Why James’ Religious Option is Not Forced, and Why It Does Not Matter

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The notion of a “forced” option plays an important role in William James’ defense of religious faith in “The Will to Believe.” In part this is because the essay, James’ “defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced” (1956f: 1-2), is a response not to atheism, but to the agnosticism of T.H. Huxley and W.K. Clifford. Clifford argues in “The Ethics of Belief” that it is “wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence”(295). His argument relies on the assumption that there are three alternatives – we can take the proposition to be true, take it to be false, or suspend judgment on the truth of it. According to Clifford, when we lack sufficient evidence to support or reject a proposition we are obligated to suspend belief in regard to it. In response James invokes the notion of a “forced” option to argue that in certain cases, including what he calls the “religious hypothesis,” the suspension of belief is not a third alternative. We can accept or reject it, but suspending judgment on it is not a third alternative. In this paper I want to argue that James’ religious option is not forced in any way that would preclude agnosticism – i.e., the suspension of belief - - but that this does not completely undermine his defense of religious faith.
James’ Argument

James’ defense of the right to adopt a believing attitude relies on the notion of a genuine option,¹ which he develops by defining several key terms. First, he defines a hypothesis as “anything that may be proposed to our belief” and an option as the “decision between two hypotheses” (James 1956f: 2-3). Second, he defines a genuine option as one that is living, forced, and momentous. A living option is a choice between two hypotheses, each of which “makes some appeal, however small, to your belief” (James 1956f: 3). A forced option is a choice between hypotheses that is unavoidable. When confronted with a forced option one must choose one of the hypotheses for, in James’ words, “there is no standing outside of the alternative” (James 1956f: 3). In such cases, suspending judgment is, in some sense, not an option. Finally, a momentous option is a choice that is unique, irreversible, or very important. James contends that when confronted with a genuine option that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds – i.e., cannot be decided by an appeal to the objective evidence – one has the right to believe the hypothesis on non-intellectual grounds, what he calls our “willing” or “passional” natures.²³

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¹ One challenge in deciphering “The Will to Believe” is determining whether James was offering one or two arguments. Gail Kennedy has argued, for instance, that there are two doctrines present in “The Will to Believe,” a “right to believe doctrine” and a “will to believe doctrine,” both of which independently lead to the conclusion that it can be rational to believe a proposition upon insufficient evidence (Kennedy 1958: 578-82). The right to believe doctrine applies to cases that are not decidable on evidential grounds, but which, because they are forced and momentous, require that one adopt a belief. The will to believe doctrine applies to cases in which the adoption of a belief helps to create the belief’s verification, or as Kennedy writes, “cases where the belief in the future existence of a fact may itself help to produce that fact” (Kennedy 580). These may also be cases in which the right to believe doctrine applies, but they need not be. See also (Beard 1966). Whether or not James intended to make two separate arguments, I will limit my comments to what Kennedy refers to as the “right to believe” argument because James states his thesis in terms of this argument and because it hinges on the notion of a forced option.

² He states his thesis as follows: “Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between two propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such
This argument challenges Clifford’s ethics of belief. If there are cases of intellectually undecidable genuine options, they would constitute counterexamples to the claim that we must suspend judgment whenever we do not have sufficient evidence. If, in certain cases, we are forced to make judgments in certain cases despite having insufficient evidence, then it cannot be morally wrong to do so. Thus, in these cases we have the right to believe despite having insufficient evidence.

Whether or not this argument is a challenge to Clifford’s agnosticism rests on whether or not the religious option is a forced option. This, in turn, depends on what James mean by both the religious option and a forced option. James’ religious hypothesis is sometimes assumed to be the claim that God exists, but this is quite misleading. His religious hypothesis is presented as a nuanced two-part claim. The first part is that “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” (James 1956f: 25). The second part is the affirmation that “we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true” (James 1956f: 26). Whether this option is forced depends on what James means by the notion of a forced option, but unfortunately, he is not as clear on this as we might like him to be. In what follows I will examine several possible accounts, trying to find one that is philosophically defensible and consistent with both what James says in “The Will to Believe” and his broader philosophical

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4 It also challenges Huxley’s principle of agnosticism “Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable” (1889: 186-87).
commitments. My conclusion is that even under the most plausible interpretation the religious option is not forced in a way that would preclude agnosticism.

**Why the Religious Option is Not Forced**

The first interpretation, what I will refer to as the “structural account,” is suggested by James when he first articulates the notion of a genuine option. He writes,

[I]f 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 decline to offer any judgment as to my theory. But if I say, ‘Either accept this truth or go without it,’ I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind. (James 1956f: 3)

The key to this account is the shift from an assessment of the truth value of a hypothesis to a decision of whether or not to believe it. Assessing the truth value of a hypothesis allows three possibilities—we can judge the hypothesis to be true, judge it to be false, or suspend judgment. In contrast, deciding whether or not to believe the same hypothesis allows only two options—either one believes it or one does not. This passage would suggest that any question regarding the truth of a hypothesis could be restructured as a forced option simply by changing it into a question of whether or not to believe it.

James’ emphasis on the value of religious belief throughout his writings makes it unlikely that he sees the religious option as forced in this somewhat trivial way. Moreover, it is not clear that on this account a forced option could also be intellectually undecidable. On the one hand, if the option is between \( p \) and \( \sim p \) — that is between truth values — then the option may be undecidable, but it is not forced. One can suspend judgment. On the other hand, if the
option is between believing \( p \) or not believing \( p \), then it would be forced, but decidable.\(^5\) If the
evidence supports \( p \), then one should believe \( p \); if it supports \( \sim p \) or is counterbalanced one
should not believe \( p \). I’ve summarized these options in the Table #1 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment of the evidence</th>
<th>Choice between ( p ) and ( \sim p )</th>
<th>Choice between believing ( p ) and not believing ( p )</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On balance supports ( p )</td>
<td>Believe ( p )</td>
<td>Believe ( p )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counterbalanced</td>
<td>Suspend judgment</td>
<td>Do not believe ( p )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On balance supports ( \sim p )</td>
<td>Believe ( \sim p )</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undecidable, but not forced</td>
<td>Forced, but decidable</td>
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George Mavrodes offers a different interpretation, arguing that behind the notion of a
forced option is a pragmatic theory of belief and that beliefs are different “only if their practical
consequences are different” (Mavrodes 1963: 193). Suspending one’s belief in a proposition
and believing it to be false would be equivalent belief states just in case the practical
consequences are the same. On this account it is not the structure of the option, but the
behavioral consequences associated with the alternatives that determine whether it is forced.
Thus, some options of the structure “either accept this truth or go without it” would be forced
options while other may not. Mavrodes then argues that religious beliefs are forced in just this
way.

Religious beliefs color our approach to so many situations and actions that they cannot
be avoided. And there is no third alternative in action. We must either act as though
the religious hypotheses were true or as though they were false. There is no practical
third way of acting as if we were uncommitted, though we may talk this way. Thus, the
agnostic gets the same sort of consequences as the atheist (Mavrodes 1963: 193-94).

\(^5\) A similar point has been made by other authors. See (Wernham 1987: 33-39) and (Feldman 2006: 9-10).
There are good reasons to prefer this approach over the structural account. This pragmatic interpretation of the notion of forced options is certainly consistent with James’ overall philosophy, particularly with the connection he draws between beliefs and action. Moreover, when James defends the claim that the religious option is a genuine option, he describes the choice between religious belief and disbelief not as a logical, but as a practical disjunction. “[R]eligion is a forced option as far as that good goes,” he writes. “We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical 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 choose to disbelieve” (James 1956f: 26, emphasis in the original).

However, there are problems with this approach as well. Jerome Gellman, for instance, rejects Mavrodes account due to general concerns regarding our ability to confirm the pragmatic theory of belief (Gellman 1978: 507). He argues that given the complexity of the relations between our beliefs and actions, it is impossible to map beliefs to actions and vice versa in any way specific enough to identify two beliefs as being the same belief. Even if we could, I would argue contrary to Mavrodes that it is implausible to argue that agnosticism and atheism are pragmatically equivalent in the sense of having exactly the same consequences. While it may be true that religious beliefs cannot be avoided, this does not entail that the

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6 James makes this connection explicitly in a footnote near the end of “The Will to Believe” James writes, “Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act as we should if we did believe it to be true (James 1956f: 29).

7 “[T]he notion of the practical consequences of a belief,” he writes, “is hopelessly weighed down with difficulties. We cannot identify the practical consequences of beliefs taken singly just each one by itself. In so far as actions and their consequences issue from beliefs, they are the product of many beliefs as well as of the opportunities to act on the part of the believer” (Gellman 1978: 507, emphasis in the original).

This is only one of Gellman’s objections. Another is that the argument assumes that both agnosticism and atheism are both beliefs, an assumption Gellman rejects. He argues that agnosticism is the absence of belief rather than disbelief (Gellman 1978: 507-08).
agnostic “must build the same sort of life as the atheist.” There are many ways in which the behavior of an agnostic who holds the religious hypothesis still open might differ from the behavior of an atheist who has already decided against the hypothesis.

A more promising approach would be to argue that atheism and agnosticism are not identical, but merely equivalent in certain important respects. James suggests as much by his reference to “the good” in the passage just quoted. This explanation of why the religious option is forced is directly preceded by a brief explanation of why it is momentous. “We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief a certain vital good” (James 1956f: 26). For this reason, several authors have proposed what I will call “vital goods” accounts of forced options.8,9

There are good reasons for adopting an account that links forced options to vital goods. In addition to the evidence found in James’ description of the religious option as a genuine option, his description of the religious hypothesis itself also seems to support this type of account. His claim that “we are better off even now if we believe” (James 1956f: 26) is a claim about the benefits, the good, of holding religious beliefs. Ultimately, however, even a vital

8 Gellman, for instance, reformulates the option as a choice between gaining or losing a particular vital good. “What then is the religious option for James? ‘Either gain the benefits of religious belief or lose them!’ And this option is forced for a formal reason: with regard to any benefits, B, and option of the form ‘Either gain B or lose B!’ is forced. There is no way of avoiding the dilemma, for no matter what we do we either gain or we lose these benefits. Hence, the religious option is forced, notwithstanding the fact that there are two ways, doxastically speaking, of losing these benefits, viz. atheism and agnosticism” (Gellman 1978: 509, emphasis is the original).

9 In a similar vein James Wernham clarifies what James means when he says that “there is no possibility of not choosing.” Wernham argues that James is not trying to convey a logical impossibility at all, but a practical one, implying that “we cannot afford not to choose,” not that we are logically precluded from not choosing. The only way in which this account makes sense is if the good we cannot afford not to choose is a vital good. “If something is logically impossible, we cannot do it, but much that we cannot do is logically possible. Often we cannot for lack of ability; often we cannot for lack of opportunity. ... ‘Cannot’ often means “cannot afford to,’ and despite his own profession, that is what James means by ‘forced.’ A forced option is one which we cannot afford not to decide. We can suspend judgment, we can leave the question open, we can avoid deciding it. That is not impossible, but we just cannot afford to do it” (Wernham, 38).
goods account is unsatisfactory. To see why consider two questions which any such account
must address. First, what precisely is the vital good of religious belief that James has in mind?
Second, is religious belief the only way to gain that vital good?

James does not tell us precisely what the vital good of religious belief is in “The Will to
Believe,” but he gives suggestions and we can look to his other writings to get a fuller account.
His statement of the religious hypothesis indicates that James is not alluding to the good of
eternal life. The second affirmation is that “we are better off even now if we believe” (James
1956f: 26, emphasis added). In other words, the good is to be found in the here and now. The
first part of the hypothesis, the claim that “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” (James 1956f: 25), suggests what this present good might be. It is the good that
comes from believing in a transcendent moral order that gives our present finite lives meaning
and significance. Believing this allows us to live in what James calls the “strenuous mood,” a
mood in which we can act courageously and endure suffering in light of the possibility that our
freely chosen actions might contribute to this transcendent moral order.10 While one can see
this idea emerging in the essays that accompany “The Will to Believe,”11 James gives it more
clear expression in The Varieties of Religious Experience.

The luster of the present hour is always borrowed from the background of
possibilities it goes with. Let our common experiences be enveloped in an eternal moral
order; let our suffering have an immortal significance; let Heaven smile upon earth, and
deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in; --

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10 For a much more complete treatment of the importance of religious belief in James’s philosophy see

11 I am referring her to “Is Life Worth Living” (James 1956b), “The Sentiment of Rationality” (James 1956e),
“Reflex Action and Theism” (James 1956d), “The Dilemma of Determinism” (James 1956a), and “The Moral
Philosopher and the Moral Life” (James 1956c).
and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. (James 1958: 122).

It would be foolish to deny the value of the good James describes here. However, for the religious option to be forced, religious belief must not only be a way to gain this vital good, it must be the only way to gain it. Whether this is the case is far from clear. If the vital good is the opportunity to live in the strenuous mood, to live a life which gains meaning from purposes and causes that transcend our finite lives, then there are certainly other possibilities. To deny that other such possibilities exist would be to deny the empirical fact that many agnostics and atheists attest to living such lives.  

12 And if this is the case, then the vital goods account fails to show that the religious option is a forced option.

**Why it Does Not Matter**

Does this mean that James’ argument in defense of the right to adopt a believing attitude fails? It is not clear that it does. James mistakenly assumes that to defend the right to believe against Clifford’s ethics of belief he needs to rule out agnosticism as a distinct response to the religious hypothesis. However, this is not the case. All he needs to do is show that suspension of belief is not the only morally acceptable option. While this is not the strategy that he invokes in the essay, he does provide the resources there to make the argument.

In the previous section I argued that the most plausible interpretation of a “forced” option relies on the connection between the option and a particular vital good. An option is not forced in general, but only forced in relation to a vital good. However, it is precisely this

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12 Gellman for instance notes that people might find such meaning through secular ideologies such as “communism, socialism, humanism, or nationalism” (Gellman 1978: 512). See also Ronald’s Aronson’s book, *Living Without God: New Directions for Atheists, Agnostics, Secularists, and the Undecided* (2008).
relationship to a vital good that also makes the religious option a momentous option. Indeed, under the vital goods interpretation, the notion of forced option is dependent on the notion of a momentous option. If this is the case, then the notion of a momentous option is really doing the work and James need not invoke the problematic notion of a forced option at all. The argument that James should have made is that when we are confronted with momentous options, the decision to suspend belief, while a logical possible alternative, is not a neutral position. It need not be that it is equivalent to believing that the proposition in question is false, as James argues, but only that it makes it more difficult to attain the vital good.

This suggests a weakness in Clifford’s argument, the implied claim that the suspension of a belief is somehow neutral or harmless. Clifford seems to takes the position that in the long run it is beneficial to hold true beliefs, harmful to hold false beliefs, and relatively neutral to suspend belief. Seen in this light, the duty to avoid error by suspending belief when we do not have sufficient evidence is the epistemological analogue of the Hippocratic dictum in medicine to first, do no harm. James’ contention that we also have an obligation to seek the truth is a reminder that we also have a duty of beneficence, a duty to help.

Let me push this medical analogy a bit further. Suppose a patient, Jamie, is experiencing a life threatening illness. Jamie desperately wants to live, but her physician informs her that there are no known treatments very likely, much less certain to be effective. However, through an internet site Jamie learns of a double-blind clinical trial testing an experimental treatment for the same condition. This experimental treatment, call it Treatment X, could potentially cure her, but it could also severely harm, if not kill her. She asks her physician, Sophia, to provide her with Treatment X. Jamie does not want to participate in the trial because it is possible,
given the double-blind structure of the trial, that she will receive a placebo rather than the treatment. Cliff, the physician guiding the clinical trial, is adamant that Jamie not be given Treatment X outside the trial. He argues that providing it would be wrong. The first priority should be to do no harm and if there is insufficient evidence regarding the risks and benefits of the treatment, then it should not be performed. Furthermore, he argues that even if it was effective, using the treatment outside the trial might negatively impact the study leading to erroneous conclusions that could harm many future patients. Jamie responds angrily that she is concerned only with her own welfare. Continued life is quite literally a vital good to her and if proceeding with the Treatment X provides the only hope of gaining it, then it is ethical to provide the treatment despite the uncertainties. Moreover, because there are no alternatives known to be effective she will likely die without Treatment X. Thus, not providing it would be equivalent to standing by and allowing her to die. Sophia disagrees with both Jamie and Cliff. Though there are no alternatives known to be effective, there are treatments – call treatments B and C – that might prolong Jamie’s life. Treatment X may turn out to be the best alternative, but it should be considered alongside all the alternatives, including the alternative of doing nothing. Thus, not providing Treatment X would not be equivalent to allowing Jamie to die. However, she acknowledges that ultimately they will have to decide without knowing which alternative would provide the greatest likelihood of achieving the vital good of saving Jamie’s life.

To the extent that the goods of finding meaning in life and preserving life in the face of a life-threatening illness are both vital goods, I think the analogy helps us better understand the debate between Clifford and James in three ways. First, just as Cliff is wrong to assume that to
do nothing is to do Jamie no harm, Clifford is wrong to assume that the option of suspending belief is always a neutral or harmless option. When a vital good is at stake the decision to suspend belief is a decision which may have significant harmful or beneficial consequences. Second, just as Jamie misunderstood her option as a choice between only the alternatives of Treatment A and death, James misconstrues the religious option as a forced option. In so doing he presents us with a false dilemma – we either choose religious belief or give up the opportunity to gain a certain vital good. It may be possible to gain the vital good through other means. One might remain agnostic on the religious hypothesis and still gain the vital good.

Finally, the analogy points to a possible deeper source of the disagreement between James and Clifford. In Clifford’s utilitarian ethics of belief the interests of the knowing subject are to be given no more consideration than the interests of others. In fact, the ethics is largely intended to prevent subjective interests or desires from getting in the way of an objective assessment of the truth of propositions. James’ defense of the right to believe, in contrast, is developed almost exclusively in terms of the consequences for the individual knowing subject who has both practical as well as theoretical interests. In this sense, he responds to Clifford’s conclusion without engaging Clifford’s argument.

If my argument is correct, then the assumption that James’ argument in defense of religious faith hinges on his claim that the religious hypothesis presents us with a forced option is mistaken. Under the most plausible account of what it means for an option to be forced, the religious option is not forced. However, I have also argued that this need not completely undermine James’ defense as his argument could be reconstructed using the concept of momentous to do the work for which he uses the notion of forced option to do.
Sources Cited


