

RESPONSES TO AIKIN AND KASSER

MICHAEL R. SLATER

RESPONSE TO AIKIN

This was a fascinating paper to read, and it gave me a great deal of food for thought. It is creative, provocative, rigorously argued, and a model of clarity, and James studies needs much more work of this sort. I particularly liked the attention that you draw to friendship, social cooperation, and romantic conquest cases in which James's will to believe doctrine applies, or more specifically the "faith-helping-to-create-a-fact" aspect of the doctrine. Recognizing these features of "The Will to Believe" is important, for it reminds us that James's ethics of belief does not simply concern the justification of religious beliefs.

I must confess, though, that I simply read the text of "The Will to Believe" quite differently than you do in several important respects, and that as a result of these interpretive differences I find myself unable to grant some of the assumptions that underlie your argument in this paper. For the sake of time, I will focus on three points of disagreement between our readings of James.

First, I find no textual support in any of James's writings for the first of your two interpretive desiderata, namely that James's will to believe doctrine only undertakes to justify *orthodox* religious beliefs (pp. 1-2), presumably by which you mean *orthodox Christian beliefs*, or even more specifically, *orthodox Protestant beliefs*. I just don't find any evidence to support this interpretation, and doubt that the view you ascribe to James accurately represents his religious views, which were not exactly "orthodox." Indeed, James was strongly critical of traditional Christian theology, especially the tradition of natural theology. And his defense of religious pluralism, "overbelief" in a finite God, and eventual defense of a pluralistic-panpsychic universe were all partly developed as alternatives to traditional Christian beliefs, which he did not personally regard as live options, and in later works such as *A Pluralistic Universe* even claimed are incredible for philosophically and scientifically educated members of his generation (PU, 18).¹

The sole passage on which you base your interpretation appears in the opening paragraph of the essay (WB, 13), and is almost surely a remark that James directed to his audience at Yale—the "good old orthodox College"—and not his audience at Brown, since the latter was actually more religiously liberal than Harvard and was the only Ivy League school which had never imposed religious tests on faculty or students.² As I read it, in the opening paragraph James is simply making some light-hearted opening remarks—in jest—as a way of communicating to his Yale audience that he will be discussing the subject of religious faith. But he is not interested in discussing—let alone defending—traditional Protestant doctrines such as justification by faith alone (*sola fide*) or the Protestant theological distinction between justification and sanctification. Indeed, when James writes that his is an essay "in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced," it seems fairly

clear (to me at any rate) that he is interested in defending the right to hold religious beliefs in general, and not simply the right to hold Christian (or more narrowly, Protestant) beliefs. In any case, in order to support an interpretation of this sort it seems to me that you would need to find specific and unambiguous textual evidence that James's will to believe doctrine has an "orthodoxy requirement," and all of the evidence I am aware of points in a very different direction. One is even tempted to say that the very idea of such a requirement is positively un-Jamesean.

Second, I am not sure that James ever explicitly claims in the essay that, "a defense of faith *must* concede that there is insufficient evidential backing" (p. 2; emphasis added). James himself had something of an aversion to attempts to specify necessary and sufficient conditions, which of course is not to say that he never did so in spite of himself. While I agree in general with your claim that James's will to believe doctrine aims to justify belief under certain conditions in cases where there is insufficient evidence (where the latter is itself one of the conditions), as well as your view that James frames his account of justified belief in the essay in terms of a distinction between lawful and unlawful beliefs (p. 2), it is not clear to me that his views on religious epistemology consistently assume that religious beliefs always or necessarily have insufficient evidential support. Not only does James call into question the very idea of objective evidence in the essay; he also defends the view in later writings—most notably in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*—that religious and mystical experiences can in principle furnish a justification for holding religious beliefs. This "experientialist" strand of his religious epistemology, if you will, stands in tension with some of his more Kantian-sounding claims in other of his writings, and whether the two strands of his thought are coherent or could be harmonized is, I think, an open question. As is so often the case, James seems to be of two minds (and possibly more) on this important philosophical issue.

For these reasons, then, and especially for the first, I am not convinced by your argument that James faces a dilemma (p. 3). The first horn of the dilemma, that the commitments constituting faith might satisfy the lawfulness requirement insofar as they are doxastically efficacious but fail to satisfy the orthodoxy requirement, is easily broken if one denies that James in fact *has* an orthodoxy requirement—and I find no reason think that he has one. But since dilemmas need at least two horns, I'm not sure there's a dilemma here at all. Regarding the second horn of the putative dilemma, I'm not sure you've actually shown that James thinks that all orthodox religious beliefs (and I'll again assume here that you mean Christian, and specifically Protestant, religious beliefs) are doxastically inefficacious, and hence unlawful. Until this has been shown I find no reason to think that James's will to believe doctrine faces this particular problem, and doing so would require providing much more textual support than you do here. While James's "religious hypothesis" in "The Will to Believe" is admittedly about as theologically general, vague, and thinned down as a religious view can be, if James does not defend an orthodoxy requirement then the only relevant question would appear to be whether the hypothesis is in fact doxastically efficacious on his own terms (which for him means being a *genuine option*, one that is *live, forced, and momentous*). It seems to be so, although one might still object to the terms in which James frames his account; but that is entirely another matter.

Third, and finally, I am a bit unsure of your suggestion that, despite its failure on its own terms, the essay is nevertheless successful in providing a template for "reconstructions of religious views in line with humanist commitments" (p. 3). If all you mean by this claim is that later pragmatists such as Dewey and Rorty drew inspiration from or were influenced by the essay in developing their own views on religion, then I don't really have any objection. But if you mean to suggest that James's will to believe doctrine *itself* somehow

undertakes or is committed to the “reconstruction” of religious views in the sense in which Dewey or Rorty understood that concept—namely, as entailing or advocating a naturalization of religious faith and a concomitant rejection of supernaturalism in the service of broadly humanistic and democratic values—then I would want to see much more in the way of argument. One of the challenges facing such an interpretation of James, I think, is that it must deal with the many instances in which he defends realist or supernaturalist religious views, particularly in such works as *Varieties*, *Pragmatism*, and *A Pluralistic Universe*. Unlike many other figures in the pragmatist tradition, James did not view the supernatural aspects of traditional religious belief and practice as inherently problematic on either scientific or humanistic grounds, and indeed he framed his own pragmatic account of religion in terms of a larger philosophical commitment to what he called “piecemeal supernaturalism.” While these non-naturalistic aspects of his philosophy of religion are unattractive or objectionable to many contemporary pragmatists, they are there all the same, and need to be taken into account by anyone interested in using James as a resource for doing constructive philosophical work.

RESPONSE TO KASSER

I’d like to begin my response by thanking Jeff for his interest in my work, and for giving my book such a careful and thoughtful reading. I’m grateful for the opportunity to discuss my interpretation of “The Will to Believe” with you tonight, and for the chance to respond to some of the very interesting, insightful, and challenging points that you raise. I agree with you that our readings of the essay are similar in a number of important respects, and I was pleased to learn that someone actually shares my view of its two-part structure (the recognition of which, I think, helps to resolve a number of potential misunderstandings of the essay). I find your expressivist interpretation of James to be fresh, exciting, and capable of shedding new light on his philosophy. What I’d like to do on the present occasion is to clarify my interpretation of James’s will to believe doctrine on some of the issues you raise, and to say a bit about where I think our interpretations of James overlap, and where they diverge.

First, regarding the issue of whether James views evidentialism as an incoherent view, I think it is fairly clear from the essay that one of James’s major objections to Clifford’s defense of evidentialism is that it problematically assumes that in order to be justified, religious beliefs must have a sufficient level of evidential or rational support; and since religious beliefs lack this support, they aren’t justified. What is problematic about this view, as James sees it, is that it assumes that in principle there is objective evidence, or some piece of objective reasoning, that we can use to definitively settle “speculative questions” of a religious, moral, or metaphysical nature, when in fact—or so he thinks—there is no such evidence, or no such arguments, available to beings constituted like ourselves. The textual evidence for this reading can be found in sections V and VI of the essay, where James develops a sustained critique of the “quest for certainty” (to borrow Dewey’s elegant phrase) that he thinks motivates not only Clifford’s views but also that of other absolutists and rationalists in the history of philosophy. But one of the significant features of James’s critique of the twin ideals of objective evidence and objective certainty is that it does not assume that, in giving up these ideals, we thereby give up “the quest or hope of truth itself” (WB, 23). As I read him, in defending our right to believe in speculative matters, James is assuming at least two things: first, that our passional 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*” (WB, 20), and second, that the beliefs in question are not *merely* expressive of our passional nature, but are also potentially true or false.

This last part of James's will to believe doctrine is absolutely crucial, I think, for in adopting a belief of a speculative nature on religious, moral, or metaphysical issues, James thinks, one is taking a certain kind of *risk*—namely, the risk of being right or wrong in one's beliefs, and more importantly, in how one acts and lives. So, one worry that I have about your expressivist reading of James is that it effectively reduces, in this case, his will to believe doctrine to his views concerning philosophical temperament. As I read him, James defends a kind of hybrid view on these matters (or as he would probably call it, a “mediating” view), one that (a) acknowledges the unavoidable (and on his view, unregrettable) role that our respective temperaments or passionate natures play in the formation and justification of our beliefs, while also (b) acknowledging that our beliefs and the statements that we use to articulate and defend them are either true or false, a fact that has both theoretical as well as practical significance. Whereas the former assumption informs James's defense of religious and metaphysical pluralism (and perhaps even reflects these views), the latter connects with his later religious and metaphysical views, most notably his doctrine of meliorism and his pragmatic account of religion in such works as *Varieties and Pragmatism*.

Second, you've raised some very good questions concerning how I conceive of the relationship between James's will to believe doctrine and his ethics of belief, as well as my view that while a person's passionate nature is involved in her inclination to hold a given belief, it is not clear how a person's passionate nature determines whether or not her belief is justified (Slater, 34).³ Regarding the first issue, what I claimed in my book is that “James's will to believe doctrine is based on an account of human psychology that is distinct from, but nonetheless has important implications for, his ethics of belief” (Slater, 36). What I meant in claiming this is that, on the one hand, James's psychology and his ethics of belief should not be run together, although the former informs the latter; and on the other hand, that James's ethics of belief is not exhausted by his will to believe doctrine, which is something that I try to show in later chapters. Regarding the second issue, you're right to press me for further clarification on how I understand the relationship between James's views on the *will* to believe and the *right* to believe. I certainly could have said more about these matters, and need to say more about them in the future. The explanation that I gave in my book for the claim that you quote from p. 34 goes as follows:

Presumably it is the evidential inconclusiveness of our options which gives us our epistemic warrant, and the liveness or deadness of the options which, according to our passionate nature, guides our decision to believe one option rather than another. I do not mean to suggest that this is how James himself understood the matter; in point of fact, his claims can be interpreted in several different ways. But it is, I think, a defensible interpretation which has the additional advantage of making James's will to believe doctrine available to those who do not agree with all the details of his psychology (Slater, 34).

One of the reasons I prefer this interpretation of James is that it avoids attributing what I see as a strong version of *perspectivism* to him; and my interpretation of James's will to believe doctrine uses the concept of *perspectivism* rather than the concept of *expressivism* to interpret his views on how a person's passionate nature influences her beliefs. What I tried to do in my book (especially on pp. 35–47) was to make a case for reading James as a weak or modest *perspectivist*, one who affirms the view that our passionate nature inevitably influences our beliefs while rejecting the radical view that there are no facts, which is what strong *perspectivism* entails. Now there are a number of areas in which my *perspectivist* interpretation of James's will to believe doctrine and your *expressivist* interpretation overlap, as you correctly point out. Where they differ most, I suspect, is that my interpretation seeks to preserve a

connection between beliefs and facts, and sees the latter as ultimately determining whether or not a given belief is true or justified, while still acknowledging that the passionate and volitional aspects of our psychology influence which beliefs we hold, how firmly we hold them and how willing we are to act on them, and so on. This sort of balancing act is also a feature of James's account of truth, as I understand it, and is reflected in his insistence that having a true belief simultaneously involves having beliefs which are pragmatically useful *and* which correspond to some aspect of reality. To return to James's will to believe doctrine, though, I tend to interpret James as holding that having true beliefs in religious and moral matters is of tremendous importance, and that it is often only by following our passionate natures and risking ourselves on an uncertain possibility that we put ourselves in a proper position to know the truth or to realize certain facts in these domains. If your expressivist reading can allow for these aspects of James's doctrine, then I'd be much more inclined to accept it. But my concern is that these aspects of the doctrine might be left out of account altogether, or minimized in importance, or—worst of all—“reconstructed” in a substantively different fashion on an expressivist interpretation.

It's at this point that I'd like to raise a cautionary flag concerning your use of the term “expressivism” to characterize James's views on moral and epistemic obligations, and perhaps other aspects of James's philosophy as well. Indeed, I'm not quite sure of the scope of your interpretation of James, but my sense is that it extends beyond his will to believe doctrine to other areas of his philosophy, and potentially even to his philosophy as a whole. One assumption that expressivist theories share, as you observe, is the correctness of a distinction between cognitive and non-cognitive meanings or mental states. Indeed, as you state early on in your paper, “expressivism about a given domain (e.g. moral or epistemic obligations) denies that statements in that domain are either true or false” (p. 2). So, in the case of moral statements, expressivism entails *emotivism*, the view that the literal meaning of moral statements is identical with the emotive meaning of those statements, or the non-cognitive attitude being expressed by the person making the statement. And this, of course, amounts to viewing moral statements as the kind of statements that don't (and can't) bear a truth-value. One of the most provocative and original aspects of your work and that of fellow pragmatists such as Huw Price, I think, is that you have taken a theory originally developed in an ethical context by philosophers such as Charles Stevenson and J.L. Mackie and broadened its scope to include other areas of philosophy such as epistemology, the philosophy of language, and the philosophy of religion. This is potentially revolutionary, but it also, I think, runs the risk of perpetuating some questionable philosophical distinctions—most notably, an essential distinction between cognitive versus non-cognitive meanings, or evidence-determined v. non-evidence determined mental states—that classical pragmatists such as James and Dewey sought to “fuzz up” on both psychological and metaphilosophical grounds. On this occasion, though, I won't try to defend the claim that this particular distinction is mistaken, nor will I try to show—as I am inclined to think—that James's psychological and philosophical views problematize the very distinction itself, both of which would require far more time than I have at present. But I will discuss, albeit briefly, some of my reservations about attributing this distinction to James.

Although I did not defend such a position in my book, I would now argue that James views intellectual obligations such as “Believe truth!” or “Shun error!” as necessarily involving certain *doxastic commitments* on our part in the absence of sufficient evidence or justifying reasons; and that these doxastic commitments, in turn (i) have their basis in the passionate and volitional aspects of our psychology, and (ii) are not based upon supporting arguments or evidence. Commitments of this sort seem to have the status of *basic beliefs* for

the person who holds them, insofar as they provide support for other beliefs that that person holds, but which themselves are not accepted on the basis of any other beliefs. This reading, if right, challenges the widespread assumption that James was a straightforward coherentist in his epistemology, and shows that his epistemological views include certain features that are usually associated with foundationalism. Indeed, I suspect that James's epistemological views might better be classed, to borrow a term of art developed by Susan Haack, as entailing a version of *foundherentism*.⁴

One interesting question, I think, concerns whether Jamesian doxastic commitments should be understood as providing *rational* support for a person's beliefs, or whether the "supports" relation he has in mind needs to be conceived in another way. My hunch is that, given both James's psychological and philosophical views, they do—but with the important caveat that *reasons* (which are often thought of by contemporary philosophers as having a *cognitive* status) are not "pure," and are interwoven with other aspects of our psychology such as feelings, emotions, and desires (which are often thought of by contemporary philosophers as having a *non-cognitive* status). But commitments of this sort should not be construed, on James's view, as entailing claims regarding self-evidency, or incorrigibility, or other hallmarks of classical foundationalism in epistemology, much less as entailing the claim to *know* certain truths. This difference sets James's view in sharp contrast with, for example, Alvin Plantinga's well-known, non-foundationalist views on properly basic belief, though both are sometimes read (incorrectly, I think) as defending versions of fideism.

In any case, I would argue that while the two intellectual obligations James discusses in section VII readily admit of an expressivist interpretation, such an interpretation needs to be qualified in order to be defensible. In one sense, imperative statements such as these are ripe for an expressivist reading because, as imperatives, they don't bear a truth-value in the first place—statements such as "pass the salt" and "stop!" are neither true nor false. They are non-cognitive in a trivial sense, we might say. The really interesting and provocative cases concern indicative statements, which at least *appear* to make claims about matters of fact, though according to expressivists really do not. An expressivist interpretation of a religious statement such as "God loves us" interprets the meaning of this sentence as expressing the attitude of the one who utters it, as opposed to asserting a fact about God. I'll return to examples of this sort later, but for now let's bracket them and return to the former sort. My sense is that James does not conceive of intellectual obligations proper in expressivist terms, which in the present case would make both "ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion" (WB, 24) merely expressions of our passional nature. Although facts aren't being picked out by statements such as "Believe truth!" or "Shun error!" (which is unsurprising, given that they are imperative statements), James does think that there are such things as true and false beliefs, and that from a pragmatic and broadly Darwinian perspective it generally pays to have more of the former than the latter. If pressed to clarify his views on this issue, I suspect he would say that the reason why we should seek to hold true beliefs and avoid holding false ones, in general, is because on the whole there are very good practical reasons for doing so. It is at this point that James would likely appeal to the practical consequences of holding a given belief, and also where he would likely insist that on pragmatic grounds it is, as a general rule, highly important to hold true beliefs. And if he happened to be in a Peircean mood at the time (as he sometimes was), he might even appeal to the regulative notion of an ideal of inquiry in explaining what it ultimately means for a belief to be true. Unlike many interpreters, I do not think that James's account of truth can be reduced to mere utility, and have argued that it retains the traditional assumption that having true beliefs in some sense entails having beliefs which accurately

represent reality, even if James gives a non-traditional, pragmatic account of how the notion of correspondence to reality should be understood.

I would readily agree with you, though, that James conceives of how we rank these intellectual obligations relative to one another in what appear to be expressivist terms, for it is on this question that legitimate evaluative differences can be said to exist among different reasonable individuals: Clifford's passionate nature and philosophical temperament incline him to prioritize the avoidance of error, whereas James's nature and temperament incline him to prioritize the search for truth; and no simple appeal to objective facts can determine whose view is right, for facts are not at issue here. There is no right or wrong way to rank these *prima facie* obligations, because one's sense of how one should rank them is not liable to being true or false. I think your reading of James is "bang on" in this respect, and that you've made a very insightful observation about James's views on the ethics of belief. On that note, I'll bring my response to a close.

Georgetown University
mrs94@georgetown.edu

NOTES

¹ *A Pluralistic Universe* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1977). All parenthetical references to this work are abbreviated "PU."

² *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979). All parenthetical references to this work are abbreviated "WB."

³ Michael R. Slater, *William James on Ethics and Faith* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁴ Susan Haack, *Evidence and Inquiry: Towards Reconstruction in Epistemology* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1993).