

WILLIAM JAMES ON ETHICS AND FAITH by Michael R. Slater. Cambridge University Press, 2009. 247 pgs. \$93 (hbk).

This is William James interpretation at its best. It displays a thorough mastery of the text and makes effective use of the vast secondary source literature. But, even more important, it manages to be both severely critical and yet highly sympathetic, no small feat. The former brings out numerous difficulties due to apparent inconsistencies, over emphases, and unclarities in James's text. The latter attempts to extricate James from these difficulties so that he winds up with a very attractive philosophy, at least by Slater's lights, though Slater honestly owns up to outstanding difficulties that still remain in his reconstructed, beautified James.

Slater's main concern is with the relation between James's accounts of morality and religion and he manages to significantly advance the extant literature on this topic, so much so that it is safe to predict that Slater will be one of the major players in any future discussions. Slater claims that all of James interpreters have failed to bring out the deep interconnections between his religion and morality, and it is the aim of Slater's book to remedy this deficiency. In particular, Slater wants to show that for James "the highest forms of human moral agency and flourishing cannot be had apart from leading a religious life" and that furthermore "the possibility of their achievement is partly contingent upon our willingness to believe and act upon our beliefs... in the existence and assistance of superhuman forces" (13). It is here that James's famous doctrine of the will to believe enters the picture for it makes it permissible to acquire such a belief even in the absence of supporting evidence or arguments for its truth.

The first two chapters are devoted to showing how this doctrine renders it legitimate to have an evidentially unsupported religious belief. Slater begins with a close to the text exposition of it from the 1896 essay "The Will to Believe" according to which one has a right or lawfully may believe an evidentially nonwarranted proposition provided it is a live, momentous, and forced option for this person to do so. Slater offers a friendly reconstruction of James that recognizes this set of four conditions as sufficient

but denies that either momentousness or being forced is necessary, thereby giving a wider range of application for will to believe options.

Slater gives a bogus argument in support of his denial of the necessity of being forced.

If I ask you to believe in James's hypothesis of an unseen order or go without it I have presented you with a forced option, but if I ask you to declare James's hypothesis true or false I have not. The way in which I have put the option to you is different in these two cases, but the content of the belief is the same. Does this mean that a person potentially has an epistemic right to believe in the first case but never in the second? This consequence seems...absurd (34).

Slater fails to realize that the second option is different from the first. Whereas the first is a belief option, the second is an overt action option, namely declaring the hypothesis to be true (false). Notice that one can declare a proposition to be true without believing it.

It is interesting to consider why James presented his beefed up version of the will to believe rather than Slater's trimmed down version. One of the reasons might concern the dialectical context of his essay. It is an attempt to produce clear-cut, dramatic counter-examples to Clifford's universal moral prohibition against having an evidentially nonwarranted belief. And having the momentous and forced requirements certainly makes his counter-examples more compelling. Slater's trimmed down version omits what gives persuasive force to James' version, namely that by acquiring a belief on the basis of the will to believe helps to promote the attainment of some desired good. Slater allows one to acquire a belief just for the pleasurable feelings it occasions, and this is quite alien to James's will to believe.

There is another possible reason for his including the requirements of forcedness and momentousness and thus making it more difficult and far less frequent to have a will to believe option. Clifford's major argument for it never being morally permissible to have an evidentially nonwarranted belief is typical of the way in which utilitarians try to neutralize counter-examples. They argue that although the agent might maximize utility in the short run, she acts in a way that will inculcate in her a habit that will prove disastrous in the long run. Thus we find Clifford arguing that the person who allows

herself even a single evidentially nonwarranted belief runs the danger of becoming credulous, even a liar and a cheat, and this will have very bad long-term future consequences for both herself and her community. By making it difficult to have a will to believe option, James is making it far less likely that the believer will become credulous. James's dialectical strategy is to give Clifford as much rope as he can before he hangs him with a really convincing counter-example.

There is still more to be said. It is important to distinguish *acquiring* from *retaining* a nonmomentous belief that is epistemically nonwarranted. We have many such beliefs that were acquired in the past without epistemic warrant, but it would not be cost effective to try and eliminate them. What we must avoid, if Clifford's utilitarian argument has any merit, and it has but not to the extent Clifford thought, is not to acquire such beliefs, for this is what will help to mold our future character in the wrong way.

One of the salutary features of Slater's exposition is the manner in which he protects the will to believe from the oft made objection that it licenses wishful thinking. Toward this end he distinguishes the psychological claims James makes about the human will and those that establish the right to believe. This really is a distinction between the causes of a belief and its justification.

But just what sort of a justification does a will to believe option furnish? Slater holds it to be an epistemological one. He speaks of being "epistemically justified," having an "epistemic right"(25), as well as its being "epistemically permissible (32), to believe when confronted with the conditions that constitute a will to believe option. "It is the *evidential inconclusiveness* of our [will to believe option] which gives us our *epistemic warrant*, and the liveness or deadness of our options which, according to our passional nature, guides our decision to believe one option or another" (my italics: 34. see also 49 and 63).

This interpretation must be wrong for it makes James's will to believe doctrine contradictory: First it says that the proposition in question is "evidentially inconclusive" but then goes on to add that the subject of the will to believe option has an "epistemic warrant" to believe it! Fortunately, James text makes it very clear that the sort of warrant for belief that a will to believe option supplies is a moral one, and it is very surprising

that Slater did not see this, given that he is one of the most conscientious and careful of all James interpreters.

In order to see that it is the moral sense of warrant and permission that is supplied by James's will to believe, we must again begin with the dialectical setting of his "Will to Believe" essay. Its purpose is to refute Clifford's claim that it is always wrong to believe upon insufficient evidence. That he meant "morally wrong" is made manifest from the title of his essay, "The Ethics of Belief," and by what he explicitly says about the morally disastrous consequences of having an evidentially nonwarranted belief. Furthermore, if he meant "epistemically wrong" his universal prohibition would be the empty tautology that it is epistemically wrong to have an epistemically wrong belief, since having an epistemically wrong belief is the same as having an evidentially nonwarranted belief. To refute Clifford, James must show that in certain circumstances we are morally permitted or justified in having an evidentially unsupported belief, and his will to believe doctrine spells out these circumstances. For James, justification and rationality are generic concepts that have as species epistemic and moral justification and rationality. Other species are practical or pragmatic justification.

It should be pointed out that there are some special cases, but they are exceptional, in which making a decision to believe does give epistemic warrant for the belief. These are cases in which the subject of the belief can make the believed proposition become true and is so psychologically constituted that she will do so in virtue of having the belief. An example would be the you-will-like-me case in which the subject of the belief will act in a way that will make you like her if and only if she first has the belief that you will like her. Prior to her forming the belief she lacks epistemic warrant for the proposition that you will like her but acquires it subsequent to her believing.

Although Slater's interpretation of James's will to believe as supplying epistemic warrant is a serious blunder, it is easily rectified. All that needs to be done is to replace his use of "epistemic (epistemological)" throughout with "moral." In the most important case of a will to believe option, the option to believe that good will win out over evil in the long run, which James takes to be a universal feature of all religions, the epistemic warrant of the belief gets raised only the tiniest bit by having the belief; for, one person's

having the disposition to perform good-making actions as a result of believing this proposition does very little to raise its probability.

In Chapter 2, Slater develops a version of James's Wager (from the appendix to James's 1911 *Some Problems of Philosophy*) that attempts to improve upon Pascal because it does not confine our religious option to a single hypothesis, that being the Catholic one for Pascal. James works with his own pet religious hypothesis, the pluralistic-melioristic one, in which unseen supernatural powers cooperate with us to bring about the world's salvation, the eventual conquest of good over evil, with there being only the possibility, not the certainty, of success.

Slater objects that "it is not clear why James's saving unseen order and the melioristic universe that it makes possible should be more *rational* than other types of religious belief" (59). This objection runs through open doors since James is the first to admit that his pet religious hypothesis is epistemically on all fours with a host of rival religious hypotheses. By believing and living in accordance with your passions and emotions you come out a winner, even if your hypothesis is false, for you are living a life that has value and meaning for yourself. It really should not be called a wager since you win no matter what. Slater gets this right when he writes that "*if* one already believes in the existence of supernatural beings or powers, *then* it is more reasonable to trust them" (60). I agree with Slater that James would have done better if had had eschewed entirely giving a wager type argument and instead gave a will to believe justification for believing one's pet religious hypothesis.

Chapter 3 gives an in depth exposition of James's 1891 essay "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." As usual, Slater gives a meticulous exposition and manages to take some well aimed potshots at a host of commentators along the way. It is only in the final section of the essay that an attempt is made to find a connection between morality and religion. Having already established that we are always morally obligated to act in a way that maximizes desire (or demand) satisfaction, he brings in God as giving us the inspirational goose that we need to fully live up to this obligation, for it is one thing to have and recognize an obligation and another thing to fully live up to it. God does this because he has an infinite scale of value. No commentator, including Slater, has been

able to make sense of this. Since James's God is finite, what could it mean to say that he has an infinite scale of values?

I do think that with some anachronistic imagination some sense can be made of this. Although God is only finite, he still is outstandingly powerful and smart, so smart that he knows the answer to the question of how we can maximize desire-satisfaction. We cannot access the Divine mind according to James. However, our social scientists, who are the people we must turn to find an answer to this question, which is the reason Dewey praised James's essay so highly, would be inspired to do their best if they believed that there is a correct answer and God has it. This is analogous to our natural scientists finding inspiration in the belief that there is, as Einstein thought, a uniquely correct answer to how nature works. This point will be important for Slater's account of James as a metaphysical realist in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 4 deals with James's solution to religiously based pessimism upon his pluralistic-melioristic faith. There is a fascinating discussion of the similarities and differences between James's pessimism and Nietzsche's nihilism. Religiously based pessimism results from one having a traditional theistic belief that is seriously challenged by the prevalence of apparently unjustified evil and various intellectual considerations that arise from science. There are two solutions. The first involves leading the morally strenuous life but giving up one's traditional theistic belief, the other leading the morally strenuous life coupled with a faith in his pluralistic-melioristic hypothesis. The latter is James's favored solution because it does a better job of promoting human flourishing and leading the morally strenuous life.

Slater raises several devastating objections to this solution. He begins by pointing out that James's God is only finite in power, unlike the omnipotent God of traditional theism, and thereby can escape the problem of evil. But if he is made too powerless, he ceases to be a suitable object of religious faith. And if he is made powerful enough to play this role, his existence becomes incompatible with evil (105). What a beautiful argument! A variant on it, championed by Antony Flew, is the unfalsifiability objection. By making God only finitely powerful, no matter how much horrendous evil we are confronted with we can always say, "He is powerful but just not *that* powerful."

But Slater's most powerful objection is yet to come. James fails to show that "leading a religious moral life provides, if not for *all* persons, then at least for *most* persons, a superior way of relieving pessimism and despair than leading a moral life alone" (107). James is guilty of making a hasty generalization from his own case. He makes no effort to gather empirical evidence to support his claim that people in general do better by having his pluralistic-melioristic faith than a more traditional theistic faith (108). Slater extends this objection to James's will to believe justification of religious faith in his pluralistic-melioristic hypothesis.

Slater's objection can be made even more powerful. There is a reason why James did not think it necessary for him to present empirical evidence in support of his generalization from his own case. It is because he believed there was a one to one correlation between belief and action such that everyone who believes a given proposition performs and/or is disposed to perform the same set of actions. That he was committed to this false one-to-one correlation thesis is made clear in his infamous footnote at the end of "The Will to Believe."

If the action required by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds.

Slater quotes this passage on pages 46-7 but fails to see its commitment to the correlation thesis.

Given the severity and, in my opinion, effectiveness of Slater's preceding objections, it raises a question of whether he has succeeded in adequately in supporting the underlying thesis of his book.

While I believe that certain features of James's account are problematic and should be modified or rejected, his basic argument that there are certain moral goods which cannot plausibly be accounted for, or are not plausibly achievable under the terms of a naturalistic moral theory is a good argument, even if it does not win universal acceptance (15).

It is hard to evaluate how successfully Slater has defended his thesis since it is stated in a vague and highly qualified manner. There are too many out there who flourish and lead the morally strenuous life, such as Russell and Dewey, who eschew any super naturalistic beliefs. Russell was willing to go to jail for his moral commitments whereas James ducked service in the Civil War. Although Slater has failed to support his thesis, he has done a good job of defending James's doctrine of the will to believe.

Chapter 5, which is the major chapter of the book, being 52 pages long, gives a very thorough and penetrating critical exposition of religion and morality in James's 1902 *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Space limitations require that I give only a bare bones summary. James's earlier essays considered the beneficial consequences of faith alone but in this book he enriches faith with religious and mystical experiences. His major test for the veridicality of these experiences is the favorable moral and spiritual progress that the subject of them displays, and he gives a colossal array of empirical evidence to support his claim that these experiences, by and large, have such desirable moral consequences, which was something that he neglected to do in support of his thesis that religious faith has such consequences. Another improvement is that whereas his earlier work was confined to James's pet pluralistic-melioristic religious hypothesis he now countenances religious pluralism. God is identified with the object of mystical experience, but he permits there to be numerous "over-beliefs," which are metaphysical theories about the nature of the object of a mystical experience.

What Slater finds most laudatory about *Varieties* is its unabashed commitment to religious realism. That God has an objective existence that is independent of us also informs his earlier essays in which God is said to be a powerful supernatural force(s); for only an objectively existent being can be a causal agent. He develops a perceptual model of mystical experiences, which has the consequence that a mystical experience is a dyadic relation between a subject and an objective accusative. Slater failed to see that this seriously limits James's pluralism. Because it makes a numerical distinction between the subject and object of a mystical experience, it precludes the monistic religious belief of Eastern mystics for whom there is an identity between the subject and object of a mystical experience. James's disagreement with these monistic mystics is not over their

respective over-beliefs but over the nature of the mystical experience itself. It is strange that James's account of a mystical experience precluded them, since many of his examples of mystical experiences are of the monistic sort.

Having successfully shown that James is a religious realist, Slater goes on in the next chapter to show that, for James, "there is a world of mind-independent objects" (186). This is called "metaphysical realism" by Slater and "epistemological realism" by James. Slater finds this doctrine in James's account of truth. Slater is a very honest interpreter and he squarely faces all of the difficulties in James's account, especially its inconsistencies. James's usually is interpreted as holding that a true belief is one that guides us successfully in realizing our goals, and there are numerous quotations from the text to support this interpretation. That truth is nothing but utility brought on the critical ire of a large part of the philosophical community, led by Moore, Russell, and Lovejoy. Slater produces a ton of quotes from *Pragmatism* and especially *The Meaning of Truth* to show that James added a correspondence requirement to that of utility, resulting in a conjunctive analysis of truth in terms of utility and correspondence with reality.

The problem that immediately comes to mind with this conjunctive account is whether the second conjunct, the correspondence with reality requirement, violates James's ardent life-long commitment to empiricism. If nothing more is said about the nature of this correspondence relation, it will appear to be an occult, salutatory relation of the sort that James scorned. James is well aware of this danger for he adds that "pragmatism defines "agreeing" to mean certain ways of "working," be they actual or potential" (212; my italics). Slater reiterates James's remark when he says that pragmatism specifies "what it *means* for a belief or statement to 'correspond' with reality" (214; my italics). The agreement conjunct thereby reduces to the utility conjunct, differing from it only in name, resulting in James's analysis being based on utility alone.

I think there is a way for Slater to save the conjunctive analysis but it requires some softening of James's commitment to empiricism. There were occasions when James admitted to the dance an idea that was not empirically vouchsafed because of its explanatory value. Slater seems to treat agreement as such an idea for he stresses its explanatory value in the following quotation. "James's views on the connection between truth and utility are underwritten by his belief in a real, objective world which serves as

the condition for the *possibility* of an idea's being true and useful" (184; my italics). He gives a quotation from James that also seems to treat agreement as an explanatory concept. "[That practically useful ideas] should be true in advance of and apart from their utility, that, in other words, their objects should really be there, is the very condition of their having that kind of utility" (185). It also can be said on behalf of this explanatory interpretation of agreement that it can be serve as a spur to certain researchers to believe that there is an objective reality that our true ideas must agree with, just as the belief that the solution to the question of how to best maximize desire satisfaction is known by God can inspire our social scientists.

Slater's conjunctive interpretation of James's theory of truth succeeds in deflecting criticisms based on our common sense way of thinking about truth. But has he really done James a favor? I think not. James is sufficiently rich and inconsistent that an interpreter can portray him in an exciting or unexciting manner. Slater definitely is of the latter type. His interpretation is of the ho-hum, trivializing sort that gives a Misunderstanding Theory of the history of philosophy. All of the shooting that was occasioned by James's account of truth rested on a misunderstanding. First, James was too much of a muddle head to give a clear presentation and his interpreters weren't sharp enough to see what he really meant or intended. Slater's interpretation shows that there was no need for that gun fight at the O K Corral. Santayana insightfully remarked that James was a like a bird that soared high in the air only to be pulled back to earth by invisible wires. Slater is all too happy to pull on those wires and it is apt that he used James's *The Meaning of Truth* as his major source since it is a large-scale exercise in wire pulling -- James at his worst. A similar story can be told about Dewey interpretation.

I personally favor the exciting interpretation of James, such as I gave in my *The Divided Self of William James*. The exciting James, the one who richly deserves a place in the Philosophy Hall of Fame in Steubenville, Ohio, is the one who gave a bold, original revisionary moralization of epistemology, common sense be damned. It is a highly original and controversial theory but the history of philosophy is best served by these sorts of contributions. The greatness of a philosopher should be measured by how much controversy and discussion he or she provokes, for it is by this that philosophy progresses. By this criterion, James is one of the all-time greats.

The book ends in a beautifully conceived and written Epilogue that rightfully portrays James's importance for the contemporary world on the basis of his passionate and moving defense of pluralism and ecumenicalism. What our world desperately needs is a good shot of William James. Amen!

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