

Essay by Albert Fried-Cassorla 12-16-24

Concerning: *On the Will to Believe* by William James

The essay that follows is not a comprehensive response to William James's famous essay. It is only a reaction to it and a further cogitation on some issues raised.

James answers a question that others may feel relevant to their lives. Paraphrased by me, this is it:

If you think that God exists but are not sure, should you go ahead and decide to believe anyway?

Now, James does not say the above exactly. But in my opinion, his lecture dances around this question. And he implicitly answers in the affirmative as in: Yes, you have a right to rationally assume that God exists.

To me, the premise of William James's famous lecture on *the will to believe*, is an unlikely one for a philosopher. Normally, I think, philosophers adopt a hypothesis based on their own logic or evidence.

Evidently NOT in this case! Instead, he forewarns us, he will show us how to take a point of view on some important matter and not look for justification.

James speaks of live and dead hypotheses. An example of a dead one is believing in a Muslim deity or apostle. To him this is a dead hypothesis. Presumably this is because belief in a Muslim god is preposterous to one raised Christian.

He continues to state that there are three kinds of options:

- * 1, living or dead;
- * 2, forced or avoidable;
- * 3, momentous or trivial;

As I said, his living or dead option illustrations are, to me, non-sensical.

Likewise, his forced or avoidable options do not seem realistic. One man's *forced* is another man's *avoidable*. His forced option illustration seems weak.

A better one might be a “Sophie’s Choice” type decision. Which of your two children do you decide to save from a cruel captor?

So yes, choosing which of your children to save is a momentous decision. Maybe not a common one. Trivial decisions abound in everyday life, and so are not worth going into here.

Why should one want to believe (as in a God)? One reason is that your friends and associates are believers and you may want to join them in a community of belief. Being raised Jewish, some of my neighbors wondered: why I had not joined a temple? To them it was obviously a good way to make friends and meet people. But I declined, feeling I could rely on my own social skills to accomplish this. And while I may have missed out on some good times and observations of enjoyable customs, on the whole I think I have not missed out on much. Of course, one can never know about the worth of lost opportunities.

Another example of a momentous decision would be whether to go into a deep-sea diving vessel with a multi-millionaire entrepreneur. I’ve seen the bad results of some who have ventured thusly; and so not thanks for me. Might miss out on an unique experience, but so what? I will seek my glory in other ways if I need it.

Next, James takes us to modifiable opinions. In his case, it’s to whether Lincoln really lived. In our age, a similar question might be: Did men really land on the moon? The evidence is too strong, in my opinion, to doubt it. I saw the movie that illustrated how such a thing could be faked: *Fly Me To The Moon*. It looked like a difficult deception to achieve. So, my empirical meter says Not worth bothering with. The Landing happened.

Can I possibly investigate all of the ways the Landing might have been faked? No. My standard, like many of you, is that good enough proof is sufficient. Of course, *good enough* varies by person and circumstance, so cannot be relied upon scientifically. We did not get to the Salk vaccine by such standards. But my standard is generally *good enough* for everyday decision-making, IMHO.

Later in his lecture, James invites us to look at Pascal’s Wager. My inadequate summary of the wager is this: You may not be sure if God exists, or whether there is an afterlife and a Judgment Day. So, if there is a Judgment Day, why not be on the side of Virtue as defined by Christianity? By being virtuous, you gain the possibility of eternal life. And if it’s a false myth, you have just lost time. On the whole, this

strikes me as a shallow game for anyone serious about their religion. I think of serious believers as ethereal and concerned with humanity's noblest ambitions – not just with making a good deal with God in exchange for a sweet afterlife in Heaven.

But I suppose that just as there is an infinite variety of snowflakes, so too are believers in endless stripes and flavors.

As a penultimate thought, in no way should this essay be interpreted as anti-religion, in the sense of opposition to a belief in God or Gods or whatever. I only oppose using casuistic logic to advocate for untenable logical positions. If people want to be (IMHO) illogical, that is their privilege – as long as they do not force their views on others.

Also, there is no denying that religion gives many people deep comfort spiritually and psychologically. But Comfort is a very different issue from Veracity.

I will end this essay here for now.... There are too many avenues to investigate. But if I do return to it, I would like to look into the many reports of UFOs, particularly with regard to US Navy pilot footage. They do warrant investigation. See:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pentagon_UFO_videos