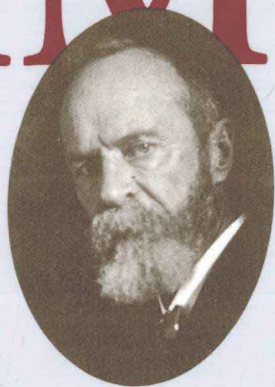


WILLIAM JAMES



Pragmatism AND The Meaning of Truth

Introduction by A. J. AYER

Pragmatism

A New Name for Some Old Ways
of Thinking

The Meaning of Truth

A Sequel to *Pragmatism*

William James

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Introduction

I

William James was not the originator of the American philosophy of Pragmatism. It was his friend and contemporary Charles Sanders Peirce who first gave currency to the term and, in a series of papers which he published in the 1870s, set out the basic principles of the pragmatic theory of meaning and truth. Much of Peirce's work, however, remained unpublished in his lifetime, and the papers which he did publish attracted relatively little attention. He was unable to command a regular position at any American university and it is only in the last fifty years that his importance as a philosopher has come to be widely recognized. William James, on the other hand, was a well-known professor at Harvard when pragmatism emerged as a philosophical force, at the turn of the century, and it was he who was regarded and acted as its principal champion. James never sought to disguise the debt that he owed to Peirce, but he was not merely or even primarily an expositor of Peirce's doctrine. The imprint under which he made pragmatism famous was very much his own.

James's major work, *The Principles of Psychology*, appeared in two large volumes in 1890. He had been born in New York in 1842 and had taken a medical degree at Harvard, to which he returned in 1872 as an instructor in physiology. He became a lecturer in psychology there in 1876 and a professor of philosophy in 1880.

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His interest in pragmatism dated from the 1870s, and his essay "The Function of Cognition" which eventually became the first chapter of *The Meaning of Truth* was originally published in 1885. *The Principles of Psychology* is not explicitly pragmatic, but its functionalist approach to psychology, which might be summarized in the phrase that mentality is what mentality does, is pragmatic in temper, and it is also a working application of the "Radical Empiricism" which was a central feature of James's philosophy. In the preface to *Pragmatism* he does indeed deny that his pragmatism and his radical empiricism are logically connected, but we shall see that his desire to harmonize them very largely dictated the form that his pragmatism took.

Influenced, perhaps, by his father, the elder Henry James, who was a disciple of Swedenborg, William James had an abiding interest in religion. He wrote a number of essays on moral and religious questions and collected them in a book called *The Will to Believe*, which was published in 1897. The assumption which underlies these essays is that there are important questions, like the question whether there is a God, or whether there is moral truth, that cannot be decided on purely intellectual grounds. Our emotional needs have also to be considered. There are cases, says James, "where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming" (p. 29) so that "one who should shut himself up 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" (p. 31). Pragmatism alone, he thinks, can enable men to satisfy their religious and moral yearnings, without offending the canons of their reason, and this may well have been his principal motive for subscribing to it. We shall, however, see that the way in which it is supposed to achieve this end is not entirely clear.

The Will to Believe was followed by *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, a set of Gifford Lectures delivered in Scotland in 1901-2 and published in 1902. This treatise on the psychology of religion is probably the best-written of all James's works and the one best known to the general public. In his way, he was as gifted a writer as his younger brother, the novelist Henry James, though

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their styles were very different. Paradoxically, it is Henry who writes with the careful qualifications and minute attention to detail that one might expect of a psychologist or a philosopher, and William who carries the reader away with his humor and zest and the vividness of his imagery. If his meaning is not always clear, the reason partly is that he so strongly felt the importance of his message and was so eager to win converts to it that he did not always take the time or trouble to formulate it in a way that sufficiently guarded against its being misunderstood. It is also true that, when it came to philosophy, he thought along broad lines which left room for some uncertainty, perhaps in his own mind as in the minds of his critics, as to the precise implications of the theories that he held.

James's interest in philosophy, at least on the evidence of his publications, appears to have grown stronger in the last period of his life. All but one of the twelve papers which make up his posthumously published *Essays in Radical Empiricism* were first printed in the years 1903-4. His book *Pragmatism*, which was first published in June 1907, was approximately a transcript of the Lowell lectures which he delivered in Boston in November and December 1906 and repeated with a few emendations at Columbia University in New York in January 1907. Some of its themes had appeared already in a lecture called "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results" which he delivered at the University of California in 1898. The book was immediately popular in the United States and had reached its tenth printing there by the end of 1910, the year of James's death. It was rather less successful in England, where it also aroused more professional criticism, but there was still a steady demand for it and the sales of the English edition amounted to nearly 5,000 copies in the six years following its publication. James was prompt in replying to criticism, and the essays which make up his book *The Meaning of Truth*, which was published in 1909, are mainly devoted to the defense and restatement of the theory of truth which he treated as the mainspring of his pragmatism. It was in 1909 also that he began work on the book *Some Problems of Philosophy*, which came out only after his death, and that he delivered a course of lectures in Oxford which was published in the same year under the title of *A Pluralistic Universe*. One of the

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claims which James made for his pragmatism was that it made allowance for the spiritual needs of those who wished to see the Universe as One, but to the extent that Monists and Pluralists were logically at issue, his allegiance went to the Pluralists. This too was an outcome of his Radical Empiricism.

II

The importance which James attached to the issue of Monism or Pluralism must be set in the philosophical climate of that time. The Monists whom he set out to combat were followers of Hegel. Though the philosophy of Hegel, who lived from 1770 to 1831, was an immediate success in Germany, it was not until the last quarter of the nineteenth century that it made much headway in either England or the United States against the prevailing empiricist tradition. When it did come to the fore, however, its influence was very great. Among the pragmatists, both Dewey and Peirce were affected by it, though Peirce's respect for Hegel was shaded by his denying him any competence in logic. The most thoroughgoing and powerful neo-Hegelians were F. H. Bradley at Oxford, J. Ellis McTaggart at Cambridge, and James's colleague Josiah Royce at Harvard. James took little notice of McTaggart, whose major work, *The Nature of Existence*, was not published till 1921, but he was in frequent, if friendly, dispute with Bradley and Royce. Neither of these philosophers was an entirely orthodox Hegelian, nor did they wholly agree with one another, but they were alike in identifying Reality with a Spiritual Whole, which they called The Absolute. In Bradley's case, this conclusion was largely the result of his thinking it impossible that any two things should be in any way related without this affecting their identity, so that everything was inextricably mixed with everything else. In Royce's case, it depended rather on his inability to see how our thoughts could refer to reality, whether truly or falsely, unless both the thinker and the object of his thought were themselves ideas in an all-knowing Mind: a doctrine which James characteristically parodied as the belief that a cat cannot look at a king unless some higher entity is looking at them both. Bradley and Royce were alike also in taking the Absolute to be perfect, with the difference that Bradley thought of it as necessarily transcending good and evil, whereas

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Royce believed that it held them in harmony, the existence of evil being, in his view, a necessary condition for that of the greatest good.

James's opposition to theories of this type was not purely logical. They were offensive to his temperament, and to his moral sense, as well as to his reason. He prized the display of variety in the world and resented its dismissal as mere appearance. He was shocked too by the blandness and the show of indifference to actual suffering which were displayed in such casual remarks of Bradley's as that painfulness can be assumed to "disappear into a higher unity," or that "The Absolute is the richer for every discord, and for all diversity which it embraces."* On this point James sided with the anarchist writer whom he quotes in *Pragmatism* as taking such statements to imply that when men commit suicide because they cannot find work to keep their families from starving, "these slain men make the universe richer, and that is philosophy. But while Professors Royce and Bradley and a whole host of guileless thoroughfeds thinkers are unveiling Reality and the Absolute and explaining away evil and pain, this is the condition of the only beings known to us anywhere in the universe with a developed consciousness of what the universe is. What these people experience is Reality."† Not only was it foreign to James's temperament to make light of anyone's misfortune, but he was intellectually opposed to a conception of reality which in any way divorced it from actual experience.

While he derided the logic which sewed the world up into a spurious unity, James was not unsympathetic to the spiritual yearnings which found a fulfillment in Absolute Idealism. In Royce's case at least, the underlying motive was overtly religious, and there are passages in *Pragmatism*, and still more in the earlier lecture "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," where James not only shows respect for this motive but appears even to concede that belief in the Absolute is justified by it. How seriously this is to be taken will depend on the way in which one interprets James's ostensible equation of truth with utility. As we shall see later on,

*F. H. Bradley, *Appearance and Reality* (1893; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1925), pp. 198, 204.

†M. I. Swift, *Human Submission*; quoted in *Pragmatism* p. 21.

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it is arguable that he treated moral and religious questions as a special case. But whatever the concessions that he was prepared to make to those who found the concept of the Absolute emotionally satisfying, there is considerable evidence that he himself did not. This comes out most clearly in a striking passage from the earliest of his *Essays in Radical Empiricism*:

since we are in the main not sceptics, we might go on and frankly confess to each other the motives for our several faiths. I frankly confess mine—I cannot but think that at bottom they are of an æsthetic and not of a logical sort. The ‘through-and-through’ universe seems to suffocate me with its infallible impeccable all-pervasiveness. Its necessity, with no possibilities; its relations, with no subjects, make me feel as if I had entered into a contract with no reserved rights, or rather as if I had to live in a large seaside boarding-house with no private bed-room in which I might take refuge from the society of the place. I am distinctly aware, moreover, that the old quarrel of sinner and pharisee has something to do with the matter. Certainly, to my personal knowledge, all Hegelians are not prigs, but I somehow feel as if all prigs ought to end, if developed, by becoming Hegelians. There is a story of two clergymen asked by mistake to conduct the same funeral. One came first and had got no further than “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” when the other entered. “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” cried the latter. The ‘through-and-through’ philosophy, as it actually exists, reminds many of us of that clergyman. It seems too buttoned-up and white-chokered and clean-shaven a thing to speak in the name of the vast slow-breathing unconscious Kosmos with its dread abysses and its unknown tides (“Absolutism and Empiricism,” p. 142).

Bertrand Russell, who quoted this passage admiringly in his *Sceptical Essays*, saw in the reference to the seaside boardinghouse an indication of the failure of James’s “attempt, made with all the earnestness of a New England conscience, to exterminate the natural fastidiousness which he also shared with his brother, and replace it by democratic sentiment à la Walt Whitman.” Russell also detected the wish “to be democratic” in James’s siding with the sinner against the pharisee. “Certainly he was not a pharisee, but he probably committed as few sins as any man who ever lived.” This may well be true, but still does not justify Russell’s inference.

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There are other motives for tolerance than the wish to be democratic: and one may be sincerely tolerant of sinners without being disposed to engage in their practices. A more serious point which Russell also made is that one of the principal factors in James's philosophical composition "was the influence of his training in physiology and medicine, which give him a scientific and slightly materialistic bias as compared to purely literary philosophers who derived their inspiration from Plato, Aristotle and Hegel."* Thus it is in *The Principles of Psychology* that James most strongly insists on taking empirical relations at their face value, as really connecting the terms which they relate without necessarily altering their identity, and so succeeds in blocking at least one of the main routes that led to Absolute Idealism.

Another mistake which James detected in the work of some contemporary Idealists was that of assuming that anything not explicitly ascribed to a subject is implicitly denied of it. It partly consisted, as he put it, in the "treating of a name as excluding from the fact named what the name's definition fails positively to include" (p. 32). This was, indeed, the reverse side of their erroneous treatment of relations, and it led to their characterizing any attempt to ascribe properties to separate items in the world as a mark of vicious abstraction. James retorted this charge upon them by calling it the outcome of "vicious intellectualism." His choice of this phrase is significant, in that it illustrates his tendency to attribute the Idealists' mistakes not to particular faults in their argument but to their trying to force concrete reality into an abstract mold into which it did not fit. As our examples have shown, he spotted the principal errors in at least one of the processes of reasoning that led to belief in the Absolute, but he did not expose their sources. He did not uncover the logical confusions which have entrapped philosophers into believing such falsehoods as that the sense of a name comprises everything that is true of its bearer, or that every relation makes an essential difference to the identity of its terms.

The fact is that James was not greatly interested in formal logic;

*Bertrand Russell, *Sceptical Essays* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1928), p. 59.

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he was inclined even to be suspicious of it, as failing to correspond to the actual course of experience. This is one of the main respects in which he differed from Peirce who was not only himself one of the pioneers in the modern mathematical development of logic, but conceived of the greater part of philosophy as coming within the scope of logic in an extended sense of the term. How deep the difference went is shown by James's sympathy for Bergson, whom he followed in holding that "instead of being interpreters of reality, concepts negate the inwardness of reality altogether" (p. 110). The moral which he drew for philosophy was that it should seek the kind of "living understanding of the movement of reality, which results from putting oneself in intuitive sympathy with 'things in the making'" (p. 117) and that it should "not follow science in vainly patching together fragments of its dead results" (p. 118). This puts him at odds not only with Peirce but with the other leading pragmatists, Dewey and Schiller, who did indeed share his distrust of formal logic but did so on the ground that it failed to reflect the actual processes of scientific inquiry. It should, however, be noted that in the lectures, published as *A Pluralistic Universe*, from which these quotations are taken, what might now be called the existentialist strain in James's philosophy was stronger than it had been in his earlier writings.

III

Nevertheless, it is in an early essay that we have found James speaking of the motives for his philosophical 'faith' as being fundamentally "of an æsthetic and not a logical sort"; and it would seem that he always had a tendency to look upon philosophy as expressing some general attitude toward the world rather than as seeking and if possible advancing the correct solutions to a special set of problems. This comes out at the very beginning of his lectures on Pragmatism where he says to his audience: "I know that you, ladies and gentlemen, have a philosophy, each and all of you, and that the most interesting and important thing about you is the way in which it determines your perspective in your several worlds" (p. 9). It is true that he then goes on to speak of the philosophy he is about to put before them as one "which to no small extent has to be tech-

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nically treated," but the implication still is that the technicalities are needed to depict "whatever universe a professor believes in" (p. 10) rather than to supply the answers to technical questions.

It is in accordance with this view of philosophy that James should characterize its history as being "to a great extent that of a certain clash of human temperaments." He does not ignore the fact that philosophers most commonly advance arguments to support their theses, but he thinks that such arguments play a secondary role. The philosopher's temperament "really gives him a stronger bias than any of his more strictly objective premises. It loads the evidence for him one way or the other, making for a more sentimental or a more hard-hearted view of the universe, just as this fact or that principle would" (p. 11). These biases are not acknowledged, with the result that philosophical discussions have "a certain insincerity."

"More sentimental and more hard-hearted": for James, this is a fundamental contrast which is to be seen at work not only in philosophy but in "literature, art, government and manners" (p. 12). Later on, he expands it into his celebrated dichotomy of the tender and the tough-minded, the tender-minded being Rationalistic (going by 'principles'), Intellectualistic, Idealistic, Optimistic, Religious, Free-willist, Monistic, and Dogmatical; the tough-minded correspondingly being Empiricist (going by 'facts'), Sensationalistic, Materialistic, Pessimistic, Irreligious, Fatalistic, Pluralistic, and Sceptical. James does not name any philosopher as fitting into either category, though it can fairly be assumed that he counted Hegel and his followers as tender-minded, while Hume might serve as a model for the tough. In most other instances, the strains are mixed, though one or other of them may predominate. Thus, Leibniz was not monistic but otherwise tender-minded; Hobbes, though largely tough-minded, was rationalistic rather than sensationalistic, and not altogether irreligious. In any case, James was concentrating on the contemporary scene rather than its sources in the past; otherwise he could hardly have asserted that "rationalism is always monistic" (p. 13): he was also not so much concerned with purely philosophical disputes as with the conflict between the tender-minded persons who hoped to find philosophical sup-

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port for their religious beliefs and the tough-minded scientists of his time. Even so, he does succeed in characterizing two broadly opposing tendencies which can be distinguished throughout the history of philosophy.

James himself is one of the most conspicuous instances of the mixture of the strains. In some ways he was very tough-minded; a radical empiricist, a sensationalist in his theory of being as well as in his theory of knowledge, a good deal of a materialist in his psychology, a thoroughgoing pluralist if not a sceptic, and not at all dogmatical. On the other hand, he was optimistic, temperamentally religious, disposed to believe in free-will, if he could find a way of reconciling it with his scientific work, and not a philosophical materialist. In sum, he was tough-minded in his approach to questions of natural fact, but tender-minded when it came to morals and theology. Though he presents the overall distinction as one of temperament, in his own case it was less a question of divided temperament than a conflict between his sentiments and his reason. He wanted to retain his tender-minded beliefs, but not at the price of relaxing his intellectual standards. In a way this was also Kant's predicament, but whereas Kant tried to solve it by setting limits to reason in order to make room for faith, James, though he too insisted that "in the end it is our faith and not our logic that decides such questions" (p. 142), sought rather to make the rule of reason more flexible so that it accommodated his tender-minded beliefs. What chiefly attracted him to pragmatism was that it seemed to him the only philosophy that could both achieve this and give his tough-minded interests their proper due.

IV

In the course of explaining "what pragmatism means," James defines its scope as covering first a method, and secondly a theory of truth. The method is based on the principle which Peirce put forward in his early paper "How to make our ideas clear." In James's words: "To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object . . . , we need only consider what conceivable effects of a practical kind the object may involve—what sensations we are to expect from it, and what reactions we must prepare. Our conception

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of these effects, whether immediate or remote, is then for us the whole of our conception of the object, so far as that conception has positive significance at all" (p. 29). In a similar vein, he speaks of the pragmatic method as forbidding us to rest content with a "solving name" like 'God', 'Matter', 'Reason', 'the Absolute', or 'Energy'. Rather, "You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience. It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*" (pp. 31-32).

These descriptions of the pragmatic method are pleasantly vivid but far from precise. It is not immediately obvious what we are to count as the effects of an object, or what the cash-value of a word comprises, or how words like 'Matter' and 'the Absolute' can be set at work, or how the process of setting them at work can lead to change in existing realities. We are, however, helped by James's illustration of the effects of an object as the "sensations we are to expect from it" and by his associating the cash-value of a word with the stream of one's experience. From this and from similar clues which occur in other passages of his works we may infer that he meant to analyze one's conception of an object in terms of the difference to one's sense-experiences which its existence or non-existence would be expected to make. If we apply the idea of cash-value to statements rather than to individual words, the cash-value of a statement may be taken to consist in the experiences that would occur if the statement were discovered to be true. A word is set at work by our belief or disbelief in the various statements in which it figures, and it is by setting out to verify or falsify these statements that we make a change in existing realities.

If this interpretation is correct, one would expect James to attempt to analyze empirical statements of every sort in terms of statements which explicitly refer to sense-experiences, and he does in fact do this, at least to the extent of maintaining that one and the same sensory item may enter into the composition of a physical object, in virtue of its relation to one set of experiences, and into the composition of the knowing subject, in virtue of its relation to another. Thus, in one of his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* he

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speaks of a presentation or experience as being on the one hand "the last term of a train of sensations, emotions, decisions, movements, classifications, expectations, etc., ending in the present, and the first term of a series of similar 'inner' operations extending into the future," and on the other hand as being "the *terminus ad quem* of a lot of previous physical operations, carpentering, papering, furnishing, warming, etc., and the *terminus a quo* of a lot of future ones, in which it will be concerned when undergoing the destiny of a physical room" (pp. 8-9). He does not, however, work this theory out in sufficient detail. For instance, he does not put forward any set of rules for translating statements about physical objects into statements about sense-experiences: and indeed, it would now be generally admitted that no such process of translation can be carried through.

A particular weakness in James's position is his insistence on cashing every concept in terms of one's own experience, with the result that he is not only faced with the problem of establishing some community of meaning but is also obliged to take account of the position which the user of the concept happens to occupy in space and time. Among other things, this creates an obvious difficulty with respect to statements about the past. James makes a cursory attempt to deal with this question in his brief essay "The Existence of Julius Cæsar" which is reprinted in *The Meaning of Truth*. He there seems to be arguing that in order to refer to a past object one has to be able to relate it to something in one's present or future experience. So "Cæsar *had*, and my statement *has*, effects; and if these effects in any way run together, a concrete medium and bottom is provided for the determinate cognitive relation"; or again: "The real Cæsar, for example, wrote a manuscript of which I see a real reprint and say 'the Cæsar I mean is the author of *that*' (p. 121). This, however, falls a long way short of the thesis, to which James would appear to be committed, that statements about the past are equivalent to statements about the actual or possible course of their author's present and future experience. Here Peirce is bolder. He is actually prepared to say that "the only meaning which an assertion of a past fact can have is that, if in the future the truth be ascertained, so it shall be ascertained to

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be.”* On the other hand, Peirce differs from James in that he neither attempts to bring everything down to the level of sensation nor ties the meaning of statements to the individual experiences of those who interpret them. Thus, in a passage in which he is contrasting his position with James’s, he claims to hold that the meaning of a concept “lies in the manner in which it could conceivably modify purposive action and in this alone,” and although there are many contexts in which such purposive action appears to amount to no more than some process of observation, Peirce generally regards this process of observation as one that would be open to anyone at the time in question to carry out.

Like other radical empiricists, James stands close to Hume, and he accepts Hume’s distinction between ‘relations of ideas’ and ‘matters of fact’, attributing the necessity of *a priori* propositions to their being concerned only with relations of ideas. He has relatively little to say about such propositions either in *Pragmatism* or elsewhere but there is a reference to them in *Pragmatism*, which is reminiscent also of Kant. “Our ready-made ideal framework for all sorts of possible objects follows from the very structure of our thinking. We can no more play fast and loose with these abstract relations than we can do so with our sense-experiences. They coerce us; we must treat them consistently, whether or not we like the results” (p. 101). On the face of it, this is at variance with his earlier statement in *The Principles of Psychology* that “The eternal verities which the structure of our mind lays hold of do not necessarily themselves lay hold on extra-mental being, nor have they, as Kant pretended . . . , a legislating character even for all possible experience. They are primarily interesting only as subjective facts. They stand waiting in the mind, forming a beautiful ideal network; and the most we can say is that we hope to discover outer realities over which the network may be flung so that the ideal and real may co-incide” (II, 664–665). The difficulty here is that if the ideal framework does represent the structure of the mind, it does not seem possible for any experiences to fail to conform to it; but perhaps the difficulty may be overcome, and the two passages recon-

**Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), V, 534.

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ciled, if we attribute to James the view that the structure of the mind is not fixed once for all but is capable of being modified in the course of experience. *A priori* propositions would indeed be 'eternally' true of the current set of 'mental objects', but the 'mental objects' which make up our 'ideal framework' at any given time might not themselves be sacrosanct. If our experience appeared to chafe against the framework, others could replace them.

If James is not always so precise as one could wish in his account of the tough-minded operations of the pragmatic method, he is still less so when it comes to the tender-minded. He says that "We cannot . . . methodically join the tough minds in their rejection of the whole notion of a world beyond our finite experience" (*Pragmatism*, p. 128) and that "The absolutistic hypothesis that perfection is eternal, aboriginal, and most real, has a perfectly definite meaning, and it works religiously" (p. 129), but leaves it unclear what he would count as evidence for the existence of such a transfinite world, or what definite meaning he supposes the absolutistic hypothesis to have. There is a suggestion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* that he is willing to count religious experience as evidence for the existence of what he there calls a 'transmarginal consciousness', but this is weakened by his going on to admit that the evidence fails to establish whether this consciousness is anything more than a projection of our own unconscious states, whether it is even a single entity, and whether it has any power to affect the course of nature. Nor does he indicate how these questions are to be settled. He adds that he wishes to vindicate "the instinctive belief of mankind: God is real since he produces real effects" (p. 517), but then it appears that these real effects are nothing more than the feelings of greater energy, security and satisfaction which those who hold religious beliefs obtain from them. This is in line with James's mockery in *Pragmatism* of the definition which "systematic theology" offers of the attributes of God and his saying that "Pragmatism alone can read a positive meaning into it, and for that she turns her back on the intellectualist point of view altogether," being content with "'God's in his heaven; all's right with the world!'" (p. 62). We are left with the impression that the pragmatic content of the belief in God's existence consists merely in