

The Will to Believe

William James

1894

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth.

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Introduction

In Leslie Stephen's recently published biography of his brother, Fitzjames Stephen, there is an account of a school to which the latter went when he was a boy. The teacher used to converse with his pupils in this manner: 'Gurney, what is the difference between justification and sanctification?' 'Stephen, prove the omnipotence of God!', and so on. In the midst of our Harvard freethinking and 'don't care' attitude we are apt to think that here, at your good old orthodox College,¹ conversation continues along similar lines; and to show you

that we at Harvard have not lost all interest in these vital subjects, I have brought with me tonight something like a sermon on *justification by faith* to read to you—I mean an essay on justification *of* faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, even if our merely logical intellect has not been driven to it.² So the title of my paper is 'The Will to Believe'.

I have long defended to my own students the lawfulness of freely chosen faith; but as soon as they have become

¹ [This work began as a lecture to a philosophy club whose members were students at Yale and Brown Universities; James was at Harvard.]

² [The phrase 'justification by faith' refers to a doctrine in Christian theology; James's one-word switch to get his topic is meant as a joke, as is the preceding 'sermon' and the following play with 'electricity'.]

drenched in the logical spirit, most of them have refused to accept my contention as lawful philosophically, despite their being crammed with some faith or other themselves. I am so sure that my own position is correct that your invitation to speak to you has seemed a good occasion to make my statements more clear. Perhaps your minds will be more open than the ones I have had to deal with up to now. I will be as little technical as I can, but I must begin by setting up some technical distinctions that will eventually help us.

I. Let us give the label '**hypothesis**' to anything that may be proposed for us to believe; and—just as electricians speak of 'live' and 'dead' wires—let us classify hypotheses into live and dead. A live hypothesis is one that appeals as a real possibility to the person it is proposed to. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature—it refuses to sparkle with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. But to an Arab (even if he isn't one of the Mahdi's followers) the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and aliveness are not intrinsic properties of an hypothesis but relations of the hypothesis to the individual thinker. They are measured by *his* willingness to act. The maximum of aliveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. . . . But there is *some* believing tendency wherever there is *any* willingness to act.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an **option**. Options are of several kinds. They may be

- (i) living or dead,
- (ii) forced or avoidable,
- (iii) momentous or trivial,

and for our purposes we may call something a *genuine* option when it is forced, living and momentous.

(i) A living option is one in which both hypotheses are alive. If I say to you: 'Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan', it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: 'Be an agnostic or be a Christian', it is otherwise: given your education, each hypothesis makes some appeal—however small—to your belief.

(ii) Next, if I say to you: 'Choose between going out with your umbrella and going out without it', I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say 'Either love me or hate me', 'Either call my theory true or call it false', your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating, and you may refuse to offer any judgment on my theory. But if I say 'Either accept this truth or don't accept it'.¹ I present you with a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the two alternatives. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.

(iii) Finally, if I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your only such opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or give you at least a chance of achieving it. Someone who refuses to accept a unique opportunity loses the prize just as surely as if he tried and failed. On the other hand, an option is trivial when

- the opportunity is not unique,
- the stake is insignificant, or
- the decision is reversible if it later proves to be unwise.

Such trivial options abound in the scientific life. A chemist

¹ [This replaces James's '. . . or go without it'.]

finds an hypothesis alive enough to spend a year on testing it: he believes in it to that extent. But if his experiments prove inconclusive either way, his loss of time is no great matter, no vital harm being done.

Our discussion will go better if we keep these distinctions in mind.

II. The next matter to consider is the actual psychology of human opinion. When we look at certain facts, it seems as if the *feeling* and *willing* side of our nature¹ lay at the root of all our convictions. When we look at other facts, it seems as if that side of our nature could do nothing once the intellect had said its say. Let us take up the latter facts first.

Doesn't it seem preposterous on the face of it to talk of our opinions being modifiable at will? Can our will help or hinder our intellect in its perceptions of truth? Can we, by just willing it, believe that **a** Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth. . . .? Can we, by any effort of our will or any strength of wanting it to be true, believe that **a** we are well and going about our business when we are actually in bed and screaming at the pain of rheumatism? or feel certain that **b** the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars? We can *say* any of these things, but we are absolutely unable to *believe* them; and the whole fabric of the truths that we do believe in is made up of just such things—**a** matters of fact, immediate or remote (as Hume said), and **b** relations between ideas, which are either there or not there for us if we see them so, and which if not there cannot be put there by any action of our own.

In Pascal's *Penseés* there is a celebrated passage known in literature as 'Pascal's wager'. In it he tries to force us

into Christianity by reasoning as if our concern with truth resembled our concern with the stakes in a game of chance. Translated freely his words are these:

You must either believe or not believe that God exists—which will you do? Your human reason cannot say. A game is going on between you and the nature of things which at the day of judgment will come out either heads or tails. Weigh what your gains and your losses would be if you stake everything you have on **heads, or God's existence**: if you win in such case, you gain eternal blessedness; if it comes up **tails**, you lose nothing at all. If there were an infinity of chances, and only one for God in this wager, you still ought to stake everything on God; for though you certainly risk a finite loss by this bet, any finite loss is reasonable—even a certain loss is reasonable—if there is even the possibility of infinite gain. Go then, take holy water and have masses said; belief will come and stupefy your scruples. Why shouldn't you? At bottom, what have you to lose?

You probably feel that when religious faith expresses itself in the language of the gaming-table, it is at the end of its resources.² Surely Pascal's own personal belief in masses and holy water had a source very different from this; and this celebrated page of his is only an argument for *others*, a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart. We feel that a faith in masses and holy water adopted deliberately after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were in the place of the Deity, we would probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this sort

¹ [Replacing James's 'our passionate and volitional nature'; later occurrences of 'passional' will also be dealt with in some such way.]

² [Replacing James's '. . . .is put to its last trumps'.]

from their infinite reward. Obviously, unless there is some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, what Pascal offers to the will is not a living option. Certainly no Turk ever took to masses and holy water on its account; and even to us Protestants these means of salvation seem such foregone impossibilities that Pascal's logic, invoked specifically for us, leaves us unmoved. The Mahdi might as well write to us saying 'I am the Expected One whom God has created in his glory. You will be infinitely happy if you accept me; otherwise you will be cut off from the light of the sun. Weigh, then, your infinite gain if I am genuine against your finite sacrifice if I am not!' His logic would be that of Pascal; but it would be in vain to use it on us, because the hypothesis he offers us is dead to us. We have not the slightest tendency to act on it.

So the talk of believing by our volition seems from one point of view to be simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile. When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was erected—

- what thousands of lives—unselfish morally decent lives—of men lie buried in its mere foundations,
- what patience and postponement, choking down of preference, submission to the icy laws of outer fact, are built into its very stones and mortar,
- how absolutely *impersonal* it stands in its vast majesty

—then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things on the basis of his private dream! Can we wonder if those who were brought up in the rugged and manly school of science should feel like spewing such stuff out of their mouths? The whole system of loyalties that grow up in the schools of science are flatly opposed to tolerating such subjectivism; so that it's only natural that

those who have caught the scientific fever should go to the opposite extreme, and sometimes write as if the incorruptibly truthful intellect ought positively to *prefer* results that are bitter and unacceptable to the heart.

It fortifies my soul to know
That, though I perish, Truth is so—

sings Clough; while Huxley exclaims: 'My only consolation lies in the reflection that our posterity, however bad they become, won't have reached the lowest depth of immorality if they hold by the plain rule of not pretending to believe what they have no reason to believe because it may be to their advantage so to pretend.' And that delicious *enfant terrible* Clifford writes:

'Belief is desecrated when it is given to unproved and unquestioned statements for the solace and private pleasure of the believer. . . Anyone who wants to deserve well of his fellows in this matter will guard the purity of his belief with a very fanaticism of jealous care, lest at any time it should rest on an unworthy object, and catch a stain which can never be wiped away. . . If a belief is accepted on insufficient evidence, even if the belief is true, the pleasure is a stolen one. . . It sins against our duty to mankind, which is to guard ourselves from such beliefs as from a pestilence that could master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town. . . It is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'

III. All this strikes one as healthy, even when expressed—as it is by Clifford—with rather too much loud emotion in the voice. When it comes to our beliefs, free-will and simple

wishing do seem to be only fifth wheels to the coach.¹ Yet if anyone inferred from this that after wish and will and sentimental preference have taken wing, *intellectual insight* is what remains, or that *pure reason* is what then settles our opinions, he would be just as directly flying in the teeth of the facts.

It is only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature can't bring to life again. But what has made them dead for us is mostly a previous antagonistic action of our willing nature. When I say 'willing nature', I don't mean only deliberate volitions that may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from. I mean all such contributors to belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set. [James seems to have invented the word 'circumpressure'. He is referring to the influence upon us of the group—the 'caste or set'—in which we are embedded, by which we are surrounded—hence 'circum'.] As a matter of fact, we *find ourselves* believing 'things', we hardly know how or why. Mr Balfour gives the name 'authority' to all those influences, born of the intellectual climate, that make hypotheses possible or impossible—alive or dead—for us. Here in this lecture-room, we all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for 'the doctrine of the immortal Monroe',² all for no reasons worthy of the name. We see into these matters with no more inner clearness, and probably with much less, than any disbeliever in them might possess. His unconventionality would probably have some grounds to

show for its conclusions; but for us what makes sparks shoot from them and light up our sleeping storehouses of faith is not insight but the prestige of the opinions. For 99.9% of us, our reason is quite satisfied if it can find a few arguments that we can use if our credulity is criticised by someone else. Our faith is *faith in someone else's faith*, and in the greatest matters this is usually the case. For instance, our belief in truth itself—that there is a truth, and that our minds and it are made for each other—what is that but a passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up? We *want* to have a truth; we *want* to believe that our experiments and studies and discussions must continually move us closer to it; and on this 'battle'-line we agree to fight out our thinking lives. But if an extreme sceptic asks us *how* we know all this, can our logic find a reply? No! certainly it cannot. It is just one volition against another: we are willing to base our lives on a trust or assumption which the sceptic does not care to make.

As a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use. Clifford's cosmic emotions find no use for Christian feelings. Huxley belabors the bishops because there is no use for sacerdotalism³ in his scheme of life. Newman, on the contrary, goes over to Roman Catholicism, and finds all sorts of reasons to be good for staying there, because for him a priestly system is an organic need and delight. Why do so few 'scientists' even *look at* the evidence for so called 'telepathy'? Because they think—as a leading biologist, now dead, once said to me—that even if such a thing were true, scientists ought to band together to keep it

¹ [Meaning that they are superfluous, don't do any of the work.]

² [This refers to President Monroe's doctrine that no European power should ever be allowed to take hold of any part of the Americas. In saying that 'we all believe' all this, James seems to have his tongue in his cheek.]

³ [The doctrine emphasising the role of priests in religious life.]

suppressed and concealed. It would undo the uniformity of Nature and all sorts of other things without which scientists cannot carry on their pursuits. But if this same man had been shown something that he as a scientist might *do* with telepathy, he might have not only •examined the evidence but even •found it good enough. This very law which the logicians would impose upon us—if I may here give the name ‘logicians’ to those who would rule out the willing part of our nature—is based on nothing but their own natural *wish* to exclude all elements for which they, as professional logicians, can find no use.

Evidently, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions. There are feelings and acts of will that run before belief and others that come after it; and it’s only the latter that come too late to make any difference; and they are not too late when the previous work of feelings has been already in their own direction. In the latter case, Pascal’s argument, instead of being powerless, seems to be conclusive, the last stroke needed to complete our faith in masses and holy water. The state of things is evidently far from simple; and pure insight and logic, whatever they might do *ideally*, are not the only things that *really* produce our creeds.

IV. Our next duty, having recognised this mixed-up state of affairs, is to ask whether it is simply •blameworthy and pathological, or whether on the contrary we must treat it as •a normal element in making up our minds. The thesis I defend, briefly stated, is this:

The feeling and wanting side of our nature¹ not only lawfully *may*, but *must*, decide an option between

propositions if it is a genuine option that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say under such circumstances ‘Do not decide, but leave the question open’ is itself a decision²—just like deciding yes or no—and involves the same risk of losing the truth.

I hope that the thesis thus abstractly expressed will soon become quite clear. But I must first engage in a bit more preliminary work.

V. Notice that for the purposes of this discussion we are on ‘dogmatic’ ground—I mean ground that entirely sets aside systematic philosophical scepticism. We are deliberately choosing to postulate that *there is truth, and it is the destiny of our minds to attain it*, though the sceptic will not postulate this. So we part company from him absolutely at this point. But the faith that *truth exists and our minds can find it* can be held in either of two ways—the **a** empiricist way and the **b** absolutist way. The **b** absolutists about this say that not only can we attain to knowing truth, but we can know when we have done so; while the **a** empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when we have done so. To know is one thing, and to know for certain that we know is another. One may hold the first to be possible without the second; so the empiricists and the absolutists, although neither is a ‘sceptic’ in the usual philosophical sense of the word, show very different degrees of dogmatism in their lives.

If we look at the history of opinions, we see that the **a** empiricist tendency has largely prevailed in science, while in philosophy the **b** absolutist tendency has dominated. The typical sort of happiness that philosophies deliver has mainly

¹ [replacing James’s ‘our passionate nature’]

² [James calls it a ‘passional decision’, meaning that it comes from the feeling and wanting side of our nature.]

consisted in each successive school's or system's conviction that *it* had reached absolute certitude. 'Other philosophies are collections of opinions, mostly false; my philosophy gives standing-ground forever'—who does not recognise in this the keynote of every system worthy of the name? A system, to be a system at all, must come as a closed system, reversible in some details, perhaps, but never in its essential features!

Scholastic orthodoxy, to which one must always go when one wishes to find things stated perfectly clearly, has beautifully elaborated this **b** absolutist conviction in a doctrine that it calls that of *objective evidence*. If, for example, I *cannot* doubt that

- I now exist before you,
- two is less than three, and
- if all men are mortal then I am mortal too,

it is because these things shine in my intellect *irresistibly*. The final ground of this objective evidence possessed by certain propositions is the *adaequatio intellectus nostri cum re* ['the matching of our intellect to things']. The certitude it brings involves

on the part of the truth in question an *aptitudinem ad extorquendum certum assensum* ['a power to compel assent'], and

- on the side of the subject a *quietem in cognitione* ['a quiet rest in knowledge'], when one has mentally received something that leaves no possibility of doubt;

and in the whole transaction nothing operates but the *entitas ipsa* of the object and the *entitas ipsa* of the mind. We slouchy modern thinkers don't like talking in Latin—indeed, we don't like talking in set terms at all—but our own state of mind is very much like this—i.e. like the one captured by those Latin phrases—whenever we uncritically abandon ourselves: You believe in objective evidence, and so do I. Of some things we feel that we are certain: we know, and

we know that we know. There is something that gives a click inside us, a bell that strikes twelve, when the hands of our mental clock have swept the dial and meet at the top. The greatest empiricists among us are empiricists only on reflection: when left to their instincts, they dogmatise like infallible popes. When the Cliffords tell us how sinful it is to be Christians on such 'insufficient evidence', insufficiency is really the last thing they have in mind. For them the evidence is absolutely sufficient, only it is evidence *against* Christianity. They believe so completely in an anti-Christian order of the universe that ·for them· there is no living option: Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start.

VI. But now, since we are all such absolutists by instinct, what ought we in our role as students of philosophy to do about that fact? Shall we **a** espouse and endorse it? Or shall we **b** treat it as a weakness of our nature from which we must if possible free ourselves?

I sincerely believe that **b** the latter course is the only one that we as reflective men can follow. Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to *play with*, but where are they to be *found* on this moonlit and dream-visited planet? So I am myself a complete empiricist so far as my theory of human knowledge goes. I live by the practical faith that we must go on experiencing, and thinking over our experience, for that's the only way our opinions can grow more true; but I believe it to be a tremendous mistake to hold *any* opinion—I absolutely don't care which—as if it could never be reinterpreted or corrected, and the whole history of philosophy, I think, will support me in this. There is only one unshakably certain truth—it's the truth that even extreme scepticism leaves standing—namely that *the present phenomenon of consciousness exists*. That, however, is the bare starting-point of knowledge, the mere admission of a

stuff to be philosophised about. The various philosophies are merely attempts to say what this stuff really is. And if we go to our libraries, what disagreement we discover! Where is a certainly true answer found? Apart from abstract propositions of comparison (such as *two and two are the same as four*)—propositions that tell us nothing about concrete reality—we find no proposition ever regarded by anyone as evidently certain that hasn't either been called a falsehood or at least had its truth sincerely questioned by someone else. The transcending of the axioms of geometry, not in play but in earnest, by certain of our contemporaries (such as Zöllner and Charles H. Hinton), and the rejection of the whole Aristotelian logic by the Hegelians, are striking examples of this.

No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon. Some make the criterion external to the moment of perception, putting it either in

- revelation,
- the *consensus gentium* ['the agreement of the people'],
- the instincts of the heart, or
- the systematised experience of the race.

Others make the moment of perception its own test—for example

- Descartes with his 'clear and distinct ideas' guaranteed by the veracity of God,
- Reid with his 'common-sense', and
- Kant with his 'forms of synthetic judgment *a priori*'.

Other standards for objective truth have been used:

- the inconceivability of the opposite,
- the capacity to be verified by sense,
- the possession of complete organic unity or self-relation. . . .

The much lauded 'objective evidence' is never triumphantly *there*; it is a mere aspiration, marking the infinitely

remote ideal of our thinking life. To claim that certain truths now *have* it is simply to say that when you think them true and they *are* true, then their evidence is objective, otherwise it is not. But one's conviction that the evidence one goes by is of the real objective brand is only one more *subjective* opinion added to the lot. For what a contradictory array of opinions have been claimed to have objective evidence and absolute certitude!

- 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 know only its own ideas;
- a moral imperative exists. . . .moral obligation is only an upshot of desires;
- a permanent mental substance exists in everyone. . . .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.

There is indeed nothing that someone hasn't thought absolutely true while his neighbour regarded it as absolutely false; and not an absolutist among them seems ever to have considered that the trouble may all the time be *essential*, and that the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible way of knowing whether or not it *is* truth. And when one remembers that the most striking practical application to life of the doctrine of objective certi-

tude has been the conscientious labours of the Holy Office of the Inquisition ·which notoriously tortured people for not believing what the inquisitors thought true·, one feels less tempted than ever to lend the doctrine a respectful ear.

But please observe that when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we aren't giving up the quest for, or hope of, truth itself. We still pin our faith on its existence, and still believe that we gain an ever better position towards it by systematically continuing to accumulate experiences and to think. What makes us so different from the scholastic is the way we are facing. The strength of the scholastic's system lies in the principles, the origin, the *terminus a quo* [Latin for 'starting-point'] of his thought; for us the strength is in the outcome, the upshot, the *terminus ad quem* ['end-point']. We decide on the basis not of where it comes from but of what it leads to. An empiricist doesn't care what quarter an hypothesis comes to him from: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of his thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true.

VII. One more point, small but important, and our preliminaries are done. There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion. They are entirely different, but the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern for the difference. We must *know the truth*, and we must *avoid error*; these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of expressing one commandment; they are two separable laws. It may happen that when we believe the truth A we escape (as an incidental consequence) believing the falsehood B; , but it hardly ever happens that by merely

disbelieving B we necessarily believe A. We may in escaping B fall into believing other falsehoods, C or D, just as bad as B; or we may escape B by not believing anything at all, not even A.

Believe truth! Shun error! These, we see, are two significantly different laws; and by choosing between them we may give our whole intellectual life one colour rather than another. We may regard the pursuit of truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may instead treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. Clifford, in the instructive passage I have quoted, urges us to take the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be deceived many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford. But we must remember that these feelings about our duty regarding truth or error are only expressions of the feeling and desiring side of our nature.¹ Biologically considered, our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as truth, and someone who says 'Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!' merely shows the dominance of his own horror of becoming a dupe. He may be critical of many of his desires and fears, but *this* fear he slavishly obeys. He cannot imagine anyone questioning its binding force. For my part, I also have a horror of being duped; but I believe being duped is not the worst thing that can happen to a man in this world; so Clifford's exhortation has to my ears an extravagantly fanciful sound. It is like

¹ [Here and in the next paragraph, 'the feeling and desiring side of our nature' replaces James's 'our passionate nature'.]

a general telling his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound. That is not how victories are gained over enemies or over nature. Our errors are surely not such awfully solemn things. In a world where

we are so certain to incur them in spite of all our caution, a certain lightness of heart seems healthier than this excessive nervousness concerning them. At any rate, it seems the fittest thing for the empiricist philosopher.

The Essay

VIII. And now, after all this introduction, let us go straight at our question. I have said—and now repeat—that not only does the feeling and desiring side of our nature influence us in our opinions, but there are *some* options between opinions in which this influence must be regarded as an inevitable and also as a lawful determinant of our choice.

I fear here that some of you, my hearers, will begin to scent danger, and to be on your guard against me. You have indeed had to admit as necessary two first steps dictated by what we *want*: we must think so as to avoid being deceived, and we must think so as to gain truth; but you will probably think that the surest path to those ideal upshots is from now onwards to take no further step dictated in that way.¹

Well, of course, I agree as far as the facts will allow. Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw away the chance of gaining truth, and save ourselves from any chance of believing falsehood, by not making up our minds at all until objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case; and even in human affairs in general, there is seldom such an urgent need for action that it is better to have a false belief to act on than to have no belief at all. Law courts,

indeed, have to decide on the best evidence attainable for the moment, because a judge's duty is to make law as well as to ascertain it, and (as a learned judge once said to me)

few cases are worth spending much time on; the great thing is to have them decided on any acceptable principle, and got out of the way.

But it's obvious that in our dealings with objective nature we are recorders of the truth, not makers of it; and in this activity it would be wholly out of place to make decisions merely for the sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and there's seldom any such *hurry* about them that we need to think about the risks of being deceived by believing a premature theory. The questions here are always •trivial options, the hypotheses are hardly •living (at any rate not living for us spectators), and the choice between believing truth and believing falsehood is seldom •forced.² The attitude of *sceptical balance* is therefore the wise one if we want to escape mistakes. What difference does it make to most of us whether we

•have or don't have a theory of X-rays,

¹ [In this paragraph, 'dictated by what we want' replaces James's word 'passional'.]

² [This echoes the three-part account on page 2 of what makes an option 'genuine'.]

- believe or don't believe in mind-stuff, or
- do or don't have a belief about the causality of conscious states?

It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to settle them with a choice, but still keep weighing reasons for and against with an unbiased hand.

Of course I am speaking here of the purely *judging* mind. For purposes of *discovery* such even-handedness is less highly recommendable, and science would be far less advanced than she is if the passionate desires of individuals to get their own faiths confirmed had been kept out of the game. See for example the sagacity that Herbert Spencer and August Weismann now display in their famous controversy over the inheritance of acquired characteristics. On the other hand, if you want an absolute duffer in an investigation, you must take the man who has no interest whatever in its results:¹ he is the warranted incapable,² the positive fool. The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always the one whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he become deceived. Science has organised this nervousness into a regular technique, its so-called method of verification; and she has fallen so deeply in love with this method that she may even be said to have stopped caring for *truth by itself*. It is only *truth as technically verified* that interests her. The truth of truths might come in merely affirmative form

[apparently meaning something like 'The most splendid of scientific truths might be, as it were, handed to her on a plate']

and she would decline to touch it. Such a truth as that, she might repeat with Clifford, would be stolen in defiance of her duty to mankind. But human passions are stronger than technical rules. As Pascal says, *Le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît pas*. 'The heart has its reasons which reason doesn't know.' The umpire of this game, the abstract intellect, may care about nothing but its bare rules; but usually each of the concrete³ players who provide him with the materials to judge of is in love with some pet 'live hypothesis' of his own. Let us agree, however, that in any case where there is no forced option, the dispassionately judicial intellect with no pet hypothesis ought to be our ideal, since it at least saves us from being duped.

The question next arises: Don't our speculative questions have forced options buried in them somewhere, and can we (as men who may care at least as much about positively gaining truth as about merely escaping dupery) always safely wait until the compelling evidence arrives? It seems *a priori* improbable that the truth should be as precisely adjusted to our needs and powers as that, i.e. as would make that a safe policy. In the great boarding-house of nature, the cakes and the butter and the syrup seldom come out so even and leave the plates so clean! Indeed, we would view them with scientific suspicion if they did.

IX. Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for empirical proof. A moral question does not ask *What exists that our senses could detect?* but *What is good, or would be good if it did exist?* Science can tell us what exists; but to compare the

¹ [Meaning that he has no stake in the investigation, doesn't *care* what its outcome will be.]

² [This seems to be an old term in mercantile law for 'not fit for purpose'.]

³ [used here as the antonym of 'abstract'.]

worth of what exists with that of what doesn't exist, we must consult not •science but what Pascal calls •our 'heart'. When science lays it down that *the supreme goods for man are the endless establishing of fact and the correction of false belief*, she is consulting her heart. Challenge that statement, and science can only repeat it oracularly, or else prove it by showing that such establishing and correction bring man all sorts of other goods which his heart chooses. The question of •having some moral beliefs or •not having any is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only biological phenomena, making things good or bad *for us* but *in themselves* neither good nor bad? How can your pure intellect decide •this question? If your heart doesn't want a world of moral reality, your head¹ will assuredly never make you believe in one. Mephistophelian scepticism,² indeed, will satisfy the head's play-instincts much better than any rigorous idealism can. Some a men (even at the student age) are so naturally cool-hearted that the moralistic hypothesis is never really alive for them, and in their supercilious presence the b hot young moralist always feels strangely ill at ease. The appearance of knowingness is on a their side, the appearance of naïveté and gullibility on b his. Yet in his inarticulate heart he clings to the idea that he is not a dupe, and that there is a realm in which (as Emerson says) all a their wit and intellectual superiority is no better than the cunning of a fox. Moral scepticism can no more be refuted or proved by logic than intellectual scepticism can. When we stick to the view that there is •objective• truth (of either kind), we do this with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results. The sceptic with *his* whole nature adopts the doubting attitude; but which of us is the wiser, Omniscience

only knows!

Turn now from these wide questions of good to a certain class of •narrower• questions of fact, questions concerning personal relations, states of mind between one man and another. For example. do you like me or not? Whether you do or don't depends in countless cases on whether I meet you half-way, assuming that you must like me, and showing you trust and expectation. In such cases what makes your liking *come* is my previous faith that your liking for me *exists*. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence •of your liking me•, until you have done something that is apt, as the absolutists say, *ad extorquendum assensum meum* [= 'to compel my assent'], ten to one you won't ever like me. How many women's hearts are vanquished by the mere optimistic insistence of some man that they *must* love him! He won't consent to the hypothesis that they *can't*. •In these cases• the desire for a certain kind of truth brings about that truth's existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. The only one who gains promotions, gifts, appointments is the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of *live* hypotheses, who. . . .sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance. His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification.

A social organism of any sort, large or small, is what it is because each member does his duty with a trust that the other members will do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the *faith in one another* of those who are immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college,

¹ [James here replaces Pascal's *la raison* by 'your head', as in the next sentence; but he's obviously echoing Pascal.]

² [in Goethe's play *Faust*, the character Mephisto refuses to believe anything.]

an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which nothing is achieved—indeed, nothing is even attempted. A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the robbers can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he tries to resist he will be shot before anyone backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, each of us would rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted. So there are cases where a fact cannot come at all unless there is a previous faith that it will come. And where faith in a fact can help create the fact, to say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the 'lowest kind of immorality' into which a thinking being can fall

would be an insane logic. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists claim to regulate our lives!

X. In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful thing, and possibly an indispensable one.

But now, it will be said, these are all childish human cases, and have nothing to do with great cosmic matters like the question of religious faith. Let us then pass on to that. Religions differ so much in their details that in discussing the religious question we must make it very generic and broad. What then do we now mean by the religious hypothesis? **Science** says things are; **morality** says some things are better than other things; and **religion** says essentially two things:

(i) The best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. Charles Secrétan's statement '**Perfection** is **eternal**' seems to be a good way of putting this first

affirmation of religion, an affirmation which obviously cannot yet be at all verified scientifically.

(ii) We are better off even now—when we are far from finality or perfection—if we believe religion's first affirmation to be true.

Now, let us consider what the logical elements of this situation are if both branches of the religious hypothesis are really true.

(Of course, we must admit that possibility at the outset. If we are to discuss the question at all, it must involve a living option. If for any of you religion is a hypothesis which cannot by any living possibility be true, then you need listen no further. I am speaking only to the others.¹)

We see first that religion offers itself as a momentous option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief, a certain vital good. Secondly, religion is a forced option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more light, because, although if religion is untrue we do avoid error in that way, if it is true we lose the good by suspending judgment just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. It is as if a man were to hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove to be an angel after he brought her home. Would he not by his hesitation cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he married someone else? So scepticism is not avoidance of choice; it is the choice of one particular kind of risk. *Better risk loss of truth than chance of error*—that is your faith-vetoer's exact position. He is actively placing his bet as much as the believer is; he is backing the field against the religious hypothesis, just as

¹ [James refers to these others as 'the saving remnant', a joking use of a phrase that has a large part in Jewish history.]

the believer is backing the religious hypothesis against the field. To preach scepticism to us as a duty until 'sufficient evidence' for religion be found, is thus tantamount to telling us, when we are in the presence of the religious hypothesis, that to *yield to our fear of its being false* is wiser and better than to *yield to our hope that it is true*. So it is not intellect against all passions; it is only intellect laying down its law on the basis of one passion. And what, forsooth, establishes the supreme wisdom of this passion? Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof of this; and I simply refuse to obey the scientist's command to imitate *his* kind of option in a case where *my* stake is important enough to give me the right to choose my own form of risk. If religion is true and the evidence for it is still insufficient, I don't want by putting your extinguisher on my nature. . . .to forfeit my one chance in life of getting on the winning side—that chance depending, of course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my desire-driven need to take the world religiously might be prophetic and right.¹

In all of this I am supposing that. . . . even for us who are discussing the matter, religion is a live hypothesis which may be true. To most of us religion comes in yet another 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. If we are religious, the universe is no longer a mere *It* to us, but a *Thou*; and any relation that might hold between one person and another might be possible here. For instance, although

in one sense we are passive *parts* of the universe, in another we show a curious autonomy, as if we were small active centres on our own account ·and thus able to stand in a sort-of-personal relation with it·. We feel, too, as if religion's appeal to us were an appeal to our own active good-will, as if evidence ·for it· 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,² 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

someone who shut himself up in snarling logicity, and tried to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance.

This feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that

by obstinately believing that there are gods (although not to do so would be so easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can

seems to be part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis. If the hypothesis were true in all its parts, including this one, then pure intellectualism, with its veto on our making willing advances, would be an absurdity; and some participation of our the feeling and wanting part of our nature would be logically required. So I for one cannot see my way

¹ [The ellipsis after 'my nature' replaces 'which feels to me as if it had after all some business in this matter', which seems to mean something like '. . . as if it had a stake in this matter' or '. . . as if it had a right to be listened to in this matter'. Further down, 'desire-driven' replaces James's 'passional'.]

² [meaning 'never complied with a request unless he was shown some authority for its being made'.]

to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth—even if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule. That for me is the long and short of the formal logic of the situation, no matter what the kinds of truth might materially be.

I really don't see how this logic can be escaped. But sad experience makes me fear that some of you may still shrink from radically accepting my general thesis that we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is **alive** enough to tempt our will. I suspect, however, that if this is so, it is because you have got away from the *general* logical point of view altogether, and are thinking (perhaps without realising it) of some *particular* religious hypothesis which for you is **dead**. You think of the freedom to 'believe what we will' in terms of something that is obviously a superstition; and the faith you think of is the faith defined by the schoolboy who said 'Faith is when you believe something that you know ain't true'. I can only repeat that this is a misunderstanding. The freedom to believe can only cover living options which the person's intellect cannot resolve by itself; and living options never seem absurdities to the person who has them to consider. When I look at the religious question as actual men really confront it, and when I think of all the possibilities it involves, both practically and theoretically,

then this command that we put a stopper on our heart, instincts, and courage, and wait—while acting pretty much as if religion were not true¹—until doomsday, or until such time as our intellect and senses working together may have raked in evidence enough, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave.² If we were scholastic absolutists, there might be more excuse for obeying that command. If we had an infallible intellect with its objective certitudes, we might feel it would be disloyal to this perfect organ of knowledge not to trust to it exclusively, not to wait for its releasing word. But if we are empiricists, if we believe that no bell in us tolls to let us know for certain when truth is in our grasp, then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly that we have a duty to wait for the bell. Indeed we may wait if we want to (I hope you don't think that I'm denying that), but if we wait, we do so at our peril as much as if we believed. In either case we act, taking our life in our hands. No one of us ought to issue vetoes to anyone else, nor should we throw around words of abuse. Rather, we ought delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom; only then will we bring about the intellectual republic; only then will we have that spirit of inner tolerance that is empiricism's glory and without which all our outer tolerance is soulless; only then will we live and let live, in theoretical as well as in practical things.

I began by a reference to Fitzjames Stephen; let me end by a quotation from his *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*:

¹ Since belief is measured by action, someone who forbids us to believe religion to be true necessarily also forbids us to act as we would if we believed it to be true. The whole defence of religious faith hinges on action. If the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a mere superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds. I myself believe, of course, that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression that specifically determines our conduct, making it considerably unlike what it might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief. [James's footnote]

² [Echoing Francis Bacon's phrase 'idols of the cave' as a label for intellectual illusions.]

'What do you think of yourself? What do you think of the world? . . . These are questions with which all must deal as it seems good to them. They are riddles of the Sphinx, and in some way or other we must deal with them. . . In all important transactions of life we have to take a leap in the dark. . . . If we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice; if we waver in our answer, that is also a choice: but whatever choice we make, we make it at our peril. If a man chooses to turn his back altogether on God and the future, no-one can prevent him; no-one can show beyond reasonable doubt that he is mistaken. If a man thinks otherwise and acts as he thinks, I

don't see that anyone can prove that he is mistaken. Each person must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for him. We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths—glimpses that may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? "Be strong and of a good courage." Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.'