William James, the New Atheists, and the Possibility of Agnosticism
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Paper Delivered to the Highlands Institute for American Religious and Philosophical Thought
June 14, 2011

In writing this paper I hope to lessen the polarization of religious discourse by making space for agnosticism between atheism and religious faith. I do this by critiquing two arguments against agnosticism, one offered by a “new atheists,” Richard Dawkins, and the other offered by a defender of faith, William James.

The new atheists¹ are notable not only for the strident rhetorical attacks on fervent religious believers, but also for their criticism of agnostics and religious moderates. In the process they draw implicitly on a normative account of the justification of belief with roots in the agnosticism of T.H. Huxley and the ethics of belief of W. K. Clifford. Given this connection, it is ironic that Dawkins argues against Huxley that religious agnosticism is untenable.

William James’s defense of religious faith in “The Will to Believe” is also a response to Huxley. Like Dawkins, but for very different reasons, James argues that agnosticism is untenable. Religious belief presents us with a forced option. We must decide either for it or against it; suspending belief is not an alternative.

My strategy is not to defend agnosticism directly, but to counter the arguments offered by Dawkins and James. In Part One I briefly trace the connection between Huxley and the new atheists. In Part Two I examine Dawkins’ critique of agnosticism, arguing that it fails because it relies on both a restrictive definition of agnosticism and an unjustified allegiance to

¹ This is not a precisely defined category, but along with Dawkins a short list would include Christopher Hitchens (Hitchens 2007), Sam Harris (Harris 2004; 2006), Daniel Dennett (Dennett 2007), and Victor Stenger (Stenger 2009).
evidentialism. In Part Three I explore James’s argument, arguing that it fails because the religious option does not present us with a forced option.

Part One: Agnosticism

When T.H. Huxley took credit in 1889 for coining the term “agnosticism” to describe a position distinguished from both theism and atheism (1889a: 183), he characterized it primarily as a guiding intellectual principle rather than a creed or set of beliefs. “Positively” he wrote, “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” (1889b: 186-87).

The spirit, if not the letter, of this principle certainly did not originate with Huxley. It was common enough in Western philosophy. However, the religious and intellectual context in which Huxley coined it significantly shaped how the term “agnosticism” would come to be used. There is much to say about this history, but for the sake of time I will only note two points here. First, because Huxley offered agnosticism as an alternative to theism and atheism, it came to be understood as a position on religious matters, rather than a guiding intellectual principle. Moreover, his ecclesiastical critics persisted in equating his agnosticism with atheism as simply two forms of disbelief, a trend which has unfortunately continued. Second, Huxley emphasized that his principle was morally, as well as epistemically normative. In so doing he echoed the view famously defended by his contemporary, Clifford, as an “ethics of belief.”

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2 For instance, W.C. Magee, the Bishop of Peterborough, referred to Huxley as “simply an old-fashioned ‘infidel’ who is afraid to own his right name” (Magee 1889: 352). Huxley defended agnosticism and responded to critics in a heated debate that took place in The Nineteenth Century over a five month period in 1889. See(Huxley 1889a), (Magee 1889),(Huxley 1889c), (Wace 1889), and (Huxley 1889b).
Clifford appealed to the harmful consequences that result both directly and indirectly from holding beliefs that are not supported by the evidence, concluding that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (295).

In the 20th century this normative attitude towards the justification of belief became widely known as “evidentialism.” The “evidentialist imperative” according to Jeff Jordan, is the normative assertion “that one should believe a proposition only if it is supported by adequate evidence” (42). Unfortunately, the normativity expressed could be interpreted epistemically, prudentially, or morally. Though Huxley intended his principle to be both epistemically and morally normative, the moral connotations have been softened and evidentialism today is discussed primarily in terms of epistemic rationality.

Though not mentioned by name, evidentialism in both its epistemic and moral senses permeates the new atheism. This is evident in the way in which the new atheists attack both the rationality and morality of religious belief. The epistemic evidentialism takes the form of an unquestioning embrace of science as the ultimate arbiter of knowledge, while the ethical evidentialism is seen in the argument that religious belief is a particularly pernicious category of belief because it is extremely harmful as well as irrational. One type of harm is direct – e.g., the violence encouraged or condoned by religious belief. Here the new atheists recite a litany of atrocities they attribute to religion, from the Inquisition, to the Holocaust, to the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. However, they are also concerned with the indirect harm caused by religious faith, the way in which holding beliefs based on insufficient evidence

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3 See Dawkins (Dawkins 2008), Hitchens (2007) and Harris (2004; 2006).
undermines science and rationality. It is not difficult to see Clifford’s ethics of belief in the background here.

Part Two: Dawkins’ “Poverty of Agnosticism”

Given this implicit appeal to Clifford’s ethics of belief it is somewhat surprising that Dawkins vigorously rejects agnosticism. However, in *The God Delusion* he goes to great length to criticize agnostics, including Huxley, even implying that they lack the courage of their convictions.

Dawkins emphasizes that he is not against agnosticism in general, but only against agnosticism in regards to the God Hypothesis, the proposition that “there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us” (52, emphasis in the original). He begins by distinguishing between Temporary Agnosticism in Practice (TAP) and Permanent Agnosticism in Principle (PAP) (69-70). TAP is the appropriate response in situations where it would be possible to answer a question if we had adequate evidence, but we don’t yet have it. In contrast, PAP is the appropriate response to questions that cannot be answered because the “very idea of evidence is not applicable” (70).⁴

Having made this distinction Dawkins argues against both versions of agnosticism, shaping each argument around a claim about the God Hypothesis. The first claim is that the God Hypothesis is a scientific hypothesis about which evidence is relevant, and thus, taking the position of PAP regarding it is unwarranted. The second claim is that there is sufficient evidence to make the hypothesis highly improbable, and thus, TAP is unwarranted as well.

⁴ As an example Dawkins cites the question of whether you see red as I do. This question belongs in the realm of PAP because it is not clear what evidence could possibly answer it.
Since both PAP and TAP are unwarranted, agnosticism regarding the God Hypothesis is unwarranted. I will not take up the first argument here. Instead, I will focus on the second, arguing that there are two critical problems with it. The first has to do with Dawkins’ conception of agnosticism. The second has to do with the allegiance to evidentialism implicit in his argument.

Dawkins’ argument against TAP relies on a particular conception of agnosticism, distinguished by his claim that in order to justify agnosticism the evidence for and against a hypothesis must make its truth or falsity at least roughly equiprobable – i.e., the evidence must be counterbalanced.\(^5\) He does not defend this claim, nor acknowledge that there are other possible conceptions of agnosticism. This leads him to argue against a conception of agnosticism that many self-proclaimed agnostics, including Huxley, may not hold. Moreover, because his conception is restrictive compared to the alternative criteria, I contend that he is offering a straw person argument.

Consider the argument he attributes to those who claim that our inability to prove or disprove with certainty that God exists justifies agnosticism. I take the argument in Figure 1 to be a fair reconstruction.

1. We cannot prove conclusively either that God does or that God does not exist.
2. If we cannot prove conclusively either that God does or that God does not exist, then the hypotheses “God exists” and “God does not exist” are roughly equiprobable.
3. One should be agnostic if and only if the hypotheses “God exists” and “God does not exist” are roughly equiprobable.
4. Thus, we should be agnostic in regards to God’s existence.

\(^5\) I take Dawkins’ criteria of equiprobability to be similar to Chisholm’s concept of counterbalance. “A proposition is counterbalanced if there is as much, or as little, to be said in favor of accepting it as there is to be said in favor of accepting its negation” (Chisholm 1977: 10).
Dawkins’ analysis of this argument is misguided. He claims that this is a bad argument, identifying premise #2 as the culprit. Moreover, he argues that Huxley’s apparent acceptance of premise #2 leads him to mistakenly adopt agnosticism when he should adopt atheism. Dawkins is correct that in his assessment of premise #2. However, he is wrong to assume agnostics need to rely on it or the argument he attributes to them. This is what makes the argument a straw person argument. Huxley may very well have agreed with Dawkins’ claim that the lack of conclusive proof regarding God’s existence or non-existence does not make the claims equally probable. However, this would have been beside the point. Huxley held that agnosticism was justified in cases where the evidence is inconclusive, not only in cases where the evidence is counterbalanced. In other words, he would not have accepted premise #3 in the argument, Dawkins’ criterion for agnosticism.7

What this suggests is that there are multiple conceptions of agnosticism. Here I will identify just two. This distinction hinges on the difference between knowledge and “mere belief” – i.e., what we imply when we say that we know something, we don’t just believe it. So

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6 “That you cannot prove God’s existence is accepted and trivial, if only in the sense that we can never absolutely prove the non-existence of anything. What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn’t) but whether his existence is probable. That is another matter. Some disprovable things are sensibly judged far less probable than other disprovable things” (77, emphasis in the original). Dawkins argues that because it is impossible to prove the non-existence of anything conclusively, accepting this premise would lead us to be agnostic, not only about God, but about the existence of all sorts of entities that we have no good reason to believe exist – e.g., the tooth fairy, unicorns, or his favorite, the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

7 Huxley’s argument might have gone something like this.
   1. We cannot prove conclusively either that God does or that God does not exist.
   2. If we cannot prove something conclusively, then we should not claim to have knowledge of it.
   3. Thus, we do not have knowledge of God’s existence.
   4. If we do not have knowledge of something, then we should be agnostic in regards to it (Huxley’s principle of agnosticism).
   5. Thus, we should be agnostic in regards to God’s existence.
as to not confuse the issue, I will assume an evidentialist notion of justification applies to both conceptions.

The first I will call “agnosticism as not knowing.” According to this view, one is agnostic in regard to $p$ if, and only if one neither knows that $p$ nor knows that $\neg p$. There is good reason to think that Huxley assumed this conception. He claimed to have intentionally chosen the term “agnostic” to stand in contrast to the term “gnostic,” that is, someone who claims to know some sort of spiritual or religious truth (1889a: 183). More recently Anthony Kenny has also adopted this sort of position (Kenny 1983; 2007). 

In contrast, Dawkins adopts a conception of agnosticism that I will refer to as “agnosticism as not believing.” There are, of course, multiple accounts of what it means to believe something, but the account that Dawkins seems to hold is that to believe $p$ is to take it that $p$ is true. In regard to the question of God’s existence, agnosticism as not believing would be a mental state in which a person is not disposed to feel either that God exists or that God does not exist. If the agnostic is a good evidentialist, it would imply that she holds that the evidence for and against the God Hypothesis to be counterbalanced. 

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8 Like Dawkins, Kenny finds the arguments for and against the existence of God to be inconclusive. The conclusion he is led to, however, is agnosticism rather than atheism. “I do not myself know of any argument for the existence of God which I find convincing; in all of them I think I can find flaws. Equally, I do not know of any argument against the existence of God which is totally convincing; in the arguments I know against the existence of God I can equally find flaws. So that my own position on the existence of God is agnostic” (1983: 84-85).

9 Because both Dawkins and James adopt a voluntaristic notion belief, I assume that notion for the purposes of this paper. It is possible, however, to make the same argument adopting involuntary doxasticism as well. However, it requires the additional step of distinguishing between belief and acceptance. Jonathan Cohen, for instance, distinguishes “acceptance” from “belief,” both of which can be expressed using the term “believe.” According to Cohen, acceptance is a mental act. “[T]o accept that $p$” he writes, “is to have or adopt a policy of deeming, positing, or postulating that $p$ – that is, of going along with that proposition (either for the long term or for immediate purposes only) as a premise in some or all contexts for one’s own and others’ proofs, argumentations, inferences, deliberations, etc.” In contrast, believing is a mental state. “Belief that $p$, on the other hand, is a disposition to feel it true that $p$, whether or not one goes along with the proposition as a premise”(368).
To see how the different conceptions of agnosticism play out, it will be helpful to look at the spectrum of possibilities regarding human judgments about the existence of God that Dawkins provides (see Figure 2). Since both Huxley and Kenny utilize the conception of agnosticism as not knowing, they would classify people falling into categories 2-6 as agnostics. In contrast, Dawkins’ conception of agnosticism as not believing is more restrictive. He reserves category 4 for the true agnostics, and only grudgingly includes people in categories 3 and 5, referring to them as “technically agnostic.” This use of a particular conception of agnosticism without recognizing or acknowledging other less restrictive alternatives is what makes Dawkins’ argument a straw person argument.10

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10 At some level he seems to at least recognize this possibility of a more modest standard. He first accuses Huxley of an error or reason, then softens criticism a bit and chides him for “bending over backwards to concede a point” (Dawkins 2008: 72).
A second problem with Dawkins’ argument has to do with the allegiance to evidentialism implicit in it. Up until now I have presumed evidentialism as a consistent standard of justification. The evidentialist imperative implies not only that the strength of our belief in a proposition should be proportional to the evidence, but that only evidence related to its truth-value is relevant. However, there are good reasons to question this model of justification. There are also non-epistemic factors – e.g., ethical or prudential factors – that are relevant to the justification of belief.

There have been many arguments against evidentialism, but since Dawkins takes science to be the epitome of rationality, it is worth noting that this point was made persuasively by philosopher of science Richard Rudner more than 50 years ago. Rudner pointed out that the question of what makes the evidence “adequate” to justify accepting a hypothesis is not a question that can be answered by the evidence alone (Rudner 1953: 1-6). It is not a strictly empirical question at all. Since no scientific hypothesis is ever completely verified, what counts

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1. Strong theist: 100 per cent probability of God. In the words of C.G. Jung, ‘I do not believe, I know.’
2. Very high probability but short of 100 per cent. De facto theist. ‘I cannot know for certain, but I strongly believe in God and live my life on the assumption that he is there.’
3. Higher than 50 per cent but not very high. Technically agnostic but leaning towards theism. ‘I am uncertain, but I am inclined to believe in God.’
4. Exactly 50 per cent. Completely impartial agnostic. ‘God’s existence and non-existence are exactly equiprobable.’
5. Lower than 50 per cent but not very low. Technically agnostic but leaning towards atheism. ‘I don’t know whether God exists but I’m inclined to be skeptical.’
6. Very low probability, but short of zero. De facto atheist. ‘I cannot know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.’
7. Strong atheist. ‘I know that there is no God, with the same conviction as Jung “knows” there is one.’ (Dawkins 2008: 73)

Figure 2
as adequate justification for acceptance will depend not only on the strength of the evidence, but also on the consequences of making a mistake.\textsuperscript{11}

If this is the case, then the strength of our belief should not necessarily be proportional to the evidence. There may be cases in which it is appropriate to wait until we have a high degree of certainty before believing a proposition. These would be cases in which the costs of making an error are significant or in which there is no pressing reason to fix upon a belief. However, when we have much to gain if the proposition be true and little to lose if it be false, we may be justified in believing a proposition upon much less evidence.

Part Three: James and Agnosticism

Though I did not invoke James, my references to gaining and losing by belief should make it clear that I take a broadly Jamesian approach to justification in this last argument.\textsuperscript{12} Without backing away from this, I am fully cognizant of the irony of appealing to such an argument to defend agnosticism given that James himself argues against it in “The Will to Believe.” James's defense of the “right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters” (James 1956f: 1) is, in fact, a direct response to Huxley’s agnosticism and Clifford’s ethics of belief.

\textsuperscript{11} “For, since no scientific hypothesis is ever completely verified, in accepting a hypothesis the scientist must make the decision that the evidence is sufficiently strong or that the probability is sufficiently high to warrant the acceptance of the hypothesis. Obviously our decision regarding the evidence and respecting how strong is ‘strong enough’, is going to be a function of the importance, in the typical ethical sense, of making a mistake in accepting or rejecting the hypothesis” (Rudner: 2).

\textsuperscript{12} For instance, in “The Sentiment of Rationality” he argues that for a philosophy to be considered “rational” it must not only meet certain theoretical or logical requirements, but it must also meet certain practical requirements as well. These practical requirements include things such as the ability to reduce uncertainty about the future and it must define the future in ways that are consistent with what James referred to as our “spontaneous powers” (James 1956e: 75-86).
At the heart of his argument is the claim that the religious option presents us with a “forced” option. We can accept the religious hypothesis or reject it. However, suspending judgment on the question, as agnostics claim to do, is not a third option. In my remaining time I want to argue that this argument fails because the religious option as he describes it is not a forced option. Whether or not this ultimately undermines his defense of religious faith is an important question that I will not attempt to answer at this time. I do not believe that it does, but defending that claim goes well beyond the scope of this paper.

James’s argument relies on the notion of a genuine option, which he introduces in the first section.¹³ James begins 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’s 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.

¹³ 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.
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.\(^\text{14,15}\)

This argument challenges Huxley’s principle of agnosticism and 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 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 the possibility of agnosticism as a religious position depends on whether or not the religious option is a forced option. It is to this question that I now turn.

The religious hypothesis that James asks us to consider is often abbreviated by commentators simply as the claim that God exists. This is quite misleading as James’s version of the hypothesis is a more 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

\(^{14}\) 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 be 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 1956f: 11, emphasis in the original)

\(^{15}\) “When I say ‘willing nature,’ I do not mean only such deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of beliefs that we cannot now escape from, -- I mean all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set” (James 1956f: 9).
affirmation that “we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true” (James 1956f: 26).

Whether the religious option is forced depends on what James means by the notion of a forced option, and unfortunately, James 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 commitments. My conclusion is that the religious option is not forced under any of these accounts.

The first interpretation, what I will refer to as the “structural account,” is suggested by James in Section I where he offers a generic description of a genuine option. He writes,

[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 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 judging the truth value of a hypothesis to deciding 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 by changing it into a question of whether or not to believe it.

James’s 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, this
account would be unlikely to convince an evidentialist. To see why this is so, it is important to remember that James’s argument is designed to apply to options which are intellectually undecidable as well as forced. This creates a dilemma. On the one hand, if the option is between $p$ and $\sim p$, 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.\(^{16}\) 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>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>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Undecidable, but not forced</td>
<td>Forced, but decidable</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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For these reasons many scholars have opted for alternative accounts. George Mavrodes, for example, takes a different approach, 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). Under this interpretation suspending one’s belief in a proposition and believing it to be false would be equivalent just in case the practical consequences are the same. The important point to note is that it is no longer the structure of the option that determines whether it is forced, but the behavioral consequences associated with the alternatives. Thus, some options of the structure “either accept this truth

\(^{16}\) A similar point has been made by other authors. See (Wernham 1987: 33-39) and (Feldman 2006: 9-10).
or go without it” would be forced options while other may not. Mavrodes hints at this point when he contrasts religious belief with belief in the Rontgen theory.

The ordinary man can avoid taking a position on the Rontgen theory because he never has to act in a situation to which that theory would make a practical difference. But it is different in the case of religion. 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. Unwilling to build his life on the hypothesis that there is a God he must build it without that hypothesis, and so must build the same sort of life as the atheist (Mavrodes 1963: 193-94).

There are good reasons to prefer this approach over the structural account. This pragmatic interpretation of the notion of a forced option is certainly consistent with James’s overall philosophy, particularly with the connection he draws between beliefs and action.17 Moreover, in Section X where 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 practically impossible to map beliefs to actions

17 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).
and vice versa in any way specific enough to identify two beliefs as being the same belief.\textsuperscript{18} Even if we could, contrary to Mavrodes 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 agnostic “must build the same sort of life as the atheist.” There are many ways, some trivial and some significant, 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. Indeed, it is hard to imagine why an atheist such as Dawkins would go to such lengths to critique agnosticism if this were not so.

A more promising approach would be to argue that atheism and agnosticism are not completely identical, but merely identical in certain important respects. James suggests as much by his reference to “the good” in the passage just quoted. This explanation of why it is forced is directly preceded by a brief explanation of why the religious option 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, emphasis in the original).

For this reason, multiple authors have proposed what I will call “vital goods” accounts of forced options. Gellman, for instance, reformulates the option as a choice between gaining or

\textsuperscript{18} “[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).
losing a particular vital good. 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.

Without choosing sides between Gellman and Wernham, there are good reasons for adopting an account that links forced options to vital goods. In addition to the evidence found in James’s 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.

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19 “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).

20 “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).

21 The advantage of Gellman’s approach is that it allows him to argue that in relation to the religious hypothesis the doxastic states of agnosticism and atheism are equivalent – both are ways of losing the benefits of religious belief – without having to argue that they are equivalent in the sense of having exactly all the same consequences. In other words, agnosticism and atheism may be different beliefs, but they lead to the same loss of benefits, so in so far as we are concerned with those benefits, they are functionally equivalent.

22 The advantage of Wernham’s account is that it doesn’t require us to revise James’s religious hypothesis. There are two disadvantages, however. The first is that it seems shift James’s meaning of forced from one that says we are compelled to choose to one that says we are compelled to decide in a certain way. That is, because the good is a vital one, we cannot afford to make a decision that would deny us of that good. Second, his account blurs the distinction between momentous and forced options. For James a momentous option is an option choice that is either unique, irreversible, or there is a lot at stake in the decision. For a decision to be forced – we can’t afford not to make it – it must be momentous.
Ultimately, however, even a vital 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 exactly 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 gives us a clue. The second affirmation that “we are better off even now if we believe” (James 1956f: 26, emphasis added) indicates that James is not alluding to the good of eternal life. The good is to be found in the here and now. The first part of the hypothesis, 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.23 While one can see this idea emerging in the essays that accompany “The Will to Believe,”24 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

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23 For a much more complete treatment of the importance of religious belief in James’s philosophy see Vanden Burgt’s *The Religious Philosophy of William James* (1981).
deities pay their visits; let faith and hope be the atmosphere which man breathes in; -- and his days pass by with zest; they stir with prospects, they thrill with remoter values. Place round them on the contrary the curdling cold and gloom and absence of all permanent meaning which for pure naturalism and the popular science evolutionism of our time and all that is visible ultimately, and the thrill stops short, or turns rather to anxious trembling (James 1958: 122).

It would be foolish, I think, to deny the value of this good as James describes it here. However, in order 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. Of course, religious belief is probably necessary to gain the benefit with the particular qualities that James describes, but if the vital good is being able to live in the strenuous mood, as living a life which gains meaning from purposes and causes that transcend our individually finite lives, then there are certainly other possibilities. To deny that other such possibilities exist would be to deny the empirical fact that some agnostics and atheists attest to living such lives. And if this is the case, then the vital goods account fails to show that the religious option is a forced option.

Conclusion

Though Dawkins and James stake out very different positions on the legitimacy of religious faith, they both attempt to make or strengthen their arguments by closing the door on agnosticism. In this way their arguments serve to further polarize debates between atheists and religious believers. By showing how their arguments fail, I hope to have cracked the door open to the possibility of agnosticism. This is not, however, a full defense of agnosticism. The

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25 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).
door has been cracked open, but the room may still be empty. If we are to move beyond conceptual possibility to full defense, we must furnish the room. We must describe how agnosticism differs from atheism and explain why that difference is an important. In other words, we must provide positive reasons for being an agnostic.

Sources Cited


