

PROSPECTS FOR A JAMESIAN EXPRESSIVISM¹

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In order to take advantage of Michael Slater's presence as commentator, I want to display, as efficiently as I am able, some major similarities and differences between my reading of "The Will to Believe" and his. I will show how things look from the standpoint of my expressivist reading of James and then will look forward to seeing how things look from Slater's somewhat less idiosyncratic perspective on James.² This being James interpretation, we can all expect to leave here with more work to do.

I think that it is one of the great merits of Slater's book that it recognizes the two-part structure of "The Will to Believe." Slater thinks that the first part of the essay is concerned with the psychology of belief and the second part is concerned with the ethics of belief. Slater also uses James's misgivings about the paper's title³ to bring out this structural point. The first several sections concern what Slater calls the will to believe, while the concluding sections concern the right to believe. Though I characterize this structure rather differently, I think that all this is more or less right, and that it might be somewhat "righter" than Slater realizes. I'll start from this important and underappreciated structural point and will try to bring out places where I'm reasonably confident that Slater and I disagree as well as places where I can't tell whether or not we disagree.

As I see things, James spends the first part of "The Will to Believe" talking about what goes on when we discuss our intellectual obligations. Only at the end of the essay does he make a case for an anti-evidentialist ethics of belief. The early sections do not, in my view, concern the ethics of belief at all but rather the metaethics of belief. In calling this section metaethical, I do not mean to dispute Slater's characterization of it as concerning the psychology of belief. I entirely endorse Slater's emphasis on these early sections and the role of our passionate nature in actual believings and decidings. Slater says that "[w]hat James intends to challenge is not merely the view that the only beliefs we are entitled to hold are those supported by objective, neutral evidence, but also the *very idea* that there is or can be objective, neutral evidence either for or against religious beliefs" (p.26). Slater calls this "perhaps the least appreciated and most significant claim at stake in James's will to believe doctrine," and I am inclined to agree, both about James having made such a claim, and about most interpreters having underappreciated the significance of the claim.

The metaethical (or, perhaps better, metaepistemological) framework into which these psychological claims get placed emerges in Section VII. At the beginning of that section, James formulates our "first and great commandments as would-be knowers," namely that we must seek truth and we must avoid error. James rightly insists that these two duties cannot be commensurated into one. He further notes that the way that we balance these two duties against one another "may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life" (WTB 18). James stresses that one is permitted to strike this balance differently and hence color one's intellectual life differently than evidentialists like Clifford would have one do. The reason for this is that "these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passionate life" (WTB 18).

Clifford is expressing a passionate fear of error and urging his readers to be moved by that fear. James denies that our intellectual duties require us, as a general matter, to prioritize error-avoidance over truth-seeking.

This passage is striking and seems crucial to those of us who are tempted to see James as an expressivist. James says, not only that our feelings of duty are expressions of our passional nature, but that they are *only* expressions of our passional nature. He clearly seems to be drawing a contrast between the way in which evidence bears on imperative statements like “believe truth!” and “avoid error!” on the one hand, and the way in which it bears on indicative statements like “Lincoln really existed.” When Clifford urges us to avoid error, the first thing to realize is that it is an urging and hence not a candidate for truth. As James has it, Clifford is merely expressing “his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe” (WTB 18).

On my reading, then, the first part of “The Will to Believe” concludes with a characterization of the practice of putting forward evidentialist or anti-evidentialist suggestions. Neither Clifford nor James is in the position of trying to state the facts about our intellectual obligations, since there are no such facts. Both should be seen instead as recommending policies for governing our belief-forming practices. This non-cognitivism about epistemic obligations supplements and helps explain James’ earlier claims about our passional nature playing such a crucial role in so many of our beliefs. Someone who places a greater value on gaining the truth than avoiding error about a given matter might well find a given amount of evidence sufficient for belief, while someone pursuing a policy that places more weight on error-avoidance would find that amount of evidence manifestly insufficient.

Expressivism about a given domain (e.g. moral or epistemic obligations) denies that statements in that domain are either true or false. But it need not and typically does not deny that evidence bears on the evaluation of those statements. And it is crucial for understanding the second part of “The Will to Believe” that one understand why James thinks that evidence (though not evidence alone) tells against Clifford’s evidentialist ethics of belief. Starting in Section VIII, James turns to what he calls the main question. He then proceeds to argue that a Cliffordian policy of privileging error-avoidance over truth-seeking is likely to produce disastrous results in many cases. James is no longer describing the practice of assessing intellectual obligations; he is now participating in this practice. And he is expressing and justifying his preference for un-Cliffordian norms of intellectual evaluation. He accuses Clifford of indulging an unhealthy and excessive nervousness about the possibility of error. Excessive concern with the prospect of being mistaken, says James, prevents us from attaining valuable goals, just as an excessive concern with keeping her soldiers safe would interfere with a general’s legitimate goals. James thinks that the members of his audience share with him goals that require a healthier balance between the need to believe truth and the need to avoid error. These goals include making friends and leading a morally and religiously rich life. If you desire, for instance, to lead a strenuous life, then Clifford’s ethic of belief should hold little appeal for you. Desires cannot be true or false, but they can be reasonable to pursue or unreasonable to pursue. James thinks that most people can be convinced of the value (though not, of course, the truth) of such things as living strenuously, and he likewise thinks that most people can be convinced that Clifford’s combination of norms is unhealthy, though not incorrect.

This is all unfortunately rather compressed, but I hope it suffices to allow me to start situating my view with respect to Slater’s. I think that Slater, like most other commentators, somewhat misunderstands James’s objection to Clifford and other intellectualists. According to Slater, James’s “basic criticism is not that intellectualism is false but rather that it is inconsistent. Both the intellectualist and the religious believer are guided by their respective (and

presumably question-begging) ‘faith-tendencies.’ The only salient difference between them lies in the character of these tendencies” (p. 53).⁴ I don’t think that James does or can object to evidentialism or intellectualism as false or as incoherent. When James is discussing the status of our beliefs about intellectual obligations, he insists that the evidentialist is as driven by his passionate nature as is the believer. But this is no objection to evidentialism. Our passionate nature “lawfully may” incline us towards evidentialism just as surely as it may incline us towards a more permissive ethics of belief. I think that James is clear about the fact that he’s not objecting to evidentialism until the end of his essay, and that his objection is that evidentialism is unhealthy and impractical, not incoherent. Both Clifford and Clifford’s opponents might easily and unfortunately forget that evidentialism itself is just the expression of a passion, but there is nothing else for evidentialism to be, and so that’s not an objectionable feature of evidentialism.

A related disagreement concerns the very thesis of “The Will to Believe.” Slater, unlike almost all previous commentators, realizes that it is problematic to identify this famous passage from Section IV as the thesis of the paper.

Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passionate decision – just like deciding yes or not – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (WTB, p. 11).

Slater, true to his appreciation of the two-part structure of the paper, thinks that “The Will to Believe” has two thesis statements. The second thesis doesn’t arrive until Section X, the final section of the paper. It says that “*in concreto*, the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider” (WTB 32). Slater thinks that the first thesis statement is the conclusion of a general argument about the psychology of belief, while the second is a special conclusion of an argument about the ethics of belief (see p. 23). The first thesis concerns the will to believe and the second concerns the right to believe. It is here that I suspect that Slater might be righter than he realizes.

I am inclined, perhaps a bit brazenly, to deny that James saw the passage from Section IV as *a* thesis of the paper, much less as *the* thesis of the paper, which is how most commentators treat it. Admittedly, the passage in question is preceded by the words “The thesis I defend, is, briefly stated, this:”. But I think that James is very clear about the structure of his essay, and so I maintain that when James describes the passage above as “the thesis I defend,” he is referring to the question with which Section IV begins, viz. whether, having recognized that our passionate nature often influences our convictions, we should regard this fact as “reprehensible and pathological” or should instead treat it as “a normal element in making up our minds.” Why does this matter? I think that if the passage from Section IV is treated as *a* or *the* thesis of the paper, one will misunderstand the status of the claim that one lawfully may decide an intellectually undecidable genuine option on the basis of one’s passionate nature. It can seem like James is describing a regrettable failure of humans to live up to our own standards of rationality, when in fact he thinks that we can often handle such options as well as their nature permits. And James goes on to argue, as we have seen, that for most people, Clifford’s evidentialism merits being strongly rejected because it would be a disastrous and irrational policy. So, in my view, treating the passage from Section IV as if it were the conclusion of the essay

involves finding a tepid and misleading response to evidentialism. I think that the passage instead signals a robust metaethical conclusion that is an intermediary result on the way to a robust rejection of evidentialism.

I think that Slater sees a lot of this but I think that he doesn't see all of it. Of course, he might see things differently than I do, and if so, I hope to hear more about how he sees the textual evidence. In particular, I'm not entirely clear about how Slater sees the relationship between the two parts of James's essay. He says that James' will to believe doctrine "is distinct from, but nonetheless has important implications for, his ethics of belief" (p. 36). Slater hopes to make James's ethics of belief a live option even for those who don't agree with his psychological views. "James's basic argument for our *right* to believe in religious matters does not directly depend upon" his claims about our passional nature. "This is because while a person's passional nature is surely involved in her *inclination* to hold a given belief, it is not clear how a person's passional nature determines whether or not her belief is *justified*" (p. 34). On the other hand, Slater sometimes emphasizes the implications of the will to believe for the right to believe, rather than the distinctness of the latter from the former. Following William Wainwright, Slater attributes to James a "conception of rationality in which needs, interests and sentiments *both do and should* play a role in the formation of adequate judgements" (p. 37; emphasis mine). This certainly makes it sound as if one's passional nature does play a role in the justification of beliefs, not just in the inclination to hold them. I do not mean to suggest that Slater's interpretation is inconsistent, but only that it's unclear how he resolves the pushes and pulls of James's texts. I hope that my interpretation can help Slater explain and develop his. Slater comes much of the way with me when he agrees that how we rank the obligations James describes is "at bottom an expression of our passional life," but he does not go on to draw the expressivist conclusion from that concession. Though I've touched on the issue, I lack the space here to detail the mechanics of how a noncognitivist reading of James gives a clear role for one's passions in explaining how a belief can be justified, and how it helps explain the perspectival features of epistemic justification that, as Slater rightly emphasizes, loom large in "The Will to Believe." I look forward to seeing how a cognitivist reading (if that's what Slater wants to defend) of James handles these problems. I hope that I've been able to help us take another step in developing sophisticated readings of this fascinating essay. Lots of intriguing terrain has had to remain unexplored, like Slater's suggestion that James's notions of "forced" and "momentous" options play no role in the "right to believe" argument on Section X. Beyond that, of course, James scholars will, I hope, be thinking about the possibilities involved in expressivist readings of such works as "The Sentiment of Rationality" and the *Pragmatism* lectures, with their emphasis on the role of temperament in philosophy.

I conclude by noting that I don't think I've by any means done enough to take cognitivist readings of James off the table. His very insistence on the primacy of our passional nature makes it tricky to attribute to him a sharp contrast between states which are evidence-determined and states which are not, and standard versions of expressivism require some such contrast. James may have anticipated a global expressivism along the lines of the one recently developed by Huw Price⁵, but it will take a lot of doing to reconcile all of the competing strands to be found in James's work.

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NOTES

¹ References are to William James, *The Will to Believe and other essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc.,

² Nishi Shah gets credit for the initial idea behind this reading of James. He and I developed our interpretation together (See Kasser and Shah, 2006, “The metaethics of belief: an expressivist reading of *The will to believe*”, *Social Epistemology*, 20: 1–17).. I claim it as mine for purposes of blame; it is ours for purposes of credit.

³ See Slater, p. 19.

⁴ Slater is here discussing a later version of the will to believe doctrine, but the criticism carries over to the earlier discussion and is offered by many commentators on “The Will to Believe.”

⁵ See Price, *Naturalism Without Mirrors*, Oxford University Press, 2011.