

NO HOPE FOR THE EVIDENTIALIST:
ON ZIMMERMAN'S *BELIEF: A PRAGMATIC PICTURE*

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While Aaron Zimmerman's *Belief* is rightly subtitled "*A Pragmatic Picture*," it concerns a set of topics about which pragmatists themselves are not always in agreement. Indeed, while there has been a noticeable pushback against evidentialism in contemporary analytic epistemology, the view can at times seem ascendant within the literature on pragmatism itself.¹ In particular, Peirceans tend to presuppose something closer to evidentialism when they accuse Jamesians of taking pragmatism in an unproductive and irrationalist direction.² Consequently, while Zimmerman rightly suggests that we can expect to find "epistemic scolds" outside the pragmatist camp, James (and Jamesians) is all too familiar with such "in house" scolding from Peirce and his followers.³

Zimmerman notes that both Peirce and James seem to make heavy use of Bain's work on belief, where "preparedness to act upon what we affirm is admitted on all hands to be the sole, the genuine, the unmistakable criterion of belief."⁴ Indeed, Peirce went so far as to claim that pragmatism was "scarce more than a corollary" of Bain's account.⁵ Nevertheless, even if Peirceans claim to adopt something like the pragmatist *descriptive* view about what beliefs are,⁶ they differ considerably from James and Zimmerman on certain *normative* issues about when belief is an appropriate attitude to take.⁷ (Though it will be argued below that these descriptive and normative views can be difficult to combine.)

This split goes back at least as far as Peirce's reaction to James's "The Will to Believe," which Peirce "scorned"⁸ as a view that said "Oh, I could not believe so-and-so, because I should be wretched if I did."⁹ Pragmatists of the more Peircean bent have shared this scorn for the suggestion that our beliefs could be justified for pragmatic reasons, but Zimmerman's book gives us reason to think that we should take a Jamesian rather than a Peircean approach to these issues.

Indeed, Zimmerman's central claim, "To believe something at a given time is to be so disposed that you would use that information to guide those relatively attentive and self-controlled activities you might engage in at that time, whether these activities involve bodily

movement or not,” applies directly to this “in house” dispute among us pragmatists over the question of whether we should be allowed to believe in things when we aren’t evidentially compelled.¹⁰

In particular, Zimmerman gives us a detailed and well-motivated proposal about the connection between belief and action. As a result, those who think that some epistemically less-committed attitude is what we should adopt in the sorts of cases James focuses on need to show (1) how the (dispositions to) action(s) associated with this alternative attitude are relevantly different from the ones associated with belief and (2) how these (dispositions to) action(s) can do the practical work that belief does in James’s cases.

REGULATIVE ASSUMPTIONS AND SELF-PROMOTING BELIEFS

There are two sorts of cases that James focuses on when he criticizes the sort of evidentialism that Peirce never lost sympathy for.

- (1) Those cases where believing *P* in advance of compelling evidence for *P* contributes to the ultimate success of our epistemic practices.
- (2) Those cases where believing *P* in advance of compelling evidence for *P* contributes to the truth of *P* itself.

James presents us with the most explicit case of the first type by asking us to imagine a God who only revealed himself to those who had faith in God’s existence already,¹¹ but cases of this type (or at least closely related to it) run through James’s work, most notably in his discussion (in, among others, “The Sentiment of Rationality” and “The Will to Believe”) of the importance of “faith” in the uniformity of nature, or in truth itself, for our scientific practice.¹² Peirce very much focuses on such attitudes as well.

In particular, Peirce thinks there are a number of presuppositions necessary for us to engage in various types of inquiry, and so, even if inquiry could ultimately produce evidence for them, they would still need to be accepted in advance of the evidence. Misak describes his position as follows:

[Peirce] thinks that there are “regulative assumptions” that we have to accept. For instance, we must assume that, in general, our

observations can be explained and that there are real things whose characters are both independent of our beliefs about them and can be discovered through empirical investigation.¹³

Similar “indispensability arguments” relate to our need to assume things like the law of bivalence, the existence of the external world, or the uniformity of nature. Transcendentalists like Royce thought that our need to presuppose such things was grounds for thinking the relevant propositions to be necessarily true. James, a committed fallibilist, doubted the necessary truth of such presuppositions but still saw the essential role they played in our practice (and lack of compelling evidence against them) as underwriting our entitlement to believe them. Peirce, on the other hand, took even this position to be too strong. As Misak puts it, “Peirce was himself very interested in the indispensable. But he disagreed with James’s idea that if we need something to be true, that warrants us in believing that it is true.”¹⁴ In the absence of compelling evidence, we are not entitled to believe such assumptions, and we should only “hope” that they were true. In Peirce’s words, “When we discuss a vexed question, we *hope* that there is some ascertainable truth about it, and that the discussion is not to go on forever and to no purpose.”¹⁵ For instance, while some might think we are entitled to actually *believe* that every proposition is either true or false, Peirce’s view is, according to Misak, only that:

for any matter into which we are inquiring [we must assume that] we would find an answer to the question that is pressing on us. Otherwise, it would be pointless to inquire into the issue: “the only assumption upon which [we] can act rationally is the hope of success” (CP 5.357; 1868). Thus we need to assume the principle of bivalence for any p , p is either true or false—holds for any question into which we are inquiring.

But it is important to see that Peirce does not want to make any claim about special logical status (that the principle of bivalence is a logical truth); nor even that it is true in some plainer sense; nor that the world is such that the principle of bivalence must hold. The

principle of bivalence, Peirce says, is taken by logicians to be a law of logic by a “saltus”—by an unjustified leap.¹⁶

Like those who thought we were only entitled to “working hypotheses” in such cases,¹⁷ Peirce took there to be another, more epistemically modest attitude that could take the place of belief and underwrite our practices just as effectively.

Misak herself admits that “there will be questions in the air about whether the propositional attitude envisioned by Peirce is one that makes good sense,” but she doesn’t really make an effort to answer such questions.¹⁸ Her inclination to sidestep this issue shouldn’t be surprising, since the requisite attitude *is* (at least if you are a pragmatist) hard to make sense of. The resolute “Cartesian” could argue that there could be an attitude that guides our behavior exactly like beliefs do, but as long as you withheld the mental affirmation “that’s true” from it, it would never rise to the status of being a belief. On this more Cartesian view of belief, being a belief rather than, say, a working hypothesis, is solely a matter of having something like a gold star mentally attached to it, and the evidentialist can argue that it is precisely this practice of mentally assigning gold stars that needs to be exclusively constrained by our evidence.

However, pragmatists are more inclined to think that if it looks like a duck, swims like a duck, and quacks like a duck, then it probably *is* a duck, and I think it’s a good question whether we can make sense of such attitudes that are meant to take the role of belief without actually being them. After all, just what could this “rational hope” be that distinguished it from belief? The assumption seems to be that in such cases the information associated with such rational hopes is guiding our controlled and attentive behavior (as inquiry is controlled and attentive, if anything is), so why shouldn’t we treat the information as believed? Just refusing to say “yes” when asked if you believe something doesn’t seem like enough to make you stop believing it, and it may seem to veer perilously close to the sorts of “paper doubts” that Peirce accuses Cartesians of promoting when he

enjoins us to “not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.”¹⁹

Of course, if the attitude in question *really* was just *hope*, then there wouldn't be such a question of making sense of the behavioral differences. However, given what the behavioral differences between belief and hope are, it seems clear that actual hope, at least as it's commonly understood, can't play the role Peirce needs for it here. For instance, when I buy a lottery ticket, I certainly hope that I will win, but I most certainly don't believe it, and my behavior clearly manifests this difference. If I actually believed that I would win, I'd buy a new computer, start looking for a new apartment, and do a whole host of things which my hope doesn't lead me to do. Hoping that *P* is true is possibly entailed by, but certainly does not entail, believing that *P* and hoping that you are right, and it may be this latter combination of attitudes, which includes belief as a component, that we should actually expect in many of these regulative cases.²⁰

While hope can seem too weak for our regulative ideals, its failure as a replacement for belief is even more manifest in the second group of cases that James discusses. James famously focuses on the case of a mountain climber whose confidence that he can make a perilous leap over a yawning chasm contributes to his success in making it,²¹ and Zimmerman presents a similar case that lays out some of its important features a little more clearly:

Imagine that you're scheduled to compete against nine opponents in a running race, opponents you know to be similar to you in both speed and endurance. Indeed, suppose that you have run exactly one hundred races against these very opponents and that each one of you has won exactly ten of these one hundred events. But here's something else that you know: prior to running the ten races that you managed to win, you were firmly convinced that you would win. A quick survey of your opponents reveals their similarity in this regard: each of them was firmly convinced that she would win on those occasions on which she won. A pattern emerges: when a runner among the ten is convinced she will win, she still more often loses than wins. (It has always been the case that three or more

runners were convinced they would win, and who wins among them is for all intents and purposes random.) But no runner wins unless she believes outright that she will prevail.²²

In these “self-promoting” cases, it’s precisely *confidence* in the truth of *P* that is important, and I can *hope* that *P* occurs without being confident in it at all.²³ If for some reason I was forced into a boxing match with Mike Tyson, I might *hope* to make it out of the first round, but I wouldn’t believe that I would, and indeed, I’d be almost certain that I wouldn’t. (And to return to the Zimmerman example above, while *every* runner probably “hopes” they will win, it is only the ones that *believe* they will win that ever do.)

Misak suggests that it’s merely a “side-issue” whether “adopting this kind of attitude towards the proposition ‘this chasm is jumpable’ . . . would be sufficient to instill the confidence required to successfully jump the chasm.”²⁴ However, even if it is a side issue to the purely *exegetical* question of whether Peirce “pulls apart the desirability of *p*’s being true from the rationality of believing *p* or from the likelihood of its truth,” if we are looking in to the *plausibility* of the view Peirce purportedly endorses, the question remains central.²⁵ Furthermore, the answer to the question of whether hope can do requisite work here is pretty clearly, “no.” Misak doesn’t really address this worry any further, pawning the question off on Santayana, who seems to just miss James’s point, essentially denying that such self-promoting cases exist when he argues:

Why does belief that you can jump a ditch help you to jump it? Because it is a symptom of the fact that you could jump it, that your legs were fit and that the ditch was two yards wide and not twenty. A rapid and just appreciation of these facts has given you your confidence, or at least has made it reasonable . . . otherwise you would have been a fool and got a ducking for it.²⁶

Santayana’s analysis is pretty weak even in James’s scenario, but when applied to Zimmerman’s version, it’s even clearer just how flawed it is. If three of the ten runners believe they will win in a

given race, and all three have the same evidence (and thus the same “rapid and just appreciation of the facts”), then it’s hard to see how the winner could be any more reasonable in their belief than the other two “fools” who get whatever turns out to be the runner’s equivalent of a “ducking.”

The same sorts of worries come up for “working hypotheses,” “assumptions,” or the other attitudes typically presented as the more epistemically responsible alternatives to belief in these cases. All these attitudes seem too weak, and so we need something a little more potent to take the place of the self-promoting belief in these contexts.

On the other hand, if the evidentialist can find an attitude that can do all the work of belief in these cases, then it isn’t entirely clear why we shouldn’t go for a more rigorous evidentialism and adopt this new mystery attitude in place of many of our other everyday beliefs, such as that the Roman Empire conquered Greece before they conquered Gaul, that Philadelphia is famous for its cheesesteak, or that there is milk in my fridge. If, as pragmatists assume, we are *fallible* about most, if not all, topics, and if there is an epistemically more modest, but still practically effective, alternative attitude that we could live our lives by, why wouldn’t taking on this attitude more generally be the epistemically responsible thing?²⁷ The Peircean thus seems to face a dilemma. If the mystery attitude is substantially weaker than belief, then it can’t do the work we need it to do for our regulative assumptions and self-promoting beliefs, but if it *isn’t* substantially weaker than belief, we face the question of why adopting it more globally isn’t the more rational thing to do.

BELIEF AND CONTEXT

One might be able to avoid this dilemma by suggesting that what distinguishes belief from the mystery attitude is not so much its *strength* as its *scope*. As Peirce puts it, “Belief does not make us act at once, but puts us into such a condition that we shall behave in some certain way, when the occasion arises.”²⁸ Beliefs guide our behavior in all situations, while the new mystery attitude may be more contextually constrained. As Zimmerman puts it:

A full belief is poised to guide any attentive, well-regulated action or deliberation to which it might prove relevant. States of acceptance, assumption, and pretense are more circumscribed in their effects.²⁹

So, to use another example from Zimmerman, Daniel Day Lewis doesn't *believe* he is Abraham Lincoln, since the "I'm Abraham Lincoln" information only guides some of his behavior (his acting in the scene and some of his behavior on set [answering to "Mr. Lincoln," etc.]), while it does not produce other behavior that the real belief would (such as refusing to shoot scenes for this Spielberg fellow because he has a country to run).

Perhaps James's mountain climber needs to be confident that he can make the jump at the time, but the Peircean could still say this attitude would ideally be something other than full belief. In particular, it could be something that strongly motivated him in this particular situation, but if the climber looked at the chasm in a less desperate context (say, there was a safe and clear alternate route to the other side available), then it wouldn't prompt him to try to make the jump (even if doing so would save him some time).³⁰ In much the same way, the sports team should be confident that they will win on game day, but should be less confident on training days so that they are still motivated to improve, etc.

Regulative assumptions could be explained the same way: we have an attitude that governs our behavior when we engage in a particular activity governed by the assumption, but we let the attitude go when the context changes. (When we play soccer, we act like we can't touch the ball with our hands, but this "belief" disappears once the game stops.) To explain how we could fail to believe the assumptions that govern our inquiry (bivalence, the existence of the external world), we argue that these attitudes motivate us when we are inquiring, but we can drop them whenever we are not. Of course, the fact that inquiry is such a pervasive aspect of our lives makes this line a little hard to defend since there is some sense in which we are always inquiring. We always seem to behave

as if there is an external world, and if we are always in that context, it's hard to say that the attitude in question isn't one of belief. That said, a more piecemeal approach to these issues might work for *some* regulative assumptions, just not for those assumptions that are tied to the practices "at the very heart of what we think makes us human."³¹

For instance, Misak suggests that we need to assume the bivalence holds for any *P* when we inquire into it, but that is a far cry from assuming it to be true *generally*. One could, for instance, imagine a group who assumed there were determinate answers to particular questions in the context of their investigating those very questions, but for other questions, or for those times when they weren't engaged in investigation, the "pretense" drops. They may assume there is a determinate answer to the question of whether there was more than one shooter in the Kennedy assassination when they are actively investigating the question, but when they are not, they happily admit there may be no fact of the matter, and they have no inclination to treat as bivalent the questions they are not inclined to ever pursue, such as, say, whether or not Caesar had more than seven illegitimate children. One can imagine such a group, but it pretty clearly isn't us, and it seems doubtful that we would be better off moving to such a practice. This wouldn't be an issue if our commitment to bivalence had to be "wholesale" rather than "piecemeal," so that to inquire effectively into *any* question at all, we needed to assume that bivalence held for *all* possible questions, but if our commitment to bivalence needed to be wholesale in this way, the evidentialist would lose their main ground for saying that it could be something other than belief.

Furthermore, such attempts to explain the mystery attitude in terms of something like Zimmerman's analysis of pretense hits a bit of a snag when we consider a different stream of explanations for why our attitudes don't motivate us to act in every context. In particular, one could argue that the change in contexts affects us in a way that changes us from believing that *P* to no longer believing so. Our failure to be disposed to react in a *P*-informed manner in context *B* may not show that we didn't really *believe* that *P* in

context *A*, it might have just shown that what we believe can change when our context does. Zimmerman highlights this in his discussion of how he believed his daughter's diagnosis would be favorable in spite of having no particular evidence for thinking so. In the face of doubts about whether he *really* believed this, and about whether he would really be inclined to bet some gifted cash on that prognosis if given the chance, Zimmerman responds:

How does my disposition to acquire the relevant evidence and bet on its basis in this imagined scenario relate to my actual frame of mind when waiting for the results of my child's MRI? Is an assessment of my betting behavior in this hypothetical scenario an accurate measure of my actual (non-hypothetical) frame of mind during the interval in question?³²

His answer to this rhetorical question seems to be "no," and there do intuitively seem to be cases where what we believe switches from context to context.³³ (And not just in the obvious sense in which some contexts would include counterevidence to the belief in question.) Perhaps the climber does believe when faced with a perilous, if necessary, leap, but would come to doubt it if he had the luxury of approaching the question in a more disinterested fashion. Or perhaps he would have doubted his belief if his partner had broken up with him that morning or if he had recently gotten some depressing news about his mother's health. The fact that his disposition would be affected by the occurrence of such things (all of which could relate to what James considers our "passional nature"³⁴) doesn't mean that it's not really a belief that is there when such things don't occur.

We seem pulled in two directions here. On the one hand, belief seems to be determined not just by what it actually makes us do but also (mainly) by the things it would make us do in various possible situations, and an attitude can be understood as pretense (or some non-believing attitude) rather than belief if it fails to inform our behavior outside of its preferred contexts. On the other hand, there are some (many) possible situations where we seem more inclined to say that the attitude has changed rather than remained but without

affecting behavior in the way that belief would. I'm not sure if there is a sharp line between the cases where we don't see something as a full belief because it doesn't inform our actions in certain contexts and the cases where some belief of ours simply changes when we move from one context to another and are less sure where to draw the line if there is a sharp one. Zimmerman's book has done much to clarify these issues, and hopefully the framework it gives us will ultimately allow us to make sense of this distinction too.

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NOTES

I'd like to start by thanking John Capps and the William James Society for organizing the session for which this paper was originally written, and Aaron Zimmerman for producing such a rich and rewarding book.

¹ Zimmerman's book would certainly be an example of this trend, as would be McCormick, *Believing Against the Evidence*, and others such as Rinard, "Against the New Evidentialists," "Equal Treatment for Belief," and "Believing for Practical Reasons."

² I'll be focusing here on Misak, "Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments," but her take on the relation of Peirce and James on this issue seems fairly standard, as it is one of the key planks in the narrative that

casts Peirce as the “good” pragmatist and James as the “bad” pragmatist. That narrative goes back to Peirce himself, and in addition to Misak, one can see versions of it in, among others, Mounce, *The Two Pragmatisms*, and Talisse and Aiken, *Pragmatism: A Guide for the Perplexed*.

³ Zimmerman, *Belief*, 83.

⁴ Bain, *The Emotions and the Will*, 505. One sees echoes of this, in, among other places, James’s claim that “The test of belief is willingness to act” (James, *The Will to Believe*, 76) or Peirce saying that “[Readiness] to act in a certain way under given circumstances and when actuated by a given motive is a habit; and a deliberate, or self-controlled, habit is precisely a belief” (Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, 5.480, 330; Hereafter *CP*).

⁵ “[Green] often urged the importance of applying Bain’s definition of belief, as ‘that upon which a man is prepared to act.’ From this definition, pragmatism is scarce more than a corollary . . .” (Peirce, *CP* 5.12: 1906).

⁶ Though it will be argued below that their talk of the role of “hope” in our mental economy sits very uncomfortably with such views.

⁷ Particularly James “The Sentiment of Rationality” and “The Will to Believe” in James, *The Will to Believe* and the sixth chapter of Zimmerman’s book.

⁸ Misak, “Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments,” 264.

⁹ Peirce, *CP* 5.377: 1877.

¹⁰ Zimmerman, *Belief*, 1.

¹¹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 31.

¹² James, 26–7, 76–77.

¹³ Misak, “Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments,” 265.

¹⁴ Misak, 264.

¹⁵ Peirce, *CP* 2.113: 1902, cited in Misak, “Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments,” 265.

¹⁶ Misak, “Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments,” 265. We have altered the source for the Peirce quotation from the Indiana edition to that of the Collected Papers.

¹⁷ See, for instance, Russell. Similar work is done by proposed attitudes like “acceptance” in Van Frassen, who claims that we should accept our scientific theories but not believe them to be true.

¹⁸ Misak, “Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments,” 266.

¹⁹ Peirce, *CP* 5.265: 1868.

²⁰ One can see this tension in Hookway's remark that "to show that a belief is unavoidable for us gives us no reason to believe that it is true" (Hookway, "Modest Transcendental Arguments," 181). While Misak takes Hookway to be suggesting that an attitude's unavoidability "provides a strong reason for hoping that it is true and for regarding it as legitimate in our search for knowledge" (Misak, *American Pragmatists*, 52), it does seem to be the case that if the belief that *P* is "unavoidable" *then you believe that P* and can't merely "hope" it.

²¹ James, *The Will to Believe*, 80.

²² Zimmerman, 128.

²³ To use the apt terminology of Zimmerman, 129.

²⁴ Misak, "Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments," 273.

²⁵ Misak, 273.

²⁶ Santayana, "Character and Opinion," 61. Quoted approvingly in Misak, "Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments," 267; *American Pragmatists*, 148; *Cambridge Pragmatism*, 63.

²⁷ Peirce occasionally leans in this direction when he says things like "what is properly and usually called belief . . . has no place in science at all" (Peirce, *CP* 1.635: 1898).

²⁸ Peirce, *CP* 5.373: 1877.

²⁹ Zimmerman, 96.

³⁰ In much the same way, Peirce's general who, because he "has to capture a position or see his country ruined, must go on the hypothesis that there is some way in which he can and shall capture it" (Peirce, *CP* 7. 219; 1901, cited in Misak, "Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments," 266), ideally wouldn't *believe* this assumption, since if the necessity of capturing the position were to disappear, he might decide that the position is effectively impregnable and not attack it. If he really believed, he might allow potential reinforcements to go to areas that "really" needed them, rather than bolstering his own.

³¹ Misak, "Pragmatism and Indispensability Arguments," 266.

³² Zimmerman, 137.

³³ To take a familiar example, someone may believe in God in church but not believe in God in the lab. The "information" guides their behavior in one context and not in the other. Someone who gets "caught up" in the service and has their faith excited by the believers around them is clearly different from someone who just pretends to believe when they are in

church itself, even if both seem guided by the information only in the context of being in the church itself.

³⁴ James, *The Will to Believe*, 20.