

The Metaethics of Belief: An Expressivist Reading of “The Will to Believe”

Jeff Kasser and Nishi Shah

We argue that an expressivist interpretation of “The Will to Believe” provides a fruitful way of understanding this widely-read but perplexing document. James approaches questions about our intellectual obligations from two quite different standpoints. He first defends an expressivist interpretation of judgments of intellectual obligation; they are “only expressions of our passional life”. Only then does James argue against evidentialism, and both his criticisms of Clifford and his defense of a more flexible ethics of belief presuppose this independently-defended expressivism. James puts forward his ethics of belief as healthy or appropriate, rather than as correct.

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Introduction

In section VII of “The Will to Believe”, William James strikingly asserts, “We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life” (James 1956, 18). This passage is noteworthy because it appears to state an expressivist view concerning judgments of epistemic obligation. But emotivism, the version of expressivism developed by Stevenson and Ayer, was still

Jeff Kasser received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and taught at Colby College before joining the Department of Philosophy and Religion at North Carolina State University. He works mainly in epistemology and in American philosophy. He is trying to develop interpretations of Peirce and of James that are textually accurate and that stake out positions of interest to contemporary philosophers.

Nishi Shah also received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan and is currently an assistant professor of philosophy at Amherst College. His research lies at the intersection of epistemology, ethics, and the philosophy of mind. One of his projects is to adjudicate the ethics of belief debate by uncovering the sense in which belief aims at truth. His publications include ‘How Truth Governs Belief’, *The Philosophical Review* 112, No. 4, pp. 447–482, and ‘Doxastic Deliberation’ (co-authored with J. David Velleman) forthcoming in *The Philosophical Review*. Correspondence to: Jeff Kasser, Department of Philosophy and Religion, North Carolina State University, Campus Box 8103, Raleigh, NC 27695–8103. Email: jkasser@social.chass.ncsu.edu

over three decades away. We will suggest that an expressivist interpretation of “The Will to Believe” provides a fruitful way of understanding this widely-read but perplexing document. Our interpretation does not contravene the standard view that James’s central thesis concerns what has become known as the Ethics of Belief Debate. But we do suggest that James offers important arguments about the metaethics of belief, and that serious misunderstandings result unless one distinguishes James’s meta-normative from his normative concerns. We also hope that this interpretation will be of relevance to current thinking about normativity. Metaethicists have just started to turn their attention to normative discourse about belief, and recently some philosophers have claimed that noncognitivism is crippled by its apparent inability to give a coherent or plausible account of the normative force of the principles governing belief.¹ Our interpretation of “The Will to Believe” suggests a response to this charge, as it sketches one path a noncognitivist might take towards accounting for epistemic normativity.

Our essay is in the spirit of Kripke’s work on Wittgenstein, an attempt at a rational reconstruction of a famous essay, with the hope that it will have philosophical interest independently of its merit as historical scholarship. We will offer textual evidence that the language and structure of “The Will to Believe” suggest a kind of expressivism, but we will not discuss the extent to which James himself would have been happy with our reconstruction of his argumentative strategy. Accordingly, we will have little to say about James’s other texts. We do, however, believe that there is a substantial case to be made that James’s pragmatism involves a kind of expressivism, albeit of a more sophisticated kind than the view that we find in “The Will to Believe”. In fact, we will suggest that the kind of pragmatism that James adopts involves an intriguing expressivism about the cognitive/conative divide itself. But providing a thorough textual rationale for thinking of James as an expressivist will have to await another occasion. In this article we will be interested primarily in identifying the expressivist strands in “The Will to Believe” and showing how they illuminate James’s famous lecture.

Here is our interpretation in a nutshell. We suggest that, in “The Will to Believe”, James discusses intellectual obligations from two quite different perspectives and that a proper understanding of the paper requires keeping this distinction in mind. James writes, first, from the perspective of a theorist attempting to explain the practice of making judgments of obligation, and, second, from that of a participant in the practice of making such judgments. As a theorist, James espouses a view that anticipates many aspects of twentieth-century noncognitivism. Judgments of intellectual obligation are expressions of our passional nature, as opposed to expressions of cognitive states such as belief. As a participant in the practice of making such judgments, James favors a view that he contrasts with evidentialism, which he claims is driven by a debilitating fear of error. He takes his normative view to be driven by a healthier state of mind, one which balances the fear of believing falsehoods against a strong desire for true beliefs.

The reason that considerations of psychological health play such a large role in James’s normative view is that, if judgments of obligation express desires, hopes and passions, and therefore do not attempt to represent or report facts, then no facts can establish the truth of one or another normative view. That is, because these normative

judgments are expressions of one's passional nature, they cannot be rendered true or false by the facts. But then what is left? James thinks that we must decide upon our intellectual obligations by considering qualities of the mind that they express or promote. James favors qualities of mind that he considers healthy, vigorous and strenuous. Of course, judgments of mental health or strength are themselves normative judgments, and are therefore themselves expressions of desire. As such, the normative judgments that he makes will only move people who have desires similar to his own. James's lecture suggests the passional outlook within which his normative contentions make sense. He expects most of his audience to share something very like this outlook, and he realizes that he cannot expect anyone who does not share his conception of healthy, vigorous mental functioning to accept his conclusions.² Our main task in this essay will be to demonstrate that an expressivist theoretical framework provides significant insight into "The Will to Believe".

Metaethics, Metaepistemology and "The Will to Believe"

First, a word about expressivism and allied notions. Expressivists take their inspiration from Hume's observation that factual belief is not intrinsically action-guiding, whereas normative judgment is. In order to explain this difference between factual belief and normative judgment, expressivists have attempted to analyze normative judgments in terms of expressions of motivation-laden states such as desires, preferences, and emotions. If such judgments themselves express motivation-laden states, then it is obvious how they can motivate action. This strategy thus captures Hume's insight that normative judgments seem to have an intimate connection to motives for action. Since these motivational states do not appear to have a representational function, expressivists have also tended to conclude, with Hume, that normative judgments do not express factual beliefs, do not attempt to describe states of affairs, and do not have truth conditions.

The region of discourse that has seemed most apt for expressivist construal is morality. However, recently philosophers have tried to extend expressivism to cover all normative discourse.³ Well, what would it mean to be an expressivist about intellectual obligation? It would be to treat statements about our intellectual duties as expressions of motivation-laden states. According to the expressivist about intellectual obligation, when an evidentialist claims that we have an obligation to form our beliefs solely on the basis of evidence, she is not making an assertion that is straightforwardly true or false. Instead, she is expressing a motivational state of some sort which favors such a policy of belief formation. We suggest that such an expressivist metaethical, or if you like, metaepistemological view about judgments of intellectual obligation is contained in "The Will to Believe".

James begins Section VII of his essay by claiming that there are two ways of looking at our intellectual duties: "We must know the truth; and we must avoid error"⁴ and that by choosing which one is to predominate, "we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life" (James 1956, 17–18). The choices are to "regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary" or to "treat the avoidance

of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance” (James 1956, 18). Notice that James is using the language of obligation in presenting his view about intellectual norms, language that has its most familiar home in moral discourse. He talks of “our duty in the matter of opinion” and uses the language of necessity in his first formulation of these duties: we *must* know the truth and we *must* avoid error. Later in the section, he presents the duties in terms of imperatives: “Believe truth! Shun error!” These are all familiar ways of capturing the special normativity associated with moral discourse, and here James deploys these forms of language to talk about intellectual norms.

James says nothing about why our duties are restricted to the two that he proclaims. He seems to assume this as an uncontroversial starting point,⁵ and indicates that the real question concerns under what circumstances each duty should receive priority, given that we acknowledge both duties. James then cites Clifford as an example of someone who has chosen the route of making the avoidance of error paramount, in effect (on our reading, at least), expressing the attitude that avoiding error is more important than finding truth. But this is not the only possible position. One may, for all that has been said so far, “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 duped many times...rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true” (James 1956, 18). At this point in Section VII, then, James has outlined two positions one could take towards one’s intellectual duties, and has more than hinted at his own preference. But he has yet to give reasons for choosing one position or the other.

What he says next shows the kind of reasoning James thinks appropriate to such questions and provides crucial evidence for interpreting him as an expressivist. He writes:

We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life. Biologically considered, our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity, and he who says, “Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!” merely shows his own preponderant private 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. (James 1956, 18)

James says that these *feelings* of our duty are *expressions of passions* (and are *only* expressions of passions). He draws a contrast between states of mind like belief that respond to evidence and states of our “willing nature” that do not.⁶ As James realizes, reasoning bears on passional states and on questions of duty. But it does not bear on them in the same way that it bears on cognitive matters. Some passional states might well be inappropriate or unwarranted unless certain states of affairs obtain; sympathy might misfire if there is no suffering. Still, the sympathetic state is neither true nor false, and the factual considerations that bear on a noncognitive state do not provide evidence for its truth. So the point that James is making is that our feelings of duty, given that they are expressions of passions, cannot be held answerable to evidence or external facts.⁷ To look for evidence to settle questions about our intellectual duties would therefore be a mistake.

In the course of this discussion, James offers an explanation of what state of mind an evidentialist is expressing when he puts forward the imperative, “Better go without

belief forever than believe a lie!” Such an utterance expresses his horror or fear of becoming a dupe, of being led astray. Furthermore, the evidentialist is expressing a fear that has overwhelming or overriding authority or sheer psychological power over him, leading him slavishly to obey it. Because of this felt overriding authority, it is a fear that goes unexamined by him, unlike his other intellectual passions.

One might interpret this passage as itself involving a criticism of evidentialism. On such a reading, James is claiming that because feelings of duty are based on passions rather than evidence, evidentialism itself is based on a passion, specifically the fear of being duped. Since evidentialism is the view that it is wrong to form beliefs on the basis of anything other than evidence, and it is based on passion rather than evidence, evidentialism entails that it would be wrong to believe in evidentialism. Thus, according to this interpretation, James claims that evidentialism is self-undermining.⁹ But the text does not support this interpretation, and in fact James is not in a position to make such a criticism. He does claim that evidentialism is based on the fear of being duped, but he does not claim that this makes the position self-undermining.¹⁰ Rather, as we shall see, he makes a more substantive, normative criticism of evidentialism as based on a neurotic fear.

James is not in a position to make the criticism that evidentialism is self-undermining precisely because he thinks that expressions of our intellectual duty are not answerable to evidence. Evidentialism is most plausibly thought of as the claim that only states that are themselves truth-apt, such as belief, ought to be formed on the basis of evidence. But the mental state that is expressed by the evidentialist is not such a state of mind. Therefore, evidentialism does not apply to the mental state of which it is an expression. Since James commits himself in this passage to the view that statements about one’s duties express passions, and therefore are not answerable to evidence, he cannot criticize Clifford as holding a self-undermining view.¹¹ When he notes that Clifford’s ethics of belief is grounded in a “private horror” or that the faith-vetoer “is actively playing his stake as much as the believer is” (James 1956, 29), James is not yet criticizing evidentialism, but is rather explaining the type of mental state that is expressed in the speech-act that an evidentialist makes when he espouses his view. James takes pains to warn his readers and listeners that evidentialism, like all views about intellectual obligations, rests on passion rather than on pure reason, but he gives no indication that he considers this an objection to evidentialism.

The Critique of Evidentialism

It is only after giving this explanation of the type of speech-act an evidentialist is performing, and the specific passion which gets expressed in that speech-act, that James goes on to criticize evidentialism. He now takes off the theorist’s hat, and becomes engaged as a participant in the practice that he has just described. And the criticism he aims at Clifford is not one of inconsistency, but is rather the substantive normative criticism that evidentialism expresses an unhealthy state of mind, one that needlessly blocks one from maximizing the satisfaction of one’s desires.

Since passions are not truth-assessable, deliberation about what is the case cannot straightforwardly settle questions about what passions to have. But then how are we to deliberate about our passions? Several options remain open. Given a set of passions with various strengths, we can determine what course of action will best satisfy as many of our strongest passions as possible. We can try to reason out the implications of our desires and we can come to see more clearly which of our desires conflict with others. This allows us to give some content to a description of a set of passions as, for instance, “strenuous” or “timid”. In addition, we can confront our desires with information that we think will alter them.¹² So while we might not be able to deliberate about what desires or passions are best in the sense of “true” or “correct”, we can deliberate about what policies to undertake to satisfy the desires that we do have, and we can appeal to some aspects of our passional nature in order to evaluate other aspects of it. In these ways, our passions can respond to reflection, though the reflection is itself typically soaked in our passional nature.¹³ James, as we understand him, appeals to these kinds of considerations in arguing that evidentialism only makes sense as a policy for maximizing desire-satisfaction for someone with a rather single-minded fear of being mistaken. He thinks that the rest of us share his own sensibility, and that a different intellectual policy will best satisfy our desires.

Still in Section VII, James writes:

For my own part, I have also a horror of being duped; but I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world: so Clifford’s exhortation has to my ears a thoroughly fantastic sound. It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound. Not so are victories either over enemies or over nature gained. 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 on their behalf. At any rate, it seems the fittest thing for the empiricist philosopher. (James 1956, 18–19)

He is not, of course, denying that being duped would be bad. But unlike Clifford, James does not think that the injunction to avoid error provides an overriding, categorical imperative. It could do so only for someone who valued nothing as highly as avoiding error. The reason that following evidentialism would block the satisfaction of important desires is given by the metaphor of the general who informs his soldiers to stay out of battle rather than risk being harmed. If one’s only care was not to be harmed, this might be sensible. The military has purposes other than health, however, and it won’t be able to serve any these purposes, such as winning battles, unless its soldiers are willing to take a chance of being wounded. Likewise, most of us have important interests that can only be served by making ourselves vulnerable to dupery. That is, as James attempts to show later with his now-famous examples, in order to satisfy some very important intellectual and nonintellectual desires, we must sometimes form risky beliefs that cannot antecedently be supported by adequate evidence. If we were to follow evidentialism we would not form such risky beliefs, and therefore we would be unable to satisfy those important desires.

James is making the substantive normative claim that the right epistemic policy for one to adopt depends on the structure of passions or desires that one has, the correct

policy being one that will maximize desire-satisfaction.¹⁴ Since he also thinks that most of his audience has desires much like his own, he suggests that evidentialism does not express an advisable intellectual policy for them. It is bound to sound fantastic to their ears, as it expresses an overwhelming passion, one which that they do not, upon reflection, have or want to have. They may fear error, but it is only one passion amongst many, not one with overriding significance.

James's examples of benefits that he thinks an evidentialist is unable to receive, and which most people would not want to be without, include friendship and a relationship with God. These examples share two crucial features:

- (1) They involve propositions that are not antecedently justified by the evidence.
- (2) One must believe those propositions in order to obtain a very important good.¹⁵

It is a matter of some controversy whether James thinks these cases share an additional property, namely that the beliefs in question possess a tendency to bring about their own truth.¹⁶ He might instead have had a weaker condition in mind, viz. that crucial evidence for the truth of the belief not be available to an agent antecedently to the agent adopting the belief. Belief in God could be necessary for getting certain evidence of God's existence without itself helping to make it true that God exists. For present purposes, we can remain neutral with respect to this issue. Minimally, there are at least some "cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming", and in those cases it "would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the 'lowest kind of immorality' into which a thinking being can fall" (James 1956, 25).

James first discusses a case in which a belief clearly plays a crucial role in bringing about its own truth:

Do you like me or not?—for example. Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you halfway, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you have done something apt, as the absolutists say, *ad extorquendum assensum meum*, ten to one your liking never comes. (James 1956, 23–24)

Friendship is clearly a valuable end for most people. Friendship often requires a person to believe that another person will like her, because that belief and its effects are part of what it takes for the other person to come to like her. Believing that another person will like you is apt to cause you to trust the other person, and to express affection and show goodwill towards that person. But being trusted and being shown affection and goodwill go a long way towards making people like one another. At least in some cases, however, you cannot have good evidence that another person likes you antecedently to believing that the other person does (or will) like you. This is because the evidence that justifies the belief that the other person likes you is the affection that the person shows you upon being shown trust and goodwill by you. But you are unlikely to show that trust and goodwill unless you already believe that the other person will like you. Therefore the evidence that justifies the belief can only come about after the belief has been formed. Since the evidentialist requires sufficient evidence antecedently to believing, he

will be cut off both from the evidence of friendship and, more importantly, from the friendship itself. This is because by not believing that the other will like him without sufficient evidence, the evidentialist is apt to stand aloof from the other, which will cause the other not to like him. Since this initial affection generates or is a precursor to friendship, an evidentialist will be cut off from friendship. Anyway, this seems to be James's view of things.

The last issue that James tackles in "The Will to Believe" is that of belief in God. He writes:

We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. (James 1956, 26)

He seems to think that there is not sufficient evidence for the proposition that God exists or for the proposition that God doesn't exist.¹⁷ Therefore, if one were an evidentialist, one would be agnostic and would believe neither that God exists nor that God doesn't exist. But, James claims, believing that God doesn't exist and withholding belief about God's existence both involve a loss of value if God actually exists. This view that the atheist and agnostic risk the same loss seems to be premised on the claim that the full benefits that accrue from God's existence come about only for those who form a relationship with God (which, let us grant, requires actually believing in God). In addition, James emphasizes that the religious hypothesis asserts that "we are better off even now" if we believe the religious hypothesis (James 1956, 26). If the religious hypothesis is true, believers can enjoy the benefits of belief in the hypothesis (e.g., the contribution theistic belief makes to living life strenuously) and will not have been duped.

James goes on to compare evidentialism about belief in God with a person who is unwilling to trust others and therefore cuts himself off from the good of social intercourse. He writes:

...just as a man who in a company of gentlemen made no advances, asked a warrant for every concession, and believed no one's word without proof, would cut himself off by such churlishness from all the social rewards that a more trusting spirit would earn—so here, one who should shut himself off in snarling logicity and try 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. (James 1956, 28)

The thought here seems to be that God will not reveal Himself to those who are insufficiently willing to believe in Him. For example, it might be that divine revelation depends on antecedent faith in God's existence. So the good to be gained from a relationship with God is not possible if one is an evidentialist, because the evidence for God's existence, and the relationship with God which constitutes the good to be gained, can only be achieved after one has already come to believe in God.¹⁸

After his examples concerning relationships with God and with other humans, James gives what looks like a rule of rationality: "... a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule" (James 1956, 28).¹⁹ On our interpretation, James is here expressing his own passionate nature when he calls the evidentialist rule of

thinking an irrational rule. But what passion is he expressing? The reason that he thinks evidentialism is an irrational rule is that it prevents one from acknowledging certain kinds of (possible) truths, among which are truths that it would be important to know given his set of values. Since the view that one has good reason to satisfy one's desires (and especially desires that one is most concerned to satisfy) figures prominently among James's normative commitments,²⁰ by calling the evidentialist rule irrational, he is making the claim that following it needlessly blocks one from satisfying desires.²¹ And the previous examples are meant to show just this. They are examples in which some very important desires, ones associated with religion and social intercourse, will be unsatisfied if one sticks to an evidentialist rule of thinking. So James is expressing a pro-attitude towards satisfying desire and his judgment of irrationality (which manifests a con-attitude) is made in relation to that normative view. That is, as James sees matters, evidentialism is instrumentally irrational in that it is an ineffective means of desire-satisfaction (not only that, it is ineffective in that it impedes the attainment of stable, widely-shared and fundamental desires), and desires ought (*ceteris paribus*) to be satisfied. Someone who was certain never to face any live, forced and momentous options might not behave irrationally in governing her beliefs by the evidentialist rule.²² But, James thinks, evidentialism constitutes an irrational policy for the rest of us.

We have emphasized James's appeal to desires that he thinks his audience will share with him. It is worth noting that he also offers arguments to the effect that evidentialism is an inadvisable policy even for those who are unlike him, and instead share the powerful fear of error that grips Clifford. Even if passions are not the kind of mental states that are governed by evidential relations, there are practical considerations that bear on whether or not a passion is worthwhile. For example, a desire might not be good to have if it is bound to be unfulfilled. And this is another problem James finds with the fear that drives evidentialism. According to empiricism (in James's rather idiosyncratic use of the term), all of our knowledge of the world is inductive and fallible. Therefore, if the fear of error consumes one, one is bound to be frustrated and in a constant nervous, unhealthy state, since, at least if one is an empiricist, one will have to recognize that one's knowledge might always be undone by further inquiry. Again, James is here making a substantive normative claim that an all-consuming fear of error is unhealthy since it is bound to be omnipresent and will lead the person who has it into a nervous, obsessive frame of mind. But his claim is based on a ground that is bound to be shared by anyone (even Clifford), since no one likes to have desires that are bound to go unfulfilled; unfulfilled desires by their nature lead to dissatisfaction and frustration.

The Ethics and the Metaethics of Belief

So far, we have based our interpretation of "The Will to Believe" mostly on Section VII. We have highlighted expressivist language that figures importantly in James's formulations of evidentialism, and we have suggested that an expressivist interpretation can explain why James objects to evidentialism as unhealthy and inappropriate, but not as

incoherent. We now want to argue that an expressivist reading reveals a structure to James's famous essay that has not yet been appreciated. A great many commentators, we suggest, have actually mislocated the thesis of "The Will to Believe". This passage from Section IV,

Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open", is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (James 1956, 11)²³

is generally cited as the thesis of the paper, or at least as the substance of James's reply to Clifford.²⁴ We think that this is a mistake. James does refer to this passage as "the thesis I defend", but context makes it clear that this is the thesis he defends with respect to the question which precedes this passage, namely whether, having established that our passional natures *do* help produce our beliefs, we should regard this situation as "reprehensible and pathological or whether, on the contrary, we must treat it as a normal element in making up our minds" (James 1956, 11).²⁵ At the beginning of Section VIII, James announces, "And now, after all this introduction, let us go straight at our question" (James 1956, 19). James then goes straight at Clifford's evidentialism. And, as we've argued above, these last few sections of "The Will to Believe" argue for something stronger than the claim that one "lawfully may" reject evidentialism. James thinks that, if one is normally and healthily constituted, one should reject evidentialism (though this is a far cry from arguing that evidentialism is false).²⁶ James regards the discussion in Section IV as a preliminary step in his argument against evidentialism, not as an exposition of his central claim, and one consequence of losing sight of this distinction is that James's objection to evidentialism appears tepid rather than forceful.

When the passage from Section IV is seen as the thesis of the essay, the normative use of "lawfully may" in this passage is naturally taken to be James's final word on the subject. But the descriptive, "must" (here clearly used to suggest something like causal necessity) part of this statement is doing the work in this early section. When James insists that our passions *must* determine our beliefs under certain conditions, he is theorizing about, rather than participating in, the normative practice of putting forth views about the content of our intellectual obligations. Since decisions about our intellectual duties are not by their nature determinable by evidence, they must be determined by practical considerations, there being nothing else to determine them. So even the evidentialist's position, which is to not decide, and therefore to withhold belief, when there is not sufficient evidence, is itself a decision that expresses a passion, namely the fear of falling into error. Consequently, James is not arguing against evidentialism when he claims that the evidentialist is himself making a decision expressive of a passion. Such an approach to deciding our intellectual obligations is unavoidable and hence unobjectionable. There is an objection to evidentialism here, but it's merely of the "'ought' implies 'can'" sort, and that's not James's central normative thesis. The normative claim James endorses in this passage simply follows from the metaethical (or metaepistemological) claim he makes.

In Section VIII and later, having taken care of these metaethical preliminaries, James later argues for a quite different normative claim, namely that the passion that rules the evidentialist is an unhealthy one. His claim there is not that the evidentialist incoherently thinks that decisions about our intellectual duties should be made on the basis of evidence, rather than passion. But neither is it the mere claim that one has violated no duty by rejecting evidentialism. Rather, James claims that evidentialism is an inadvisable policy for governing belief because it blocks the fulfillment of important human needs such as friendship. James consistently treats evidentialism as a claim about the content of our intellectual obligations; he never attributes to Clifford *et al.* a position we might call metaevidentialism, according to which the statements of our intellectual obligations are evaluable as true or false, and thus that evidence alone is capable of determining the correctness of judgments of intellectual obligation.²⁷ So James rightly indicates that it is only at the end of the essay that he arrives at his main topic, the objections to evidentialism. In the Section IV passage James is arguing against metaevidentialism by claiming that all positions about our intellectual duty, including evidentialism must, by their nature, be determined by our passions. This, we have argued, is because he thinks that feelings of duty are expressions of states that are not themselves determinable by evidence. So James's position in Section IV is aimed not against the normative position of evidentialism, but rather against the theoretical position that holds that feelings of duty, or the psychological states that underlie expressions of duty, are themselves truth-evaluable and thus capable of being settled by evidence rather than by practical considerations. James is not, in Section IV, engaged in what has become known as The Ethics of Belief Debate but is instead engaged in The Metaethics of Belief Debate.

Conclusion

We have attempted to provide an interpretation of "The Will to Believe", that in the first instance offers a useful framework for gleaning the insights of this philosophically rich document. We also hope that this interpretation turns out to be of independent philosophical interest, as we think it sketches an attractive noncognitivist route into thinking about epistemic normativity, a domain of normative judgment that unfortunately has been neglected in the noncognitivist tradition.²⁸ There are, however, considerable obstacles to be overcome before James himself can be read as a noncognitivist. We will finish by laying out one of these textual difficulties, so that we might suggest a way of deepening the expressivist interpretative framework in order to accommodate the difficulty. Intriguingly, this more sophisticated version of noncognitivism, is identical to one understanding of the slippery term "pragmatism".

The problem we have in mind for our expressivist framework as a way of understanding James's own philosophical position is that James did not distinguish belief and desire as starkly as do most noncognitivists. But noncognitivism only seems to be an intelligible position on the assumption that beliefs and desires are distinct existences, beliefs being states of mind which primarily function to represent the world, and desires being states of mind which primarily function to motivate the agent. Without

this distinction, (or some distinction between representation and motivation), there seems to be no way of drawing a cognitive/noncognitive contrast. Therefore the very idea of noncognitivism is put in jeopardy if the belief/desire distinction is undermined.²⁹

And there is evidence to suggest that James would have balked at this distinction. James insists in “The Will to Believe” that “our passional and volitional nature” stands “at the root of all our convictions” (James 1956, 4).³⁰ The discussion in Section II begins on an undecided note: “When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions. When we look at others, it seems as if they could do nothing when the intellect has once said its say” (James 1956, 4). But James goes on to make it clear that the former statement is the one he endorses. The burden of Section III is to show that apparent cases of the intellect operating in causal isolation from the passions are better described as instances in which “a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind” renders a given hypothesis dead.⁸ Our willing nature appears irrelevant only when it has already led us all the way to belief. “There are passional tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief, and it is only the latter that are too late for the fair; and they are not too late when the previous passional work has been already in their own direction” (James 1956, 11). A number of additional passages suggest that our intellectual nature is ultimately subject to, and explained by, our passional nature. Everyone in James’s audience believes “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’, all for no reasons worthy of the name” (James 1956, 9). “As a rule”, James claims, “we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use” (James 1956, 10). And “[o]ur belief in truth itself” is nothing but a “passionate affirmation of desire, in which our social system backs us up” (James 1956, 9). When the passionate believer in truth confronts a “pyrrhonic sceptic”, “[i]t is just one volition against another” (James 1956, 10).³¹ In short, James’s very insistence on the primacy of our passional nature with respect to our believings appears to sit poorly with the expressivism which we attribute to him.

Nevertheless, James does have room and need for a distinction between states of mind that should be characterized as directly responsive to evidence or external facts, and states that should not. Without such a distinction, James could not draw the contrast between our “willing” or “passional” nature, on the one hand, and our theoretical nature on the other. James clearly thinks that some questions (many philosophical questions, for instance) demand a voice from one’s passional nature, while other questions can (and should) be approached more deliberately and dispassionately. How, though, can James really make room for a distinction between states of mind that are evidence-driven and those that are not, since all of these states of mind are ultimately driven by our willing, rather than by our cognizing, nature?

We can only sketch the briefest reply here, leaving a fuller exegetical treatment to another occasion. In brief, we suggest that in order to accommodate this point, we need to see James as a fairly radical noncognitivist. That is, we think that James should be interpreted as taking a noncognitivist position about the very distinction between our

passional and intellectual natures. According to this position, there is a distinction to be had between those states of mind that are responsive to evidence and those that are not, but this distinction must itself be construed as a passional decision, not one that is dictated by evidence. That is, where one draws the line between intellectual and passional states is not itself a matter of *discovery*, something the world itself dictates. Rather, resolving where to draw the line is itself a practical *decision* (though it need not have the phenomenology of a decision, and it need not result from deliberation). Therefore, how one decides to draw the line will itself be an expression of one's passional nature, rather than a reflection of a real psychological distinction that the world offers up. According to this reading of James, there is no objective fact of the matter about whether a state of mind is essentially intellectual rather than passional; these categories are themselves a reflection of the interests of those who employ them.³² In calling a mental state a belief, one emphasizes such things as that the state serves important representational purposes, that one regards evidence as bearing importantly on the state, and perhaps that one is prepared to explain and defend why one is in that state without appealing to any idiosyncratic passional states.³³ In considering something a part of one's willing nature, one emphasizes the motivational power of the state and that personal factors figure prominently in the etiology and appropriateness of the state. A term like "conviction" can indicate mental states that partake importantly of both sorts of mental state.

This kind of noncognitivism, for which the demarcation of some states of mind as intellectual, cognitive, or doxastic and others as passional, affective, or emotional, is a practical decision, is itself a kind of pragmatism. This is not a kind of pragmatism that tries to obliterate distinctions, but rather one that tries to soften them up by making them reflections of human needs and predilections, which may shift as human interests themselves shift. It is a pragmatism that is opposed to a realism that sees these distinctions as marking real joints carved out by nature as it is in itself. On this kind of realist picture, these joints impress themselves onto our minds, leaving us with true cognitions about the way the world is independently of the reflections or projections of our interests. The pragmatist sees these distinctions as reflections of our passions (though not as *mere* reflections of our passions), rather than as facts that the world impresses onto our minds. We suggest that this view, when suitably developed, will provide a sympathetic way of understanding how pragmatism tries to defend the primacy of willing to cognizing.³⁴

Notes

- [1] See Jackson (1999) and Smith (2001) for examples of such attacks.
- [2] Someone might, of course, come to share James's normative outlook, and he invokes a number of considerations that might persuade someone of the attractiveness of this position. As we will see below, some parts of James's argument demand little or nothing in the way of controversial passional commitments. It is for these reasons, we think, that James can say such things as that "I am...profoundly convinced that my own position is correct" (James 1956, 2) and that "I do not see how this logic can be escaped" (James 1956, 29).
- [3] See Gibbard (1990), and Blackburn (1993) for attempts at such extensions of expressivism.

- [4] This passage is italicized in the original.
- [5] At page 22, in the process of insisting that even scientific values are established only by an appeal to passions, James suggests how this claim about our duties might be supported. "Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man. Challenge the statement and science can only repeat it oracularly, or else prove it by showing that such ascertainment and correction bring man all sorts of other goods which man's heart in turn declares".
- [6] What does James mean by "willing nature"? He does not mean "only such deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from". He means to include "all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set" (James 1956, 9).
- [7] Some of James's formulations might suggest that feelings can have truth values, but there are generally clearer and more charitable ways to understand such passages. When, for instance, he writes "my passionate need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right" (James 1956, 27), it is reasonably clear that he means that it might be the case that the world really is as this passionate need requires it to be. That doesn't make the passionate need true.
- [8] James (1956, 8). He claims that it is "*for the most part* a previous action of our willing nature" that deadens an hypothesis [emphasis added]. Presumably, he grants that evidential considerations play a role as well, but the "for the most part" claim evidences a striking non-cognitivism.
- [9] See Myers (1986, 451) for such an interpretation. According to Myers, James objects to evidentialism "because it is emotionally based, itself formed from passion rather than intellect".
- [10] The key passages are: "Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man" (James 1956, 22) and the claim that evidentialism with respect to religious belief "is not intellect against all passions, then; it is only intellect with one passion laying down its law" (James 1956, 27).
- [11] If Clifford claimed to have sufficient, passion-neutral evidence for his normative position, James would certainly disagree ("And by what, forsooth, is the supreme wisdom of this passion warranted? Dupery for dupery, what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear?" [James, 1956, 27]). Importantly, however, James never accuses Clifford of making such a claim. Alternatively, James could try to stick Clifford with the position that all mental states should be formed only on the basis of evidence, but this seems an unduly uncharitable reading of Clifford.
- [12] As in the strategy of "cognitive psychotherapy" suggested by Richard Brandt (1979).
- [13] James is far from thinking that we are each born with an unalterable "passional nature". To take an example near and dear to James, one needs to have experienced certain things and to have reflected upon one's experiences in order to adopt and endorse "the strenuous mood". See O'Connell (1997, Chapter 7) for some relevant discussion.
- [14] This is a bit too simple, since James imposes some deontological constraints on the maximization of desire-satisfaction. Sadistic desires, for instance, have little or no claim to satisfaction. See Gale (1999, 48). The oversimplification will make no difference for our purposes.
- [15] We assume here that James is trying to justify *belief*, rather than, say, acceptance of a working hypothesis. So we assume, for present purposes, that nothing short of belief will suffice to bring about the desired benefits. For recent discussion, see Gale (1999, 109–110).
- [16] Or at least the truth of a related desirable proposition. For a recent discussion, see Gale (1999, 102–104).
- [17] There is a great deal of scholarly disagreement about whether and to what extent James requires that genuine options concerning factual questions be "intellectually undecidable". Note that questions about our intellectual obligations are not factual questions and so are intellectually undecidable in a strong and straightforward sense.

- [18] O'Connell finds in this, James's second discussion of interpersonal relations, a "deontological streak" fused with the "eudaimonistic" strand that we have been emphasizing. The coldly evidential agent in the company of gentlemen is "churlish" and *deservedly* misses out on "social rewards". See O'Connell (1997, 111). While we will not address the issue of whether a deontological streak runs through James's thinking about these matters, we want to note that James has resources for objecting to "churlish" behavior that go beyond the loss of "social rewards". He could maintain that (for most normally-constituted agents, at least) a warm and friendly disposition contributes to one's happiness in any number of ways. He could even claim that many normal and healthy people intrinsically value warmth and friendliness in themselves and in others. Similarly, belief in God might be both intrinsically and extrinsically rewarding.
- [19] This text is italicized in the original.
- [20] Gale argues for a stronger claim, viz. the "casuistic rule" of the "Promethean" James: "We are always morally obligated to act so as to maximize desire-satisfaction over the other options available to us". See Gale (1999, Chapter One). We rely only on the uncontroversial claim that James values desire-satisfaction.
- [21] Obviously if what one desires is to know certain truths, then from James's view that one has good reason to satisfy one's desires it follows that one has reason not to adopt an evidentialist rule that makes knowing those truths impossible. If it could be shown that the truths that science discovers could not be solely known by following those methods licensed by evidentialism, it would follow that those who adopt evidentialism in the name of science, as Clifford seems to do, are being irrational.
- [22] Notice how both a different intellectual makeup and a different set of emotional attachments are involved in James's counterfactual about a case in which evidentialism might make sense. "If we had an infallible intellect with its objective certitudes, we might feel ourselves disloyal to such a perfect organ of knowledge in not trusting to it exclusively, in not waiting for its releasing word" (James 1956, 30). James is not granting that evidentialism would be appropriate even under such circumstances; he claims only that "there might be more excuse".
- [23] This text is italicized in the original.
- [24] Explicit statements of this view include: Dooley (1972, 141); O'Connell (1997, 7–8); Rorty (1997, 90); and Wernham (1987, 34). The vast majority of commentators at least suggest such a view.
- [25] Notice that James thinks that some statistically normal ways of thinking are nevertheless pathological. Though "we are all such absolutists by instinct", James insists that we should treat this fact "as a weakness of our nature from which we must free ourselves if we can" (James 1956, 14). James clearly treats the natural influence of our passional nature upon our beliefs differently than he does our natural absolutism. The former is neither avoidable nor, as such, pathological (though some passions, of course, have deleterious effects upon our beliefs). In general, James is quite scrupulous about distinguishing normative from descriptive claims throughout the paper.
- [26] James rather diplomatically ends the essay by insisting that "we may wait [indefinitely for sufficient evidence] if we will—I hope you do not think I am denying that..." (James 1956, 30). He does not think that evidentialism is impermissible, but he does think it exceedingly ill-advised, at least for most people.
- [27] James may well hold that some evidentialists are unaware that passions help determine their views about intellectual duties or (more strongly) that some evidentialists believe that questions about intellectual duties can be settled on the basis of evidential considerations alone. The fact that James repeatedly insists that our willing nature affects our philosophical positions certainly suggests that he thinks this fact is not generally appreciated. He also suggests that some evidentialists are confused or blind. He writes, for instance, that "[w]hen 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 makes the other way"

- (James 1956, 14). What James does *not* do is assume that evidentialism implies metaevidentialism, and that is what would be required for the passage from Section IV to count as an objection to evidentialism. Even if Clifford mistakenly thought that evidentialism implied metaevidentialism (which James does not claim), James understands quite clearly that he needs distinct arguments against evidentialism and against metaevidentialism.
- [28] Notable exceptions are Gibbard (1990) and more recently Field (2000).
- [29] The claim that a non-cognitivist cannot deny the belief-desire contrast without thereby undermining the intelligibility of non-cognitivism itself has an echo in the literature on content. Boghossian (1989, 1990) and Wright (1992) argue that a non-factualism about content or truth undermines the contrast between truth-conditional and non-truth-conditional statements that a non-factualist position requires.
- [30] It is true that in this passage, James says only that “when we look at certain facts it seems as if” our passionate nature explains our convictions. But he then considers objections to the claim that our convictions are, at bottom, passionate. He concludes by rejecting a simple doxastic voluntarism, according to which we can believe something simply by wanting to. A rejection of doxastic voluntarism, however, is quite different from a rejection of the view that our passions largely determine our beliefs. Immediately after rejecting doxastic voluntarism, James says “Yet if any one should thereupon assume that intellectual insight is what remains after wish and will and sentimental preference have taken wing, or that pure reason is what then settles our opinions, he would fly quite as directly in the teeth of the facts” (James 1956, 8).
- [31] Some other Jamesian texts from this period help clarify his position. In “The Sentiment of Rationality”, he claims that “every human being of the slightest mental originality” is “peculiarly sensitive to evidence that bears in some one direction”, and that “[i]ntellect, will, taste and passion co-operate” in the formation of philosophical opinions “just as they do in practical affairs” (James 1956, 92). He also claims that the balance between the passion for simplicity and the passion for distinguishing will exert a large force on all one’s intellectual undertakings. James did not, however, think that inborn temperament straightforwardly determines the content of one’s opinions (or of one’s philosophical opinions). “[E]ven in the pessimistically-tending mind”, he claims in “Is Life Worth Living?” deep forces are arousable that can give life “a keener zest” (James 1956, 47).
- [32] Rorty (1997, 88–90) suggests a somewhat similar (but not identical) view. Rorty claims that James should have denied any sharp distinction between the cognitive and the noncognitive, but failed to do so in “The Will to Believe”. According to our reading, James needs such a distinction, but needs it to be understood pragmatically. We also think “The Will to Believe” less of a failure than Rorty seems to.
- [33] It might seem strange to treat statements of belief as serving a non-descriptive function. After all, aren’t beliefs cited in psychological explanations of behavior? But the fact that the concept of belief serves such a descriptive function does not entail that it might not also serve a non-descriptive function. See Shah (2003) for an argument that we must think of belief in part as a *prescriptive* concept in order to capture the way that truth governs belief within first-personal deliberation.
- [34] A version of this paper was given at the 2002 meeting of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, and we are grateful to our commentator, Matt Flamm. The authors would also like to thank Jonathan Adler, Daniel Cohen, Richard Gale, Louis Loeb and David Velleman for helpful discussion.

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