

Positivism, Cerebralism and Voluntarism in William James

Wesley Cooper

Abstract

James's positivism is different from Comte's, Clifford's, and the logical positivists'. Notably, it presupposes a difference between natural-scientific inquiries and the metaphysical inquiry he calls radical empiricism. Equally importantly, the positivism of James's great book, *The Principles of Psychology*, studies the cerebral conditions of the will. This cerebralism is necessary background for understanding James's voluntarism, the will-to-believe doctrine that came later. James's positivism goes hand-in-hand with his value pluralism; they are responsible for different domains of inquiry, natural-scientific and ethical, respectively. It is a mistake to impose a "master moral syllogism" onto the former, implying that all facts are constituted by the will as guided by a utilitarian moral principle. Cerebral shaping of the will occurs not only through the "front door" of experience, especially in the formation of habit, but also through the "back stairs" of mutation and natural selection, which creates brains suited to different pursuits. The brain is no *tabula rasa*.

Preliminary Distinctions

William James declared his "strictly positivistic point of view" in the Preface to *The Principles of Psychology*:

I have therefore treated our passing thoughts as integers, [p. vii] and regarded the mere laws of their coexistence with brain-states as the ultimate laws for our science. The reader will in vain seek for any closed system in the book. It is mainly a mess of descriptive details, running out into queries which only a metaphysics alive to the weight of her task can hope successfully to deal with. That will perhaps be centuries hence; and meanwhile the best mark of health that a science can show is this unfinished-seeming front. (James 1981b)

In the same place he distinguishes various different *contexts of inquiry* including the various natural sciences and, at a more general level, the context of natural-scientific inquiry as opposed to metaphysics:

I have kept close to the point of view of natural science throughout the book. Every natural science assumes certain [p. vi] data uncritically, and declines to challenge the elements between which its own 'laws' obtain, and from which its own deductions are carried on....This book, assuming that thoughts and feelings exist and are vehicles of knowledge, thereupon contends that psychology when she has ascertained the empirical correlation of the various sorts of thought or feeling with definite conditions of the brain, can go no farther — can go no farther, that is, as a natural science. If she goes farther she becomes metaphysical. (James 1981*b*)

James might also have said, as he said later in the *Principles*, that if she goes further she may become ethical. At the end of the chapter “Attention” he observes that there are “no facts definitely known to stand as arbiter between” the mechanical conception of the will and a conception of the will as a spiritual force.

Under these circumstances, one can leave the question open whilst waiting for light, or one can do what most speculative minds do, that is, look to one's general philosophy to incline the beam. The believers in mechanism do so without hesitation, and they ought not to refuse a similar privilege to the believers in a spiritual force. I count myself among the latter, but as my reasons are ethical they are hardly suited for introduction into a psychological work. (James 1981*b*, 429)

This division of labour between psychology and ethics is starkly at odds with Richard Gale's “master syllogism” interpretation of James, which globalizes the activity of the will, constrained only by a unitary conception of value, the “preference–satisfaction utilitarianism” that Gale detects in James's later essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”. More plausibly, James was a value pluralist who always honoured the division of labour between the natural sciences and moral philosophy.

Two points can be extracted from these basic commitments. First, James's positivism must be separated out from a variety of "positivisms" hovering in the Zeitgeist of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

1. Auguste Comte's historicist positivism, in which history discloses progress from a theological stage of mythical explanations, to a metaphysical stage of explanation by reference to obscure forces postulated by abstract philosophy, and finally a "positive" stage at which scientific explanation reigns.

2. Victorian positivism such as Clifford's, which insists that belief should be a strict function of the evidence, forbidding the "over-beliefs" that figure prominently in James's philosophy of religion, as well as the tie-breaking role for life-enhancing beliefs when the state of science is indifferent between such beliefs and hypotheses that lack this feature.

3. William James' instrumentalist positivism, which recommends pursuit of psychophysical correlation laws in psychology, in order that it might achieve predictive and practical value. "The kind of psychology which could cure a case of melancholy, or charm a chronic insane delusion away," as opposed to one that promises "the most seraphic insight into the nature of the soul" (James 1983, 277). This instrumentalism about the natural sciences goes hand-in-hand with James's non-instrumentalism or realism about his radical-empiricist metaphysics, the world of pure experience.

4. The Vienna Circle's logical positivism, a marriage of logic as descended from Frege, Russell, etc., and empiricism as descended from Hume, Mach, etc. The marriage is characterized by a Verification Principle that distinguishes scientific sense from nonsense — in particular, from metaphysics.

These differences must be kept in mind in order to avoid such false dilemmas as David Hollinger's, that James was either a positivist or a precursor to postmodernism. (Hollinger 1997, 69, 81). Hollinger writes that "However diverse our opinions of William James today, we generally agree that the great pragmatist was right about one thing: the pretensions of the Victorian "positivists," opposing them "as a founder of truly 'modernist' or even 'postmodernist' thought" (Hollinger 1997, 69).

The second point to be drawn from the Preface is that evidence for beliefs is context-specific rather than context-neutral. Each natural science has its postulates or unchallenged assumptions, for instance, defining distinct contexts of inquiry.

Context-specific evidence: What counts as evidence for a hypothesis depends on the context of belief that the hypothesis addresses. Evidence is not generic but rather specific to the assumptions or postulates of particular contexts of inquiry.

Context-neutral evidence: What counts as evidence is context free: hypotheses are generic empirical hypotheses for which generic empirical evidence is relevant.

Hollinger advocates a context-neutral reading of James: empirical evidence was what decided the merits of religion in the long run, “and it was up to people who believed in religion to go out and get that evidence, thereby putting their cherished ideas at empirical risk” (Hollinger 1997, 81). He takes this as reason to reject the “spheres of belief” reading of James, or what is being called here the context-specific conception of evidence. However, the evidence for belief in God (quality of life considerations) is of a very different *kind* from the evidence that there are butterflies in the backyard (observation reports), the former having to do with whether a faith venture does indeed enhance life, the latter with seeing butterflies. Hollinger appreciates that “the various over-beliefs of men, their several faith ventures,” (James 1981*a*, 144) are needed to bring the evidence in, but he doesn’t appreciate the context-specificity of evidence that is central to James’s positivism.

Another distinction is needed to get James’s voluntarism in focus. If there is a role for the will in formation of belief, what is the character of the mind/brain on which the will is to have its influence?

- The will may act on a blank-slate brain, a constant from individual to individual, from culture to culture, etc.
- The will may act on a structured brain that is predisposed to this or that pattern of beliefs by its phylogenetic and ontogenetic etiology, a variable from individual to individual via evolutionary spontaneity, from culture to culture via habit formation, etc.

This pair corresponds to two different approaches to interpreting James's 1897 essay "The Will to Believe." The latter, the structured-brain conception, stresses the unity of James's thought and orients his voluntarism towards brain science, emphasizing cerebral constraints on voluntarism implied by discussion of brain and habit in the 1892 *magnum opus*, *The Principles of Psychology*. The former, the blank-slate conception, sees James's thought as disconnected and orients his voluntarism towards prudential or ethical reasons willing belief in this direction or that, such as the prudential idea that it is rational to accept any belief that promises significant benefits to the believer even if the belief is known to be false, (Nathanson 1985) or the ethical idea that James was a utilitarian whose "master syllogism" required believing whatever maximizes desire satisfaction. (Gale 1999). (See Jackman (1999) for a critique of the prudential idea, which he calls crude pragmatism, and Cooper (2002) for critique of the ethical idea, which overlooks the value pluralism that is present in the crucial essay, "The moral philosopher and the moral life.")

James's value pluralism is expressed in the following passage by the phrase "the more imperative ideals". There is not a *single* ideal that the strenuous mood harkens to:

When, however, we believe that a God is there, and that he is one of the claimants, the infinite perspective opens out. The scale of the symphony is incalculably prolonged. The more imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new objectivity and significance, and to utter the infinitely penetrating, shattering, tragically challenging note of appeal. They ring out like the call of Victor Hugo's Alpine eagle, "qui parle au précipice et que le gouffre entend," and the strenuous mood awakens at the sound. It saith among the trumpets, ha, ha! It smelleth the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains and the

shouting. Its blood is up; and cruelty to the lesser claims, so far from a deterrent element, does but add to the stern joy with which it leaps to answer to the greater. All through history, in the periodical conflicts of puritanism with the don't-care temper, we see the antagonism of the strenuous and genial moods, and the contrast between the ethics of infinite and mysterious obligation from on high, and those of prudence and the satisfaction of merely finite need. (James 1891, 352)

James acknowledges the possibility of “a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands,” whose way of subordinating demands to each other would be the finally valid casuist scale. But his way is “hidden from us even were we sure of his existence,” so James’s religion of humanity preaches the need for the various imperative ideals to adjust themselves to each other with what wisdom we can muster in the long course of the history of the race. (James 1891, 353) This is why he begins his essay by writing, “The main purpose of this paper is to show that there is no such thing possible as an ethical philosophy dogmatically made up in advance. We all help to determine the content of ethical philosophy so far as we contribute to the race’s moral life.” (James 1891, 330) In particular, a principle of desire-satisfaction utilitarianism cannot spare us the challenge of moral life, which puts “our character and total personal genius on trial; and if we invoke any so-called philosophy, our choice and use of that are but revelations of our individual aptitude or incapacity for moral life.” (James 1891, 354) We must muddle through with the strenuous spirit harking to the more imperative ideals, which ring out like the call of Victor Hugo’s Alpine eagle. The need for this muddling is why James concludes his essay with these stirring words: “The solving word for the learned and the unlearned man alike lies, in the last resort, in the dumb willingnesses and unwillingnesses of their interiors, and nowhere else. It is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea. But the word is very

nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart that thou mayest do it.” (James 1891, 354)

A puzzle about cerebralism and voluntarism

In the first chapter of the *Principles*, “The Scope of Psychology,” James argues that the soul and its faculties, the bread and butter of *spiritualist* psychology, are parasitic on brain science for any explanatory power they may have. Similarly, an *associationist* psychology that replaces souls and faculties by recombinant ideas is shallow without brain science to explain “the effects of fever, exhaustion, hypnotism, old age, and the like” on mental life. (James 1981*b*, 17) He writes,

The spiritualist and the associationist must both be ‘cerebralists’ to the extent at least of admitting that certain peculiarities in the way of working of their own favorite principles are explicable only by the fact that the brain laws are a codeterminant of the result. (James 1981*b*, 18)

The chapter that follows, “The Functions of the Brain,” sharpens his cerebralism by arguing that the higher brain is different in different human beings, in such a way as to affect the beliefs or ‘considerations’ they act on. This occurs before the chapter on habit, so the cerebral influence should be understood, not as caused by the influence of habituation in the course of experience, but rather as due to brain facts caused by evolutionary and developmental processes, phylogeny and ontogeny.

Within the psychic life due to the cerebrum itself the same general distinction obtains, between considerations of the more immediate and considerations of the more remote.... The tramp who lives from hour to hour; the bohemian whose engagements are from day to day; the bachelor who builds but for a single life; the father who acts for

another generation; the patriot who thinks of a whole community and many generations; and, finally, the philosopher and saint whose cares are for humanity and for eternity,— these range themselves in an unbroken hierarchy, wherein each successive grade results from an increased manifestation of the special form of action by which the cerebral centres are distinguished from all below them. (James 1981*b*, 35)

The next chapter, “Habit,” presses even further this cerebral shaping of considerations, in this case by reference to the acquisition of habits.

Habit is thus the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent. It alone is what keeps us all within the bounds of ordinance, and saves the children of fortune from the envious uprisings of the poor. It alone prevents the hardest and most repulsive walks of life from being deserted by those brought up to tread therein.... It dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again. It keeps different social strata from mixing. Already at the age of twenty-five you see the professional mannerism settling down on the young commercial traveller, on the young doctor, on the young minister, on the young counsellor-at-law. You see the little lines of cleavage running through the character, the tricks of thought, the prejudices, the ways of the ‘shop,’ in a word, from which the man can by-and-large by no more escape than his coat-sleeve can suddenly fall into a new set of folds. On the whole, it is best he should not escape. It is well for the world that in most of us, by the age of thirty, the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again. (James 1981*b*, 125)

This sampling of the cerebralism of the *Principles* is enough to pose a problem for understanding the voluntarism of James’s well-known doctrine of the will to believe.

Written only five years after the *Principles*, his essay “The Will to Believe” *makes no mention* of the cerebral structuring of considerations that produces a bohemian or a patriot, a doctor or a minister. It mentions only the structuring that is due to *authority*, by which he means the intellectual climate. The brain does not belong to a person’s intellectual climate, but rather to the person. So the puzzle is: How to integrate

James's cerebralism with the voluntarism of his will-to-believe doctrine. Is that doctrine constrained only by 'authority', or is it constrained too by facts about the brain? An overview of the essay will be followed by an attempt to solve the puzzle.

Overview of James's Essay "The Will to Believe"

James announces in the opening paragraph of "The Will to Believe" that his aim is "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." (James 1979, 13) The exercise of this right is what he calls *voluntarily adopted faith*. A candidate for belief is a *hypothesis*, which can be *live* or *dead*, the former if the prospective believer considers it a real possibility. A decision between two hypotheses is an *option*. Options may be living or dead, but they may also be *forced* or *avoidable*, and *momentous* or *trivial*. An option is *genuine* when it is living, forced, and momentous. He takes it as evident that there must be some pre-existing tendency to believe a hypothesis if it is to be a living option.

"It is evident," James writes, "that unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered to the will by Pascal is not a living option." The general point applies just as forcefully to evidentialist critics such as Clifford, showing how their own preference for adhering to an atheistic, materialist worldview is rooted in their desires and will. "As a rule," according to James, "we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use." (James 1979, 19) Everyone's beliefs are affected by the passions, then, and consequently by their

origins in cerebral facts, so if this is James's pragmatism at work, it is not a crude form of pragmatism that simply sanctions adding prudential considerations to epistemic values when we reason: "While crude pragmatism introduces prudential considerations as an alternative to epistemic ones," Henry Jackman writes, "[James's] more sophisticated type of pragmatism allows prudential considerations to shape the epistemic norms themselves." (Jackman 1999, 18) There is a connection between epistemic justification and the passions, but it is the role of the passions in the brain's belief-forming processes, the role reserved for the higher brain in grounding our emotional and instinctive lives, and not the utility of actual beliefs that is important. This role is what Ellen Kappy Suckiel is concerned with when she attends to the link between passional beliefs in James's sense and an individual's serious commitments. (Suckiel 1982, 87) This link will become important when interpreting the relevance of James's chapter "The Functions of the Brain" in the *Principles* to an individual's higher aesthetic, moral, and intellectual life.

That there are pre-existing tendencies to belief is not a reason to follow Clifford in holding that belief should be a strict function of the available evidence, but rather a reason to acknowledge that a voluntarily adopted hypothesis cannot be dead. James adds that dead hypotheses "for the most part" are rendered thus by our "willing nature." (James 1979, 18) This latter phrase denotes not only "such deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from," but also "such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set." (James 1979, 18) He accepts

the term *authority* to encompass “all those influences, born of the intellectual climate, that make hypotheses possible or impossible for us, alive or dead.” (James 1979, 18) Hypotheses that are authoritatively dead are “as a rule” those for which we have “no use,” an aspect of our “non-intellectual nature” that, though “far from simple,” is not simply a matter of “pure insight and logic.” (James 1979, 20) He is led to announce his thesis:

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; for to say, under such circumstances, “Do not decide, but leave the question open,” is itself a passional decision, — just like deciding yes or no, — and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (James 1979, 20)

That no hypothesis is “indefectibly certain,” except that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists, is the *empiricist* position, as opposed to the *absolutist* view and the claim to objective certitude. He endorses empiricism and the associated idea that there is no “concrete test” for truth, denying the doctrine of objective certitude although pursuing truth with the expectation of corrigibility. (James 1979, 22)

Belief formation is subject to two different duties, *we must know the truth* and *we must avoid error*. He accepts both duties as expressions of our passional nature, but blames evidentialists like Clifford for over-emphasizing the latter step of passion, the duty to shun error. He recommends instead on behalf of the empiricist philosopher, that “[O]ur errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness on their behalf.” (James 1979, 25) However,

he acknowledges that in scientific questions, governed as science is by its method of verification, it is “almost always the case” that the option is not momentous, so shunning error is the advisable posture. (James 1979, 27) “[A]nd even in human affairs in general,” he allows, “the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all.” (James 1979, 27) But moral questions are different, because they are not about what “sensibly exists” but about what is good, and we are led to answer them by the heart rather than the intellect: “If your heart does not *want* a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one.” (James 1979, 28) Questions about personal relations, such as *Do you like me or not?* , are another such domain, where “[t]he desire for a certain kind of truth...brings about the special truth’s existence,” where the desire “creates its own verification,” where “faith in a fact can help create the fact.” (James 1979, 28) Then there are questions about “great cosmical matters” such as the question of religious faith. Science says things are; morality says some things are better than other things; and religion says “the best things are the more eternal things” and we are better off even now if we believe so. (James 1979, 29) If the religious hypothesis is a live option, then it is a momentous one, and forced. In this kind of case the advantage of being on the “winning side” outweighs the principle *Better risk loss of truth than chance of error*. (James 1979, 30) This is an irrational rule to apply to such questions, for it would “absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there.” (James 1979, 30) James emphasizes that his argument here rests on the assumption that the religious hypothesis is a live option for the person who entertains the argument. The scope of James’s will-to-believe doctrine

goes beyond religious belief. He mentions personal and moral contexts in which it is relevant, and what follows will put colour on that expanded scope, refuting Russell's estimate that James's doctrine is simply "a specious but sophistical defence of certain religious dogmas". (Russell 1945, 814)

The Puzzle Solved

a non-solution dismissed

One short way with the puzzle integrates it with the cerebralism of the *Principles* by acknowledging the two tracks that that book follows, the physical track featuring the brain's contribution to mental life, and the mental track featuring the stream of thought. It studies the mind 'from without' by reference to brain science, and 'from within' by reference to introspective awareness of the stream of thought. Then the "Will to Believe" essay is about belief as something in the stream of thought, particularly about the conditions under which one is justified in exercising the right to believe. The cerebral track is simply irrelevant, or at most taken for granted. Beyond the truism that the mental is dependent on the physical, there is nothing more to say about the will to believe at the cerebral level.

The chapter "Habit" in the *Principles*, and its contribution to the solution

That this way is too short is proven by reflection that the theory of habit in *Principles* explains how the intellectual climate constrains the will to believe. This climate shapes habits that shape belief: it affects the educational system, which affects what we believe about molecules, etc. More generally, as James writes,

Here in this room, we all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for the doctrine of the immortal Monroe, all for no reasons worthy of the name. We see into these matters with no more inner clearness, and probably with much less, than any disbeliever in them might possess. (James 1979, 18)

The original puzzle depends on a duality of organism (including brain), on one hand, and the intellectual climate, on the other hand. A partial solution notes that the climate influences brain by inculcating habits, and so the duality is false. The mechanism of climate's influence on the individual is given by the cerebralist theory of habit, whereby, as James approvingly quotes Dr. Carpenter in the *Principles*, "our nervous system grows to the modes in which it has been exercised." (James 1981*b*, 117) In this case it is exercised under the guidance of intellectual climate, producing a believer in the Monroe doctrine, etc.

But the puzzle isn't entirely solved, since the solution so far presumes that the brain, apart from its acquisition of habits, is a *tabula rasa* in respect of its constraining the will to believe. James certainly rejected the theory that the brain was in general a blank tablet, emphatically rejecting the then-favoured Meynert scheme of the brain on this particular among others. (James draws on the writings of the Austrian anatomist Theodor Meynert to present the way Modern Science conceives of the relationship between mind and brain. It holds that brain and mind alike consist of simple elements, according to James, who proposes that on the mental side there is no such granular "mind dust" but rather a continuous stream of thought, which is correlated not with simple elements of the brain but rather with states of the brain as a whole.)

The plain truth is that neither in man nor beast are the hemispheres the virgin organs which our scheme called them. So far from being unorganized at birth, they must have native tendencies to reaction of a determinate sort. These are the tendencies which we know as emotions and instincts. (James 1981*b*, 83)

The final chapter of the *Principles*, “Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience,” and its importance to the puzzle’s solution

More specifically, some nativism about belief formation is implied by the passage from the *Principles* about tramp, bohemian, bachelor, father, patriot, philosopher and saint. Cerebral influences due to phylogeny and ontogeny, or what James calls *psychogenesis*, constitute what for him is the “back stairs” (or sometimes the “back door”) to our mental life, in contrast to the “front door” provided by experience and experience-driven processes like habituation. This is where James locates the influence of necessary truths, as he writes in the final chapter of the *Principles*, “Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience,” where he defines his own view of such truths by triangulation with the views of “apriorists” and “evolutionary empiricists,” agreeing with the apriorists that “taking the word experience as it is universally understood, the experience of the race can no more account for our necessary or *a priori* judgments than the experience of the individual can,” and siding furthermore with the apriorists in denying that our instinctive reactions are fruits of our ancestors’ education in the midst of the same environment, transmitted to us at birth.” (James 1981*b*, 1216) However, he parts ways with the apriorists’ view that necessary truths have a “transcendental origin,” contending rather for “a naturalistic view of their *cause*.” (James 1981*b*, 1215-6) More specifically, he favours the view that the relevant features of our “organic mental structure” must rather “be understood

as congenital variations, 'accidental' in the first instance, but then transmitted as fixed features of the race." (James 1981*b*, 1216)

James distinguishes between direct and indirect ways in which an animal can become adapted to its environment by modification of brain structures. "The direct influences are the animal's experiences, in the widest sense of the term," he writes. (James 1981*b*, 1224) When such influences affect the "mental organism," in his phrase, "they are conscious experiences, and become the objects as well as the causes of their effects." (James 1981*b*, 1224) Indirect influences on the other hand are causal factors influencing behaviour without becoming experiences that conceptualize the behaviour as a mental object. They are "causes of which we are not immediately conscious as such, and which are not the direct objects of the effects they produce." (James 1981*b*, 1224) So necessary truths like those of arithmetic are causes of arithmetical thought and behaviour, but they are not the "direct objects" of experience, as they would be if arithmetical truths were high-level empirical generalizations, as in John Stuart Mill's view.

James's account of a necessary truth's "transmission to the race" emphasizes individual spontaneity in evolution and cultural development. The trail of the human serpent is not a monolithic path, but rather an aggregation of different paths, giving rise to different predispositions of the bohemian, the bachelor, etc. James's regard for variety between individuals freed him from a kind of species determinism, where a shared physiology leads to a common psychology. He appealed to the interplay of

individual variation and the selective forces of the group to build a model of human thought evolving over time. But it is not a simple case of logical habits and scientific concepts entering the mind through the front door of experience. The sources of our modes of thought are fundamentally back-stairs phenomena. The use of Darwin to counter the environmental determinism of those James called evolutionary empiricists makes his work stand out from his contemporaries both for his refusal to oversimplify the theory and his boldness in employing it for purposes supporting individuality.

This many-paths account is how James appropriates Darwinian evolutionary doctrine, specifically the influence of mutation (“accidental” variations) on natural selection. Such back-stairs influence extends beyond necessary truths to the basic tendencies of one’s instinctive and emotional life, and particularly to the tendencies that predispose to their different ways of life the types of people James refers to in “The Functions of the Brain”: bohemian, bachelor, patriot, philosopher, saint. James makes the point more broadly in “Necessary Truths and the Effects of Experience.”

Our higher aesthetic, moral, and intellectual life seems made up of affections of [a] collateral and incidental sort, which have entered the mind by the back stairs, as it were, or rather have not entered the mind at all, but got surreptitiously born in the house.... The way of experience proper is the front door, the door of the five senses.... It would be simply silly to say of two men with perhaps equal effective skill in drawing, one an untaught natural genius, the other a mere obstinate plodder in the studio, that both alike owe their skill to their ‘experience.’ The reasons of their several skills lie in wholly disparate natural cycles of causation. (James 1981*b*, 1225)

James's humanistic principle, and its relevance

The points that James is making in the *Principles* under the rubric of “the back stairs” are an early expression of what he later called his humanistic principle, as in this passage from *Pragmatism*:

You can't weed out the human contribution. Our nouns and adjectives are all humanized heirlooms, and in the theories we build them into, the inner order and arrangement is wholly dictated by human considerations, intellectual consistency being one of them. Mathematics and logic themselves are fermenting with human rearrangements; physics, astronomy and biology follow massive cues of preference. We plunge forward into the field of fresh experience with the beliefs our ancestors and we have made already; these determine what we notice; what we notice determines what we do; what we do again determines what we experience; so from one thing to another, altho the stubborn fact remains that there is a sensible flux, what is true of it seems from first to last to be largely a matter of our own creation. (James 1981a, 114-5)

The particular aspect of the humanistic principle that James called the will to believe is also an expression of back-stairs phenomena. Our “willing nature” is conditioned not only by culture but also by what James called “psychogenesis,” or the factors of mental evolution. These factors must be understood to belong to the *authority* that James refers to in the “Monroe doctrine” passage quoted earlier, on pain of a deep inconsistency in James's oeuvre. The intellectual climate then must be understood to include what we bring to it, in virtue of our psychogenetic inheritances, or what “got surreptitiously born in the house.” (James 1979, 18) This is to reject the reading that James meant authority to exclude back-stairs influence. Such reading would imply that James changed his mind about the cerebralism of the *Principles* and the impact of psychogenesis on mental life. It implies that our willing nature expresses itself by a

cerebral mechanism that can be treated as a *tabula rasa* when considering how the influence of authority makes hypotheses possible or impossible for us, alive or dead. Adding to the interpretive burden, James's theory of habit is still in place even if the mind is viewed as a blank tablet at birth, and that introduces a constraining background for the exercise of free will that only the structured-brain interpretation does justice to. That theory purports to require only an indeterministic free choice and a moral principle of desire-satisfaction utilitarianism. It ignores the cerebralist background, including habit formation as well as inherited brain architecture.

Support for the proposed solution in "Great Men and Their Environment"

The persistence of innovative thoughts beyond an individual's momentary awareness is largely determined in a cultural setting. In the essay "Great Men and Their Environment" James argues for the crucial role of individuals in cultural evolution. He cites a scientific revolutionary's conceiving a new law. This is "a spontaneous variation in the strictest sense of the term. It flashes out of one brain, and no other, because the instability of that brain is such as to tip and upset itself in just that particular direction." (James 1979, 185) James goes on to note that good flashes and bad ones have the same origin. It is the cultural environment that selects, preserves one over the other.

[T]o the thought, when it is once engendered, the consecration of agreement with outward relations may come.... The scientific hypothesis arouses in me a fever of desire for verification. I read, I write, experiment, consult experts. Everything corroborates my notion, which being then published in a book spreads from review to review and from mouth to mouth....The environment preserves the

conception which it was unable to produce in any brain less idiosyncratic than my own. (James 1979, 186)

So the authority of the intellectual climate is not exclusive of back-stairs influence, such as the effect of James's idiosyncratic brain on his readers, even though its effect is enhanced or inhibited by cultural selection. The following passage from "Great Men" underscores this point about brain-to-environment causation:

[T]he spontaneous upsettings of brains this way and that at particular moments into particular ideas and combinations are matched by their equally spontaneous permanent tiltings or saggings toward determinate directions.... [T]he personal tone of each mind, which makes it more alive to certain classes of experience than others, more attentive to certain impressions, more open to certain reasons, is equally the result of that invisible and unimaginable play of the forces of growth within the nervous system which, irresponsibly to the environment, makes the brain peculiarly apt to function in a certain way. (James 1979, 186-7)

It was the interplay of 'accidental variation' in individuals and the selective forces within a group and environment that gave Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection its great appeal for James. This is what justifies Wiener's assertion, "That Neither physical nor biological science sealed man's fate or destined him to passive resignation in a closed universe was one of the chief moral and metaphysical conclusions of James's great psychological work." (Wiener 1965, p. 99)

Darwinian ideas are present in many different discussions in *Principles*, where the notion of selection plays a prominent role in explaining how various psychological systems function. As Philip Wiener suggested in his detailed examination of James's Darwinism in the *Principles*:

What James as a metaphysician finally retained of evolution, namely, the ideas of temporalism and spontaneous variation, served him persistently in his defense of the primary importance of individual experience and personal freedom. That is the Ariadne's thread to James's philosophy of evolution. The elusive but genuine character of individual spontaneity in both the external world and in man is in James's view of evolution epitomized by "saltatory" mutations, original, spontaneous, irreducible phases of experience. (Wiener 1965, 101)

The idea that individuals contain traits not found in their ancestors allowed James to reject the environmental determinism of his day. James found other uses for Darwinism, as many writers have noted. He defended the adaptive role played by consciousness against epiphenomenalism, argued for the selective function of attention (where competing instincts and perceptions are selected according to an inner environment of needs and desires), and of course pragmatism can be considered a form of evolutionary epistemology. As indicated earlier, James applies Darwinian thinking at several levels, distinguishes between mental selection, cultural selection and the more familiar biological selection, and then goes on to portray these processes as interrelated with the products of one level serving as environmental constraints for another. In short, James's thinking across his oeuvre evinces a theory of modes of mental organization whose causes are native to the brain, and the relevance of his cerebralism to his voluntarism is a case in point.

A concluding puzzle, and its solution

One might ask, as the extent of constraint on the will to believe is increasingly exposed as being determined by cultural and psychogenetic selection and interplay

between them, whether there is any scope left for exercise of our willing nature. Two points should assuage this concern. First, the culturally and genetically defined live options for belief foreclose no options within this large category for the individual's willing nature. Scope is preserved in particular for the religious hypothesis that James addresses directly in "The Will to Believe," as well as for other manifestations of the voluntarism he defends, such as willing to believe that one can jump over a chasm, inducing a raised ability to do so. Second, the live options are liable to be reshaped by "flashes out of the brain" of the revolutionary scientist and others whose cerebral idiosyncrasies challenge the status quo.

The first point is important because it addresses a bogus motivation for the blank-tablet interpretation of the brain's relationship to the will. Referring to James's essay "The Will to Believe," Gale declares "a curious anomaly in James's text that has escaped all of his commentators." (Gale 1999, 68) He begins by quoting the following passage from the essay, in which, as Gale phrases it, "James raises the objection that we cannot believe at will." (Gale 1999, 68)

Does it not seem preposterous on the very face of it to talk of our opinions being modifiable at will? Can our will either help or hinder our intellect in its perceptions of truth? Can we, by just willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth, and that the portraits of him in *McClure's Magazine* are all of someone else? ... We can *say* any of these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them. (James 1979, 15-6)

Gale characterizes James's response as the assertion that all of our beliefs are "passionally or emotionally caused," quoting James:

Our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions. There are passional tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief, and it is only the latter that are too late for the fair; and they are not too late when the previous passional work has been already in their own direction. (James 1979, 19-20)

Gale turns to the alleged anomaly, remarkably putting his version of the blank-tablet theory at odds with the classical statement of the doctrine that it purports to present: “This is a disastrous response that leads right into the creating-discovering aporia. We are supposed to be able to create some of our beliefs by making the effort to attend, but now we are told that the cause of all beliefs is passional, and since we cannot control our passions at will neither can we control at will our beliefs. This makes us into passive registerers or discoverers of our beliefs.” (Gale 1999, 68)

But before James’s essay is declared a disaster zone, consider that the passage about Lincoln is preceded by the following: “When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions. When we look at others, it seems as if they could do nothing when the intellect had once said its say. Let us take the latter facts up first.” James does indeed say about this dead-options category that its beliefs are expressions of our passional nature, but he also *contrasts* it with the live-options category, where our passional and volitional nature is more evidently at the root. *And the cases in this live-options category are precisely those that express the will to believe.* The cases in the other category narrow the scope of live options for the will to believe, as the structured-brain interpretation has it, but

they do not eliminate it. Although all of our beliefs are passionate, contrary to the appearance of the second category (such as scientific beliefs), some of our beliefs, those in the first category, are the proper exercise of our will to believe (such as religious beliefs). Also to be kept in mind is that the contents of the two categories are not static. They are liable to change from cultural shifts and the influence, as James puts it, of “idiosyncratic brains.”

Gale continues: “Why, for heaven’s sake, did James not avail himself of his earlier causal recipe for indirectly inducing belief by acting as if we believe?” (Gale 1999, 68) Jackman’s distinction between crude pragmatism and James’s more sophisticated pragmatism affords a reply. James’s voluntarism is meant to contribute to a pragmatic account of epistemic norms. It would be trivial if it merely insisted on the possibility of indirectly inducing belief that Lincoln never existed; one could do this in principle by inducing the belief with electrodes implanted in the brain. The more sophisticated pragmatism is about insisting on the right to believe as contributing to an account of epistemic virtue, one that departs from W.K. Clifford’s ethics of belief, according to which virtuous belief must always be strictly proportional to evidence. This is not to say that indirectly inducing belief will never be justified. Rather, it may be justified when it conforms to epistemic norms. Specifically, it will be justified only when it occurs within a domain of live options appropriately conditioned by cerebral and cultural background. Providing a theory of this background is just as much a feature of pragmatism about epistemic virtue as is the doctrine of the will to believe. Indeed, they are inseparable.¹

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NOTE

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Wesley Cooper teaches Philosophy at the University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

E-mail: 123drc@gmail.com