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# The God of Abraham, Isaac, and (William) James

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The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has often been distinguished from the god of the philosophers.<sup>1</sup> The latter is allegedly only a human conception—a product of rational theologizing, with no explicit basis in biblical revelation. While the philosophers' God is variously conceived, it is usually said to be, among other things, absolutely unlimited in all respects, wholly other, absolutely simple, immaterial, nonspatial, nontemporal, immutable, and impassible.<sup>2</sup> By way of contrast, the biblical record describes the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as “the living God”<sup>3</sup> who created man in his “own image and likeness” (Gen. 1:26), who spoke with Moses “face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend” (Exod. 33:11). He is the loving God who is profoundly “touched with the feeling of our infirmities” (Heb. 4:15) and salvifically involved in our individual and collective lives.

Not all philosophers have accepted the philosophers' God. Some reject this God on strictly logical grounds. For instance, Anthony Kenny argues that the God who is the product of rational theologizing is, ironically, irrational—an incoherent concept, a logically impossible being (1979, 121–22).

One of the more articulate dissenters from the God of the classical theistic tradition is William James, the American pragmatist. For James, there was a sharp contrast between the God of the Bible and the God of orthodox theology. He drew this contrast in a letter to Henry Rankin dated 10 June 1903: “[T]he Bible itself, in both its testaments . . . seems to me by its intense naturalness and humanness, the most fatal document that one can read against the orthodox theology, in so far as the latter claims the words of the Bible to be its basis.” But James rejected the god of orthodox theology, not because he thought the concept unbiblical and not because he thought it logically incoherent,<sup>4</sup> but because he found it devoid of significant practical meaning. In this paper, I set out by clarifying James's criterion of pragmatic meaning, then sketch his arguments *against* the God of the philosophers based thereon, and, finally, show that the God who survives James's critique seems very much like the “God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.”

## 1. JAMES'S THEORY OF PRAGMATIC MEANING

While James's fundamental ideas on pragmatic meaning are central to his philosophy, he never explicitly develops them in any systematic or sustained fashion. Rather, he leaves them largely embedded in his individual analyses of the meanings of particular philosophical claims and concepts. To get a clear view of James's meaning-criterion, I draw on Ellen Kappy Suckiel's interpretative construction of it in her book *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (1982).<sup>5</sup> She succeeds admirably in her stated intention "to account for James's numerous remarks on meaning in a way that shows them to embody a single principle—consistent within itself and of a piece with the remainder of his philosophy" (31–32). Her analysis is careful, informed, and, I believe, essentially correct. In any event, Suckiel's interpretation of James provides a standpoint that is important and interesting in its own right and will serve as our point of departure in this paper.

James's pragmatic philosophy is grounded on his conception of a human being as a goal-positing, interest-fulfilling organism, whose rational activities are subservient to her practical and emotional aspects:

The mind [is] an essentially teleological mechanism. I mean by this that the conceiving or theorizing faculty . . . functions *exclusively for the sake of ends* that . . . are set by our emotional and practical subjectivity altogether. It is a transformer of the world of our impressions into a totally different world—the world of our conception; and the transformation is effected in the interests of our volitional nature, and for no other purpose whatsoever. (James 1979b, 94–95; emphasis in original)

James thus sees our cognitive activities—concept formation, belief acquisition, theory construction, and so on—as instruments molded by our desires and interests whose natural endpoint is action or conduct. Their role is to redirect us into experience better prepared to overcome obstacles to what we will. Based on these assumptions, our beliefs, theories, and concepts are pragmatically meaningful to the extent that they contribute to the achievement of our concrete or practical ends (Suckiel 1982, chaps. 2–3).<sup>6</sup>

In seeking to formulate James's criterion of pragmatic meaning more precisely, Suckiel begins with A. O. Lovejoy's classic critique of it (Lovejoy 1963). According to Lovejoy, though James presumably intends to provide only a single criterion of meaning, he actually ends up with two. In some passages, James seems to hold that a belief's pragmatic meaning is restricted to its "predictive import"—the future experiential consequences that ipso facto expectedly flow from it. Yet, in other texts, he apparently takes a belief's meaning to consist entirely in the future consequences of *believing* it, regardless of whether the belief *itself* has experiential consequences.

Lovejoy claims that these two criteria are mutually inconsistent and that each is in its own way inadequate. The first criterion is too narrow, apparently excluding many traditional metaphysical, religious, and moral beliefs from the realm of pragmatically significant discourse. The second criterion is too broad, including any belief with practical impact even if it were too vague or vacuous to be considered even cognitively intelligible. For example, Lovejoy says the belief that “evil is a form of good” might somehow function in an energizing or inspiring way for believers and thus have meaning, even though it lacks any clear cognitive content.

But, says Suckiel, Lovejoy’s bifurcation of James’s theory is incorrect. First, James’s notion of predictive import is richer than Lovejoy supposes; it includes not only a belief’s experiential consequences in this life, but also its eschatological implications. Thus, the belief that God exists is meaningful if it enables the theist to anticipate a different cosmic future—if not a different immediate one—from that anticipated by the materialist. On the hypothesis that God is there to insure it, one may expect the ultimate preservation of moral ideals; on the materialist hypothesis, one may not. For James’s predictive import criterion, properly construed, then, a belief is pragmatically meaningful if and only if those who accept it ipso facto anticipate either immediate consequences or eschatological experiential consequences.

Also contra Lovejoy, Suckiel argues that James did not intend pragmatic meaning of an idea to consist merely in the practical consequences of believing it in isolation from anything else, thereby leaving those consequences unexplained. Rather, predictive import and practical impact function inseparably as part of a single principle in James’s theory. A pragmatically meaningful proposition leads a believer into the future differently prepared than she would be if she did not hold it and enables her to make predictions about the future, and thereby leads her to have certain attitudes and emotions and to engage in certain sorts of conduct that are (relative to her purposes) appropriate to that future as envisioned. Thus, a belief’s pragmatic meaning “is determined by the consequences that follow from it, *conjoined with* the different attitudes, feelings, and actions in the life of the believer which arise from the [very] fact that she anticipates those consequences” (Suckiel 1982, 38; emphasis in original).

On the basis of this analysis, I believe we can now formulate James’s criterion of pragmatic meaning quite precisely:

- (1) A belief has pragmatic meaning if and only if it has predictive import.
- (2) If a belief has predictive import, then believing it will lead to practical consequences.

So,

(3) A belief has pragmatic meaning *only if* believing it has practical consequences.

From (1), it follows that

(4) Predictive import provides a positive test for pragmatic meaning and the lack of predictive import provides a negative test.

And from (2) and (3) it follows that

(5) The absence of practical consequences provides a negative test of pragmatic meaning, but the existence of practical consequences fails to provide a positive test.

And further,

(6) Pragmatic meaning or value admits of gradations or degrees. The greater, the more concrete, the more definite the predictive import and practical consequences of a belief, the greater its pragmatic value. Of two beliefs, then, both of which have pragmatic meaning, one may be pragmatically richer than the other. For example, though James rejects the notion of the Absolute quite decisively on pragmatic grounds, yet he acknowledges that the idea does have some minimal pragmatic meaning.

## 2. THE CRITERION OF PRAGMATIC MEANING AND THE NATURE OF GOD

Armed with this more precise formulation of James's criterion of pragmatic meaning, we should now be able to understand more clearly his pragmatic arguments for and against particular views of God's nature. In some cases, James argues that a particular attribution is devoid of pragmatic meaning altogether; in other cases, he argues that it lacks significant pragmatic meaning or that it is pragmatically inferior to some alternative attribution.

### A. THE METAPHYSICAL ATTRIBUTES

James rejected much of classical theism, especially as it was elaborated in scholastic philosophy, suggesting that both its a priori methodology and many of its tenets were "diseases of the philosophy-shops"<sup>7</sup> that obscured and falsified God's nature and his relationship with men.<sup>8</sup>

Concerning the method, James argues that whatever conceptual clarification may be achieved by carefully working out the analytic content of the word *God*, this activity has no relevance to any vital human concern:

What is their deduction of these metaphysical attributes but a shuffling and matching of pedantic dictionary-adjectives, aloof from morals, aloof from human needs. . . . One feels that in the theologians' hands, they are only a set of titles obtained by a mechanical manipulation of synonyms; verblatness has stepped into the place of vision. . . . Instead of bread we have a stone; instead of a fish, a serpent. Did such a conglomeration of abstract terms give really the gist of our knowledge of the deity, schools of theology might indeed continue to flourish, but religion, vital religion, would have taken its flight from this world. (James 1985, 352)

James similarly scores the metaphysical attributes derived by following this method:

Take God's aseity, for example; or his necessariness; his immateriality; his 'simplicity' or superiority to the kind of inner variety and succession which we find in finite beings, his indivisibility, and lack of the inner distinctions of being and activity, substance and accident, potentiality and actuality, and the rest; his repudiation of inclusion in a genus; his actualized infinity; . . . his self-sufficiency, self-love, and absolute felicity in himself:—candidly speaking, how do such qualities as these make any definite connexion with our life? And if they severally call for no distinctive adaptations of our conduct, what vital difference can it possibly make to a man's religion whether they be true or false?

For my own part, . . . I must frankly confess that even though these attributes were faultlessly deduced, I cannot conceive of its being of the smallest consequence to us religiously that any one of them should be true. Pray, what specific act can I perform in order to adapt myself the better to God's simplicity? Or how does it assist me to plan my behavior, to know that his happiness is anyhow absolutely complete? . . .

So much for the metaphysical attributes of God! From the point of view of practical religion, the metaphysical monster which they offer to our worship is an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind. (351–53)

Much could be said by way of objecting to this critique of the metaphysical attributes. James seems uncharacteristically intolerant; his judgments too hasty and unduly summary.<sup>9</sup> And, to a large extent, he has unjustly tried the entire set en bloc, although, clearly, each attribute needs to be evaluated individually. For instance, it may be the case that believing God to be necessary, and hence not liable to perishing, makes a profound difference in my life (in that I can rely on Him unconditionally) while believing Him to be absolutely simple makes no difference at all. Yet, whatever the weaknesses in James's actual critique, we can see, on the basis of his criterion of pragmatic meaning, the argument he apparently intends to make: the metaphysical attributes severally fail the negative test of the fifth criterion of pragmatic meaning. If this is his intent, the

general structure of his arguments against the metaphysical attributes can be represented syllogistically as follows:

- (1) A proposition is pragmatically meaningful only if believing it has practical consequences for our feelings, attitudes and conduct.
- (2) Believing that God is *x* (e.g., absolutely simple, immaterial, not included in a genus, without succession, absolutely self-sufficient, etc.) fails to call for any responsive adaptations in our feelings, attitudes, or conduct.
- (3) Hence, the proposition that God is *x* (absolutely simple, etc.) is pragmatically meaningless.

James does little to support the second premise of each argument-instance other than to affirm it emphatically. But it should be kept in mind that each instance is a negation and that it is difficult to provide evidence for, let alone prove, a negation. Evidence *against* these negations would be more readily forthcoming. So, James might plausibly claim that the burden of persuasion should shift to the person denying any instance of premise 2. In any event, with the basic structure of James's pragmatic arguments against the metaphysical attributes more clearly delineated, these arguments can now be more rigorously evaluated. Arguments for and against pragmatic meaning based on the other positive and negative tests of the criterion of pragmatic meaning can, of course, be similarly constructed and assessed.<sup>10</sup>

## B. DIVINE PERSONALITY

On the basis of his criterion of pragmatic meaning, James concludes that the belief that God is nonpersonal is meaningless while the belief that he is personal is pragmatically warranted. Considering the former point, James charges that "the absolute" of monistic idealism (like the god of scholastic theism) is also "a metaphysical monster" in that "it is neither intelligence nor will, neither a self nor a collection of selves, neither truthful, good nor beautiful. . . . [It] neither acts nor suffers, nor loves nor hates; it has no needs, desires, or aspirations, no failures or successes, friends or enemies, victories or defeats" (James 1977, 26–27).<sup>11</sup> In short, the absolute is not a person and, lacking personality, seemingly calls for no vital human responses. Thus, by the negative test of the fifth criterion of pragmatic meaning, belief in the absolute is devoid of significant pragmatic meaning. On the same ground, James rejects "The Unknowable" of Herbert Spencer: "Mere existence commands no reverence whatever, or any other emotion, until its quality is specified. Neither does mere cosmic power, unless it

makes for something which can claim kinship from our sympathies. . . . As well might you speak of being irreverent to Space or disrespectful of the Equator” (cited in Perry 1935, 1:486).<sup>12</sup>

Although James rejected substantial elements of scholastic theism, he nonetheless believed that theism (if purified and corrected) offers the best chance of an adequate understanding of God. This is because it alone conceives of God in terms of personality and personal relationships. Indeed, pragmatically, it is essential, James said, that God be conceived as the deepest power in the universe and that he

be conceived under the form of a mental personality. The personality need not be determined intrinsically any further than is involved in the holding of certain things dear, and in the recognition of our dispositions towards those things, the things themselves being all good and righteous things. . . . Extrinsicly considered, so to speak, God’s personality is to be regarded, like any other personality, as something lying outside of my own and other than me, and whose existence I simply come upon and find. A power not ourselves, then, which not only makes for righteousness, but means it, and which recognizes us. . . . In whatever other respects the divine personality may differ from ours or may resemble it, the two are consanguineous at least in this—that both have purposes for which they care, and each can hear the other’s call. (James 1979b, 97–98)<sup>13</sup>

The challenges of the human being’s moral and spiritual life require help and guidance, which only a divine person and co-worker can provide. Understanding God to be a personal “thou” who invites our participation in bringing about his purposes and who hears and responds to our calls for help with our own purposes is rich in both predictive import and practical consequences.<sup>14</sup> We expect to receive such help and guidance, and the expectation gives hope, overcomes fear, and influences conduct.<sup>15</sup>

### C. MORAL AND POWER PREDICATES

As contrasted with the metaphysical attributes, James finds that the moral and power predicates attributed to God stand pragmatically on a much stronger footing in that

they positively determine fear and hope and expectation, and are foundations for the saintly life. It needs but a glance at them to show how great is their significance. God’s holiness, for example: being holy, God can will nothing but the good. Being omnipotent, he can secure its triumph. Being omniscient,



he can see us in the dark. Being just, he can punish us for what he sees. Being loving, he can pardon too. Being unalterable, we can count on him securely. These qualities enter into connexion with our life. (1985, 353)

For reasons I make clearer in my section on James's notion of divine finitude, it is significant to observe here that James does not use *omnipotence* and *omniscience* in their traditional senses. He uses *omnipotence* to refer to God's power to secure the triumph of the good (as opposed to the power to bring about any logically possible state of affairs); he uses *omniscience* to refer to God's awareness of all that is transpiring (as opposed to his having complete foreknowledge of the future).

#### D. DIVINE IMMANENCE

Though James finds eschatological predictive import sufficient for pragmatic meaning, he also believes it is pragmatically important that God be actively involved in our present lives—he must make a difference, not only in eternity, but in our day-to-day existence (1985, 411).<sup>16</sup> In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James divides supernaturalists into two camps: “refined” supernaturalists (including transcendental idealists and all others), who “bar out ideal identities from interfering causally in the course of phenomenal events” (409), and “crass” or “piecemeal” supernaturalists (with whom James personally identifies<sup>17</sup>), who “admit miracles and providential leading, and find no intellectual difficulty in mixing the ideal and the real worlds together by interpolating influences from the ideal region among the forces that causally determine the real worlds details” (409–10). In no sphere is that influence more evident, James says, than in the phenomenon of prayerful communion, which shows that God produces “immediate effects within the natural world to which the rest of our experience belongs. . . . The appearance is that in this phenomenon something ideal . . . actually exerts an influence, raises our centre of personal energy, and produces regenerative effects unattainable in other ways” (411–12).<sup>18</sup> By this standard of pragmatic efficacy, the Absolute of transcendental idealism again largely fails to measure up:

An entire world is the smallest unit with which the Absolute can work, whereas to our finite minds, work for the better ought to be done within this world, setting in at single points. Our difficulties and our ideals are all piecemeal affairs, but the Absolute can do no piecework for us. . . . It is strange, I have heard a friend to say, to see this blind corner into which Christian thought has worked itself at last, with its God who can raise no particular weight whatever,

who can help us with no private burden, and who is on the side of our enemies as much as he is on our own. Odd evolution from the God of David's psalms! (410, n. 1)

Odd evolution, indeed!

In contrast to the deity who can lift no particular burden, James pictures God and human beings as collaborators in the vast task of building a moral universe. And in this creative and redemptive work, James says, God must not be above "dirtying His own hands": "The prince of darkness may be a gentlemen, as we are told he is, but whatever the God of earth and heaven is, he can surely be no gentleman. His menial services are needed in the sweat and dirt of our daily human trials, even more than his dignity is needed in the empyrean" (1975, 40). A God involved in the sweat and dirt of our daily human trials and who, in response to prayer, produces concrete effects within the phenomenal world seems preeminently to satisfy the positive test of James's fourth criterion of pragmatic meaning.

## E. GOD AND HUMAN BEINGS AS SOCIALLY RELATED

The pragmatic value of God's involvement with us in the world is further enhanced if it be conceived to be social and reciprocal, not merely unilateral. And by this standard, orthodox theism again fares rather poorly:

Orthodox theism has been so jealous of God's glory that it has taken pains to exaggerate everything in the notion of him that could make for isolation and separateness. Page upon page in scholastic books go to prove that God is in no sense implicated by his creative act, or involved in his creation. That his relation to the creatures he has made should make any difference to him, carry any consequence, or qualify his being, is repudiated as a pantheistic slur upon his self-sufficingness. I said a moment ago that theism treats us and God as of the same species, but from the orthodox point of view that was a slip of language. God and his creatures are *toto genere* distinct in the scholastic theology, they have absolutely *nothing* in common; nay, it degrades God to attribute to him any generic nature whatever; he can be classed with nothing. There is a sense, then, in which philosophic theism makes us outsiders and keeps us foreigners in relation to God, in which, at any rate, his connection with us appears as unilateral and not reciprocal. His action can affect us, but he can never be affected by our reaction. Our relation, in short, is not a strictly social relation. Of course in common men's religion the relation is believed to be social, but that is only one of the many differences between religion and theology. (1977, 17; emphasis in original)<sup>19</sup>

Accordingly, on this point, James rejects scholastic theism for “what may *roughly* be called the pantheistic field of vision, the vision of God as indwelling divine rather than the external creator, and of human life as part and parcel of that deep reality” (19; emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> He sees prayer as a means to genuine social interaction between human beings and God:

This intercourse with God is realized by prayer. Prayer is religion in act; that is, prayer is real religion. . . . I understand no vain exercise of words, no mere repetition of certain sacred formulae, but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence,—it may be even before it has a name by which to call it. . . . One sees from this why ‘natural religion,’ so-called, is not properly a religion. It cuts man off from prayer. It leaves him and God in mutual remoteness, with no intimate commerce, no interior dialogue, no interchange, no action of God in man, no return of man to God. (1985, 366; see also 373)

A God with whom human beings are socially related and who reciprocally responds in concrete ways to our overtures toward him satisfies the positive test of the fourth criterion of pragmatic meaning.<sup>21</sup>

## F. GOD AND TIME

On pragmatic grounds, James also rejects the classical conception that God is timelessly eternal and thereby immutable and impassable. As such, God could not enter into genuine social relation with us, or be touched with the feelings of our infirmities, or be responsively involved in the sweat and dirt of our daily human trials. He could not be a co-laborer with us in the vast task of building a moral universe, for he would have neither history nor future.<sup>22</sup> But James notes that “all the categories of my sympathy are knit up . . . with things that have a history. . . . I have neither eyes nor ears nor heart nor mind for anything of an opposite description, and the stagnant felicity of the absolute’s own perfection moves me as little as I move it” (1977, 27).

Nonetheless, James finds the view that God is temporally eternal rich in pragmatic significance: “Having an environment, being in time, and working out a history just like ourselves, he escapes from the foreignness from all that is human, of the static timeless perfect absolute” (144).

If God is working out a history just like we are, then we enjoy an intimacy with him and respond to his will in a way that is impossible under any other system. Our whole nature is quickened by the thought that we are co-laborers with God, aiding in the realization of purposes that are ours as well as his.

Contrastingly, a belief in an absolutely static divinity seemingly lacks both predictive and practical import; and hence by the negative tests of the fourth and fifth criteria of pragmatic meaning, it is pragmatically meaningless.

## G. DIVINE FINITUDE

Perhaps the most controversial, and most misunderstood, implication of the criterion of pragmatic meaning is the warrant James thinks it provides for the belief that God is finite. Indeed, James claims that “the only God worthy of the name *must* be finite” (1977, 60). But what does he mean by this claim? Most fundamentally, he means that God does not comprise the whole of reality, and hence that God has an external environment: “‘God,’ in the religious life of ordinary men, is the name not of the whole of things, heaven forbid, but only of the ideal tendency in things, believed in as a superhuman person who calls us to co-operate in his purposes, and who furthers ours if they are worthy. He works in an external environment, has limits, and has enemies” (60). Second, in describing God as “finite,” James means that God’s external environment is not entirely of his own making.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, he broaches the possibility that God is one of a plurality of original beings, albeit the supreme one:<sup>24</sup>

Theism, whenever it has erected itself into a systematic philosophy of the universe, has shown a reluctance to let God be anything less than All-in-All. In other words, philosophic theism has always shown a tendency to become pantheistic and monistic, . . . and this has been at variance with popular or practical theism, which latter has ever been more or less frankly pluralistic, not to say polytheistic, and shown itself perfectly well satisfied with a universe composed of many original principles, provided we only allowed to believe that the divine principle remains supreme and that the others are subordinate. (1985, 112)

In *A Pluralistic Universe* and in his other writings, James personally endorses this metaphysical pluralism, apparently postulating agents with incompatibilist freedom as among the entities co-original with God.<sup>25</sup> Commitment to this ontology, as well as reflection on the extent of evil in human experience, leads him to reject omnipotence and omniscience (*as traditionally construed*) as divine attributes,<sup>26</sup> and this rejection constitutes a third sense in which James holds God to be finite.<sup>27</sup> For instance, James takes it for granted that if agents have incompatibilist freedom, then necessarily God lacks absolute foreknowledge. Accordingly, James suggests that God’s knowledge of the future is similar to

ours in that it consists partly of facts and partly of possibilities.<sup>28</sup> Likewise, it would not do for James to understand divine omnipotence as the power to bring about any logically possible state of affairs; given his commitment to a plurality of original principles and agencies, there are ontological, not merely logical, constraints on what he can do.<sup>29</sup>

Among other things, a non-absolutistic understanding of God enables James to come to grips with the problem of evil. If God were the whole of reality (or even the absolute creator of all else that exists), “evil, like everything else, must have its foundation in God; and the difficulty is to see how this can possibly be the case if God be absolutely good. . . . [T]he only *obvious* escape from paradox here is to cut loose from the monistic assumption altogether, and to allow the world to have existed *from its origin* in pluralistic form, as an aggregate or collection of higher and lower things and principles” (James 1985, 112–13; first emphasis in original, second added). For if God truly works in an external environment not entirely of his own making and has limits and enemies, then the problem of evil becomes primarily a practical task calling for cooperative action, not an insoluble theoretical puzzle.<sup>30</sup>

Further, James holds that belief in a finite God is pragmatically richer than belief in an absolutely unlimited God in that it provides greater virility and impetus to our moral endeavors.<sup>31</sup> Any world other than a pluralistic one with a finite God takes away all life’s real achievements as well as its losses. The finite God in a pluralistic universe is, on that account, more approachable and more of a real leader and inspirer.<sup>32</sup> James imagines God, before the creation, putting forth to us the following proposal:

I am going to make a world not certain to be saved, a world the perfection of which shall be conditional merely, the condition being that each several agent does its own “level best.” I offer you the chance of taking part in such a world. Its safety, you see, is unwarranted. It is a real adventure, with real danger, yet it may win through. It is a social scheme of co-operative work genuinely to be done. Will you join the procession? Will you trust yourself and trust the other agents enough to face the risk? (1975, 139)

James believes that there is a “healthy-minded buoyancy” in most of us most of the time that would impel us to accept the risk.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, in “The Dilemma of Determinism,” James posits an open and indeterminate universe in which we finite human agents have freedom significant enough to make a difference here and now in the world’s outcomes. Believing this, James says, is what gives “the palpitating reality to our moral life and makes it tingle . . . with so strange and elaborate an excitement” (1979a, 140). The view that God is not the whole, or even the ultimate, cause of reality and hence neither all-controlling nor all-know-

ing enables one to formulate a coherent view of experienced evil and leads to a meliorism that motivates individual and collective action to make the world better than it is. As we have already seen, the belief that God is omnipotent and omniscient has predictive import and thus is pragmatically justified by the first criterion of pragmatic meaning. The further qualification that he is somewhat limited in his power, knowledge, or both does not negate that predictive import, but may reasonably modify one's expectations as to what experiential outcomes will actually ensue. For example, given the belief that God is not absolutely unlimited, one may not expect the prevention or elimination of everything evil.

## H. GOD AS REDEMPTIVELY SOVEREIGN

Whatever moral stimulus attaches to a world of genuine adventure and risk, James also recognizes our deep human need for religious comfort and security.<sup>34</sup> He addresses the tension generated by these conflicting human needs throughout his writings, but never more directly than in his conclusion to "The Dilemma of Determinism," where he attempts to show that even in a risk-filled world of agents with genuine freedom, God can providentially achieve his redemptive aims.<sup>35</sup> He imagines his reader objecting to his notion of human freedom as follows:

Does not the admission of such an unguaranteed chance or freedom preclude utterly the notion of a Providence governing the world? Does it not leave the fate of the universe at the mercy of the chance-possibilities, and so far insecure? Does it not, in short, deny the craving of our nature for an ultimate peace behind all tempests, for a blue zenith above all clouds?

And James answers:

The belief in free-will is not in the least incompatible with the belief in Providence, provided you do not restrict the Providence to fulminating nothing but *fatal* decrees. If you allow him to provide possibilities as well as actualities to the universe, and to carry on his own thinking in those two categories just as we do ours, chances may be there, uncontrolled even by him, and the course of the universe be really ambiguous; and yet the end of all things may be just what he intended it to be from all eternity. (1979a, 138)

James shows how this is possible by means of his famous chess-game analogy, in which he posits an expert (representing God) playing a chess game against a novice (representing finite free agents). While the expert cannot foresee the actual moves of his opponent, he can envisage in advance all of her possible moves.

Further, he knows how to respond to each of these possible moves in a way that leads in the direction of victory. James says, "And the victory infallibly arrives, after no matter how devious a course" (138).<sup>36</sup> His point is that God can exist within a community of genuinely free agents whose choices he can thus neither completely control nor foreknow, and yet, by his creative responses to their free choices, he can still achieve his redemptive aims. Agentive freedom in what is ultimately a pluralistic universe does not negate God's redemptive sovereignty.

James reinforces the pragmatic significance of belief in God's redemptive sovereignty in a moving passage in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*:

The lustre of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of possibilities it goes with. Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let Heaven smile upon the earth, and deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in;—and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. Place round them on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent meaning which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time are all that is visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to an anxious trembling.

For naturalism, fed on recent cosmological speculations, mankind is in a position similar to that of a set of people living on a frozen lake, surrounded by cliffs over which there is no escape, yet knowing that little by little the ice is melting, and the inevitable day drawing near when the last film of it will disappear, and to be drowned ignominiously will be the human creature's portion. The merrier the skating, the warmer and more sparkling the sun by day, and the ruddier the bonfires at night, the more poignant the sadness with which one must take in the meaning of the total situation. (1985, 119–20)

The belief that God exists and is redemptively sovereign, when translated into its pragmatic meaning, transforms that sadness into vibrant hope and living. It means that where God is "tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution not the absolutely final things" (1975, 55);<sup>37</sup> thus it satisfies, at least in terms of its eschatological predictive import, the criterion for pragmatic meaning set out in the first criterion of pragmatic meaning.

## SUMMARY: TWO CONTRASTING PORTRAITS

Out of James's analyses we can construct two contrasting portraits of God that are drawn, respectively, from those attributes that do not and those that do survive his pragmatic tests. The following is a composite description of a being

who fails to pass pragmatic muster: the whole of reality or the total cause of all things, absolutely unlimited in all respects; all-controlling; utterly transcendent; wholly simple; impersonal; immaterial; sui generis; totally self-sufficient, needing none else; timeless; metaphysically immutable and impassible and thus unaffected by what we do or fail to do and unresponsive to petitionary prayer. But this portrayal of God, I suggest, is the product of rational theologizing and thus represents what I have called the God of the philosophers.<sup>38</sup>

The second is a composite description of a being whose attributes pass his tests: a personal Thou with whom we may be socially related; morally constant and unchanging; has purposes and plans and is working out his own history in time; creatively engaged with us as co-laborers in building a moral universe; knowledge and power sufficient to fulfill all his purposes and promises; profoundly touched by the feelings of our infirmities, even so as to salvifically involve himself in the dirt and sweat of our daily human trials, and because of whom our shipwrecks need not be absolutely final things. I will henceforth refer the deity described in this portrait as the God of William James.

It seems to me that the God of William James fits well with one rather straightforward and plausible reading of the God-language in the biblical text. My project in this final section is to make this fit more perspicuous.

### 3. THE GOD OF ABRAHAM, ISAAC, AND (WILLIAM) JAMES

Considerable work closely coinciding with this project has been underway in a movement that began in about 1980 and is steadily gaining momentum. Much of this work, which initially appeared primarily in journal articles, is distilled in a recent book entitled *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (1994), which is co-authored by five prominent drivers of the movement: Clark Pinnock, Richard Price, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger. In the book, the authors present and defend their shared understanding of God ("free will theism" or "the openness of God"), which closely matches that of William James, against the traditional view of God (the "classical-biblical synthesis"), which in many of its attributions matches closely my portrait of "the God of the philosophers." The free-will theists sketch their own portrait of God in rather broad strokes in the book's preface:

God, in grace, grants humans significant freedom to cooperate with or work against God's will for their lives, and he enters into dynamic, give-and-take relationships with us. The Christian life involves a genuine interaction between God and human beings. We respond to God's gracious initiatives and



God responds to our responses . . . and on it goes. God takes risks in this give-and-take relationship, yet he is endlessly resourceful and competent in working toward his ultimate goals. Sometimes God alone decides how to accomplish these goals. On other occasions, God works with human decisions, adapting his own plans to fit the changing situation. God does not control everything that happens. Rather, he is open to receiving inputs from his creatures. In loving dialogue, God invites us to participate with him to bring the future into being. (8)

Put in more Jamesian terms, these free-will theists conceive of God as a morally perfect person who exists in and is working out a history in time within an external environment. His environment includes a community of genuinely free human agents with whom he is socially related and whose choices cannot be controlled or even exhaustively foreknown. God is profoundly influenced by these choices; indeed, his own history, as well as theirs, is significantly shaped by his creative responses to them. Human agents, then, are co-laborers with God in fashioning the world's outcomes.

To this point, the positions of James and these free-will theists seem well-nigh identical; however, they part company on the issue of creation. While free-will theists vigorously critique classical Christian theology on many points, they nonetheless hold fast to the traditional doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, holding God to be the only original reality who brought all else (including agents) into being out of nothing. Thus, for these theists, whatever limitations attach to God by virtue of his having an external environment, they are ultimately of his own doing and, thus, instances of divine self-limitation. But James sees God's external environment as consisting of entities and principles co-original with himself and hence as imposing constraints that are not merely a matter of self-limitation.

The authors defend the openness of God against traditional theism on historical, theological, philosophical, and (yes, even) practical grounds; but it is their biblical defense that is most pertinent for our purposes here. I will draw on that defense in arguing that the God of William James closely resembles the God of the Bible, treating first and somewhat summarily claimed resemblances that seem relatively noncontroversial and then dealing more thoroughly with claimed resemblances more open to objection. Finally, I will address James's point of departure from free-will theism and argue that there is also a biblical basis for James's ontological pluralism and his corresponding denial of creation out of nothing.

In sketching a biblical defense of the God of William James, one must keep in mind that the Bible is a complex work by several authors whose own views of God may not be entirely congruent and that it is susceptible to various alterna-

tive plausible interpretations. In undertaking a similar defense of free-will theism, Richard Rice correctly reminds us that

[t]he Scriptures contain such vast and varied material that it is not difficult to surround an idea with biblical quotations. The crucial question is whether the idea is faithful to the overall biblical portrait of God—the picture that emerges from the full range of biblical evidence. My contention is that this familiar concept [the God of the classical-biblical synthesis] does not reflect faithfully the spirit of the biblical message, in spite of the fact that it appeals to various biblical statements. The broad sweep of biblical testimony points to a quite different understanding of the divine reality. (1994, 15)

Given the close correspondence of James's God to the God of free-will theism, if Rice is right, then the broad sweep of biblical testimony points toward a Jamesian understanding of God. Of course, I can present nothing like a full-scale biblical defense of the Jamesian God in a journal article. In particular, I will not have space to deal with passages that seemingly contradict a Jamesian reading of the biblical text.<sup>39</sup> Necessarily, then, my defense will be only sketchy and suggestive, though I have no doubt that a full-scale defense could be mounted. Finally, while I will treat the biblical case for the several pieces of James's portrait individually, it is obvious that they form a closely related cluster of attributes, so that evidence for one attribute (e.g., God's social-relatedness) will serve as evidence for another (e.g., God's temporality) and, indeed, for his whole portrait.

## A. GOD AS PERSONAL AND INVOLVED IN HUMAN HISTORY

The claim that the God of the Bible is a personal being profoundly and salvifically involved in the individual and collective lives of his people is a theme that dominates the whole biblical narrative from Genesis to Revelation. As Isaiah puts it simply, "God the Holy One is in our midst" (Isa. 12:6). Perhaps nowhere is God's willingness to "involve himself in the dirt and sweat of our daily human trials" more clearly demonstrated than in the biblical account of the incarnation of God the Son ("the Word") in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. As biblical writers attest, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:1, 14), "[f]orasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same" (Heb. 2:14). As incarnate Lord, Christ was "in all things tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). A New Testament writer (1 Pet. 2:21–25) identifies Jesus with "the suffering ser-

vant” described in Isaiah 53: “He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief . . . he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquity . . . and with his stripes we are healed.” And the author of Hebrews teaches that “[w]herefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succor them that are tempted” (Heb. 2:17–18).

Not only is the incarnate Lord described as involved in saving us from sin and death, the Bible depicts him at work in ameliorating all kinds of earthly ills. For instance, when John the Baptist sends his messengers to ask Jesus, “Art thou he that should come, or do we look for another? Jesus answered and said unto them, Go and shew John again those things which ye do hear and see: The blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the gospel preached to them” (Matt. 11:3–5; Luke 7:22).

## B. GOD AS TEMPORAL

Closely related to their understanding of God as personal and involved with us in our daily trials, free-will theists, like Nicholas Wolterstorff (1975) before them, argue that the God of the Bible is temporally everlasting, not timelessly eternal. “Time is real for God,” says Rice (1994, 36). Pinnock writes, “The God of the Bible is not timeless. . . . If he were timeless, God would be unable to work salvation in history, would be cut off from the world, have no real relationship with people and would be completely static” (1994, 121). And Alan Padgett argues that “[s]cripture knows nothing of a timeless God, as this doctrine is found in Christian tradition” (1992, 2).

## C. GOD AS RESPONSIVE TO PETITIONARY PRAYER

There can be little doubt that the Bible describes God as being responsive to individual and collective petitionary prayer.<sup>40</sup> Consider two representative instances. The author of Exodus reports that God’s deliverance of Israel out of Egyptian captivity was prompted by petitionary prayer: “[T]he children of Israel sighed by reason of the bondage, and they cried, and their cry came up unto God. . . . And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (Exod. 2:23–24). Thus begins God’s redemption of the community of Israel. Or, for a more personal example, consider

God's response to Hezekiah's prayer as recorded in 2 Kings 20. Hezekiah is sick unto death, and the prophet Isaiah tells him he will die. But Hezekiah prays to God for deliverance, and the Lord tells Hezekiah, "I have heard thy prayer, I have seen thy tears: behold, I will heal thee" (2 Kings 20:5). Suffice it to say that the Bible is the paradigm for the "piecemeal supernaturalism" that James finds so pragmatically appealing.

#### D. GOD AND HUMAN BEING AS SOCIALLY INTERACTIVE

The Bible takes the social nature of God-human interaction even further by recording ongoing dialogue between God and human beings<sup>41</sup> and numerous accounts of God's actually changing his own feelings, intentions, and actions in response to human choices.<sup>42</sup> Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel, in sharply distinguishing the interactive communication between Yahweh and the biblical prophets from the passivity of the mystic in her ecstatic union with the divine, asserts, "The prophetic act is an encounter of a concrete person and the living God. The prophet is responsive, not only receptive. The act is often a dialogue in which consciousness of time, remembrance of events in the past, and concern with the plight of the present come into play. God as a person confronts the prophet as a person" (1962, 357–58). Unlike the ecstatic, "the prophet is both a recipient and a participant in the divine encounter. . . . By response, pleading, and counterspeech, the prophet reacts to the divine disclosures he receives, turning revelation into dialogue." Indeed, Heschel says, "the prophet's share in the dialogue can often give the decisive turn to the encounter, evoking a new attitude in the divine Person and bringing about a new decision. In a sense, prophecy consists of a revelation of God and a co-revelation of man" (366).

In his biblical defense of free-will theism in *The Openness of God*, Richard Rice (1994) sees profound evidence for the "social and dynamic" (not absolute) God in the numerous (over forty) biblical accounts of God changing his plans, actions, and attitudes in response to human actions and changes. Drawing on these accounts (e.g., God's sparing of Nineveh, Moses and the golden calf, God's expressions of regrets for his own past actions, etc.<sup>43</sup>) Rice contends that "[f]or God to will something, therefore, does not make its occurrence inevitable. Factors can arise that hinder or prevent its realization. Consequently, God may reformulate his plans, or alter his intentions, in response to developments. . . . God is not the only actor on the stage of history. Other agents, too, play a role" (1994, 26, 38).

For Rice, the New Testament corroborates—indeed strengthens—the case for the view that God's interaction with humans is dynamic and reciprocal. If Jesus is taken as the definitive revelation of God, then we ought to think that

God “is personal . . . enjoys relationships, has feelings, makes decisions, formulates plans and acts to fulfill them” (39). It is not impassibility that epitomizes Godliness: “[W]hereas traditional theism seeks to safeguard God’s transcendence by denying divine sensitivity, the open view of God does so by maintaining that his sensitivity and love are infinitely greater than our own” (43).

In sum, the Bible, much like James, presents God as a person within a community of persons who together as co-laborers shape both human and divine history.

## E. GOD AS FINITE

While admittedly, no Biblical writer (or, for that matter, no free-will theist) uses the word *finite* to describe God, the critical question is not James’s choice of terminology, but whether the conceptual understanding James intends to signify by that term matches or fails to match the biblical portrait. Is James’s portrait of a finite God like or unlike the “mighty personality” that we find in the Bible? To answer that question, we must again get clear about what James means when he says that God must be finite.

First, by referring to God as finite, James means that God is not the whole of what is and thus has an external environment. Second, in calling God finite, James means that, since God’s external environment includes agents with contra-causal freedom, God can neither control nor exhaustively foreknow all of these agent’s future choices (and hence is neither omniscient nor omnipotent in the traditional senses of those terms). Third, in calling God finite, James means that God’s external environment is not totally of his own making, and hence the constraints it poses for his knowledge and power are not merely matters of self-limitation. Our question, then, is, To what extent, if any, is the God of the Bible *finite*, given James’s uses of the term?

Surely the Bible agrees with God being finite in the sense that it does not portray him as being the whole of reality. Indeed, it seems as if the Bible would be utterly incoherent (how does God deliver himself, or punish himself?) on any strictly straightforward pantheistic reading.<sup>44</sup>

Is the biblical view of God also finitistic in the sense that it affirms that God exists within a community of agents whose future free choices can be neither foreknown nor controlled? Free-will theists argue for an affirmative answer to this question, thus rejecting on biblical grounds traditional formulations of omniscience and omnipotence.

That biblical writers understood human beings to have significant freedom, free-will theists argue, is evidenced by exhortations such as “Look unto me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth” (Isa. 45:22) and “Behold therefore the

goodness and severity of God: on them which fell, severity; but toward thee, goodness, if thou continue in his goodness: otherwise thou also shalt be cut off" (Rom. 11:22). Indeed, if the entire Christian message is "whoso believeth in Him should not perish" (John 3:16), freedom to choose to believe seems to be presupposed. If this freedom is real, then the human will is one area over which God does not have total control, irresistible influence, or even absolute foreknowledge. God cannot have *absolute* foreknowledge, for "the future is not yet settled" (Rice 1994, 7). God's knowledge of the world is dynamic in that he comes to know events as they take place (26). Even prophecy, Rice argues, is better understood if one assumes that God's knowledge is open (50–52). The traditional view of absolute foreknowledge outstrips its biblical support (55). Yet, Pinnock argues, the open view of divine knowledge does not diminish God's greatness; God "know[s] all things that can be known and know[s] them truly." The doctrine of absolute foreknowledge is not biblical, it is a tradition that is rooted in Greek philosophy (Pinnock 1994, 121–23).

Given biblical support for a community of free agents whose choices are neither controllable nor foreknowable by God, there is reason to reject on biblical grounds the traditional definition of divine omnipotence in that there are indefinitely numerous instances of logically possible states of affairs that God cannot unilaterally bring about—indeed, all those states of affairs that emerge out of the free choices of agents. Accordingly, Pinnock proposes that, from a biblical perspective, "God's power should be understood, not as the power to bring about any logically possible state of affairs, but rather as the power that enables God to deal with any situation that arises" (114).

Though this brief sketch is hardly dispositive of the issue, it appears that a credible biblical case can be made for the claim that God is *finite* in James's second sense of the term.

Finally, is there biblical support for James's view that God is also finite in the sense that his external environment is ultimately not of his own making and hence the constraints that it imposes are not merely a matter of self-limitation? The authors of *The Openness of God* seemingly would answer this question in the negative, since they affirm the traditional doctrine of creation out of nothing.

But what biblical warrant do they provide for this doctrine? They provide little or none, presumably, because they just take the doctrine for granted. Yet, surprisingly, the present consensus among biblical scholars is that the God pictured in the Bible did *not* create out of nothing, but rather imposed order on chaos.<sup>45</sup> For instance, Jon Levenson, the Albert A. List Professor at Harvard University, writes, "[I]t is now generally recognized that creation *ex nihilo* is not an adequate characterization of creation in the Hebrew Bible" and actually "does violence to the plain sense of the text" (1988, xii, 53). And Terence

Fretheim, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, asserts, "God's creative work in this chapter begins with something already there" and Genesis 1:2 "testifies to a pretemporal reality." Fretheim concludes that, "[a]lthough the doctrine of creation out of nothing has often been grounded in this verse, it speaks almost exclusively of the ordering of already existing reality" (1994, 342). Another well-respected biblical scholar agrees with this interpretation of Genesis: "To be sure, the present interpretation precludes the view that the creation accounts in Genesis say nothing about coexistent matter . . . the biblical writers repeat the Babylonian formulation [of the coeternality of divine spirit and cosmic matter] perhaps without full awareness of the theological and philosophical implications" (Speiser 1964, 13). The author of *Harper's Bible Commentary* similarly argues, "The description of the pre-creation state in verse 2 is probably meant to suggest a storm-tossed sea; darkness, a great wind, the watery abyss. God's superiority over the sea . . . may be reminiscent of the ancient Near Eastern mythic portrait of creation as the victory over hostile chaotic forces" (Mays 1988, 87). On the strength of this scholarship, then, a case can be made that the God of the Bible, like the God of William James, has an external environment whose existence and structure are not of his own making.<sup>46</sup>

Even a natural, naïve reading of the Bible seems to support the scholarly consensus. Referring to the creative actions of God, several biblical passages present the imagery of a builder (Isa. 29:16, 51:13; Job 38:4), a potter (Isa. 45:9, 64:8; Rom. 9:21), a gardener (Isa. 51:16, Rom. 11:17–24), and an artisan who skillfully forms his product (Gen. 2:7, Isa. 64:8, Ps. 90:2, Heb. 11:3). The biblical theme is that God "laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thy hands" (Ps. 102:25). This paints a picture, not of a God who wills into existence something from nothing, but of a God who exerts his influence to bring order and beauty from chaotic raw material. Thus the Bible lends support to a Jamesian picture of a God who "works in [what is primordially] an external environment, has limits, and has enemies"<sup>47</sup> and is thus finite in this third sense.

## F. GOD AS REDEMPTIVELY SOVEREIGN

Finally, it seems that the God of the Bible, though finite in the relevant senses, is still redemptively sovereign. Like the God of William James, he can and will ultimately fulfill all of his purposes and promises. From a biblical perspective, this point seems undeniable.

At issue, however, is the way in which God providentially achieves his designs. By divine fiat and control? Definitely not. Indeed, James's analogical

model of God as an expert chess player seems strikingly apropos when we read biblical accounts of God fulfilling his promises in sometimes circuitous ways. For example, in 1 Samuel 15:1, the prophet Samuel tells the king of Israel, Saul, that he is required to obey the words of the Lord. This is what God wants. Yet Saul disobeys God by salvaging some sheep and oxen when he was commanded to utterly destroy. Is the will and work of God frustrated by this? No. God tells Samuel, "I will send thee to Jesse the Bethlehemite: For I have provided me a king among his sons" (1 Sam. 16:1). God prepared another, David, to fulfill his purposes. And though Saul attempts to take David's life, God preserves David, who is eventually anointed king (2 Sam. 2:4). Like James's expert chess player, God may change his method or tact, yet his purposes are unfailingly fulfilled.

Free-will theists, again without acknowledging indebtedness to James, seize on his chess-game model in reconciling God's redemptive sovereignty with human freedom. For instance, Pinnock argues, "God has the power and ability to be an 'ad hoc' God, one who responds and adapts to surprises and to the unexpected. God sets goals for creation and redemption and realizes them ad hoc in history. If Plan A fails God is ready with Plan B" (1994, 113). Bruce Reichenbach similarly argues that, since God's plans are often entrusted to genuinely free agents, "God at different times must adopt different plans and stratagems so that his ultimate purpose, the unification of the cosmos under Christ, can be achieved" (1986, 118). The narrative in 1 Kings 22:1–40 is instructive on this point. When King Ahab tries to foil God's plan to kill him in battle by disguising himself, God ensures that an archer unknowingly strikes the king with a mortal wound. Interestingly, God's original plan was to convince King Ahab that he was going to be victorious in battle, and when Micaiah foils this plan by disclosing the secret deception, God finds another way. Therefore, although God's original plan is foiled, he is prepared with (or creatively devises) an alternative means to ensure that his promise of punishment (1 Kings 21:19) is fulfilled. Paul teaches that we should believe that "what (God) had promised, he was also able to perform" (Rom. 4:21).

The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob gives grand promises and then participates in guiding history toward the fulfillment of those promises.<sup>48</sup> He has given reason for us to have faith that eventually he will accomplish all his purposes. This is a God, like the one who survives James's critique, who can guarantee that "shipwreck and dissolution (are) not the absolutely final things."

Though nothing like a full case has or could be made here, I believe enough evidence has been presented to warrant our seriously considering the claim that the God of William James bears significant resemblance to the God of the Bible. James, of course, was not unaware of this. He made it clear that, in rejecting the God of the philosophers, he was not *thereby* rejecting the God of the Bible:



I must parenthetically ask you to distinguish the notion of the absolute carefully from that of another object with which it is liable to become heedlessly entangled. That other object is the 'God' of common people in their religion. . . . The God of our popular Christianity is but one member of a pluralistic system. He and we stand outside of each other, just as the devil, the saints and the angels stand outside of both of us. I can hardly conceive of anything more different from the absolute than the God, say, of David or of Isaiah. *That* God is an essentially finite being *in* the cosmos, not with the cosmos in him. . . . If it should prove probable that the absolute does not exist, it will not follow in the slightest degree that a God like that of David, Isaiah, or Jesus may not exist, or may not be the most important existence in the universe for us to acknowledge. (1977, 54)<sup>49</sup>

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### Notes

1. Among the prominent thinkers who have drawn this distinction are Blaise Pascal, Martin Buber, and Jehuda Halevi. Pascal believed in a personal God "who has chosen to dwell within the history of human kind." During his spiritual conversion experience, Pascal penned these words: "From about half-past ten in the evening until about half-past twelve. Fire. God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob. Not of the philosophers and intellectuals. The God of Jesus Christ" (O'Connell 1987, 96–99). Halevi argued that philosophy's practice of inference has led to false notions of God, which includes the belief that "God neither benefits nor injures, nor knows anything of our prayers or offerings, our obedience or disobedience" (1965, 113–14). In the words of Buber, "[T]he man who says, 'I love in God the father of man,' has essentially already renounced the God of the philosophers in his innermost heart" (1958, 10). For a rigorous defense of the claim that these two God-descriptions cannot refer to the same being, see Samuelson (1972). See also Kenny (1979, esp. chap. 10, "The God of Reason and the God of Faith").

2. I use the definite description "*the* god of the philosophers" to refer to God-concepts that are significantly constituted by attributes derived through rational theologizing without explicit basis in biblical revelation, including, most notably, those attributes enumerated in the text corresponding to this note. So understood, the description encompasses both the God of scholastic theism and the God of nineteenth-century transcendental idealism—the two God-concepts that bear the brunt of James's pragmatic critique. There are, of course, significant differences between the various gods denominated by my description. For instance, the God of Thomas Aquinas is a person while the God of F. H. Bradley is not.

3. To mention just a few such references: Josh. 3:10, I Sam. 17:26, Jer. 10:10, Hos. 1:10, Acts 14:15, I Thess. 1:9.

4. Of course, for James logical consistency was a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for philosophical adequacy. He recognized the limits of logic and affirmed that, after one has pushed reason as far as one can, there is still something left over that can only be "pointed at" or "acted on" (Gavin 1992, 44).

5. In Suckiel's view, James should not be understood as proposing a pragmatic criterion of cognitive meaning. Rather, pragmatic meaning already presupposes cognitive meaning and is "an

attempt to reorient the approach to meaning in ways that [James] considers to be more fruitful and more profound" (Suckiel 1982, 42–44).

6. Levinson unpacks this idea in terms of "interest": "As James sees it, there simply is no sort of knowledge or activity (or, obviously, expectation or hope) that is disinterested or indifferent. Every specifiable aspect of human behavior attends to some need, responds to some problematic situation, is committed to some tendency or other: in sum, holds some interest. Indeed, as I have indicated, the chance of salvation for James is the chance that our outstanding problems will be solved, and the chance that our outstanding problems will be solved is the chance that our interests will be adequately served" (1978, 10–11).

7. James uses this epithet to describe classical Christian theology in a letter to Charles Strong dated 9 April 1907.

8. Though with a decidedly different world view than James, Sigmund Freud similarly critiqued classical formulations of the divine attributes: "Philosophers stretch the meaning of words until they retain scarcely anything of their original sense. They give the name of 'God' to some vague abstraction which they have created for themselves; having done so they can pose before all the world as . . . believers in God, and they can even boast that they have recognized a higher, purer concept of God, notwithstanding their God is now nothing more than an insubstantial shadow and no longer the mighty personality of religious doctrines" (1961, 32).

9. James, himself, admitted as much in his very next lecture (perhaps in response to criticisms); he acknowledged that the metaphysical attributes *do* fulfill an aesthetic function: "I spoke, therefore, too contemptuously of the pragmatic uselessness of the famous scholastic list of attributes of the deity, for they have one use which I neglected to consider. The eloquent passage in which Newman enumerates them puts us on the track of it. Intoning them as he would intone a cathedral service, he shows how high is their aesthetic value. It enriches our bare piety to carry these exalted and mysterious verbal additions just as it enriches a church to have an organ and old brasses, marbles and frescoes and stained windows. Epithets lend an atmosphere and overtones to our devotion. They are like a hymn of praise and service of glory, and may sound the more sublime for being incomprehensible" (1985, 361–62).

10. Due to spatial constraints, I will not formulate these arguments in premise and conclusion form. However, I will identify the component(s) (e.g., criterion of pragmatic meaning 4) from which each such argument might proceed.

11. It should be here acknowledged that in *A Pluralistic Universe* (1977), James does not critique the Absolute of nineteenth-century transcendental idealism nor the God of scholastic theism explicitly in terms of the criterion of pragmatic meaning. Rather, he introduces "intimacy" and "foreignness" as alternative categories for determining philosophical and religious adequacy. However, the two categories seem to overlap significantly (if they are not completely interchangeable), since both are grounded in lived experience and its experiential consequences. For simplicity's sake, I use James's criterion of pragmatic meaning as my critical framework throughout this piece. For an excellent interpretative analysis of "intimacy" and "foreignness" as Jamesian categories for philosophical evaluation, see Lamberth (1997).

12. Perry does not provide the source—though quotes around it come from James's marginalia in copies of Spencer's books: "James attacks Spencer's scientific materialism . . . because it renders the universe meaningless, and he accounts for Spencer's mistaken belief on the grounds that he developed only the aesthetic side of the argument and neglected its practical side" (Seigfried 1990, 45).

13. Given James's understanding of what it means to be a person and his insistence that God be personal, Richard Gale argues that it follows that God must be a temporal and social being: "[A] highest being . . . must be temporal. Such a being must be a person, but only a temporal being can qualify as a person" (1991, 92). Levinson notes "James's position that persons are historical, psychophysical organisms with empirically describable points of view." He also notes James's view that the body is the locus of personal experience (1978, 88–90). Thus, if James's assertion that God

must be personal is taken seriously, and if this definition applies to all personal beings, God must be temporal, social, and perhaps even embodied in some sense.

14. These predictive and ensuing practical consequences, which thus satisfy the fourth and fifth criteria of pragmatic meaning are summed up well by George Graham: “[God] is able to have an influence upon us and, in order to achieve our destiny, we have to open ourselves to his influence. God is personal, and he is able to make demands upon us. Our own being is fulfilled or not depending on whether or not we are responsive to God’s demands. The cognitive content of James’s God in his reconciling hypothesis is summed up in a proposition: God is real since he produces real effects” (1992, 211; see also James 1985, 407).

15. The belief that God is a person and thus capable of entering into a personal relationship with us not only is pragmatically meaningful according to James, but also serves to provide pragmatic warrant for faith, as James argues in “The Will to Believe”: “Now to most of us religion comes in a still farther way that makes a veto on our active faith even more illogical. The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having a personal form. The universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here. . . . We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if the appeal of religion to us might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way. To take a trivial illustration: just as a man who in a company of gentlemen made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed no one’s word without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn—so here, one who should shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods’ acquaintance” (1979c, 31).

16. Indeed, that “no concrete particular of experience should alter its complexion in consequence of a God being there” James finds incredible, not merely on pragmatic grounds, but on instinctual and logical grounds as well.

17. James says that “notwithstanding my own inability to accept either popular Christianity or scholastic theism, I suppose that my belief that in communion with the Ideal new force comes into the world, and new departures are made here below, subjects me to being classed among the supernaturalists of the piecemeal or crasser type” (1985, 410).

18. Though James apparently thinks otherwise, he acknowledges that “it may well prove that the sphere of influence in prayer is subjective exclusively, and that what is immediately changed is only the mind of the praying person. But however our opinion of prayer’s effects may come to be limited by criticism, religion . . . must stand or fall by the persuasion that effects of some sort genuinely do occur” (1985, 367).

19. James said that “the whole drift” of his education led him to believe that “human-divine continuity was *transactional*—that is, salvific events were codependent on the operations of both human and nonhuman agents” (cited in Levinson 1981, 163).

20. James models a world consisting of human selves (or individual unities of consciousness) who are continuous with or even constituents of increasingly more inclusive selves, of which the most enveloping of all is God. Though he refers to this model as being *roughly* within the pantheistic field of vision and even sometimes calls the model “pluralistic pantheism” (as opposed to monistic pantheism or the philosophy of the absolute), his view is certainly not a pantheism in the strict sense in that he posits an external environment for God. One commentator sees the model principally as an instrument for affirming God’s immanence and intimacy: “This so-called pluralistic pantheism is not at all a final point of view in itself: it is rather another instrument produced to purify traditional theism from the effects of dualism . . . [and] a device to assert divine immanence against traditional insistence on divine transcendence” (Brennan 1968, 119). His calling his model “pantheistic” might also be seen as a concession to his several audiences. Pantheism, while in decline, was still regnant at the time and especially at Oxford, England, where James delivered his

lectures on pluralism. Richard Bernstein, in his introduction to the Harvard edition of *A Pluralistic Universe*, writes that “in 1908 the influence and seductiveness of idealism were on the wane, and [James] obviously enjoyed the opportunity to deal it a death blow” though James did want to salvage “what is sound and true in idealism while rejecting what is false and misguided” (James 1977, xv). The intimacy of idealistic pantheism is arguably what James was attempting to salvage. But compare Miles Gerald Bradford (1977), who interprets James’s later writings, particularly *A Pluralistic Universe*, as presenting a genuinely pantheistic view of God that differs substantially from his earlier theistic conception. Bradford argues that James’s earlier theistic conception is philosophically and religiously superior to what he takes to be James’s final viewpoint. Levinson also identifies James’s later viewpoint as a pantheism, explaining that “James wanted to articulate a pantheism that admitted real chaos on the one hand but real reparation of chaos on the other.” He says, “James’s theism was a pantheism because it pictured whatever was conscious as continuous in a concatenated way, not because it pictured everything participating in one collective consciousness. Simultaneous characters participating in the same communities overlapped each other in their being—in their activities and their lives” (1981, 205, 258).

21. Gavin states, “So far, James has identified radical empiricism as pluralistic pantheism and asserted that reality is broader than the knowable. . . . James realized that his own presentation, while it discloses reality, at the same time conceals, that is, is only itself a retrospective presentation, through conceptual symbols” (1992, 50–51). He quotes James, “As long as one continues *talking*, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can’t come about by talking. It is an *act*: to make you return to life, I must . . . deafen you to talk. . . . Or I must *point*, point to the mere *that* of life” (James 1977, 131). This would naturally explain why James used personal experiences to explain religiosity in the *Varieties* and why he attacked the distancing of the Absolute, it was merely a verbal construct devoid of human contact.

22. For a rigorous working out of these implications of the doctrine of divine timelessness, see Nelson Pike (1970).

23. Gavin argues that this point naturally flows from James’s entire metaphysic, as well as from his epistemological claim that “reality is broader than the knowable” (1992, 51).

24. “Our vision may be considerably less encompassing than that of the Divine, but what is important is that this is a difference of degree, not of kind. The real world, the world of true reality, is the very world that we are in the process of working to better. God is part of that world and not the inhabitant of a foreign domain. Thus the urgency is in no sense drained away from the projects of our present existence by tying it to a realm that encourages us to accept whatever is because it is an element of perfection in a world that transcends our own” (Vanden Burgt 1981, 93).

25. Though James does not here explicitly identify exactly what entities and principles he takes to be co-original with God, in a 1904 response to a questionnaire from James Pratt regarding his personal religious belief and experience, he explicitly includes “agencies and their activities” among the ultimate spiritual realities. He wrote, “‘God,’ to me is not the only spiritual reality to believe in. Religion means primarily a universe of spiritual relations surrounding the earthly practical ones, not merely relations of ‘value’, but of *agencies and their activities*” (1920, 213; emphasis added).

Compare what he says in *A Pluralistic Universe*: “[T]he pluralistic view which I prefer to adopt is willing to believe that there may ultimately never be an all-form at all, that the substance of reality may never get totally collected, that some of it may remain outside of the largest combination of it ever made, and that a distributive form of reality, the each-form, is logically as acceptable and empirically as probable as the all-form commonly acquiesced in as so obviously the self-evident thing. . . . Yet because God is not the absolute, but is himself a part when the system is conceived pluralistically, his functions can be taken as not wholly dissimilar to those of the other smaller parts,—*as similar to our functions consequently* (1977, 143–44; emphasis added).

26. “I do not believe, picturing the whole as I do, that even if a supreme soul exists, it embraces all the details of the universe in a single absolute act either of thought or of will. In other words I disbelieve in the omniscience of the Deity, and in his omnipotence as well. The facts of the struggle

seem too deeply characteristic of the whole frame of things for me not to suspect that hindrance and experiment go all the way through" (James 1988, 5). In a letter to Charles Strong on 9 April 1907, James wrote: "The 'omniscient' and 'omnipotent' God of theology I regard as a disease of the philosophy shop."

27. Vanden Burgt argues that James was not "so much interested in the technical question of the incompatibility of divine omniscience and human freedom as he was interested in the consequences for human life that followed from a religious orientation centered on the Absolute" (1981, 92).

28. James explains this idea more fully in his famous chess-game analogy, which is presented in "The Dilemma of Determinism": "The creator's plan of the universe would thus be left blank to many of its actual details, but all possibilities would be marked down. The realization of some of these would be left absolutely to chance; that is, would only be determined when the moment of realization came. Other possibilities would be *contingently* determined; that is, their decision would have to wait till it was seen how the matters of absolute chance fell out. But the rest of the plan, including its final upshot, would be rigorously determined once for all. So the creator himself would not need to know all the details of actuality until they came; and at any time his own view of the world would be a view partly of facts and partly of possibilities, exactly as ours is now" (1979c, 139–40).

29. By an *ontological* constraint, I mean a limit or condition necessitated by the very structure of ultimate being, as opposed to a merely *logical* constraint, which I take to be conceptual only.

30. "Not why evil should exist at all, but how can we lessen the actual amount of it . . ." (James 1977, 60). Compare James's statement in *Essays in Radical Empiricism*: "If there be a God, he is no absolute all-experier, but simply the experier of widest actual conscious span. . . . Ethically [metaphysical pluralism] takes for me a stronger hold on reality than any other philosophy I know of—it being essentially a *social* philosophy, a philosophy of 'co,' in which conjunctions do the work. But my primary reason for advocating it . . . is its matchless intellectual economy. It gets rid, not only of the standing 'problems' that monism engenders ('problem of evil,' 'problem of freedom,' and the like), but of other metaphysical mysteries and paradoxes as well (1978, 99; cited in Levinson 1981, 180).

31. Vanden Burgt insightfully states, "The same concerns that led James to affirm the existence of God also shape his conception of God. The primary purpose that the existence of God serves in his philosophy is as a support for the strenuous mood. God is a moral stimulant. If this is why God is needed, then His nature must be so conceived as to allow man a morally stimulating role in the world. James opposes those conceptions of God which he feels deprive man of this role" (1981, 87). James also believed that God could not be wholly other than man because "God must need us just as we need him in our mutual work. The result is a universe of maximum moral stimulation" (97). Compare Brennan, who has argued that "from a 'purely logical' point of view, theism and atheism are equally admissible; but judged from other points of view—the moral, the spiritual, and the metaphysical—theism is the incomparably superior belief and leads to the better life for man" (1968, 116).

32. Compare Barnard (1997, 251–52): "For James, this finite God offers numerous theo-metaphysical and ethical advantages. First, the finite God, as a theological construct, reflects the moral intuitions of many individuals that God is willing and able to assist in humanity's moral struggles, but not to such an extent that human ethical responsibility is undercut. Second, the finite God offers a theological understanding of the divine that is more concrete, and more personal, than the abstract, impersonal Absolute of nineteenth-century philosophical idealism. James's finite God is a loving, interactive God, a God who is related to us, who cares about us, who is intimately linked with us. Third, because the theological understanding of the finite God stresses the loving, personal nature of the divine, it maintains a type of continuity with other theistic speculations, even if it breaks with those theological speculations that emphasize God's complete ontological otherness. James's finite God may be distinct from other individual beings, but is not ontologically

separate from them. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, the finite God, who is understood to be 'finite, either in power or knowledge, or in both at once,' is a bold attempt to solve the logical dilemma that plagues classical theism: how to resolve the fact that God is both all-powerful and all-good, and yet still permits evil to exist."

33. Linda Simon, James's most recent biographer, related his feelings about this subject: "Personal hardship, he told his audience, only served to give life 'a keener zest.' In fact, if life were easy and comforting, it would be less interesting. 'If this life be not a real fight in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is not better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it feels like a real fight—as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all,' he added, recalling his own nightmares, 'to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears'" (1998, 269).

34. James acknowledges that the need for religious security is not characteristic of "tender-minded" persons only. Indeed, he says that "there are moments of discouragement in us all, when we are sick of self and tired of vainly striving. Our own life breaks down, and we fall into the attitude of the prodigal son. We mistrust the chances of things. We want a universe where we can just give up, fall on our father's neck, and be absorbed into the absolute life as a drop of water melts into the river or the sea" (1975, 140).

James recorded his feelings in response to a state of despair and deep melancholy, which he, himself, experienced, as documented in the *Varieties*: "James claimed that the attack had 'a religious bearing . . . I mean that the fear was so invasive and powerful that if I had not clung to scripture-texts like 'The eternal God is my refuge,' etc. 'Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy-laden.' etc., 'I am the resurrection and the life,' etc., I think I should have grown really insane." This is an obvious instantiation of the comfort and security he's talking about (cited in Simon 1998, 127).

35. In an 8 January 1882 letter to Thomas Davidson, James writes, "In saying 'God exists' all I imply is that my purposes are cared for by a mind so powerful as on the whole to control the drift of the Universe. This is as much polytheism as monotheism."

36. Whatever James means by *victory* in this context (and he doesn't make it clear), I take it that it does not involve any ultimate divine overriding of an individual's freedom. Perhaps, for God, *victory* means helping each person realize the highest possibilities to which she freely chooses to aspire.

37. Despite James's consistent affirmation of the pragmatic value of belief in God's redemptive sovereignty, he is maddeningly (and maybe studiously) vague over precisely what this means. For example, he doesn't make it clear whether it involves some mode of personal immortality or, if so, what mode. In this connection, I should note that the strength of his own belief in the doctrine underwent considerable development. In his 1898 Ingersoll Lecture entitled "Human Immortality," James argued that the brain-function theory then in vogue does not preclude the possibility of personal immortality (1982). Though early on James was not personally "keen" on the idea of immortality, he became so "when he felt the rush of the creative impulse" because "he disliked the thought of being interrupted" (Perry 1935, 2:355–56). In 1904, James began to believe in immortality, not just as a possibility, but as a "probability." In a letter to Carl Stumpf, he wrote: "I never felt the rational need of immortality as you seem to feel it; but as I grow older I confess that I feel the practical need of it much more than I ever did before; and that combines with reasons, not exactly the same as your own, to give me a growing faith in its reality." (345). Why such a change of heart? "Because," James says, "I am just getting fit to live" (1920, 214).

38. It is important to keep in mind that this composite portrait of God does not necessarily match in *every* component that of any particular religious philosopher such as Aquinas or Scotus or even Royce, though many philosophers, including the three mentioned, affirm substantial portions of the portrait. Aquinas, for instance, affirms divine timelessness, but rejects impersonality.

39. For a fuller (though hardly complete) attempt to show that apparently conflicting scriptural passages are really compatible with a Jamesian-type understanding of God, see Rice (1994).

40. The Bible abounds with general assurances of God's responsiveness to petitionary prayer. For instance, consider the assurance of Jesus in his Sermon on the Mount: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Matt. 7:7-11). Or, consider the promise given in the epistle of James: "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (James 1:5).

41. Genesis, for instance, contains a remarkable account of a dialogue between God and Moses, in which "the Lord spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Gen. 33:11, 12-23).

42. For further examples of conversational interaction between God and human beings, see Isaiah 6:8-13, Exodus 3:2-4:17, Amos 7:1-9, and Acts 9:3-6.

43. Through Jonah, God told the people of Ninevah that he would destroy the city in forty days (Jon. 3:4). But the people repented—the entire city fasted and prayed (3:10). In response, God stayed his hand (4:2). When God told Moses that he was going to destroy the Israelites, Moses interceded and God relented (Exod. 32:12-14). Abraham before Moses had also petitioned God to change his mind; Abraham pled for the people of Sodom. Although the city was eventually destroyed, Abraham did succeed in persuading God to save the city if he found there but ten righteous people (Gen. 18:23-32).

44. There are, of course, some dissenters from this claim. For instance, in his *That Which Is* (1955), Alfred Aiken uses the Bible extensively to support his pantheistic metaphysics, even though he does not specifically claim that the biblical God is pantheistic. John Hunt, in his *Pantheism and Christianity* (1884) claims that Christianity and pantheism can be reconciled and that "Christianity will be a great gainer by the reconciliation" (iv). He concedes, however, that because "there is no systematic theology in the Scriptures . . . [w]e do not . . . expect to find more than occasional passages which may have a Pantheistic meaning" (365).

45. Admittably, the consensus is still not unanimous. For representative dissenting opinions, see Genesis 1:1, Keil and Delitzsch (1983, 46-47), and Vawter (1969, 172-73).

46. James goes further in including "agencies and their activities" in "this original" reality while the biblical writers are silent on this point and explicit identifying no more than "chaos" or "chaotic matter" as God's primordial environment.

47. One might wonder whether or not having an external environment implies that God has limits. But a case that God is limited in what he can accomplish due to his environment seems to be quite consistent with (if not indicated by) scriptural texts. For example, in Judges 5:23, the text says, "Curse Meroz, says the angel of the Lord, curse bitterly its inhabitants, because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty." This seems to imply that God needs the help of the "inhabitants" in order for his plan to be satisfied. Moreover, it seems to imply that, in this case, his plan was not fulfilled due to the lack of help provided by the inhabitants. It is clear that God cannot carry out any plans that rely on the freedom of agents external to himself without those agents choosing in the right way. Thus, God is limited by the freedom of the agents in his external environment. Similarly, it seems to follow from the above passage that God can have enemies. The Lord is said to be "against the mighty." It would seem that being against the Lord is enough to count one as his enemy. Moreover, it seems clear that, if agents have freedom to choose whether to follow the Lord, then they also have freedom to decide to be the Lord's enemy. Furthermore, in at least one place the scriptures tell us that God has enemies: "[W]hosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God" (James 4:4). That God has enemies implies

his lack of control over the wills of agents external to himself, thus implying that he is limited by an external environment: "The biblical narrative plainly reveals that God has rivals and has to struggle with them."

48. See Joshua 23:11, "[F]or the Lord . . . fighteth for you, as he hath promised you"; 1 Kings 8:56, "[T]here hath not failed one word of all his good promise, which he promised by the hand of Moses his servant"; Jeremiah 33:14, God said "I will perform that good thing which I have promised unto the house of Israel"; Titus 1:2, "In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began."

49. Théodore Flournoy, a colleague of James, may have been among the first to recognize that, while William James's conception of God differs significantly from that of orthodox Christian theology, it doesn't follow that it therefore departs from the God of the Bible: "[A]lthough James's philosophical ideas are certainly far removed from those of ordinary theologians, they are in at least as good, and are often in much better accord with the spirit of the Scriptures. Was not Christ in a sense the first pragmatist when he declared that 'by their fruits ye shall know them,' and that the truth of his doctrine was to be judged by putting it in practice? Did he ever treat the problem of evil other than pluralistically; quite as James treats it? Surely Christ did not teach that God is an 'Absolute' that includes and condones all the evils and miseries of this world, but rather that He is the Father, the great Ally who desires our welfare and who demands only our co-operation in resisting and casting out all evil. . . . I would point out once more that the great idea which dominates James's religious moralism,—that human effort and divine power must collaborate for the salvation of the world,—is after all no more than a development of the thought of the apostle: 'we are laborers together with God'" ([1917]1969, 164–65).

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