

## *Introduction: a practical faith*

Our faculties of belief were not primarily given us to make orthodoxies and heresies withal; they were given us to live by. And to trust our religious demands means first of all to live in the light of them, and to act as if the invisible world which they suggest were real. It is a fact of human nature, that men can live and die by the help of a sort of faith that goes without a single dogma or definition.

“Is Life Worth Living?” (1896)

Faith thus remains as one of the inalienable birthrights of our mind. Of course it must remain a practical, and not a dogmatic attitude. It must go with toleration of other faiths, with the search for the most probable, and with the full consciousness of responsibilities and risks.

“Faith and the Right to Believe” (1911)

In Part XII of Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1998), Cleanthes asserts that the proper office of religion is to enforce “the motives of morality and justice,” and that when it “distinguishes itself, and acts as a separate principle over men, it has departed from its proper sphere and has become only a cover to faction and ambition.”<sup>1</sup> Only a philosophical or rational religion avoids such excesses, Philo replies, but it is not relevant to practical life.<sup>2</sup> The *Dialogues* concludes by leaving us with a choice: between an intellectually credible but practically irrelevant type of faith, on the one hand, and a practically relevant but vulgar and even vicious type of faith, on the other hand. (The unstated third option, of course, is not to believe at all.) Hume’s way of framing the relationship between religion and morality and our options with respect to religious belief provides an illustrative contrast with William James’s views on these matters. Throughout his philosophical career, James

<sup>1</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Richard H. Popkin (ed.), 2nd edn. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1998), p. 82.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 82–89.

devoted himself to showing that religious faith can be at once reasonable and practically valuable, that we do not have to choose. In order for faith to be reasonable, he believed, it must (among other things) reject dogmatism and practice tolerance toward other faiths. And in order to be practically valuable it must demonstrate its value for life, above all for what James called “the moral life.” These are two of the essential features of his pragmatic account of religion, an account that has been widely studied and criticized over the years but rarely well understood.

This book offers an interpretation and critical analysis of the connection between James’s religious and moral views. It shows that James viewed religion and morality as related and in some cases interdependent matters, and argues that an adequate understanding of either his philosophy of religion or his ethics requires that we grasp their relation to each other. Although previous interpreters have recognized this connection to varying degrees – Bernard P. Brennan, Henry S. Levinson, Hilary and Ruth Anna Putnam, and Ellen Kappy Suckiel have all discussed it in their respective work on James – none have explored the issue at any great length or in very considerable detail.<sup>3</sup> This is an issue of no small importance, for what is at stake here is nothing short of how we understand James’s philosophy of religion and his ethics, and, indeed, how we understand his philosophy as a whole. What I hope to show, in particular, is that the relationship between James’s religious and moral views ran in both directions, leading him to stress not only the moral value and function of religious belief but also the claim that the highest forms of moral agency and human flourishing can be achieved only through leading a religious life. Indeed, as we shall see in Chapters 5 and 6, James would eventually combine his pragmatic views on religious belief with a commitment to a version of religious realism, a fact that has important consequences for virtually every area of his thought, including not only his ethics and philosophy of religion but also his epistemology and metaphysics.<sup>4</sup> In addition to

<sup>3</sup> See Bernard P. Brennan, *The Ethics of William James* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1961), pp. 44–67; Henry S. Levinson, *The Religious Investigations of William James* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1981); Hilary Putnam, with Ruth Anna Putnam, “William James’s Ideas,” in, James Conant (ed.) *Realism with a Human Face* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 217–31; and Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *Heaven’s Champion: William James’s Philosophy of Religion* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), pp. 97–112.

<sup>4</sup> By *religious realism*, I mean the view that there are knowable, mind-independent religious facts, objects, or properties. This definition is broad enough to include the views of realist philosophers of religion such as D. C. Macintosh and John Hick, but it presumes no special connection with their views. For the definition of realism on which this definition of religious realism is based, see the entry for “anti-realism” in Robert Audi (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, 2nd edn. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 33.

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showing that James was a religious realist, however, I shall also argue that James was a kind of metaphysical realist, and that a commitment to this variety of realism is not only presupposed by his religious realism but is also basic to his pragmatic theory of truth.<sup>5</sup> I make a case for reading James along these lines in Chapter 6, and, if I am right, the widespread assumption that James's pragmatism reduces truth to utility – including the reduction of religious truth-claims to their practical value – is mistaken.

Before discussing these aspects of my interpretation in greater detail, it will be helpful first to survey James's views on religion and morality and consider some of their more prominent features. James's interest in religion was due chiefly to its practical value for life, but he did not believe that religion was a mere supplement to morality. Rather, he held it to be the most important of all human functions, and our only means of achieving the highest forms of happiness or human flourishing (VRE, 48–49, see Bibliography for abbreviations of works by James). While we can lead moral lives without being persons of faith, James believed, “in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power” (WB, 160). Beyond the practical benefit of increasing our “moral energy” or moral motivation, however, religious faith also provides an objective standard – an “infinite scale of values,” as James calls it – against which we can and, more importantly, should measure our moral values and ideals (WB, 160). As James insisted, “the stable and systematic moral universe for which the ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands” (WB, 161). If we want to achieve and sustain a truly “strenuous mood” in our careers as moral agents and account for the existence of objective moral values and ideals, James argues, we must postulate the existence of a divine thinker (WB, 159–62).

When James first advanced this argument in the early 1890s he denied knowledge of the divine thinker's existence and attributes, and instead held that “our postulation of him ... serves only to let loose in us the strenuous mood” (WB, 161). Over the course of the next decade, however, James would come to believe that we could do more than merely postulate the existence of a divine thinker. Beginning with *The Varieties*

<sup>5</sup> For other interpretations of James as a religious realist, see Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *Heaven's Champion* (1996), and T. L. S. Sprigge, “William James as a Religious Realist,” in Jeremy Carrette (ed.) *William James and The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Centenary Celebration*, New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 191–202.

of *Religious Experience* (1902), he would argue that religious and mystical experiences can provide access to and knowledge of such a being, and, just as importantly, provide a warrant for religious and moral beliefs based upon them. In the process, James's moral views also underwent changes, the most significant of which was his coming to believe in the reality of an unseen ideal order, one that could produce real and positive effects in the lives of human beings (exemplified *par excellence* in the person of saints) and which was the source of most of our moral ideals (VRE, 406).<sup>6</sup> Thus, James came to believe that the content of morality is also dependent on religion to a significant degree, and that the moral improvement of human lives and societies is dependent on it as well. Indeed, he would come to believe that the perfection or salvation of the world itself depended on the beliefs and actions of religious persons acting in concert with the objects of their faith, a religious view that he called *meliorism* (P, 137–44; SPP, 115–17).

While James usually emphasized the practical value of religious belief, he recognized that there was more to religious faith than this, and that the *value* of religion cannot be finally separated from the *facts* about religion. Writing of the objective truth of beliefs based on religious experiences, James makes clear that he understands the word “truth” as meaning “something additional to bare value for life, although the natural propensity of man is to believe that whatever has great value for life is thereby certified as true” (VRE, 401, note 23). Hence, despite his deep interest in the psychology and practical value of religion, his understanding of the objects of religious belief and his account of religion more generally did not reduce either to human psychology or utility. For James, religious faith involves belief in what he variously calls a “more,” a “wider self,” an “unseen region,” or “the supreme reality,” one which not only grounds our moral values, but in relation to which we achieve our highest good (VRE, 399–408). As I mentioned above, he believed in the existence of an unseen, supernatural order of reality – “God” was the name of his “over-belief” about it – and held that it can be not only the source of our moral values or ideals, but can also produce real effects in this world (VRE, 405–6). As James makes clear, to hold such a view is to see the unseen order as a real, active, and ameliorating force in the world, as – in the

<sup>6</sup> For James's discussion of saints and the value of saintliness, see VRE, 210–300. To my knowledge, Ellen Suckiel was the first interpreter to recognize that James's ethical views underwent important and specifically *religious* changes subsequent to the publication of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891). See Suckiel, *Heaven's Champion* (1996), pp. 97–112.

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most general terms – a “*wider self through which saving experiences come*” (VRE, 405).

Under the terms of this “pragmatic” or “piecemeal supernatural” view of religion, as James variously called it, the world is believed to have a different metaphysical constitution than a purely materialistic world would have: “it must be such that different events can be expected in it, different conduct must be required” (VRE, 408). James argued that religious belief can be reasonable under certain conditions, and can, when acted upon, produce valuable practical effects which cannot be obtained in any other way (WB, 13–33, 76–89; SPP, 111–17). Indeed, he believed that “the faithfulness of individuals here below to their own poor over-beliefs” might conceivably help God to be “more effectively faithful to his own greater tasks” (VRE, 408). But a practical faith of this sort need not be evidentially groundless, even if the evidence for it is of a different kind than other of our beliefs. As James maintained, “we may well believe, on the proofs that religious experience affords, that higher powers exist and are at work to save the world on ideal lines similar to our own” (P, 144).

What this brief survey reveals, I think, is not only that James endorsed a realistic theory of religion, but also that he saw religious faith as an ethical matter, one that concerns not merely what a person *believes* but also how she *lives*. Although he viewed morality as autonomous in a basic sense, he also held – as we shall see, beginning in Chapter 2 – that there are important moral goods which can be had or accounted for only through religious belief. But just as religion performs an important and irreplaceable function in the moral life, James suggests, so too do our moral values and judgements perform an important function in the religious life, providing an ethical criterion for the evaluation of religious beliefs and experiences (WB, 8–9, 159–62; VRE, 23–29, 46–50, 262–300; PU, 147).

One of the basic challenges in exploring this topic is the apparent imbalance between James’s religious and moral views, specifically the fact that he seems to have written much more about religion than about morality. That James made important contributions to the philosophy of religion almost goes without saying, but his ethics remains one of the most obscure and understudied areas of his thought. The latter state of affairs is due, at least in part, to the difficulties inherent in even *identifying* James’s ethics. Although he wrote a number of popular philosophical essays on moral issues, he published only one essay on ethical theory, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” (1891). James has much more to say about ethics than this, however, and, indeed, the closing section of the essay provides us with a clue about the subsequent direction of his ethical

thought. For having outlined a naturalistic approach to metaethics and a consequentialist moral theory in the first four sections of the essay, James proceeds to develop a practical argument for religious faith in the final section, one which aims to show why morality and any fully adequate account of ethics requires metaphysical and theological beliefs, the most important of which is belief in God (WB, 159–62).<sup>7</sup> Although much has been made of James's views in the first four sections of the essay, especially his ethical theory, the significance of his turn to religious ethics in the final section has been largely and curiously overlooked in the secondary literature.<sup>8</sup> This tendency is all the more glaring when one considers that the dependence of morality on some form of religious faith is *the* dominant ethical theme in James's subsequent writings, and is especially pronounced in such works as *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), *Pragmatism* (1907), and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909).

The fact is that James's moral views are frequently bound up with his religious views. For this reason, it is not inaccurate to say that James has a *religious ethics*: that is, he holds certain moral views that are religious in nature, or are expressive of certain religious commitments.<sup>9</sup> We shall encounter the specific content of James's religious commitments as this study progresses, as well as the arguments that he gives in support of them. In brief, I hope to show not only that religion and morality are fundamentally interrelated matters for James, but that on his view the highest forms of happiness or human flourishing can be attained only through religious faith. More specifically, I hope to show that James's ethics entails a pluralistic version of *eudaemonism*, one which conceives

<sup>7</sup> Although early in his philosophical career James argued for the practical necessity of theistic belief, he eventually came to endorse a more pluralistic view in which belief in God is but one of many possible and legitimate *overbeliefs* that a person might hold. By "overbelief," James means a religious or metaphysical belief which reflects a particular religious doctrine, and which exceeds the "more" of consciousness that he believes is encountered in genuine cases of religious or mystical experience (see VRE, 399–414). As we shall see in Chapter 5, James's view presumes that religious and mystical experiences are to some extent conceptually underdetermined and require interpretation in the light of a conceptual system or framework. Whether or not this is a defensible view is something that we shall have to consider. For now, it is enough to note that whereas James explicitly argued for a version of theism in such essays as "Reflex and Action and Theism" (1881) and "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" (1891), by the mid-1890s his religious views had begun to move in a decidedly pluralistic direction, as evidenced by such works as "The Will to Believe" (1896) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902).

<sup>8</sup> There are notable exceptions, which I discuss in Chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> Some exceptions to this rule are James's essays "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings" and "What Makes a Life Significant" in *Talks to Teachers on Psychology and to Students on Some of Life's Ideals* (1899) (TT) and "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910). What James says about the moral life in such works as WB, VRE, P, and PU, however, explicitly connects morality with religious belief and experience.

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the chief aim of religion as the promotion of happiness or human flourishing, which in turn can take a variety of legitimate forms. I argue, furthermore, that James is committed to a pluralistic and religious version of *ethical perfectionism*, insofar as he develops a pluralistic religious account of the highest good for human beings, and insofar as he believes that any fully adequate account of moral obligation and moral agency requires us to hold certain types of religious belief. Indeed, James extends this eudaemonistic and perfectionist conception of the moral life beyond the flourishing of individuals to include that of societies and even the universe through his religious and metaphysical doctrine of meliorism, the belief that the world's salvation is "a possibility, which becomes more and more of a probability the more numerous the actual conditions of salvation become" (P, 137). Here, as we shall see, James hypothesizes that our moral ideals and religious and metaphysical "overbeliefs" may – when resolutely believed and acted upon, and in conjunction with the efforts of higher powers – really contribute to the world's salvation (P, 131–44; see also WB, 76–89, VRE, 407–14, and SPP, 221–31). Overall, what I hope to show is that on James's view morality cannot be finally separated from religion, because there are moral goods that only religious faith – and in some cases, only the *objects* of religious faith – can plausibly bring about.

When we examine what James says about morality in connection with his religious views, we find that he describes two fundamental requirements for leading an optimally successful and flourishing moral life, at least in the long term: (1) the possession of a *morally strenuous* attitude; and (2) the achievement of a saving or liberatory sense of intimacy with an unseen order or "wider self," or what I term *metaphysical intimacy*.<sup>10</sup> The first of these requirements refers to our ability to sustain a high level of confidence in and commitment to our moral ideals and capacities as moral agents, in particular the capacity to be "indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained" (WB, 159–60). The second, in turn, involves the sense that one stands in a relationship with a "more," a "wider self," or "unseen order" – James uses these terms interchangeably – which one believes to be the source of one's salvation or liberation (VRE, 400–8). The second of these requirements is necessarily religious in nature, as it involves holding religious beliefs (and possibly

<sup>10</sup> James typically uses the term "intimacy," though the kind of intimacy that he has in mind is invariably religious and metaphysical, in that it deals with a range of possible, intimate relations with an unseen supernatural order or "wider self," such as those described in reports of religious and mystical experiences. In order to clarify James's metaphysical use of this term and bring his meaning to the fore, I shall use the term "metaphysical intimacy" throughout this study.



having religious experiences). This is not necessarily true of the first requirement, and at times James suggests that one can possess it (albeit to a lesser degree) apart from religious faith (WB, 159; VRE, 45). But he also claims that we can attain the *highest degrees* of moral strenuousness only through religious faith, and that the history of religion bears this out, particularly in the person of saints (WB, 161; VRE, 45, 294–300). Indeed, James would eventually come to believe that it is through our experiences of and belief in an unseen supernatural order that personal moral transformation is most successfully accomplished and new and better moral ideals enter the world (VRE, 406). This last point is especially significant, since it implies not only that religious experience potentially has practical value, but also has epistemic value, providing a potential source of moral and metaphysical knowledge.

These requirements are basic to James's account of the moral life, but unfortunately he did not subject them to rigorous analysis or systematic elaboration. Indeed, James's informal approach poses a considerable challenge to anyone wishing to study his moral views. Given the difficulties inherent in identifying and interpreting James's ethics relatively few studies have been produced, and most systematic treatments of James's philosophy have failed to recognize the full importance of ethics for his overall philosophical project. Ralph Barton Perry, while not always the most sympathetic interpreter of James, provided a valuable but largely biographical treatment of James's personal character in such works as *In the Spirit of William James* (1958) and *The Thought and Character of William James* (1948).<sup>11</sup> Gerald Myers devotes a chapter each to James's moral and religious views in his intellectual biography of James, but like Perry he generally neglects the extent of their connection.<sup>12</sup> Ellen Suckiel, one of the best contemporary interpreters of James, includes a chapter on James's moral views in *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (1982) and a thought-provoking chapter on the moral significance of James's account of religious belief in *Heaven's Champion: William James's Philosophy of Religion* (1996).<sup>13</sup> The only book-length studies of James's ethics to date are Bernard P. Brennan's *The Ethics of William James* (1961) and John K. Roth's

<sup>11</sup> See Ralph Barton Perry, *In the Spirit of William James* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1958), *The Thought and Character of William James*, 2 vols. (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1935), and *The Thought and Character of William James*, Briefer Version (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1948).

<sup>12</sup> See Gerald Myers, *William James: His Life and Thought* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), in particular chs. 13 and 14.

<sup>13</sup> See Ellen Kappy Suckiel, *The Pragmatic Philosophy of William James* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), pp. 45–68 and *Heaven's Champion* (1996) pp. 97–112.



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*Freedom and the Moral Life: The Ethics of William James* (1969), but each has important shortcomings.<sup>14</sup> Although Brennan correctly recognizes the interconnections between James's metaphysical, religious, and moral views, and in particular the importance of James's views on religion and morality, his analysis is too often superficial and overly expository. The chief merit of Roth's study, on the other hand, is the improved rigor of its analysis over Brennan's, though at times it pushes its "existentialist" reading of James too far. Its major shortcoming, however, is that it does not adequately account for the connection between James's moral and religious views, and as a result leaves the reader with a distorted picture of James's ethics.

More recently Richard Gale (1999) and Wesley Cooper (2002) have published significant book-length interpretations of James's philosophy.<sup>15</sup> Both studies make important contributions to the literature on James's ethics, and Gale's in particular is outstanding for its attention to the ethical and religious aspects of James's thought, in addition to being a model of analytical clarity and rigor. Yet, while each stresses the importance of James's ethics in the process of developing a systematic interpretation of his philosophy, neither sufficiently accounts for the connection between James's moral and religious views, in particular his views on the relationship between morality and religious faith. This leads to a gap in their respective treatments of these issues, with the consequence that the religious aspect of James's ethics and the ethical aspect of James's philosophy of religion go largely unnoticed.

Although I agree with Gale on many points, I believe that one questionable feature of his interpretation of James in general and of James's ethics in particular is the extraordinary weight it accords to "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" – specifically, the interpretive weight it assigns to James's discussion of "the casuistic question" in ethics, which concerns the basic or supreme principle of morality.<sup>16</sup> In the third and fourth sections of this essay James sketches the outlines of

<sup>14</sup> See Bernard P. Brennan, *The Ethics of William James* (New York: Bookman Associates, 1961) and John K. Roth, *Freedom and the Moral Life: The Ethics of William James* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1969).

<sup>15</sup> See Richard M. Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Wesley Cooper, *The Unity of William James's Thought* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> That ethics requires a basic or supreme principle of morality is an unquestioned presupposition on James's part, and it is a feature that his ethical theory shares with many other principle-based theories, including Kantian ethics and utilitarianism. I call this an unquestioned presupposition because James does not consider, as contemporary virtue ethicists have asked, whether ethics requires such a principle, or even requires principles at all.

a consequentialist ethical theory, and these serve as the basis for Gale's controversial interpretation of James as a desire-satisfaction utilitarian, not only in his ethics but also in his ethics of belief, a move that has far-reaching interpretive consequences. As we shall see in Chapter 3, this essay deals with a number of issues in moral philosophy, and ends with a practical argument for religious faith. James expands upon this argument in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which is the subject of Chapter 5, and I believe that it informs much of what he has to say about religion in *Pragmatism*, which I discuss in Chapter 6. While it is true that James never explicitly *disowns* his consequentialist moral theory in "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life," it is also true that he never explicitly *discusses* it again in his later moral writings, which are not obviously based on consequentialist principles and deal with other moral issues – above all, the practical need for religious faith and a moral view of the universe.

The major failing of Cooper's treatment of James's ethics, on the other hand, is that he seldom provides the necessary textual support for his claims; indeed, the second of his two chapters on James's ethics does not cite James at all. While Cooper makes clear that his larger purpose is to show that "there is a systematic philosophy in James's writings, however it may have been with the philosopher," this demand for coherence sometimes leads him to attribute claims to James which have little or no textual basis.<sup>17</sup> Among the most problematic of these are Cooper's claims that (1) James did not have a realistic interpretation of the objects of religious belief and experience, which starkly contradicts what James says in his most important work on these matters, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and (2) that "James had relatively little to say about ethics."<sup>18</sup>

<sup>17</sup> See Cooper, *The Unity of William James's Thought* (2002), p. 2.

<sup>18</sup> Regarding the first claim, I do not share Cooper's view of James as a consistent instrumentalist about the objects of religious belief (see Cooper, *The Unity of William James's Thought* (2002), Ch. 6, especially pp. 149–51). On my view, James makes both realist and instrumentalist claims about religion, but he no more holds that the *objects* of religious belief and experience are reducible to the practical value of belief in such objects (whatever that would mean) than he holds that objects in general are reducible to their practical value. This is a common misreading of James's pragmatic theory of truth, one that I discuss and refute in Chapter 6, and Cooper seems to extend it to his reading of James's philosophy of religion. Beginning in Chapter 5 and continuing in Chapter 6, I shall argue that while James held an instrumentalist view of the *function* of religious belief, he also held a realist view of the *objects* of religious belief and experience. So far as I am aware, there is no textual evidence to support Cooper's contention that James understood the objects of religious experience as human "constructs" of pure experience. Rather, and as I show in Chapters 5 and 6, James understood such objects as real and *active* mind-independent entities on which our salvation, and possibly the salvation of the world, depends. Regarding the second claim (see Cooper (2002), p. 222), it should be pointed out that James discusses ethical issues in *all* of his major philosophical works, even if he did not devote any one of them exclusively to