and it must be possible and plausible, at least to the person adopting it. It was not a choice for most people in nineteenth century America whether or not to be a Muslim or a Hindu. It was a live issue whether or not to be a Christian. As such, there are not only personal, but also cultural elements which determine the liveness of a given option. An option is *forced* if there are only a set number of choices, and one cannot abstain from a decision. The obvious example James offers is any 'dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction'. Given a vote between two candidates, I might choose to abstain, or to spoil my ballot. However, I cannot abstain on the decision of whether or not God exists. I either believe or I do not.²⁶ An option is *momentous* if my choice whether or not to believe will make a significant practical difference to my life. Believing or not believing in God will radically shape the way one organises their moral and practical life, and the way in which one looks at their place in the universe (1896, WB: 14-15). When we have met these three criteria, James asserts, we have the right to adopt the belief on practical grounds: 'we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will' (1896, WB: 32).

James's talk of adopting religious beliefs as 'hypotheses' here is important to note. This choice of word is indicative of James's insistence that, once adopted on practical grounds, our religious beliefs should be just as susceptible as other beliefs to revision and assessment in the light of subsequent experience. In fact, James defines 'faith' in these scientific terms:

Faith is synonymous with working hypothesis. The only difference is that while some hypotheses can be refuted in five minutes, others may defy ages. [... These theories] may exhaust the labors of generations in their corroboration, each tester of their truth proceeding in this simple way – that he acts as if it were true, and expects the result to disappoint him if his assumption is false. The longer disappointment is delayed, the stronger grows his faith in his theory (1882, WB: 79).

James uses the words 'belief' and 'hypothesis' somewhat interchangeably, a fact which has not escaped the notice of some critics.²⁷ This equivocation is not without reason, however. For James, a hypothesis is something that we adopt, which guides our action, and which we confirm, deny, or revise in the light of subsequent experience. For the pragmatist, beliefs too

empiricism, seeing as the adoption of beliefs on insufficient evidential grounds is an important part of scientific inquiry. Klein (2015) draws this out nicely.

²⁶ There is no religious middle ground for the pragmatist, according James, as the agnostic is for all practical purposes an atheist (1896, WB: 20, 30; 1895, WB: 50-51). As James puts it, in certain questions "[t]he universe will have no neutrals" (1882, WB: 88-89).

²⁷ Aikin (2014) for instance, holds that what James's will-to-believe argument gets him is the proscription that in certain cases it is legitimate to act *as-if* one believes a proposition prior to the evidence, not that it is legitimate to *believe* such propositions.

are guides for action, which are always revisable in the light of subsequent experience. There is much more that could be said about this, but we will leave this issue aside here.²⁸

We might distinguish two significant classes of will-to-believe cases. The first are cases in which the adoption of the belief gives us access to the evidence by which the belief can be assessed. James's (imperfect) example is friendship. If I want to know whether or not you and I are friends, I cannot 'stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence'. If I do not assume friendship, and act accordingly, I am unlikely to ever experience the evidence which will confirm that the friendship exists. As such, it is the adoption of the belief in the friendship itself which allows me to access the evidence relevant to assessing it (1896, WB: 28-9). On practical grounds – I want to be your friend! – I adopt the belief that we are friends on insufficient evidence, and as such make myself open to the evidence needed to assess the belief.²⁹

The second class of will-to-believe cases are those in which the adoption of the belief contributes to the state of affairs which makes it true. James uses the case of a climber stuck in the mountains (1882, WB: 80-2; 1895, WB: 53-4). The climber must jump across a chasm in order to survive. If she believes that she can make the jump, then she will gain the confidence required to make the leap across the chasm. If she believes that she cannot make the jump, she will lack the required confidence, and fall to her death. In either case, adopting the belief brings about the state of affairs which makes that belief true:

[...] you make one or the other of two possible universes true by your trust or mistrust – both universes having been only *maybes* [...] before you contributed your act (WB: 54).

On practical grounds – she wants to live! – it is permitted for the climber to adopt the belief that she can make it across the chasm, despite the fact that there is insufficient evidence to support that belief at the time of its adoption. In doing so, her faith, as James puts it, “*creates its own verification*” by contributing to the state of affairs which makes it true (1882, WB: 80).

These types of case allow James to distinguish between two basic relationships that a belief can have to evidence. In the cases which we typically take to be paradigmatic, there is sufficient evidence prior to the adoption of a belief for us to judge it to be true or false. Call this type of evidential relation *anterior*. In certain cases, however, the evidence for a belief only comes *after* its adoption. Call this type of relation *posterior*. There is a further distinction which our discussion of the will-to-believe thesis allows us to make. What we have called the *posterior* evidential relation can be split into two types. Cases in which the adoption of a belief is required before evidence for or against that belief is made available (like the friendship case)

²⁸ It is worth noting that Kant also talks of hypotheses, and differentiates them from the postulates of practical reason. For Kant, hypotheses are permissible claims of theoretical reason, where the postulates – as we have seen – are inseparably connected to necessary claims of practical reason. For a fuller account of this difference, see Willaschek (2010: 184-5).

²⁹ James's example is imperfect for two reasons: firstly, it is not clear in what way the friendship case is sufficiently live, forced, and momentous, and so a legitimate candidate for adoption on practical grounds; and secondly, it is not clear in what ways the friendship pre-exists the adoption of the belief, and in what ways the adoption of the belief calls the friendship into existence. Thus, it is not clear whether the friendship case belongs to this or the second class of will-to-believe cases.

might be called *posterior non-productive*. Cases in which the adoption of a belief is a factor in *making* that belief true (like the climber case) might be called *posterior productive*. As we have shown, we can find both types in James's discussion, though he is not himself careful in distinguishing them.

These distinctions allow us to be clearer on James's relation to evidentialism. If evidentialism is understood as the thesis that the only thing which justifies the adoption of a belief at *t1* is the evidence that we have at *t1*, then James's will-to-believe position is a straightforward rejection of evidentialism. Cliffordian evidentialism is the position that the *anterior evidential relation* is the only thing which can legitimise the adoption of a belief. In most cases, James agrees that establishing the truth of a belief prior to its adoption should be our ideal. When possible, when the evidence is available, or when we have no practical or temporal restrictions, we should continue 'weighing reasons *pro et contra* with an indifferent hand' until we have sufficient evidence to judge the truth of a belief (1896, WB: 26). However, in certain cases we may legitimately adopt a belief on practical grounds and 'at our own risk', which can only be assessed subsequent to its adoption (1896, WB: 32). Nonetheless beliefs which are adopted without evidence at *t1* can be later assessed, revised, and rejected in light of evidence at *t2*, and so demonstrate a posterior relation to evidence.

In what follows, we shall focus on beliefs which have a *posterior non-productive* evidential relation. This is because James holds that religious belief is an example of this type. He makes this clear by interpreting religious belief under the analogy of friendship:

[J]ust as a man who in a company of gentlemen made no advance, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed no-one's word without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn – so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods exhort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the god's acquaintance (1896, WB: 31).

With religion, we must adopt belief (on practical grounds) before we have access to the evidence by which we assess it, but adopting this belief does not *contribute* to its truth. This is just as well. No whole-hearted religious believer is going to hold that the truth of their belief is dependent on their believing it.³⁰

At this point it is worth noting that, up till now, we have been talking as if the experience of one person is sufficient for assessing the truth or falsity of a religious belief. In fact, though James sometimes 'for the sake of simplicity' talks as if this were the case, his considered opinion is that the 'co-operation of generations' and the experience of the "entire human race" are required to assess beliefs of such scope (1882, WB: 87-8). This coheres with the

³⁰ Aikin (2014) seems to delineate a distinction similar to the one we draw between *posterior productive* and *non-productive* cases. Aikin's distinction is between what he calls *evidentially productive doxastic efficacy* and *alethically productive doxastic efficacy* (Aikin 2014: 159). However, he believes that James holds all his cases to be cases of the former, which loosely corresponds to our *posterior productive* evidential relation (Aikin 2014: 160). Aikin correctly asserts that such a position would fail to capture orthodox religious belief (Aikin 2014: 175).

long-established pragmatist view that truth emerges within a community of inquiry, rather than in the experience of one person.³¹

In summary, James believes that we have practical grounds for the adoption of religious belief, but holds that these beliefs are evaluable in light of subsequent experience. It is clear that James, in posterior non-productive cases in particular, wants to separate the legitimate grounds for *adopting* a belief from the grounds on which we judge that belief to be justified.³² We are legitimately allowed to adopt religious belief on practical grounds, provided the option is live, forced, momentous, and unsettled by theoretical reason. Nonetheless we judge religious belief – like any other belief according to the pragmatist – to be true or false based on whether or not ‘the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it’ (1896, WB: 24). Exactly what counts as evidence, for James, will be examined in the next section.

§ III: KANT AND JAMES ON RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND EVIDENCE

At first glance, it seemed that neither Kant nor James allowed evidence to play a role in matters of religious belief. For Kant God is an *a priori* practical postulate, and for James religious belief is something adopted for practical reasons. We have argued, however, that whereas Kant wants to insulate belief in God from the empirical world, James thinks that religious belief should be responsive to evidence, subsequent to its adoption.³³

³¹ See, for instance, Peirce (1868, CP5.311); Misak (2013: 60).

³² In separating the legitimacy of belief adoption from the subsequent evaluation of the truth or falsity of that belief, we differ from the majority of traditional and contemporary interpretations. Pihlström, for instance, has recently argued that James is making a transcendental argument for God’s existence akin to Kant’s:

James may be interpreted as arguing for the reality of God [...] on moral grounds. The “religious hypothesis” is needed for us to be able to lead a “strenuous moral life”. It seems that we have to believe, or must reserve ourselves the right to believe, that God exists, in order to be able to take morality seriously and to avoid falling into moral nihilism – analogously to Kant’s “postulates of practical reason” (Pihlström 2014: 190).

Though James *does* hold that there are practical moral benefits to religious belief (e.g. 1891, WB: 160), he is *not* making a transcendental argument for the existence of God. James’s argument in “The Will to Believe” aims only to legitimise the adoption of religious hypotheses, to be tested in future experience. This said, it may be that the practical moral benefits of a religious hypothesis might count as (coherentist or practical) evidence of its validity in the long run.

³³ This difference is emphasised by James himself, in his conclusion to *Varieties of Religious Experience*. There he contrasts his own “crass” religious theory, in which religious objects (if real) are expected to have phenomenal effects, with “Kantian” religious theories, which “bar [...] ideal entities from interfering causally in the course of phenomenal events” (1902, VRE: 409). According to James, the idea:

[t]hat no concrete particular of experience should alter its complexion in consequence of a God being there seems to me an incredible proposition, and yet it is the thesis to which (implicitly at any rate) [Kantian religious theory] seems to cling (1902, VRE: 411).

Were religious objects to exist, we ought to expect there to be *experiences* which would count as evidence for religious beliefs, whereas this is precisely what Kant denies.

To clarify our position, it will be worth briefly contrasting our reading with another account of Kant and James on practical grounds for belief. Marcus Willaschek (2010) argues that both Kant and James allow for adopting religious belief on practical grounds, and that neither Kant nor James allow evidence to play a role in the assessment of those beliefs. We agree with Willaschek on the first point, but disagree on the second.

By 'evidence', Willaschek means 'considerations that tell in favour of p (i.e. in favour of the truth of that proposition)' (Willaschek 2010: 169n3). According to Willaschek:

As Kant claims, there can be reasons for believing something which are not evidence in this sense, since these reasons do not bear on the truth of the proposition in question, but on the belief's relation to the subject's moral commitments. Hence, to deny that there is evidence for the propositions in question is not to deny that there are reasons for holding them (Willaschek 2010: 169n3).

The important insight of Kant (and James), according to Willaschek, is that there can be rational belief without evidence.

We agree with this general point. However, we have argued that, according to James, though religious beliefs can be *adopted* on non-evidential practical grounds, they must subsequently be assessed on the basis of future evidence (with the added complication that the relevant experience is not available prior to the adoption of the belief). This however raises the question of what could count as evidence in the case of religious belief. Though James does not answer this question directly, we might distinguish three interrelated classes of evidence which he takes to be relevant to assessing religious belief: experiential evidence, coherentist evidence, and practical evidence. We shall briefly examine these in turn.

What we call 'experiential' evidence is essentially empirical evidence. Upon adopting religious belief, believers might have access to specific phenomenal experiences which would indicate (to them) the truth of their belief. James is quite clear that 'many persons [...] possess the objects of their [religious] belief, not in the form of mere conceptions which their intellect accepts as true, but rather in the form of quasi-sensible realities directly apprehended' (1902, VRE: 59). Such beliefs are 'as convincing to those who have them as any direct sensible experiences can be' (1902, VRE: 66), and without such experiences faith can become hollow and empty (1902, VRE: 59-60). According to James such religious experiences constitute 'evidence exactly similar in nature' to those which are taken to be evidence in our more scientific inquiries (1902, VRE: 335). In principle, there is no epistemic difference between phenomenal experiences which indicate the truth of religious hypotheses and those which indicate the truth of physical hypotheses. Nonetheless, taken by themselves – as subjective experiences of the believer – such experiences are imperfect evidence, and without additional epistemic support from the other two types of evidence, they do not indicate truth any more than hallucinations do (1902, VRE: 377). The pragmatist connects truth with what *community* of inquirers would believe in the long run, and so such private experiences do not constitute adequate evidence.

By *coherentist* evidence we mean indications that some particular hypothesis coheres with beliefs which we already hold to be true. When some new hypothesis fits nicely with things we already hold to be true, or offers additional explanation or unification, this is taken to be evidence of its truth. Similarly, when the findings of one science confirm the findings of another, this indicates the truth of both. Though James holds that we should to some extent separate different spheres of inquiry from each other, if something we hold to be a fairly stable belief in one sphere flatly contradicts a hypothesis in another sphere, this might count as evidence of its falsity.³⁴ For instance, James held that discoveries in the natural sciences, most notably Darwinism, disproved the religious hypothesis of natural theology. Under our current understanding of nature, the natural world cannot be seen as the expression of a perfect, benevolent deity (1895, WB: 43). Darwinism does not disprove *all* religious hypotheses, but it does limit the particular hypotheses which we can adopt. Similarly, the fact that our religious hypotheses cohere with and support our moral practices is – for James – indicative of their truth (1891, WB: 160).³⁵

The third type of evidence is what we call ‘practical’ evidence. Crudely put, James thinks that if a belief is *useful* or *works* in our experience, then this is indicative of its *truth*. It is this form of evidence that James puts the most weight on, and where we can see another crucial difference between Kant and James. Whereas Kant argues that practical reason gives us *a priori* grounds to believe in God, James holds that the practical role that religious beliefs play in our subsequent concrete experience, that is, whether or not they work, indicates the truth of those beliefs.

James’ claim here follows from what classical pragmatists take truth to consist in. Though these pragmatists hold that a true proposition is one which agrees with reality, they deny the possibility of a theoretical stance in which this agreement can be determined *a priori*. The truth of a proposition must instead be demonstrated by its working. A true belief would be one which better enabled us to operate on – and more accurately predict – future experience. We thus have good reason for holding that a belief that works is a true belief. Conversely, a belief which encountered problems when applied to experience would be rightly doubted, and judged in need of revision or rejection. An *absolutely* true belief would be one which always worked, and which ‘no farther experience [would] ever alter’ (1907, P: 106).³⁶

³⁴ We might think that some coherentist evidence might well be available *prior* to the adoption of a religious belief, and that this would tell against our claim that evidence for religious beliefs are only available subsequent to adoption. This seems correct, to an extent. A potential belief being coherent with our already held beliefs seems to be one component to it being considered plausible, and thus *live*. However, accepting this is consistent with holding that other coherentist evidence is only available after adoption; Sometimes it is only once we adopt and act under a belief that we see whether it coheres with all our other commitments, or continues to cohere with other beliefs which we adopt later.

³⁵ Stern (2015) has recently argued that both Kant and James are coherentists about freedom. According to Stern, both thinkers hold that the idea of freedom coheres with and supports our moral beliefs and practices, and this counts as evidence for the truth of freedom. If Stern is correct, then it might be argued that Kant allows for some notion of evidence – coherentist evidence – to play a role in the legitimisation of religious belief. On this reading of Kant, the fact that belief in God supports our commitment to the highest good might indicate the truth of that belief.

³⁶ Or as Peirce would put it, truth is “a state of belief unassailable by doubt” (1905, CP5.416).

According to James's Darwinian inspired epistemology, by testing our various beliefs within our own experience, and against that of other people's, we allow reality to 'select' for true beliefs. Though all classical pragmatists share some form of this epistemology, James is unique among the pragmatists in that he applies it to religious beliefs:

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 and falsehood can be wrought out. The truest scientific hypothesis is that which, as we say, "works" best; and it can be no otherwise with religious hypotheses. Religious history proves that one hypothesis after another has worked ill, has crumbled at contact with a widening knowledge of the world, and has lapsed from the minds of men. Some articles of faith, however, have maintained themselves through every vicissitude, and possess even more vitality today than ever before [...] Meanwhile the freest competition of the various faith with one another, and their openest application to life by their several champions, are the most favourable condition under which the survival of the fittest can proceed (1896, WB: 8).³⁷

In certain carefully delimited contexts, James allows individuals to adopt religious beliefs on practical and personal grounds. Through doing so, these individuals gain access to the practical experience through which these beliefs can be assessed. Whether these beliefs are satisfying in the long run, whether they stand up to external criticism, and whether they allow us to successfully predict and act in future experience, are the kinds of experimental tests by which we assess them. This 'working' is what we mean by practical evidence. According to James, in such matters we 'cannot possibly conceive of any other sort of 'evidence' or 'proof' than this'. Over the course of 'the experience of the entire human race', through such experiential tests, we move closer to absolutely true beliefs (1882, WB: 87-88).

The major difference between the two thinkers then, is that whereas Kant conceives of religious belief as insulated from the world of experience, James opens religious beliefs to assessment through their application to concrete experience. When Kant defends belief in God on practical grounds, he means that theoretical reason leaves the matter undecided, but that we nonetheless have necessary and *a priori* grounds for believing in God if we are to fulfil our practical duties. Such practical grounds do not count as evidence of God's existence, in the sense of telling favour of the truth of that proposition, but are instead rational requirements for practical reason.³⁸ When James defends religious belief on practical grounds, he means that theoretical reason leaves the matter undecided, but that believers are (subject to certain limitations) free to adopt a belief which they find plausible and meaningful. James's practical grounds are not *a priori* and necessary postulates of practical reason, but they nonetheless may have some significant impact on our moral practices. James's kind of practical grounds do not count as evidence either. However, James does leave room for the subsequent

³⁷ James says something similar in his *Pragmatism* lectures:

On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true. Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it certainly does work, and that the problem is to build it out and determine it, so that it will combine satisfactorily with all the other working truths (1907, P: 143).

Here we see the clear application of what we have called practical and coherentist evidence to religious belief.

experience of how these beliefs work when applied to reality to count as *practical evidence*, in the sense of telling in favour (or against) the truth of some religious proposition.

Here it is worth noting that, in the *Canon of Pure Reason*, Kant seems to allow that some beliefs can be adopted through practical considerations, but later defeated on theoretical grounds.³⁹ And indeed, when it comes to the highest good and Kant's argument for God as a postulate, Kant only offers this practical argument because he thinks that theoretical reason cannot settle the issue either way. However, important differences still remains between Kant and James' accounts on this. For one, Kant thinks that the highest good is *inseparably* connected to a necessary object of practical reason; James by contrast, does not conceive of practical grounds in terms of necessity. Relatedly, as we have seen, James thinks that we should assess how our religious beliefs work *after* we've adopted them, and moreover, claims that if these beliefs work, that counts in favour of their *truth*.

What is the upshot of these differences? One concrete consequence concerns atheism. According to Kant, belief in God is a necessary practical postulate, and as such atheism is rejected as irrational. For James, on the other hand, there is nothing irrational about being an atheist. In fact, both the atheist and the religious believer are, according to James, engaged in the same philosophical project of trying to make sense of the world, and their different hypotheses can be judged by the same criteria. Both adopt hypotheses about the way the world is based on personal and practical grounds. And both should be free to act according to their own hypotheses, gathering relevant evidence for assessing them, and revising or rejecting them when appropriate. Over time, one view will perhaps show itself to be more attuned to our lived experience, more coherent with other beliefs which we hold to be true, and more practical, and so the continued drift of human thought will confirm it. But it is only through actual experience (and conversation) that such a conclusion could be reached. For now, we can only adopt the hypotheses which appeal to us, and subject them to our own – and other's – lived experience.

However, in suggesting that religious faith is akin to scientific hypotheses, and subject to the same epistemic norms as other beliefs, James perhaps moves away from traditional religious phenomenology. A traditional religious believer might object that our belief in God is not a fallible hypothesis, and should be maintained even in the face of substantive negative experience. So, by trying to make religious belief more plausible to the scientifically minded, James may end up alienating the more traditional religious believer. Kant on the other hand, in suggesting that religious faith is practically justified regardless of how the empirical world appears, seems to align himself with more standard religious phenomenology.

³⁹ See A 824-5/ B 852-3. We are grateful to an anonymous referee for pointing us to this passage.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

According to both Kant and James, theoretical reason leaves religious belief unsettled. Rather than abandoning religious belief in the face of theoretical reason's insufficiency, both thinkers turn to practical reason to ground religious belief. But, despite apparent similarities, we have argued that the two thinkers differ significantly in the way they go about this. Whereas Kant argues that belief in God is a necessary *a priori* practical postulate, James treats religious belief as a hypothesis which is adopted on practical and personal grounds. And whereas Kant insulates religious belief from the world of experience, James holds religious beliefs to be revisable or rejectable in the light of subsequent experience. In particular, we have shown that according to James, whether or not a religious belief works counts as evidence for its truth or falsity. In short, James opens religious belief to experience in ways that Kant does not.

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