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# The Volition of Faith and Appreciation of Pragmatism and Existential Contributions

*By Sterling Courtney*

**Abstract:** Propositions of belief depend on some degree of factual basis. Philosophical arguments vary as to whether certainty is necessary to form beliefs which can lead to compelling faith. Furthermore, if faith is a criteria for salvation, the volition of faith would be fundamental in ones' culpability for having faith. Idealism represents the antithetical position of pragmatism and involves factual accounts in which to base beliefs, however, this paper intends to provide various considerations for pragmatic and existential philosophies by examining concerns of William James, Blaise Pascal, Soren Kierkegaard, and others. I.e., "Pascal's Wager" is a philosophical idea used to demonstrate a practical argument that faith is better, and more reasonable, than unbelief. Kierkegaard measures faith's virtue to the contrary of dependency on fact and reason, expressing that the obligation of Christianity is not to affirm the existence of God, but to love God. A utility of existential thought and pragmatism concerns self-transformation. Although the voluntary nature of belief may remain ambiguous, a willing commitment to faith is certain.

## Introduction

Although many theologians and philosophers have adequately reasoned and are content in their position, upon a cursory review of literature, one may find controversy and contemplative dissatisfaction inferring the volition of faith. The topic is regarded repeatedly by references sharing familiar existential philosophers, Pascal, Kierkegaard, and James. The argument may lie somewhere in the varied interpretations of their works. In respect of this, references to *Pascal's Wager*, James's *Will to Believe*, and James' *The Variety of Religious Experiences* will be included.

Pragmatism and existentialism can collaborate in some respects: the existence of relative "working" truths for the sake of a successful, prosperous, and deep life, whatever truth may be otherwise, can blend with a strong contempt for rationalism. The intent of collaborating these three philosophers is to collate the commonalities of pragmatism and existentialism for considering the nature of belief and faith. Another philosopher of existentialism, Karl Jaspers, expressed truth through four aspects: Usefulness (pragmatism), scientific evidence, moral conviction, and existential faith... faith is the necessary basis of all meaningful human existence (Seyppel, 1953, pp. 229, 230).

It is conceivable that the three philosophers mentioned above had a similar audience in mind. It is said that James' was less concerned with the institution of religion (Johnson, 2003, pp. 101, 109) and more with reasoned belief and faith for ones' self-transformation (Koopman, 2017, p. 494). Kierkegaard criticized Christendom in favor of a Christianity manifest through personal subjective truth (Wisdo, 1987). Although a devout Catholic, Pascal certainly wasn't targeting church patrons expressing religiosity when he proposed the wager saying, "Men despise religion. They hate it and are afraid it may be true" (Pascal, 2019, p. 52). Whether or not we can settle the volition of faith, we can find convincing impetus for consideration.

### Belief Versus Faith

Christian tradition has generally affirmed that one's faith in God is purposeful, albeit with the dynamics of faith containing an element of 'belief.' There is the argument as to whether 'belief' is voluntary and discretionary or contingent and dependent on evidence. If belief is truly involuntary and determined by evidential conditions, and the nature of Christian faith is dependent on certain beliefs, how can faith be a voluntary matter? Furthermore, if faith is not voluntary, how can someone be culpable according to whether or not they have the requisite beliefs of the atonement as the reconciliation of God and humanity through Jesus Christ?

Although various references regard belief and faith interchangeably, it may help parse the two concepts. Merriam-Webster Dictionary cites the "essential meaning" of faith as 'belief in the existence of God' and 'a system of religious beliefs' yet "fully defines" faith as a 'firm belief in something for which there is no proof' and 'belief and trust in God' (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

A definition of belief is 'something that is accepted, considered to be true, or held as an opinion.' Furthermore, belief 'may or may not imply certitude in the believer.' Faith 'almost always implies certitude even where there is no evidence

or proof (Merriam-Webster, 2021). So, our beliefs are concepts, ideas, and opinions of which we are convinced through experience and learning. Our beliefs can change over time depending on acquiring more knowledge and experience throughout our lives. The dictionary entry for faith, ‘belief and trust in God,’ favors an equation where faith is a product of belief and trust (Marti, 1946, p. 30). Adding to this equation, in James 2:17 from the New Living Translation (NLT), “So you see, faith by itself isn’t enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless.” Therefore, faith becomes a product of belief, trust, and action. When we believe with enough confidence to act, we exercise faith from William James “The whole defense of religious faith hinges upon action” (James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1912, p. 24). Considering these sources, belief refers to an agreement, and faith relates to commitment.

### **Free Will**

A theme that has preoccupied theologians and philosophers from Augustine to William James, historical ruminations regarding belief and will are sufficient for relevant concern (Wisdo, 1987, p. 95). From the fourth century, one may brood how Augustine reconciles his beliefs that humans are morally responsible for their actions versus his view that one’s life is predestined. He spent much of his life concerned with the unity between two fundamentally divergent concepts; the grace of God and man’s original sin (Peterson, 2005-06, p. 11). In Augustine’s early writings, he expresses that man cannot choose to be good without having the ability to choose (Peterson, 2005-06, p. 3). For Christian history, 412 is the pivotal year when Augustine changed his theology, teaching that the will to believe in Christ was predestined and that God is not the cause of any evil. Still, that evil comes from humanity’s free will to sin (Wilson, 2018, p. 285). While the Catholic Church considers Augustine's teaching consistent with free will (Portalié, 1913), predestination is a concept of Augustinian Calvinism (McMahon, 2012, pp. 7-9). For Augustine, the two assertions, man’s free choice to choose evil and reliance on God’s grace for salvation, are never at odds (Peterson, 2005-06, p. 11). However, this contradiction fuels confusion.

### **Pragmatic Volition of Belief and Faith**

To regard the volition of belief and faith with concern to pragmatism, appraisal of contrasting philosophical positions may sufficiently offer opposing views for consideration: Idealism will suffice. Pragmatism is a philosophical approach that evaluates the practical consequence as the main component of applied theories or beliefs. Idealism refers to a philosophy that asserts that reality as we can know it is mentally constructed and immaterial, thoughts and ideas as reality’s main component.

Twentieth-century philosopher, Fritz Marti, considered an expert in post-Kantian idealism (OSU Library, 1909-2009), asserts that we cannot embrace a belief at will because all beliefs are conditionally supported by proof. Therefore, no one can believe what he knows is not true (Marti, 1946, p. 34). In the chapter *Deciding to Believe*, moral philosopher Bernard Williams 1929-2003, states that a

belief necessarily aims at the truth, discrediting the ability to form a belief on a known falsehood (Williams, 1976, pp. 136-151).

Perhaps commonly mistaken, William James' pragmatism does not succumb to belief in falsehoods; qualifying hypothetical options saying:

Well, of course, I agree as far as the facts will allow. Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of gaining truth away, and at any rate, save ourselves from any chance of believing falsehood by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come (James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1912, pp. 18, 19).

James' famous philosophical viewpoint, pragmatism, was that freedom of the will exists, but not as the freedom to create an idea. However, supporting credulity, the will to believe suggests that perhaps evidential proof through scientific investigation is not appropriate or relevant for deciding issues raised by religious experience. James indicates that religious belief can be a personal decision made from the heart with the conviction of as a passionate nature influencing our opinions; in essence, one's conviction of objective evidence is a subjective matter (James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1912, p. 15). James expresses that the element of faith is that Christian religion has recognized despite philosophy's tendency to avoid in its search for absolute truths... "Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is a willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance" (James, *The Sentiment of Rationality*, 1912, p. 90)

Reiterating the likeness of pragmatism and existentialism, "working" truth reasoned as existential reality is more than mere intellectual truth. Pascal expressed this position by saying, "The heart has its reasons which reason knows nothing of... We know the truth not only by the reason but by the heart." In *The Little Prince*, Antoine de Saint-Exupery echoes this thought with, "What is essential is invisible to the eye" (Saint-Exupery, 1943, p. 73). James hinges volition of belief on our passionate nature, influencing our opinions to the point of inevitability (James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1912, p. 18). Kierkegaard explains belief as an act of will that negates uncertainty and doubt, arguing that belief is ultimately a resolution of the will by stating, "belief is not a form of knowledge, but a free act, an expression of the will" (Wisdo, 1987, p. 107).

Influenced by Kierkegaard and in a like manner rejecting authoritarian and dogmatic religion, Karl Jaspers developed a version of existentialism in which the effort to understand our existence comes from self-analysis leading to a personal crusade for truthfulness concerning the transcendent. With truth as a common theme for Jaspers, the correlation between pragmatism and existentialism is apparent for consideration of four elements of truth: Practical usefulness, scientific evidence, moral conviction, and existential faith. As understood above, James' pragmatic belief is defined by practical use and confidence of will. For Jaspers, faith is the necessary foundation of all meaningful existence (Seyppel, 1953, p. 230).

## The Proposition of Faith with Diminishing Belief

As mentioned earlier, belief and faith differ, including action through trust and commitment. James uses belief and faith interchangeably in *The Will to Believe*. Known for his work in applied ethics and philosophy of religion, American philosopher Louis Pojman (1935 – 2005) supported the claim that propositional belief in the existence of God is not necessary for authentic religious faith. Given this view, genuine faith can be established in a "profound hope" that Christianity is true together with a passionate orthopraxy as if Christianity is true. As with the previous dictionary entry, if faith as a product of belief and trust can be analyzed in terms of a disposition or a commitment to act, then it follows that we do not need to believe that *x* exists to believe in or sincerely hope in the existence of *x*. Therefore, according to Pojman, someone who assigns a probability of less than .50 to Christianity's central principles can embody an authentic Christian faith and thereby receive the benefits of religion (Himma, 2006, pp. 65, 66).

Considering Kierkegaard's understanding of belief and faith, we can examine the extent to which the will can be said to contribute to the acquisition of religious faith as more introspective, stressing the priority of Christian praxis over theory. Faith involves living Christianity, not just theorizing about it (Paulsen, 2008, p. 61). Kierkegaard believes that although one can explain the acquisition of our shared beliefs by appealing to the will, this analysis cannot help us understand the Christian faith. To attain eternal truth, one must pursue and develop faith. Faith is a condition that reflects one's subjective passion. The element of risk is central to this view of faith (Emmanuel, 1991, p. 280). Given the earlier dictionary definition, faith implies certitude with no evidence (Merriam-Webster, 2021).

For Kierkegaard, the strength of faith is inversely proportional to objective proof. With certitude, there is no faith, and the greater the uncertainty, the greater the faith: "The more objective security, the less inwardness (for inwardness is precisely subjectivity), and the less objective security, the more profound the possible inwardness" (Kierkegaard S. , 2009, p. 188). The greater the improbability that a proposition such as "Christianity" is true, the greater the volitional effort required to accept it. The degree to which the truth of Christianity is objectively uncertain is a desire that it is logically impossible to the extent that there is no possibility that it could turn out to be true (Emmanuel, 1991, p. 281). Kierkegaard reasons that if the scriptures could be authenticated, they would be knowledge, not confused with faith. Therefore he rejects any objective explanation which purports to explain the acquisition of faith but relies on personal subjective spirituality by saying, "Christianity is spirit, the spirit is inwardness, inwardness is subjectivity, subjectivity is essentially passion, and in its maximum an infinite personal, passionate interest in one's eternal happiness" (Kierkegaard S. , 1941, p. 33). For Kierkegaard, 'faith' is a miracle so far removed from 'belief' that he would not support any attempts to explain it by an appeal to the will (Wisdo, 1987, p. 110). Moreover, Kierkegaard concludes that "an 'objective' acceptance of Christianity is paganism" (Kierkegaard S. , 1941, p. 116). Consider James' remark in *Pragmatism* that expresses his will to believe

doctrine to justify his religious beliefs; "...in the end, it is our faith and not our logic that decides such (religious) questions, and I deny the right of any pretended logic to veto my own faith" (James, *Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, 1907, p. 140). The pragmatist state makes minor claims on having ultimate knowledge about anything, so knowledge is always based on probability. The question lies in the sense of whether something is true enough to elicit a particular action.

### **Significance of Pascal's Wager & Pragmatism**

The wager takes its name from Blaise Pascal (1623–1662). He had studied many of the traditional arguments for the existence of God but did not find the arguments persuasive. Living in an era when gambling was popular among society, Pascal's work was intended to facilitate the conversion of religious skeptics in secular society and perhaps the restoration of apathetic Christians based on chance (Pecorino, 2001). For this writing, exploring objections to the wager is not necessary to reason for the sake of spirituality.

Based on the aforethought concerning the varied probability that God exists, suppose that you are unsure, but you do think the existence of God is a real possibility. Then despite your uncertainty, you should commit to living a devout religious life because there is so much to gain and comparatively little to lose. The more traditional arguments for the existence of God, such as the cosmological argument, the design argument, the moral argument, and the argument from religious experience, are arguments for a theoretical conclusion (e.g., "God exists"). "Pascal's Wager" is a pragmatic argument urging us to adopt a spiritual way of life, concluding not that God exists but that one should live as if God exists. The wager aims for a "practical" conclusion ("You should wager on God's existence"). Pascal's thoughts on conversion included that God's grace sometimes works by helping a person see the available evidence as convincing (Rota M. , 2017, p. 4). Once we no longer demand certainty, the available evidence is sufficient to make Christian commitment reasonable. Simply stated, if one considers that the net good that would come from committing to God if Christianity is true is much greater than the net cost of commitment if Christianity is false.

William James' view was that "Religion also includes the following psychological characteristics: A new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or appeals to earnestness and heroism;" as well as "An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections" (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 2012, p. 355).

Again, controversy concerning grace and free will are relevant objections to the wager. Numerous passages in the New Testament maintain that salvation depends on individuals' actions through faith. However, other scriptural texts imply that salvation is dependent on God and destiny, such as seen in Calvinism (Rota M. , 2016, p. 70). Further consideration of James' contribution to American Psychology via pragmatism enables either conviction. Understanding the limitations of objective truth versus what pragmatic truth offers makes possible either perspective. In comparison, objective reality means that something exists independent of subjectivity; pragmatic truths answer what we need to know in

interacting with objective reality, i.e., knowledge is validated by its practical consequences (Johnson, 2003, p. 105). James' pragmatic approach accounts for the certainty that in search of truth, there will be fallacies. James can be credited with establishing that, under certain passional conditions, it may be morally permissible to accept a truth claim beyond what the evidence supports (Bishop, 1994, p. 29).

If the function of the religious claim is to secure a basis for moral commitment, then James's conditions for pragmatic acceptance of such a claim appear to be met. Frequently cited, from *The Will to Believe*, James expresses the genuine option (For James, when a decision is based on the medley of life, forced, and momentous preferences) most compelling which he thinks religion presents as follows:

Religion says essentially two things: First, she says 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 ...an affirmation which obviously cannot yet be verified scientifically at all... [and] the second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true (James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, 1912, pp. 4, 24).

This statement does not refer to God; the Jamesian formulation of the wager reduces religious claims to ethics: religion is about the ultimate values (Bishop, 1994, p. 26).

### **Pragmatism and Jamesian Self-Transformation**

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James recommends discounting institutional religion and concentrating on personal and psychological factors, his reason being that the institutional aspect focuses on the routine orthopraxy (Gavin, 1984, p. 146).

Worship and sacrifice, procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology, and ceremony, and ecclesiastical organization are the essentials of religion in the institutional branch... In the more personal branch of religion, it is, on the contrary, the inner dispositions of the man himself which form the center of interest, his conscience, his deserts, his helplessness, his incompleteness (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 2012, pp. 20, 21).

By focusing upon personal religion, i.e., the religious feelings and experiences of individuals and not on institutional religion (Dein, 2010, p. 527), James made experience central to his definition of religion, "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude . . . concerning whatever they may consider divine" (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 2012, pp. 31-32). Furthermore, spiritual transformation often occurs during and after a period of stress, emotional upheaval, or despair. Therefore, James felt that religious experience was most often beneficial through resolving psychological distress and thus was transformative (Dein, 2010, p. 529). The message of "The Will to Believe" can be summarized as Jamesian self-transformation; writing of faith in oneself can facilitate the work of freely transforming oneself (Koopman, 2017, p.

505). Evidence of the benefits of religion and spirituality on well-being are well documented and accumulating in the research of Duke University's Harold Koenig and collaborators, with an updated edition of the Handbook of Religion and Health available in 2022 (Koenig, 2021).

In *The Psychology of Religion: An Empirical Approach*, the authors provide criteria that differentiate spiritual transformation from other types of religious experiences, including a process (sudden or gradual) by which the transformed self is achieved, radical in its consequences, and indicated by such things as a new centering of concern, interest, and behaviors. This process occurs within a social context; specifically, spiritual transformation is recognized by others within a religious frame of reference. If behaviors from these new ideals and changed habits have no permanence, there has been no transformation (Dein, 2010, p. 532).

An example of the utility of the substance of William James' pragmatism is credited by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) founder Bill Wilson as the essence of the program's spirituality. Viewed simply, the sole purpose of AA is to help people stop addiction, i.e., drinking. By assimilating James, a broader sense of exploring spiritual growth on an individual basis is facilitated by allowing all members, including atheists and agnostics, the opportunity of pursuing spirituality and self-transformation. James suggested the consistent finding that the unique experience of spirituality was just as valid and reliable as the tenets of institutional religion. James defended the mind-cure movement emphasizing the healing power of positive emotions and beliefs. The foundation of AA's spirituality is directly traced to James' individualized "mind-cure" methods in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (Kirkland, 2018, pp. 2-4). James uses the term "the sick soul" as he applies the need for self-surrender and subsequent conversion for the goal of "healthy mindedness." Transformation involves the process, gradual or sudden, by which a divided self is "... consciously wrong, inferior, and unhappy, becomes unified and consciously right, superior, and happy" (James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 2012, pp. 59-153).

Charity and benevolence, AA's twelfth step, after one has a spiritual awakening that came as a result of completing the previous eleven steps, carries the message of AA to other alcoholics and the practice of these principles in all our affairs. James felt that a person could not commit one's life to being optimistic and "healthy-minded" about life without paying careful attention to the call to reduce suffering in the world. The emphasis on spiritual and long-term personal growth is an ever-present theme through service to others (Kirkland, 2018, p. 5).

## **Conclusion**

Although the volition of belief has contradicting support from meritorious philosophies, theistic religious tradition concerning faith does not depend on what a person believes. In terms of proselytization, rather than evangelizing for belief, i.e., for Christians to believe in the gospel message without evidential certainty, perhaps it would be prudent enough to suggest hope that the gospel message is genuine. Even though belief may or may not be voluntary, a commitment to faith is. Pragmatism claims freedom to act on ideas that present themselves in ways beyond our conscious control and that we have the freedom to select and reject

which information to focus on. A person thus can direct the stream of consciousness. To James, it is therefore that people who can develop this ability can exercise more control over their minds, resulting in a more profound sense of empowerment. William James' doctrine of pragmatism maintains that we can be justified under certain conditions in holding beliefs for which there is insufficient evidence, but which are of fundamental importance for how we live and how we make sense of the world. James's doctrine of pragmatism also valued religion for its practical value for life as a primary agent for acquiring happiness and well-being. James referred to pessimism as "an essentially religious disease" (James, *Is Life Worth Living?*, 1912, p. 31).

Our faculties of belief were not primarily given us to make orthodoxies and heresies withal; they were given us to live by. And to trust our religious demands means, first of all, to live in the light of them and act as if the invisible world they suggest were real. It is a fact of human nature that men can live and die by the help of a sort of faith that goes without a single dogma or definition (James, *Is Life Worth Living?*, 1912, p. 41).

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