

PHILOSOPHICAL TEMPERAMENTS, FREEDOM, AND RESPONSIBILITY¹



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Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in 1931 that philosophy is really “work on oneself,” on “how one sees things.”² In addition to Wittgenstein himself, one of the thinkers providing us with a glimpse of what it means to have a personal voice in philosophy, to be fully present as a human being in one’s philosophizing, is obviously William James.³ In this address, I will briefly explore a topic familiar to most of James’s readers: his concept of a philosophical temperament. I will argue that this concept should not be understood in terms of reductive psychologism claiming that our temperaments simply *determine* our philosophical views but as an encouragement to freely seek and find one’s own voice, *enabled* by one’s temperament, and to take full responsibility for developing it further. Thus, my reflections also serve, I hope, as a suggestion to the community of James scholars of what could be seen as truly lasting and both personally and culturally significant in his pragmatism – even if we may have to move beyond what can actually be found in James’s own writings.⁴

James’s account of philosophical temperaments as personal characteristics⁵ that inevitably frame and limit our engagement in philosophical theorization and argumentation is understandably controversial. James famously saw the history of philosophy as a history of clashes of temperaments, but this does not mean that he would have understood the temperament-relativity of philosophical discussion as a merely psychological phenomenon, or that he would have viewed our personal philosophical temperaments as something “merely personal” in the subjectivist sense of being arbitrary or idiosyncratic. Rather, questioning his own resolutely non-Kantian self-understanding, we may even see Jamesian philosophical temperaments as playing a quasi-transcendental role in constituting the *philosophical possibilities* we find genuinely open for us in discussion and argumentation (i.e., “transcendental” in a broadly Kantian, not Emersonian or transcendentalist sense). Some of these possibilities, and their limits, are explicitly ethical, while *all* of them contain ethical dimensions. I take James to be arguing, in *Pragmatism* and elsewhere, that our world-viewing in general is a value-directed and value-embedded human activity; accordingly, metaphysics also has an irreducibly ethical core.

Moreover, we are – or so I will suggest we may read James – at least to a certain degree responsible for *developing* our philosophical temperaments. We cannot just *arbitrarily* decide to find something philosophically possible, and something else impossible, for us to think; instead, the (both epistemic and ethical) choices we make within the area limited by such decisions are something we are at least partly responsible for. Accordingly, the philosophical discussions we engage in on the basis of our temperaments are at the same time, and all the time, processes of shaping and reinterpreting those temperaments, and hence also the limits of what we find genuine philosophical options in our lives.

It might be suggested – now going far beyond James’s own views – that we can deny this responsibility only on pain of being excluded from what we (currently) consider “us” – a community of thinkers or inquirers who are answerable to each other for their ideas. Something like the Jamesian notion of an individual philosophical temperament is needed for us to be able to seriously maintain that one is responsible for what one oneself finds “thinkable” and “unthinkable” (ethically and more generally) in one’s community, and the limits of purely rational argumentation must be acknowledged here. In short, personal philosophical (including, especially, ethical) responsibility is not merely the responsibility of rational argumentation, which is *only possible* within the limits set by our (responsibly) drawing the, or at least some, limits of the (for us) thinkable. I will later try to explain what I mean by this with reference to a non-Jamesian philosopher, Raimond Gaita.

The notion of a philosophical temperament should immediately be supplemented by another obvious Jamesian reference. In what is presumably his best known essay, “The Will to Believe,”⁶ James argued – against evidentialist ethics of belief according to which it is always wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence – that in religious and other existential or *weltanschaulichen* contexts, we have a personal right to choose to believe, at our own risk, a hypothesis that makes our lives (for example) morally significant provided that we are dealing with a “genuine option” and that there are no purely intellectual or evidential grounds for deciding between that hypothesis and its rivals. One of the key Jamesian concepts in this context is, indeed, the concept of a *genuine option*, which I take

to be a close relative of the notion of a philosophical temperament. For example, it might be a genuine option for me – with my personal background in the Western world and Christian culture, even if I am not practicing any religion – to embrace Christianity, if I were considering the possibility of embracing any religious outlook at all. Only Christianity (rather than, say, Islam) would be “alive” for me – and as a Finn, presumably only Lutheran Christianity, more specifically, would be an outlook I could seriously consider adopting. In other words, it is “thinkable” for me to be or become a Christian, or not to be or become one. It is, however, quite unthinkable for me to turn into a Muslim or a Hindu. The Jamesian notions of a “live option” and a “genuine option” are not identical with the concept of the (temperamentally) thinkable, but they are parts of the same conceptual terrain.⁷

People may have various extremely problematic ideas about what is thinkable or unthinkable based on, for example, their religious convictions. On my reading, Jamesian pragmatist philosophy of religion is firmly opposed to any apologetic approaches. It could be suggested that one can coherently maintain both that (i) *if* one were religious, only a certain specific religious outlook (e.g., Christianity) would be “alive” for one as a genuine option (in the sense of “The Will to Believe”), and that (ii) it is unthinkable, or morally impossible, to maintain – that is, even to entertain the possibility as something to be seriously considered – that one’s own religion (even when it is the only genuine option for oneself) would be, from an absolute metaphysical perspective, or from a God’s-Eye View, *the* true one and all other religious standpoints would be false. Here, (ii) expresses the view, in my view clearly associated with Jamesian pragmatism, that religious exclusivism is not just wrong, or theoretically false, but ethically unthinkable because it profoundly misconstrues our common humanity characterized by irreducible diversity. We should find such exclusivism as unthinkable as we find racism, for instance; its rejection should be a premise rather than a conclusion in serious philosophy of religion. In particular, there is no way of maintaining, decently, that only one’s own religion “saves.”⁸ Any attribution of such a life-transforming value to a religious outlook arguably needs to acknowledge others’ (people representing different outlooks) entitlement to similar attributions from their own standpoints.

2

Raimond Gaita, one of the most original thinkers in the (broadly) Wittgensteinian tradition of moral philosophy, has emphasized the ethical significance of the concept of the “unthinkable.” He writes:

[Fearless thinkers in “practical ethics”]⁹ have extended the arrogance and insularity of the worst kind of academic professionalism beyond the academy. Generally they show no fear or even slight anxiety at the responsibility they have assumed. They have no sense of awe in the face of the questions they have raised, and no sense of humility in the face of the traditions they condescendingly dismiss. They are aggressively without a sense of mystery and without a suspicion that anything might be too deep for their narrowly professional competence. They mistake these vices for the virtues of thinking radically, courageously and with an unremitting hostility to obscurantism.¹⁰

Gaita uses the phrase, “fearless thinkers” pejoratively. The danger he warns us about here, in short, is not the danger of saying something false but of *saying something evil*.¹¹ Importantly, this threat, or an awareness of being haunted by such a threat, is something that is open only to *real human beings*: a mere “*res cogitans*” can no more have a corrupt mind that it can be a crank.¹² Gaita’s views here resemble James’s urge to take seriously the “whole man [*sic*] in us,” avoiding “vicious intellectualism:”

The idea of being seriously responsive to the claims of reason means nothing unless people can seriously and without equivocation stand behind what they claim reason compels them to conclude. That is why a conclusion must be someone’s conclusion in a sense more substantial than is suggested by the fact that he feels compelled to write it at the end of a piece of reasoning on a blackboard. The indivisible human being [...] must be able to say in all seriousness: this is what I believe.¹³

Essentially the same point was, I think, made by James in his exploration of philosophical temperaments, an absolutely important concept for understanding what the *limits* of argumentation (also emphasized by Gaita) can mean. One philosopher's *modus ponens* can be another's *modus tollens* depending on their individual temperaments (and related individual or cultural unthinkabilities), but this does not mean that they would not be responsible for maintaining and developing the temperaments they do have. Our philosophical temperaments should never be considered "given"; they must be actively critically examined and re-examined. However, the question can be raised *how* exactly this is supposed to be possible, if those temperaments constrain what we are able to consider responsible argumentation. I am not entirely sure James ever explicitly told us how.

In any event, the quasi-Jamesian point emphasized by Gaita (without citing James) is that even the most technically sophisticated argument is always *presented by someone*, a concrete person, in some real life situation and in a historical and cultural context, a person with an individual philosophical temperament as well as socio-political relations to other people. The strength of an argument must therefore be critically assessed in *holistic* terms taking such pragmatic contextuality seriously.¹⁴ This is another way of saying, with Gaita, that the technically or purely intellectually "best," or sharpest, argument may sometimes undermine the conditions of sane and decent thought that argumentation as a human activity depends on. In a self-destructive way, the "best" argument may thus violate the enabling or even constitutive conditions of the holistic context it is grounded in. In other words, philosophical arguments cannot be isolated from their authors' and defenders' lives considered as totalities – their philosophical temperaments, that is. In this sense, for ethical reasons, the "best" argument (understood in the merely technical or intellectual sense) cannot, and must not, always or necessarily "win." Whether an argument is to be seriously considered at all depends on contextual factors that may determine its sanity – or insanity, as the case might be. To fail to recognize this is to be in the grip of "vicious intellectualism." As Gaita reminds us, sometimes our blindly¹⁵ following the sharpest argument may not only lead us to a kind of lunacy but even to wickedness (e.g., in the sense of radically utilitarian thought experiments à la Peter Singer).

3

This takes us back to James's notion of a philosophical temperament. In the first lecture of *Pragmatism*, James wrote as follows:

The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments. Undignified as such a treatment may seem to some of my colleagues, I shall have to take account of this clash and explain a good many of the divergencies of philosophers by it. Of whatever temperament a professional philosopher is, he tries when philosophizing to sink the fact of his temperament. Temperament is no conventionally recognized reason, so he urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions. Yet his temperament really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises. It loads the evidence for him one way or the other, making for a more sentimental or a more hard-hearted view of the universe, just as this fact or that principle would. He trusts his temperament. Wanting a universe that suits it, he believes in any representation of the universe that does suit it. He feels men of opposite temper to be out of key with the world's character, and in his heart considers them incompetent and 'not in it,' in the philosophic business, even though they may far excel him in dialectical ability.

Yet in the forum he can make no claim, on the bare ground of his temperament, to superior discernment or authority. There arises thus a certain insincerity in our philosophic discussions: the potentest of all our premises is never mentioned.¹⁶

Our chief challenge in philosophizing, then, is to avoid such insincerity – to inhabit and develop our temperaments as sincerely as possible. “Temperaments with their cravings and refusals,” James added, “do determine men in their philosophies, and always will.”¹⁷ The core of James's view here, as already emphasized, is that philosophical positions are adopted by real flesh-and-blood human

beings living in a real natural and social world. Philosophizing is not a purely theoretical activity but entangled with the needs and interests of human individuals. The doctrine of philosophical temperaments as formative forces in the history of philosophy is inseparable from James's pragmatism. It also includes the idea that philosophizing ought to be understood as a thoroughly, even radically, reflexively self-conscious – and self-critical – endeavor aiming, fundamentally, at sincerity.

Jamesian philosophical temperaments, as suggested, are at least partly our own psychological and philosophical constructions for which we should take full responsibility.¹⁸ By philosophizing we continuously paint self-portraits of ourselves as philosophizing individuals, using our philosophical “voice” in order to learn to use it better. We cannot responsibly pretend that our individual temperaments might not in some cases lead us astray; therefore, we might legitimately come to think that they have actually done so and thus find it necessary to holistically revise not only our beliefs about the world but the temperamental grounding of our arguments for those beliefs.¹⁹ A philosophical temperament can be revised whenever it produces – pragmatically – results we cannot (or can no longer) see as truly “ours.” At its best, philosophical discussion may amount to a serious and honest effort to identify and characterize the needs and aims of the temperaments grounding it. The concept of a philosophical temperament thus encourages us to continuous critical self-examination. It functions as a kind of philosophical or metaphilosophical mirror: we have to know who we are in order to be able to philosophize at all, and to enable our philosophizing to transform us.²⁰ Due to this reflexivity, the Jamesian notion of a philosophical temperament is actually a relative of the self-critique of human reason familiar from Kantian critical philosophy. The thoroughly fallible activity of entering into critical and possibly self-transforming philosophical dialogues amongst temperaments is, according to James, still a rational project, with rationality itself embedded in the pragmatic. It must also be a project taking seriously the “physiological” metaphors James used to characterize our finitude: our instinctive blindness to others' ways of finding life meaningful and our deafness to the “cries of the wounded” potentially harmed by our pursuing what we find valuable.²¹

Like Kant, James was (temperamentally) a philosopher of *human freedom*: the world is not determined but remains open to our human contribution, to our shaping reality in accordance with our purposive practices and the ends and goals they serve. The reflexive concept of a philosophical temperament also reminds us of this freedom and responsibility. We are not only urged to investigate the world around us as we find best but to critically examine our own capacities of investigation and critical reflection themselves. It is precisely in his apparently (but only apparently) reductively psychologistic account of philosophical temperaments that James is, crucially, a Kantian critical thinker.

It must be added that James is also, perhaps most importantly, a philosopher of *individual freedom*:²² the world must in some sense be responsive to our individual temperaments. We are continuously responsible for our temperaments also in the sense that it is at our (or my) own responsibility to reflect on how we expect the world to be responsive to what we say and think about it, and on how we in turn ought to respond to the possible failures of these expected responses. We are free to categorize the world as we find best, but any such categorization must be critically (holistically) tested within a context of some kind of pre-understanding of what it is possible for “us” to think, given who we are, and thereby even the temperamental basis of our categorizing activities may at any time have to be reconsidered.²³

In a vocabulary adopted from Gaita, we might say that while, from a Jamesian point of view, someone’s not sharing our philosophical temperament does not exactly entail that they are cranks, lunatics, or evil – as Gaita²⁴ claims those who “fearlessly” think the “unthinkable” to be – in a more modest sense they do, by our lights, violate the conditions upon which sound argumentation depends. They are “out of key” with “the world’s character”, as James writes, “not in it”. There is a sense in which someone not sharing my (our) philosophical temperament fails to “see the world aright” (quoting Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, 6.54).²⁵ What is not always sufficiently appreciated by interpreters (and critics) of James is, indeed, the above-emphasized view that we are – individually – responsible for our philosophical temperaments.²⁶ They are not immutable in the sense that they would psychologically determine our philosophical thinking. While James was one of the founders of

modern psychology, his psychological description of the temperamental grounding of philosophy is not psychologistic in the sense of reducing the normative philosophical level of inquiry to facts of psychology; it may rather be suggested, conversely, that his account of individual psychology is thoroughly philosophical. Psychological and philosophical analyses are intertwined, for example, in his famous distinction between the “tough-minded” and the “tender-minded” temperaments. The clash between these particular temperaments, and the related clashes between the various philosophical views associated with them, are, on James’s analysis, decisive in the history of philosophy, and he puts forward his own pragmatism as a mediating approach intended to guide us in our critical reflection on our own temperamental inclinations. This simple fact indicates his firm conviction that temperaments are not permanently fixed but can be critically renewed and developed.

4

For the Jamesian pragmatist philosopher, a certain kind of freedom to “think otherwise” – to develop one’s temperament in new directions – is always a real possibility. The scope of our genuine options *could* change, and as James himself often suggests, we may be required to transform our received ways of thinking. We are, paradoxically, “free” to think the (up to now) unthinkable and thus to existentially change who and what we are. On the other hand, we are not free to liberate ourselves from this freedom and the responsibility that goes together with it. We are not free not to be free but, as Jean-Paul Sartre insisted, doomed to freedom. As we remember from the “Will to Believe” writings, James himself maintained that we can employ the voluntaristic will to believe strategy in order to adopt a morally significant belief in freedom.²⁷ However, freedom is already *presupposed* by the will to believe strategy. There are no genuine options or ethically pregnant *weltanschaulichen* choices at all without there already being freedom to think and choose. James was thus (perhaps deliberately) inconsistent when emerging from his depression and crisis in the early 1870s and famously suggesting that his “first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.”²⁸ He took himself to be free to decide whether to believe in freedom or not, but *this* choice seems to be an

illusion. His already believing in freedom was the inescapable ground for his very ability to so believe.

I would be prepared to suggest – though I cannot develop this interpretation at any length here²⁹ – that James was a Kantian in the sense of articulating the concept of freedom analogously to Kant’s idea of freedom as a postulate of practical reason. While we cannot metaphysically speaking know, or even meaningfully speculate on, whether freedom exists in the mind- and thought-independent world, as conceived in terms of metaphysical realism, we cannot avoid employing the concept of freedom (and the related one of responsibility) whenever we seek to make sense of our human life in the human world, including our being able to discuss and argue *anything*, including anything related to freedom itself, as enabled by our philosophical temperament(s). This does not refute determinism as a metaphysical thesis about non-human nature but shows, transcendently, that from within our practices of discussion and argumentation, we cannot but conceive of ourselves as free and responsible. We are doing so by merely taking ourselves to be participants of such practices (which we must do in order to, again, argue anything regarding freedom or anything else). In this sense, freedom is *constitutive* of our humanity; to be fully within the “human world” is to be free. Those who try to think otherwise are “not in it.”

We always have and need one or another enabling – for pragmatists practice-embedded – frameworks for our thought and argument; our philosophical temperament functions like a Kuhnian paradigm in this regard, making it *possible* for us to subscribe to certain ideas or arguments while ruling out others as wrong or even unthinkable. But this does not mean that we could never change. Kuhnian normal science *can* change through a crisis.³⁰ James, on my reading, is a quasi-transcendental thinker in insisting that temperaments are historically relative and changing yet contextually constitutive conditions of what we might also call our “mindedness;”³¹ that is, necessary conditions for the possibility of our viewing the world in certain ways, or in any way at all, and thus something to which we cannot take a “sideways on” perspective but that need to be understood and critically developed from within.³²

We cannot, however, avoid the question of how exactly to *argue* for the necessity of, or the need for, a change in our philosophical

temperament. Having suggested that we are responsible for our temperaments and their possible changes, we still have failed to show how that responsibility can be really carried by any real life person. James himself maintained that pragmatism *should*, for example, mediate between the tough- and the tender-minded temperaments.³³ He never gave up the normative level of discussing temperaments, but if all discussion depends on temperaments, it is not easy to see how that level can be maintained.

This is also why we may perceive a problematic ambivalence in James's above-quoted injunction, "My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will." James is right to maintain that we can only freely embrace the view that we are free, that is, adopt it reflexively in the context of our already understanding our human existence as free. But he does suggest, more problematically, that non-freedom (viz., our being causally determined without any possibility of free choice) is thinkable by us and in some sense metaphysically possible – as if this were just a matter of what we contingently choose to believe, and as if here, as elsewhere, we could "freely" choose what to believe in the light of the possible practical consequences of our beliefs. While I am generally in agreement with many leading ideas of James's pragmatism, including the significance of philosophical temperaments and "genuine options," here we need a more robustly transcendental (albeit temperament-based) approach to freedom as a necessary condition for the possibility of human life as we know it, including the possibility of Jamesian pragmatist inquiry into the ethics of belief.³⁴

This does not mean that we would need to commit ourselves to an orthodoxly Kantian account of freedom as a postulate of practical reason, though it does require that we realize that freedom cannot be an illusion in the Kantian framework (let alone discovered to be an illusion by an allegedly non-illusory science or scientific metaphysics). The pragmatic transcendental approach may also be developed into a Wittgensteinian direction, conceptualizing freedom as a necessary condition for the possibility of any linguistic (or other) actions (including discussion or argumentation carrying any normative force) possible for us within the form of life we inhabit, or viewing the claim that as human beings we are free as a "grammatical" remark on what it means to be a human being at all – to be "one of us." Again, I end up urging, partly against James's

own temperament, that we necessarily have to include a Kantian-like transcendental element in our temperamental conception of what it is for us to (borrowing from Wittgenstein again) see the world “aright.”

This also applies to how in my view our appreciation of William James’s legacy should be developed in future scholarship. One of the implicit messages of this address has been that Jamesian pragmatism needs to be both historically and systematically developed in constructive dialogue with other philosophies, including diverging philosophical temperaments – among them the Kantian and Wittgensteinian approaches loosely invoked throughout my argument.

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NOTES

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² Wittgenstein 1998, 24.

³ On James's influence on Wittgenstein, see Goodman; Boncompagni; Pihlström 2023, chapter 9.

⁴ In one of the best recent scholarly discussions of James and philosophical temperaments, Madelrieux usefully distinguishes between three uses of "temperament" in James: romantic expressivism, scientific ethologism (emphasizing psychological constitution), and logico-ethical dispositionalism (emphasizing dispositions of mind and moral thought).

⁵ James, 1975 [1907], Lecture I.

⁶ James 1979 [1897].

⁷ In James's terms, in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, (1979 [1897], 13-15), a genuine option must

be “live,” “forced,” and “momentous.” See Pihlström 2021, chapter 4, for further discussion.

⁸ This Jamesian emphasis on human individuality and diversity can be interestingly compared to what Hannah Arendt called human “natality,” that is, the fact that we are all born as different individuals and have the capacity of spontaneously bringing something new into the world. For discussion of Jamesian pluralism and Arendt’s views, see Pihlström 2021, chapter 2. One of the best recent overall accounts of James’s individualism is in Bush. Religious pluralism can also be defended on the grounds of a Jamesian insistence of individual psychological dispositions of character underlying religious thinking (see Madelrieux, 255).

⁹ Gaita refers to ethical theorists willing to consider, at least for the sake of argument, *anything* – even, say, the possibility of murdering a person in order to save others by taking the deceased person’s organs – as a potentially morally serious issue to be discussed, e.g., in the classroom.

¹⁰ Gaita 2004 [1991], 322.

¹¹ Gaita 2004 [1991], 323.

¹² Gaita 2004 [1991], 324.

¹³ Gaita 2004 [1991], 324.

¹⁴ As I try to argue elsewhere (Pihlström 2021), I believe it is fruitful to develop Jamesian pragmatism, including the will to believe strategy, in terms of Morton White’s holistic pragmatism.

¹⁵ Recall James’s views on “a certain blindness in human beings” in *Talks to Teachers of Psychology and to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals* (1983 [1899]).

¹⁶ James, *Pragmatism* (1975 [1907]), 11.

¹⁷ James, *Pragmatism* (1975 [1907]), 24.

¹⁸ See Bush 2017, on James’s individualism and responsibility.

¹⁹ For readings of James emphasizing our responsibility for our philosophical temperaments and the idea that temperaments are subject to criticism, see Putnam 1990, 227-228; Conant 1997, 208. In Madelrieux’s (2021) terms, the idea of philosophical temperaments being open to criticism presupposes understanding them as fallible dispositions of the mind (a prevailing view, according to Madelrieux, in *Pragmatism*) rather than in terms of “romantic” expressivism or (reductionist) psychological character traits; the latter variants of the concept render criticism impossible.

²⁰ On the significance of personal transformation in James's ethical thought, see Marchetti 2015.

²¹ For these metaphors, see James, *Talks to Teachers*, and the essay, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," in James, *The Will to Believe*.

²² See again Bush 2017.

²³ This ought to be seen as directly relevant to developing pragmatist approaches in metaphysics emphasizing the categorization-relativity (and thus value-relativity) of the way(s) the world is. See Pihlström 2009.

²⁴ Gaita 2004 [1991], chapter 17.

²⁵ The concept of a philosophical temperament thus plays a role analogous not only to Gaita's distinction between the thinkable and the unthinkable but also to, say, Thomas Kuhn's notion of a paradigm in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, or the later Wittgenstein's idea of "hinges" in *On Certainty*.

²⁶ Conant 1997.

²⁷ See especially the essay, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in James, *The Will to Believe*.

²⁸ Gunnarsson 2020.

²⁹ Pihlström 2021, chapter 3.

³⁰ Kuhn, by the way, carefully read James (Reisch 2018), and the Kuhnian view on the "invisibility" of scientific revolutions, as discussed in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, as readily comparable to the Jamesian above-quoted observation that the philosopher relying on a temperament seeks to "sink" that reliance, instead of making the temperamental premises of their arguments explicit.

³¹ Lear 1998.

³² A certain combination of pragmatism and transcendental thinking is thus a feature unifying James's and Kuhn's otherwise quite different philosophical projects. They are, in my view, equally strongly, or equally weakly, transcendental pragmatists. See Pihlström 2022, chapter 2.

³³ James 1975 [1907], Lecture I.

³⁴ See again Pihlström 2021, for further discussion.