

Was William James an Evidentialist?

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Most writers on the ethics of belief adopt some version of evidentialism, roughly the view that one should limit one's beliefs to the evidence one has for their truth.¹ William James, particularly in his paper "The Will to Believe", has traditionally been seen as a critic of evidentialism, with his claim 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"² being understood as saying that in certain cases we have the right to believe beyond what is certified by the evidence.

However, there is an alternate, "expansive", reading of James that portrays him not as criticizing evidentialism itself, but only as trying to expand our conception what we should count as evidence. So, for instance, Scott Aikin and Robert Talisse argue that the kind of cases James supports his view with are "not exceptions to evidentialism (but rather involve a pragmatist expansion of the concept of evidence)",³ and in her *The American Pragmatists*, Cheryl Misak argues:

what James was trying to do was not to refute evidentialism but, rather, to expand the concept of what can count as evidence for the truth of a belief... one of the ways in which James wants to expand the concept of evidence is to include as evidence the satisfaction of the believer. (Misak 2013, p. 63.)

While this "expansive" reading James has become increasingly prominent, the *prima facie* case against it obvious. If James had wanted to expand the concept of evidence, he could have said so, and while he often speaks of beliefs legitimately going beyond the "literal", "scientific" or "objective" evidence,⁴ he never goes on to say that they manage to do so based upon "non-literal", "non-scientific" or "non-objective" evidence. Indeed, he never describes the passional contributions to belief as "evidence", and Misak's suggestion that James "wants to broaden the scope of "intellectual grounds" so that they include the passional"⁵ sits ill with his canonical statement above which states that the passional contribution is licit *precisely* in cases which cannot by their nature "be decided on intellectual grounds".

¹ For a general discussion of evidentialism, see Chignell 2018.

² James 1897, p. 20.

³ Aikin and Talisse 2018, p.63. (See also Aikin 2014, p. 84.)

⁴ As Misak notes (2013, p. 67).

⁵ Misak 2013, p. 65.

So what would motivate the expansive reading? I'll be focusing on two strategies here. The first, 'internal' approach relies on showing that the logic of James's argument itself relies on highlighting a new type of evidence rather than rather than undermining the need for our beliefs to be grounded in evidence, while the 'external' approach appeals to aspects of James's biography to show that he always intended something closer to the expansive reading.

1. The 'Internal' Argument: Doxastically Efficacious Beliefs

The 'internal' argument for the expansive reading of James has two steps. The first is to argue that James's criticisms of evidentialism are limited to "doxastically efficacious" cases, that is, cases where believing that *P* can contribute the ultimate truth of *P*.⁶ (The most famous instance of this being his "mountain climber", whose confidence in his ability to make the leap contributes to his success in doing so.). The second step is to argue that in such cases, our awareness of this efficacy allows us to count our belief that *P* as *evidence* for its truth. Aikin and Talisse present a clear case of this strategy:

As Richard Gale terms it, the subject makes a "knowing self-induction" (1980). However, notice something important about this case. Assuming that the subject is right about the doxastic efficacy of her belief, she also has a reason counting in favor of *p*'s truth. In this case, it is the believer's own mental state that will by hypothesis make *p* more likely. Her belief, then, is evidence that *p*. (Aikin & Talisse 2018, p. 66).

Sometimes, beliefs are doxastically efficacious, and when they are, having the belief and being aware of their efficacy is itself evidence for the belief's truth. (Aikin & Talisse 2018, p. 67)

However, there are problems with both parts of this strategy. First of all, while James was always fascinated by cases in which "*faith in a fact can help create the fact*",⁷ his statement of his views in "The Will to Believe" never brings this factor in as something that should be required *in addition* to the question's representing an evidentially undetermined genuine option. Doxastically efficacious cases may be ones in which James takes passional belief to be justified as well, but its much more plausible to think that the cases he views the contribution of our passional nature to be justified to be a *union* (rather than an *intersection*) of these two sets of cases.⁸ After all, given that "James's endgame for "The Will to Believe" is a justification of religious faith,"⁹ if his view really

⁶ Aikin 2014, p. 84, Aikin & Talisse pp. 63, 64, 72, 75. (See also Gale 1999, pp. 113-114.)

⁷ James 1897, p. 29.

⁸ See Jackman 1999.

⁹ Aikin & Talisse 2018, p. 73.

were that we were only entitled to believe in God if God's existence depended upon our believing in him, then his views would provide *very* cold comfort to the would-be religious believer.¹⁰

This brings us to the second part of the internal argument, the assumption that the relevant beliefs are, for James, "reflective", that is, the relevant believers are consciously aware of the effect that their believing has on the truth of those beliefs. It is, admittedly, tempting to understand "doxastically efficacious" cases like this, and many presentations of James's mountain climber describe him in just this way.¹¹ However, when we look at James's own descriptions of such cases, such reflections seem entirely absent. The climber is only described as having "hope and confidence"¹² that he will succeed, and he never goes through any reflection about how this confidence itself will help get him across. Further, even if James's believers were 'reflective', it's hard to see why this would be enough to make the cases fit the evidentialist model. James describes cases where confidence makes success *more* likely, and perhaps even cases where confidence is *necessary* for success, but for the reflective cases to fit the evidentialist model, one's confidence would need to make one's success *highly likely*, and James never describes belief as being *that* effective.¹³ Indeed, for the cases that James often focuses on (such as, say, whether Good will ultimately triumph over Evil), knowing that you can *contribute* to the outcome is a far cry from knowing that one's confidence can *assure* it. Our beliefs may nudge things in the direction we want, but to meet the evidentialist standard, we would need much more than a nudge. Even worse for the 'reflective' reading of James, reflection on the doxastic efficacy of one's beliefs only helps one meet the evidentialist standard if one has *evidence* for this efficacy, and while we may now have evidence for this in 'athletic' cases such as the mountain climber, James's central concern was religious belief, and while he certainly thought that such efficacy was *possible* in the religious case,¹⁴ he never suggests that we have evidence for that being so.¹⁵

¹⁰ Especially since the the "sick soul" that James is often so concerned with needs something more than this 'melioristic' conception of religion.

¹¹ See, for instance, Aikin & Talisse, p. 69, Jordan 1996 pp. 412-413, Pojman 1993 p. 543, Gale 1999, p. 112.

¹² James 1897, p. 80.

¹³ For a clear discussion of a case where confidence is necessary for success, but still leaves one with only a small probability of it, see Zimmerman 2018, p. 128.

¹⁴ James 1897, p. 55.

¹⁵ Though, of course, the fact that the scope of the doxastically efficacious cases is unknown would be a reason against the global application of a restrictive evidential rule for belief (see Jackman 1999).

It seems then, that while one's awareness of one's being in a doxastically efficacious case could be used to make some new evidence available, there is little reason to think that this sort of evidence is what was being appealed to in "The Will to Believe".

3. The External Argument: The Duty to Believe and James's 'Duel' with Chauncey Wright

The 'external' argument for the expansive reading requires us to go back the very start of James's academic career. One natural reason for thinking that James wasn't any sort of evidentialist was that he typically expressed his views in terms of our having a *right* to believe beyond what the evidence compelled us to.¹⁶ Indeed, he later suggested that "The Right to Believe" would have been a more appropriate title for his paper.¹⁷ However, if he really was an 'expansive evidentialist' we wouldn't expect this sort of permissive talk. If our subjective preferences really were a sort of evidence, it would seem as if we would have not just a *right* to believe in accordance with them, but an actual *duty* to do so. Consequently, on the expansive evidentialist reading, one should expect James to think that we had a *duty* to believe what was in our interests.

It is, then, not surprising that the claim that James had, at some deeper level, a commitment to some sort of "duty to believe" view has a number of supporters among defenders of the 'expansive' reading,¹⁸ and Misak has argued that James was aware of this commitment himself. She make a case for this by placing a lot of emphasis on the one occasion where James *did* seem to explicitly put forward a 'duty to believe' view, namely, his unsigned 1875 review of Tait and Stewart's *The Unseen Universe* in *The Nation*, where James claimed that if a belief in the supernatural order was evidentially underdetermined, then "any one to whom it makes a practical difference (whether of motive to action or mental peace) is in duty bound to . . . it."¹⁹ Of course, giving a single line in a short anonymous book review written before he published any of his main philosophical (or even

¹⁶ As when James says at the start of his paper that it 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 1897, p. 13, italics mine), or when in *Pragmatism* he describes that paper as "an essay on our right to believe" (James 1907, p. 124).

¹⁷ He makes the suggestion that this would be a better title than his "luckless" and "unfortunate" choice "The Will to Believe" in his letters (C 10: 434, 449), where he also proposes "A Defense of Faith" (C 8: 476), and "A Critique of Pure Faith" (C 8: 493, C: 9: 552) as preferable options.

¹⁸ In addition to Aikin, Misak and Tallise, Gale 1999 defends the claim that James saw a duty to believe in this area.

¹⁹ James 1875a, p.293.

psychological) works²⁰ precedence over all the more considered views presented in his later philosophical writings would take some justification, but Misak argues²¹ that we can find this justification in Chauncey Wright's account of his encounter with James after the publication of the 1875 *Nation* review. On this reading, James (in his heart of hearts) always clung to something like the "duty to believe" view, but drew back from it in print because he was "bullied" by an "onslaught" of criticisms from Wright,²² and "this early tussle supports an interpretation of 'The Will to Believe' in which the point is to expand the scope of evidence so as to include the consequences that a belief has on one's life."²³

Misak argues that James's true intentions can be seen in the account that Wright gives of their "duel" in his letter to Grace Norton, the relevant portion of which runs as follows:

I have carried out my purpose of giving Dr. James the two lectures I had in store for him. I found him just returned home on Wednesday evening. His father remarked in the course of talk, that he had not found any typographical errors in William's article. . . . I said that I had read it with interest and had not noticed any *typographical* errors. The emphasis attracted the youth's attention, and made him demand an explanation, which was my premeditated discourse. . . . He fought vigorously, not to say manfully; but confessed to having written under irritation . . . On Friday evening I saw him again and introduced the subject of the 'duty of belief' as advocated by him in the *Nation*. He retracted the word 'duty'. All that he meant to say was that it is foolish not to believe, or try to believe, if one is happier for believing. But even so he seemed to me to be more epicurean (though he hates the sect) than even the utilitarians would allow to be wise . . . He quite agrees that evidence is all that enforces the obligation of belief, and that it does this only in virtue of its own force as evidence. Belief is only a matter of choice, and therefore of moral duty, so far as attending to evidence is a volitional act; and he agreed that attention to all accessible evidence was the only duty involved in belief.²⁴

According to Misak, while James "altered his position in light of this onslaught", and switched his talk of "duty" to talk of "right", the fact that he had to be "bullied" into doing so is "significant" and "puts the anti evidentialist interpretation into question" (Misak 2013, p. 63).

However, when we look at Wright's letters more closely, we see that far from revealing James's "original intent,"²⁵ (an intent that he fought "vigorously", if unsuccessfully, to maintain in the face of Wright's criticisms), the talk "duty" in his 1875 review was never particularly important to James, and the 'right to believe' doctrine was always more central to him.

²⁰ Even very early papers like "Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence" and "The Sentiment of Rationality" were still three years away at this point.

²¹ In Misak 2013, 2015, 2016.

²² Misak, 2013, p. 65, 2015 p. 120.

²³ Misak 2016, pp. 65-66.

²⁴ The passage appears in Misak 2013, p. 63, Misak 2015, p. 120, and Misak 2016, pp. 65-66.

²⁵ Misak 2013, p. 62.

In particular, Wright's letter describes *two* days of debate with James (a Wednesday then a Friday), and while Misak presents this all being about the 'duty of belief',²⁶ a more extensive examination of Wright's correspondence shows this not to be the case. We see a sign of this in the initial letter quoted above when Wright claims that he only "introduced the subject of the 'duty of belief'" on the *Friday*, suggesting that the vigorous debate two days before was about something else entirely, a suggestion reinforced by the letter's opening line where he claims to have had "two lectures" in store for James.

So what else could their Wednesday debate have been about? Fortunately, Wright answers this question himself in another letter (also to Grace Norton) written six days earlier, in which he writes:

When Dr. William James gets back from his journeys I shall have two bones to pick with him. One we have — that is, you and I have — talked about and happily agreed upon, namely, his doctrine in the *Nation* about the duty of belief. The other is in a book-notice by him, in the *North American Review*, of Wundt's psysio-psychology. In a paragraph in which he distinguishes and compliments me among the "empiricists," he has so badly misapprehended what the experience philosophy in general holds and teaches, that the compliment to me goes for nothing in mitigation of my resentment...²⁷

This letter make it clear that Wright's attention was caught not just by James's review of *The Unseen Universe*, but also by his review on Wundt's 1875 *Gundzüge Der physiologischen Psychologie*.²⁸ In that review, he speaks favorably of Wright, but is generally critical of the "experience philosophy" for treating experience as too passive. It seems likely that it is this later article on empiricism, and not the one of the 'duty to believe' that Wright tells James contains no *typographical* errors, and about which the two engaged in such vigorous debate on Wright's initial Wednesday visit to the James household. This is clear not only from the fact that Wright claims to have "introduced" the subject of the duty to believe on the Friday, but also by Wright's description of the Wednesday debate, which includes a line (omitted by Misak) where Wright claims that James "referred to the compliment" to him in that article, to which Wright rejoined "Made at the expense of my friends!"²⁹ There is no compliment, or mention, of Wright in the

²⁶ The impression is also given in Madden 1963 pp. 44-46 (Misak's cited source for the letter from Wright) and Madden 1979, p. xvii. (Since delivering this paper, I've learned that Wernham (1987) criticizes Madden on much the same grounds that I use to criticize Misak here, and while I'm unpersuaded by his arguments that James doesn't endorse a 'right to believe' view, on this particular topic, he seems to have things exactly right.)

²⁷ Letter to Grace Norton, July 12, 1875, quoted in Perry 1935, pp. 529-530.

²⁸ James 1875b.

²⁹ Letter to Grace Norton, July 18, 1875, quoted in Perry 1935, pp. 531-532, italics mine.

review of Tait, but there is a clear compliment of Wright in the Wundt review, and (as we saw in his letter of July 12) Wright did not particularly appreciate it.

With the Wednesday debate taken up by the review of Wundt, the entire ‘duel’ over the duty to believe must be found in their Friday meeting, but the description of *that* day’s debate doesn’t really provide *any* evidence that James was particularly attracted to the “duty to believe” view. When Wright questions James about the use of “duty”, James shows no real concern with defending that terminological choice at all, giving it up with no apparent fight and saying only that “*All he meant to say* was that it is foolish not to believe, or try to believe, if one is happier for believing.”³⁰ This phrasing suggest that James is not admitting to *any* change of mind on this issue. Rather, he is only admitting that what he wrote did not aptly capture what he originally had in mind. This suggests that the “original intent” behind James’s 1875 review corresponds roughly to his later doctrine that, even if it isn’t a “duty”, it is “the part of wisdom”³¹ to believe what is in one’s interest in such evidentially underdetermined cases.

Further, on the question of our having a *right* to believe in these cases, Wright seems to have been brought around to James’s side (if he wasn’t there already) writing to Norton that at the end of the Friday debate:

I allowed that unproved beliefs, unfounded in evidence, were not only allowable, but were sometimes even fit, becoming or appropriate to states of feeling or types of character, which are deserving of approval or even honor. This fitness does not, however, amount to an obligation or duty.³²

It seems, then, that Wright was, in allowing the legitimacy of beliefs that were “unfounded in evidence”, ultimately willing to join James in his rejection of evidentialism.³³

Conclusion

The debate between “evidentialists” and “pragmatists” is still very much alive in epistemology today,³⁴ and while I haven’t focused here on the strength of James’s arguments against

³⁰ Letter to Grace Norton, July 18, 1875, quoted in Perry 1935, pp. 531-532, italics mine.

³¹ James 1897, pp. 53, 80.

³² Letter to Grace Norton, July 18, 1875, quoted in Perry 1935, pp. 531-532.

³³ One should also note that while Wright’s original letter describes James as successfully sticking to his guns on the right to believe question, he portrays him as agreeing that “evidence is all that enforces the obligation of belief”, so whatever grounds this right for James, he doesn’t consider it a type of *evidence*.

³⁴ With, for instance, Shah 2003, 2006 and Shah & Vellman 2005 on the evidentialist side, and Rinard 2015, 2018,

evidentialism, I hope to have at least shown that he was a precursor to our more contemporary critics of the view, and not just an evidentialist with an (unduly) expansive conception of what the evidence was.³⁵

2019, McCormick 2015 and Zimmerman 2018 on the pragmatist.

³⁵ I'd like to thank Alex Klein, Rob Elisher and David Beisecker for their comments on this paper.

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