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A Neglected Argument in “The Will to Believe”

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Abstract

In “The Will to Believe,” William James develops two distinct arguments for the legitimacy of holding a belief on what he calls unintellectual grounds. The first of these arguments (which I call the ‘indeterminacy argument’) attempts to distinguish between intellectual and unintellectual grounds as objective epistemological categories. The second argument (which I call the ‘subjective argument’) abandons that attempt and instead distinguishes between public and private, and subjectively intellectual and unintellectual reasons. Although these arguments differ, and both are present in “The Will to Believe,” the indeterminacy argument has received far more critical attention than the subjective argument. This disparity is unfortunate because the subjective argument presents a greater challenge to James’s opponents than does the indeterminacy argument. In this paper I will draw from “The Will to Believe” and other related works by James to outline both arguments. I will also criticize both to show why the subjective argument is more successful than the indeterminacy argument at proving James’s thesis.

A Neglected Argument in “The Will to Believe”

William James’s famous essay, “The Will to Believe,” is commonly understood to argue that there are certain questions—such as the question of God’s existence—that we must answer but which cannot be answered on purely intellectual grounds. Our answers to these momentous questions, then, may legitimately rest on unintellectual grounds. “The Will to Believe” certainly does contain this argument, but it is neither the only nor the best argument in that essay. Towards the essay’s end James develops a second argument that makes a far better case for adopting beliefs on unintellectual grounds. In the interest of intellectual integrity, and to give James his due, all criticism of this controversial essay should account for both arguments.

James spends the majority of his essay defending the first argument (which I call the ‘indeterminacy argument’) because of his particular intellectual opponent, William Kingdon Clifford.

Clifford held that beliefs maintained on unintellectual grounds were morally reprehensible because they were a kind of selfishness. An unattached person may believe whatever she likes, but when she lives in a community her beliefs are accountable to others because they affect those others. Maintaining beliefs without evidence is selfish because it means influencing others without good reasons.

The indeterminacy argument deftly responds to this charge. If empirical evidence or basic logic answer a question, then we should rely on that answer. However, some questions do not have such a reasonable answer. In these cases, James points out, the only criteria for picking one answer over another is something like an *a priori* light of reason. These criteria are too subjective to yield universal truths so philosophers who rely on them always come up with conflicting answers:

For what a contradictory array of opinions have objective evidence and absolute certitude been claimed! The world is rational through and through,—its existence is an ultimate brute fact; there is a personal God, —a personal God is inconceivable; there is an extra-mental physical world immediately known, —the mind can only know its own ideas; a moral imperative exists, —obligation is only the resultant of desires; a permanent spiritual principle is in every one, —there are only shifting states of mind; - there is an endless chain of causes, —there is an absolute first cause; —an eternal necessity, —a freedom; —a purpose, —no purpose; -a primal One, —a primal Many; a universal continuity, —an essential discontinuity in things, an infinity, —no infinity.
(1897, 16)

James claims, then, that empirical evidence and basic logic are much better tests of a belief's universal validity because they do not yield such contradictory answers. These are the grounds that he calls "intellectual" and Clifford would agree.

Thus, when multiple rival theories consistently explain all of the empirical evidence, there is no objective test to decide between those theories. Intuitive subjective criteria have popped up—like simplicity or the desire for the existence of the divine—but they hold no more sway over disagreeing parties than do the contradictory arguments based on competing *a priori* truths. In these cases the evidence is indeterminate, and the difference between the two alternatives is meaningless, according to Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatic maxim.

With no intellectually worthy reason for picking one rival theory over the other, Clifford might think that we should remain agnostic in such cases to avoid selfish beliefs. James agrees that we should withhold judgment in cases that may provide decisive evidence in the future, but he disagrees with Clifford over the cases in which no such decisive evidence will come. He can disagree because Clifford's argument only holds if our unintellectual belief can influence other people in our community, and that is not the case here. When two rival theories explain all of the evidence and make all the same material predictions, then adopting one or the other will not affect our publicly influential behavior, so that belief ceases to be selfish in Clifford's sense. Because of this, James holds that we may adopt beliefs for unintellectual reasons, like simplicity or the desire for the existence of the divine. James extends Peirce's maxim by pointing out that a choice between meaninglessly different options is no choice that should affect anyone but the chooser.

The indeterminacy argument led Richard Rorty to interpret "The Will to Believe" as an argument for privatizing religion. Rorty followed the argument to its logical conclusion: that religion justified in this manner cannot influence public action—such as conscientious objection, or voting to ban gay marriage—because any religion which would influence an adherent's public action can be held accountable to the rest of the public. Religious belief maintained on unintellectual grounds which influences public action is exactly the kind of thing that Clifford deemed selfish.

James agreed with this extension of his argument. His own formulation of "the religious hypothesis" at the end of "The Will to Believe" is particularly anemic, and he claims that its chief benefit is to allow believers to take moral holidays. In *Pragmatism*, he writes of a religion which says little more than that humanity can move the world towards salvation, but that salvation is not guaranteed. This characterization of religion impels its adherents to act morally, but gives no clue as to what moral action is. In order to find out how to act, adherents must consult secular—and therefore publicly debatable—moral theories.

Many religious people could do without the victory won by the indeterminacy argument. A God who is only materially effective by acting through us is conceivable enough for most religious people, but when we strip that God of any moralizing power and give it all to Kant, Mill, and Rawls, it is hard to see why we need God at all. James seems to need God to feel a sense of purpose and that is fine, but such a God reminds us of those who call themselves "spiritual but not religious," and such a belief does not do much for organized religious communities with books full of morals and miracles.

Aside from that massive shortcoming, the indeterminacy argument also suffers a serious logical malady. James takes pains to establish that we hold all of our beliefs for unintellectual reasons, and that Clifford has merely targeted those beliefs in which the unintellectual reasons played a decisive role after we had considered the intellectual reasons. James sees no difference in the unintellectual choice to disbelieve something without disconfirming evidence and the unintellectual choice to believe something without confirming evidence. The only difference is that Clifford made his unintellectual choice before he began collecting evidence and James appears to have made his afterwards.

The original mistake, however, was to distinguish between intellectual and unintellectual reasons in the first place. If, as James argues, Clifford decided that some reasons are intellectual for unintellectual reasons, then the indeterminacy argument falls apart because all reasons are unintellectual. Simplicity is just as intellectual a reason for believing something as is empirical evidence. The indeterminacy argument forgets this and claims that no non-empirical reasons count as good reasons (a mistake that the Logical Positivists would make in the coming decades).

We can see this problem clearly in James's own troubles with Peirce's pragmatic maxim. Peirce seemed to think that by keeping all disputes rooted in observable practical effects, we could avoid overly metaphysical debate. James, though, understood that practicality covered more than the objective world, and that observable effects need not submit to a single interpretation. In his evaluation

of the Hegelian Absolute, James calls it a useless concept because it has no practical effects, except that it provides comfort to its adherents. That comfort, however, is a practical difference for the Hegelians and therefore meaningfully differentiates an idealistic world from a materialistic one. The maxim that Peirce intended to distinguish between real differences and meaningless differences eventually makes all differences that anyone cares about real, and thus fails to move us past any actual metaphysical debate.

Peirce's maxim may be better interpreted as a method to resolve disputes, rather than as a criterion of the rightness of any belief. By referring all disagreement to concrete particulars, he made all disagreement either resolvable or unreal. Concrete particulars are important because they are accessible by anyone and so serve as public evidence in an argument—everyone we know of accepts them. This, however, does not make an argument that refers to concrete particulars any more intellectual for one party or the other than an argument that does not. We may base some beliefs on mental concepts which cannot be demonstrated publicly but which we think everyone should accept. Likewise, we may disagree about what is actually concrete and particular. Blind people, for instance, do not have access to the sorts of empirical reasons to which I would appeal to differentiate between an American flag and a Russian flag. Different parties may also interpret the same physical event differently, drawing contradictory conclusions from it.

It seems that all reasons are unintellectual in the sense that we accept any reason as valid simply because we do—there is no grand epistemological criterion by which to distinguish intellectual reasons from unintellectual ones. James and Clifford both agreed that empirical evidence provided intellectual reasons, but they should not have thought that this agreement could illuminate what it was about empirical data that is intellectual. Failing to find such a criterion by which to judge a reason intellectual or unintellectual, the indeterminacy argument fails because there is no way to distinguish

between beliefs held for unintellectual reasons which contradict intellectual reasons and beliefs held for unintellectual reasons but harmonize with intellectual reasons.

The second argument (which I call the 'subjective argument') avoids these particular pitfalls. In the subjective argument, James claims that beliefs might create their own empirical evidence. This means that a belief adopted for unintellectual reasons could create intellectual reasons for maintaining that belief. James gives examples of this kind of belief in "The Will to Believe," but the best example comes in another essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality," which he published in the collection *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* alongside "The Will to Believe." In this example James hikes through the Alps and comes upon a crevasse over which he must leap.

Being without similar experience, I have no evidence of my ability to perform it successfully; but hope and confidence in myself make me sure I shall not miss my aim, and nerve my feet to execute what without those subjective emotions would perhaps have been impossible. But suppose that, on the contrary, the emotions of fear and mistrust preponderate... why, then I shall hesitate so long that at last, exhausted and trembling, and launching myself in a moment of despair, I miss my foothold and roll into the abyss. (1897, 96-7)

James's confidence before he takes the leap is based on some empirical evidence—he knows that he can jump, after all—but that evidence is far from decisive. The decisive piece of evidence is the leap itself. He may remain agnostic about his success until that simple bit of empirical testing is done, but adopting the belief that he will succeed before he performs the decisive test actually influences the results of that test as will refraining from adopting any belief. If James believes in his success, then the decisive empirical test of that belief may yield different results than it would have had he not believed in his success. The empirical evidence might prove the belief true because James had already adopted it.

This argument differs from the indeterminacy argument in two ways. First, the evidence is entirely determinate, or at least determinable. Will James make the leap? Have him attempt it and we can find out. Such a question does not fall under the purview of the indeterminacy argument because we can test it empirically. Second, it does not attempt to give a definition of what someone should

accept as an intellectual reason. It only points out that we can influence a particular class of reasons—those furnished by empirical evidence, which both James and Clifford accept—by maintaining beliefs that have little empirical foundation. Stated differently, a belief held for non-public, non-intellectual reasons can create both public and intellectual evidence for itself.

One of James's examples of this kind of belief from "The Will to Believe" is of a man who tries to figure out if a stranger likes him or not before introducing himself to that person. In such a situation, the introduction itself will play a part in the stranger's opinion of the man, and a confident introduction will likely play out better than a timid one. Thus, the man's belief that the stranger does or will like him can make that fact come about.

James extends this exact reasoning to religious belief. If we try to determine whether or not God exists on intellectual grounds before we become theists, then we might never meet God. On the other hand, an unproven belief in God can actually make it easier to commune with God, and such communion is the best evidence of theism that there is.

The subjective argument does not saddle theists with an ineffective God whose only message is "don't worry, you can make things better." By providing a path to contact with God, the subjective argument shows how religious people can weave complex theological doctrines that make specific demands upon their adherents. The Jews obey Kosher law because God told Moses to, and Christians eat whatever because God told Peter to forget Kosher law. The subjective argument legitimizes specific moral codes because God dictated those codes to people.

The subjective argument has its own problems, however. Although it is a program for further empirical testing, it does not promise that everyone will get the same results. If all it took to commune with God were the right attitude, then we could all adopt that attitude and record what happens.

Obviously, were everyone to try this, we would not all get consistent results. In this case, the belief may have created its own intellectual evidence while failing to produce public evidence.

In order to explain this disagreement, James distinguishes between live and dead hypotheses:

A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature,—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi's followers), the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. (1897, 2-3)

The correct attitude will only yield positive empirical evidence for religious belief if that belief is a live hypothesis for the person adopting the attitude. That people may adopt the correct attitude but reach no consensus about the resulting evidence shows that the belief in question is a live hypothesis for some and dead for others. For James, the particularity of the individual thinker will determine the nature of the hypothesis.

Although James gives no indication of how the individual thinker's particularity would affect the liveness or deadness of a hypothesis in "The Will to Believe," he addresses the problem more squarely in the *Principles of Psychology*. There, it seems to be a matter of attention: "The practical and theoretical life of whole species, as well as of individual beings, results from the selection which the habitual direction of their attention involves...each of us literally *chooses*, by his ways of attending to things, what sort of universe he shall appear to himself to inhabit" (1890, 424). Again: "A man's empirical thought depends on the things he has experienced, but what these shall be is to a large extent determined by his habits of attention. A thing may be present to him a thousand times, but if he persistently fails to notice it, it cannot be said to enter his experience... On the other hand, a thing met only once in a lifetime may leave an indelible experience on the memory" (1890, 286). These passages suggest that empirical experience of God may exist as stimuli for everyone, but only enter conscious experience for some because of individual variations in habits of attention.

Unlike the vague differences between live and dead hypotheses, differences in attention have a solid explanation: prior training.

Any one of us can notice a phenomenon after it has once been pointed out, which not one in ten thousand could ever have discovered for himself. Even in poetry and the arts, some one has to come and tell us what aspects we may single out, and what effects we may admire, before our aesthetic nature can 'dilate' to its full extent and never 'with the wrong emotion'... In short, *the only things which we commonly see are those which we preperceive*, and the only things which we preperceive are those which have been labeled for us, and the labels stamped into our mind. (1890, 443-4)

This stamping process may be very simple, as in learning to attend to the shape of a tree's leaves to identify it. It may also be very complex, as in learning to attend to the musical overtones produced by a well-tuned chord. The habits of attention produced in this latter case require some advanced training and personal skill.

For James's account of the division between live and dead hypotheses to make sense of interpersonal differences in religious experience, that experience must be the result of some combination of training and skill. The tendency of groups to maintain their religious traditions across generations supports this explanation. Parents teach their children to attend to those parts of experience pertinent to the beliefs of a particular religion, and thus the children's experience, trained in this way, confirms the religion itself. This also explains the tendency of disbelief to reproduce itself. Communication with disbelievers draws our attention to some bit of experience that informs their disbelief and may reproduce it in us.

For James, habits are only plastic in the first thirty years of life, and habits of attention are no exception. Once an individual has settled into the habit of attending to some things rather than others, he can only change that habit through "*as strong and decided an initiative as possible*" or because of an "indelible experience" (1890, 123, 286). Such effort rarely comes when the habits of attention entail no negative consequences, so adult conversion experiences are often the result of some indelible

experience. The intransigence of habits in adults makes some hypotheses "dead" rather than merely unchosen.

When coupled with the distinction between live and dead hypotheses, the subjective argument leads to relativism. This yields the possibility of private empirical evidence which may influence our beliefs but which cannot be publicly demonstrated. For many, this will disqualify the argument because relativism is such an unwanted result in philosophy. Still, it is an interesting argument for relativism and one that is not commonly addressed. Those who wish to refute relativism should account for it in their arguments.

We should also remember that the subjective argument has no logical connection to the distinction between live and dead hypotheses. Although that distinction is necessary in James's defense of his own theism, it is not necessary for the example of the leap in the Alps. The difference between the two cases is the difference between public and private evidence. In the case of theism, the resulting empirical evidence is only accessible to the individual who has the proper training and chooses to believe in God. That individual cannot demonstrate the reasons for his belief to other people if they do not share his habits of attention. In the case of the leap the evidence is public, so anyone could watch James make the jump and then know that his belief in his ability is warranted. Thus the subjective argument does not lead to relativism when the choice to adopt a belief justifies itself by bringing about public evidence for that belief.

"The Will to Believe" contains two similar yet distinct arguments for James's right to maintain religious beliefs. The indeterminacy argument takes up most of the essay and has been widely discussed. The subjective argument only appears late in the essay, and it has received far less attention. This is regrettable because the subjective argument is more successful than the indeterminacy argument at showing that we may adopt beliefs on insufficient evidence. However, when James extends the subjective argument to cover cases like theism, he must introduce the distinction between live and dead

hypotheses. This distinction creates the possibility of non-public empirical evidence. It allows him to do far more work with the subjective argument, but that work is far more open to criticism.

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