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The Place of Values in Inquiry
(Lecture I)

In Lecture I James sets the stage for the lectures to follow, situating his project with respect to what he takes to be deep concerns of his audience. James believes that questions about the meaning of life and one’s place in the order of things are troubling and on the minds of many thoughtful people. He says the primary purpose of his lectures is to explore “what life honestly and deeply means” [P, 9] to each of us. James worries that such existential questions are no longer of central interest to academic philosophers. He also assumes that members of the audience may not be familiar with the positions and arguments of those who are. Thus James will attempt to avoid technical matters as best he can. He will be “dealing in broad strokes, and avoiding minute controversy” [P, 5]. He will, nonetheless, have to examine a number of philosophical assumptions and doctrines, since they stand in the way of solving the problems he will address.

Having presented his overall plan for the lectures, James then argues that answers to these important existential questions are influenced by an individual’s philosophy. When he uses the term “philosophy” here James is not referring to a person’s particular set of beliefs or principles but to his or her approach and attitudes toward the issue at stake. The claim that a person’s philosophy has a major impact on judgment is a commonplace. We often explain and predict someone’s views and decisions on the basis of such things as his or her judicial philosophy, economic philosophy, educational philosophy, or political philosophy. These “philosophies” affect how people describe the phenomena, how the problems are formulated, what evidence is taken to be relevant and what weight is given to the evidence.

Robert Schwartz.
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James holds that the concepts brought to inquiry have an especially strong influence on the conclusions reached. First, they affect the way one divides and categorizes the domain under study, highlighting some groupings and ignoring others. Without such organizing schemes there is no way for inquiry to get off the ground. We cannot conduct inquiry absent a description and conceptualization of the domain to be studied. Second, even if organizing schemes pick out and highlight the same things, they may conceptualize them differently. In turn, the nature of the problem, the type of solutions sought, and the course of inquiry may diverge. It seems obvious that in current public debates in the United States it makes a difference if the tax law under consideration is called an “inheritance tax” or a “death tax,” or if the educational policy being examined is labeled “affirmative action” as opposed to “quotas.”

James is clear, however, that “philosophies” are not free from challenge. Some may have no legitimate or plausible justification from the start. Others do, but new evidence and new understandings can come along that undermine their grounds. A large part of Pragmatism is devoted to doing just this, criticizing “philosophies” that inform and shape philosophical claims he wishes to challenge. As a pluralist, though, James is willing to allow that there may be more than one acceptable solution to a problem, and that the conflicting “philosophies” that underpin the conclusions reached may each offer a legitimate approach to the issue.

To be influenced by a “philosophy” is not necessarily an indication of subjectivity or bias. One might in fact question the intellectual seriousness of a judge who has no overall conception of the law and its applications. Judges who harbor distinct judicial philosophies, however, will approach cases from different perspectives, will differ in what they see as the relevant precedents, and will evaluate the evidence accordingly. As a result they may reach conflicting decisions on the same case. Still, if they adhere to the epistemic standards and rules of judicial practice, their verdicts will have been objectively decided and justified. By contrast, judges whose decisions are influenced by race, color, gender, sexual orientation, religion, and the like have overstepped the norms and bounds of judicial fairness. One might wish to call these biases “philosophies,” but this does not mitigate the fact that verdicts so influenced are unjustified and not to be tolerated. As will become clearer further along in this study, the Pragmatists also held that the standards or norms of practice are not fixed. They evolve hand in hand with practice and are constrained by inquiry.
James calls the factors that characterize a philosophy “temperaments.” People of different temperaments have different philosophies that significantly influence which among competing theories and hypotheses they find convincing. James notes that the idea of temperament being a legitimate factor in the fixation of belief does not generally go down well with philosophers. They hold that “Temperament is no recognized reason . . . so [the philosopher] urges impersonal reasons only for his conclusions” [P, 11]. James argues that this view of objectivity distorts the actual nature of inquiry, including that of philosophy. “The history of philosophy is to a great extent that of a certain clash of temperaments” [P, 11]. Dewey often echoes James’s warning that the tendency of philosophers to deny the influence of temperament, education, and history on their own positions has a serious negative impact on their work.

In arguing that there is a place for temperaments (or as he sometimes calls them “sentiments”) in inquiry, James does not believe that he is turning his back on reason and empirical evidence. Not all temperamental factors are legitimate influences on the fixation of belief. Being dour, bashful, greedy, generous, high-spirited, and temperamental are personality traits that have no place in conducting and evaluating inquiry. The temperamental factors that count must always be responsive to established fact and to sound practices of reason.

In order to get a better picture of James’s position on the influence of temperament on the acquisition and fixation of belief, I think it helpful to review some earlier writings where he elaborates his views. James holds that hypothesis acceptance is the work of the will, and he devotes a chapter of The Principles of Psychology to presenting an account of how the will operates. He writes: “we reach the heart of our inquiry into volition when we ask by what process it is that the thought of any given object comes to prevail stably in the mind” [PP II, 561]. In the Principles, James sees it as his business to explore subjective, pathological decisions as well as objective normal ones. For our purposes it is enough to summarize what he says about the latter.

James, along with the other Pragmatists, maintains that, strictly speaking, cognitive actions that are fully under the control of habit are not episodes of thinking. When all goes well we have no need to question belief habits that “prevail stably in the mind.” Thinking occurs when available habitual responses are not satisfactory for coping with a problem. Then it is necessary to deliberate, search for, and adopt a solution that can relieve the pressure. Once a satisfactory solution to the problem is found there is
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no need to continue thinking about it. What counts as satisfactory, however, can differ from case to case, and there are alternative mechanisms by means of which the will settles on acceptable answers.

In many situations the will is passive. No noticeable deliberation takes place. The observational evidence is compelling and the belief appears forced. Your cat leaps onto your lap, and the will automatically endorses the hypothesis that there is now a cat present. The will is also passive in certain situations where actual deliberation does take place. In searching for a solution to a problem, we hit upon a promising hypothesis but realize immediately that it follows from firm beliefs previously adopted. Once this connection is recognized, the fund of established beliefs brings its force to bear, and the will cannot resist the pressure to accept the hypothesis.

James discusses a range of other types of decision-making in the fixation of belief. He is especially interested in cases where conflicting hypotheses are equally well supported by the available evidence. When this occurs it may seem that the only responsible thing to do is suspend judgment and await additional data. This is a standard practice in scientific inquiry. But sometimes it is not possible to adhere to this policy; a choice is needed immediately. It is necessary to make a decision and to turn the decision into action. James recognizes that there are many who feel decisions so made are in some sense not fully rational or are lacking in epistemic justification. They assume that once human preferences enter into the process the decision is no longer bound by the evidence and hence is not objective. James demurs. He is convinced that it is a psychological fact that the fixation of belief is in the end more a matter of “sensibility” than calculation. The hypothesis chosen is the one that feels right, the one the reflective will is most at home with. 2

Cases where “sentiments” influence forced decisions are familiar phenomena. A person must choose between colleges, jobs, or houses, and the evidence available concerning the choice is not compelling. There are pros and cons to all the alternatives: one is better on this count another better on that. The decision deadline approaches. The worst anyone can do is to be tied in knots and make no decision at all. This is pathological behavior. Usually a decision is made. In the course of mulling over the college, job, or house options one choice surfaces as the best, and the person feels most comfortable with the solution. On occasion it may take a jolt for awareness of a preference to kick in. A person cannot make a decision and in desperation turns to flipping a coin – heads it is A, tails it is B. But when the coin
lands tails she is uneasy with the decision rendered: B just does not feel right; A seems the better fit, and she goes with and endorses A.

While sentiments have a say, these decisions are neither whimsical nor arbitrary. The available evidence eliminates a host of options right from the start, and established facts about the pros and cons of the remaining options must be taken into account. The comfort, ease, and sense of satisfaction required to justify a decision is that of a knowledgeable will, one constrained by evidence, reason, and principles of sound inquiry. There is a significant distinction between objective sanctioned decisions and subjective unacceptable decisions, even if the boundary between them is not sharp or well defined.

In an early paper, “The Sentiments of Rationality,” James argues that in scientific inquiry, too, hypothesis acceptance is never solely a matter of evidence and logic. Other epistemic considerations have a say [WB, 63–110]. As a fallibilist, he assumes that no amount of positive evidence can warrant being certain about any belief. Moreover, in principle, there will always be competing hypotheses that fit all the accepted empirical evidence. Thus appeals to observation and reason alone will not be sufficient to sanction a unique choice between supported but conflicting hypotheses. Human factors must enter to tip the balance.

Human preferences for simplicity, conserving existing theory, wide scope, and cognitive economy have a significant effect on hypothesis acceptance. This does not mean that scientific inquiry is at root subjective or non-rational, rather there can be no fruitful inquiry independent of such preferences. James believes as well that a study of scientific practice shows that scientists do not always agree as to how they evaluate and order these preferences. Their “philosophies” differ, and there may be more than one legitimate weighting scheme, each favoring competing hypotheses. Sound scientific inquiry, like sound judicial inquiry, can justify alternative decisions. Nowadays factors such as simplicity, conservatism, scope, and economy are often said to be epistemic values or virtues and their indispensability is recognized in introductory philosophy of science texts.

In “The Sentiments of Rationality” James notes that Hume, in his analysis of induction, had already shown the need to recognize an ineliminable human element. Observation and reason alone cannot justify accepting the principle of the uniformity of nature. Our practice of predicting the future on the basis of past regularities is a preference we bring to inquiry. James sees nothing wrong in saying that we employ the principle as a matter of “faith.” Many have argued that if induction is founded on faith, skepticism
inevitably follows. James thinks this is not the best way to understand matters. We should recognize that sentiments go into the construction of the standards of sound inquiry, rather than cling to traditional assumptions or intuitions about objectivity and rationality. Sentiments not only play a role in rational hypothesis choice; their influence cannot be ignored without distorting the nature of objective inquiry.

In another early, even more discussed paper, “The Will to Believe” [WB, 1–31], James offers an elegant but different critique of the claim that temperament should have no place in evaluating hypotheses. His target here is W. K. Clifford’s doctrine that the ethics of belief obligates us to take only impersonal factors into account. James argues that in practice this position is untenable. All judgments are fallible, so adding a belief to the corpus always entails risk. If we are unwilling to take some risk, inquiry comes to a halt. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. In the pursuit of knowledge, science seeks both to acquire truths and to avoid error. These desiderata, though, set off in different directions. Minimizing error would entail never moving beyond tautologies. Maximizing the number of beliefs accepted would encourage adding hypotheses to the corpus willy-nilly. Exclusive adoption of either strategy is not viable; nor can they simply be combined.

The fixation of belief requires compromise, tradeoffs between credibility and coverage, and there are no a priori or absolute standards for making these tradeoffs. Alternative compromises are reasonable. Scientists of cautious temperament will lean toward maximizing credibility; those of less cautious demeanor will lean toward maximizing coverage. Within limits both “temperaments” are rational, and both allow for conducting inquiry in accord with the dictates of the scientific method. Such intrusion of temperament in the decision-making processes of both science and everyday life does not mean the choices are unconstrained. The evidence must adequately support the hypothesis, and the new hypothesis must reasonably cohere with beliefs taken as settled. There will be only a restricted range of hypotheses that are reasonable to consider, and the assessments of the costs and benefits of each must be made in accord with the evidence. Everything does not go. Whether tolerance for risk is to be understood as an “epistemic” value may be debatable. What James feels is not debatable is that this and other factors of temperament are part and parcel of objective inquiry.4

In light of these features of the actual practices of inquiry James is convinced that there can be no rules for the direction of mind, decision
procedures, or formal principles of inductive logic for deciding which hypotheses to accept. “The absurd abstraction of an intellect verbally formulating all its evidence and carefully estimating the probability thereof by a vulgar fraction by the size of whose denominator and numerator alone it is swayed, is ideally as inept as it is actually impossible” [“The Sentiment of Rationality,” in WB, 92–93]. It is also a mistake to assume that deductive logic is a fixed, eternal arbiter in the fixation of belief. Logic does constrain rational thought and decision-making, but the rules for evaluating even deductive inference itself can change. Today’s logic is not the same as Aristotle’s logic, medieval logic, or Boole’s logic. Moreover, totally new patterns of reasoning may develop that sanction inferences not valid by the standards of any of these deductive systems. The Pragmatists were particularly impressed by the increasing use of statistical methods in science. 5

James’s defense of temperaments/sentiments in inquiry is central to many of his claims in Pragmatism, especially to his defense of God and free will. Note, however, that the reasons just given for adopting his account of the role of sentiments in inquiry do not depend on these additional claims. It is possible to accept a pragmatic analysis of the practices of inquiry without accepting all of the further uses James makes of it. Today I think it would be hard to argue that James’s views concerning the role of human preferences in both the context of discovery and the context of justification are simply those of a romantic, anti-intellectual, or subjectivist defender of the irrational. Differences in “philosophy” do make a difference.

Examples abound in the sciences. Economists of the Chicago school are likely to reach different conclusions from Keynesians, although they may rely on the very same empirical data. In the social sciences, theorists favoring quantitative analyses frequently hold that qualitative research is uninteresting, its data not probative, and its findings of little value. Qualitative theorists adopt the same attitude in the opposite direction. Over the years controversies between behaviorist and mentalist approaches to the study of mind and language have shaped the nature of psychological inquiry. They have influenced the phenomena to be explained, the experiments run, the evaluation of evidence, and the psychological journals that would consider the work for publication.

Resistance to certain probability aspects of quantum theory is often cited as an example of the impact of temperament on theory choice in physics. It is said that Einstein’s initial dissatisfactions with quantum theory were due in part to an “aesthetic” preference or “philosophy” summed up in a remark that God does not play dice. To recognize the legitimacy of
differences in “philosophy” today is not to deny that at a later date one “philosophy” and theory will be shown to prevail. The point is that at particular stages in inquiry alternative “philosophies” may be justified, and decisions that reflect these different philosophies can be equally rational and scientifically acceptable. In addition, there is usually no sharp line to be drawn as to when holding onto a “philosophy” goes from being a reasonable strategy to one of misplaced allegiance or stubbornness. The decision depends on informed “good sense.”

Convictions and commitments brought to philosophical inquiry also influence the issues to be explored and the tools of analysis employed. Until recently there has been a wide chasm between the “philosophies” that shaped work in continental and analytic philosophy. The problems, assumptions, and modes of analysis employed were not compatible. Even within the analytic tradition there has been no agreement as to the ground rules for inquiry. Some reject analyses that rely on necessity, essences, possible worlds, and the like. They feel that these notions are unclear, and the intuitions that underpin them not to be trusted. As W. V. Quine remarks in several places, he has an aesthetic preference for desert landscapes. For those with less stringent methodological standards a whole range of new problems and new solutions to ancient ones appear on the horizon.

Nelson Goodman expresses his view of such preferences as follows:

In the absence of any convenient and reliable criterion of what is clear, the individual thinker can only search his philosophic conscience . . . talk of conscience is just a figurative way of disclaiming any idea of justifying these basic judgments . . . If your conscience is more liberal than mine, I shall call some of your explanations obscure or metaphysical, while you will dismiss some of my problems as trivial or quixotic.⁶

I think that some of Thomas Kuhn’s claims about the influence of paradigms in the fixation of belief are akin to what James has in mind in highlighting the influence of “philosophies” on inquiry.⁷ Kuhn and other historians of science maintain that a study of the history of science indicates the widespread influence of informed “taste” and developed sensibility in choosing between hypotheses. According to Kuhn these tastes and sensibilities flow from paradigms. Paradigms, like James’s “philosophies,” are not themselves theories but approaches to a domain that set the concepts employed, the way problems are formulated, the evidence taken to be
relevant, and the weightings given to the evidence. Scientists have faith in the paradigms they work within and resist giving them up.

On the other hand, James is not committed to Kuhn’s strong notion of incommensurability or to the idea that knowledge is non-cumulative. Such theses do not follow from James’s accounts of inquiry, language, and truth. And although James will argue that certain religious beliefs are justified, he does not claim that religious beliefs and sentiments should be given weight in science or more generally in settling matters of empirical fact. In allowing room for preferences, tastes, sensibilities, and conscience, philosophic or otherwise, one must always be careful not to step over the line between those values, preferences, and temperaments that have epistemic legitimacy and those that do not. The line, though, is not set by a priori principles, nor is it fixed. Its boundaries emerge and change in the course of inquiry.

At times Kuhn and other proponents of the sociology of knowledge seem to deny the significance of this distinction, but they do so at considerable peril. Although it may be difficult to fix a sharp boundary between epistemic and non-epistemic values, those of religion, political party, power, and personal aggrandizement are out of bounds. The consequences of allowing them to intrude are dire, for then the important distinction between objective inquiry and subjective bias collapses. James believes that his own pragmatic theory of inquiry avoids falling into this trap. Many of his critics disagree. Be that as it may, for James, philosophies and paradigms are open to and should be subjected to criticism and critical evaluation. They can be challenged and overturned on rational grounds. If adopting them does not prove fruitful and enlightening, they should be given up. Faith, for instance, is no excuse for holding onto biblical notions of God and biblical stories about the creation of the universe or species.

So far I have been sketching the reasons James believes that temperament is a legitimate and non-eliminable influence on the evaluation of hypotheses. In Lecture I he more or less assumes but does not discuss or defend this thesis. I have tried to fill in some of the background. It is now time to confront directly what James does focus on in Lecture I. After introductory remarks about the goal of his lectures and the role one’s “philosophy” may play in the positions a person adopts, James offers two lists of contrasting temperamental factors that he thinks exert significant force on inquiry. These “philosophical” differences are intimately connected with how one treats the meaning of life issues he wishes to explore, but they reflect influences on inquiry in general. James’s lists are:
James warns, though, that this dichotomous scheme is a simplification and an idealization. People come in all combinations and degrees of the factors listed, and it could be that no actual person manifests all the symptoms cited in characterizing either of the two types.

It can be argued that most of these factors seem reasonable and appropriate to employ in characterizing a person’s cognitive temperament. Nowadays, and even among many scientists in James’s day, it was thought obvious that religious preferences have no intellectual standing. They should have no say or influence in the conduct of inquiry. In opposition, James argues that in a certain set of narrowly circumscribed situations, it is not necessary to quarantine religious sentiment from intellectual endeavors. It is important to keep in mind, however, that in all his writings James does not equate being religious with religion. Being religious does not entail adopting or rejecting any particular religion or any particular religion’s concept of God.

What James means exactly by the terms “religious” and “God” is hard to pin down, not only in Pragmatism but elsewhere in his writings. James sides with the tender-minded in having religious leanings, but he seems to identify these sentiments with a feeling of oneness with the world. He speculates that the origin of this religious need may lie in the unconscious, and this is the otherness we sense we are in touch with. In response to a questionnaire asking explicitly “What do you mean by ‘spirituality’?” James responds, “Susceptibility to ideals but with a certain freedom to indulge the imagination about them. A certain amount of ‘other worldly’ fancy.”

In Common Faith, Dewey describes religious sentiment as “the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected).” It is “the unification of the self through allegiances to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires.” Dewey believes that James is onto something that is pragmatically significant in calling attention to this

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feature of human temperament and the role it plays in life. Dewey takes pains, though, to argue that these ideal ends and their unification in the self do not depend on a supernatural God for grounding. These ideals are human constructions, and the unification of them within the self is a wholly independent human undertaking.

James agrees that these ideals are human constructs, but he allows that in his own case the idea of a substantive God is part and parcel of his account of the process of self-unification. James’s God, though, is definitely not a biblical God. God is “a combination of Ideality and (final) efficacy . . . He must be cognizant and responsive in some way.” James also holds that his own religious sentiments may rely on being allied with an unnatural or supernatural force. Nonetheless, his God is finite, not omniscient, and is not the creator of the universe. And James insists that it is necessary to leave room for one’s conception of God to evolve when needed to better cope with experience. More will be said on James’s God in later lectures.

At present, it is enough to note that James intends to defend the legitimacy of religious temperament in the fixation of belief, but only in very special cases and only in the way he understands the nature of the religious. He will argue that, so understood, it is not necessary to neutralize or eliminate its influences everywhere. Subjectivity is a threat only when temperaments irrelevant to the fixation of belief in question intrude or when relevant ones overstep their acceptable boundaries of application. Temperaments must be judiciously employed and constrained by observation, logic, and epistemic values. James continually stresses that religious factors are always to be employed in addition to, not as substitutes for, the other demands of empirical inquiry. He contends that his own religious sentiments meet these conditions and do not overreach their legitimate influence.

Although James titles his lists “The Tender-Minded” and “The Tough-Minded,” he could equally well have adopted “Rationalist” and “Empiricist” in their stead. For my purposes I think the latter labels are more useful for laying out the Pragmatists’ epistemic and metaphysical views. James has qualms with both rationalism and empiricism. When rationalism is pursued too robustly it ends in an untenable Idealism. When empiricism is pushed too far it ends in untenable materialism. On the whole, James along with his fellow Pragmatists look more favorably on the empiricists. The rationalist outlook encourages people to think that it is possible to gain knowledge merely by reflecting on ideas and concepts. The Pragmatists argue that it
is not possible to acquire knowledge by these means. They are convinced that the experimental method has proved to be the most successful and most promising way to acquire knowledge. Therefore inquiry must be grounded in experience as the empiricists insist.

James, nevertheless, finds much that is appealing in the temperament of the rationalists that is missing in the empiricists. The rationalists are defenders of free will, and they recognize more fully the extent of the human contribution in inquiry. They are also concerned with values, ethics, and spirituality. The empiricist’s program, when taken to its “tough” extremes, results in a doctrinaire rejection of their cognitive significance. James characterizes tough-minded empiricism as a “nothing but” position. It holds that cognitively significant inquiry can be only about material objects, and all theory must be couched in materialistically acceptable terms. For all intents and purposes this leads these empiricists to ignore or at least not explore the meaning of life issues. They feel that such matters are unscientific, since the objects and concepts employed in these realms cannot be understood as nothing but material. James believes that such reductive or eliminative materialism makes it impossible to explore seriously issues that are of deep concern to him and his audience, “what life honestly and deeply means.”

Although he is quite appreciative of some of the insights and aspirations they bring to the table, throughout Pragmatism James indicates his overall distaste of the rationalist perspective. Too often rationalism turns into a debilitating form of intellectualism. James feels that the rationalists he opposes are not constrained and do not see the need to be constrained by the scientific method or by empirical findings. Yet these thinkers feel free to propose and defend all-encompassing abstract theories about the nature of the universe and our place in it. For James, rationalist doctrines are often far worse than anything empiricism brings with it. Adopting a rationalist outlook can have quite pernicious consequences for the way we think about and treat others.

In Lecture I, without offering much argument, James dismisses a biblical Judeo-Christian God, sitting on high, creating the universe, and ruling over it. In light of Darwin’s work and other developments in science, the biblical beliefs of traditional religions are in retreat, and their chances of making a comeback grow dimmer by the day. In opposition to religious traditionalists, many of James’s contemporary rationalists do appreciate the need to come to terms with science and the negative implications it has for the biblical picture of God. Nonetheless, they continue to feel a need to appeal
to something of a higher nature, something beyond experience that unites
the world and makes it whole. James has sympathies with their needs, but
not with the way they attempt to meet them. The Idealists’ solution is to
posit the “Absolute,” an abstract all-encompassing “One” or infinite Mind
structures, but has no direct contact with human affairs and the day-
to-day conditions on earth. So conceived, James argues the Absolute cannot
hope to provide solutions to meaning-of-life questions. James does not
object to the Absolute on the grounds that it is an abstraction or an idealization.
He believes that abstractions and idealizations have good use in
sound inquiry. James’s point is that the rationalists’ postulated Absolute
is not anchored in experience and fact. The main constraints on its con-
struction are a given philosopher’s intuitions or favored metaphysical
commitments.

More troubling for James, belief in either a biblical God or the Absolute
can lead people to adopt a “this is the best of all possible worlds” attitude.
Since everything is well or at least as good as it can be, it is difficult to
motivate people to undertake the work we need to and should do to
improve the human condition. James thinks that all it takes to see that
things are far from the best is to open one’s eyes. He quotes a newspaper
report by M. Swift detailing the horrible living conditions many people
endure and the tragic consequences that follow their attempts to cope. The
Idealists often turn their backs on these realities. They do not see and hence
do not take into account life as it is actually lived. This attitude conflicts
with James’s meliorist commitment to engaging the world and making it
a better place in which to live. The Absolute is an “intellectualist” construct
that does not encourage such action.

In sum, James feels that many in his audience harbor meaning-of-life
worries similar to his own. They cannot ignore science, but they have been
led to believe that science is incompatible with the religious sentiments and
aspirations they harbor. Like him, they yearn to find room for the spiritual,
but when they turn to professional philosophers for help they are frus-
trated. The empiricists James opposes wish to steer clear of spirituality,
values, and ethics entirely. They deny that there is an objective way to
engage the issues. On the other hand, the rationalists are willing to talk
about the topics, but in distancing themselves from the real world their
proposals can make things worse. Neither tender-minded rationalism nor
tough-minded empiricism will do. James believes that there is a viable mid-
ground position that can address humanist concerns, pay proper attention
to science, and adopt the scientific method. That is pragmatism.
Of course, it will not be possible to accept the compromise James will offer if one starts with a misconception about the nature of actual inquiry, especially as it occurs in science. James will argue that tender-minded rationalist and tough-minded empiricist programs both hit dead ends, because they are each based on faulty analyses of scientific practices. The rationalists’ goal of certainty is unreachable. And simply dropping certainty as a goal will not set things right as long as the rationalists continue to think the deepest and most important truths are necessary and are to be uncovered by a priori or non-experimental inquiry. James rejects rationalism not because he finds it too intellectual. His complaint is that the rationalists’ abstract approach is not how objective inquiry is or should be pursued. Their position substitutes intellectualism for the actual sorts of intellectual activities involved in sound inquiry.

James’s complaint against the empiricists is quite different. He does not object to their setting scientific practice as the model for objective inquiry. He agrees with them on this. Their problem is that they assume that all science is logically derivable from observation and/or reducible to some set of basic material items. James will argue that efforts to deduce all theory from observation or to reduce all concepts and laws to those of physics or some other materialist base have failed and are not likely to succeed. James’s opponents are wrong too in assuming that experimental science develops entirely independent of human preferences and interests. This is not possible. Objective inquiry depends crucially on epistemic values and temperamental factors in the fixation of belief. The philosophical claim that the norms of inquiry are eternal and can be studied ahistorically, independent of the “context of discovery,” is mistaken.

Science does not and could not function adequately within the restrictions imposed by tough-minded materialist doctrine. The tenets of this form of empiricism are not those of science; rather they are a species of scientism. It will become more apparent in later lectures that the battle James wages against the materialist positivists of his time has much in common with the one waged against logical positivism in the last half of the twentieth century.

If the nature of objective inquiry is conceived pragmatically, James contends that he has a viable solution to “the present dilemma in philosophy.” He will spend the rest of *Pragmatism* explaining and defending a position that lies between that of the tender-minded and the tough-minded. In Lecture I it is enough for him to suggest that his own empiricism does not require dismissing the legitimate influence of “philosophies” on the fixation of beliefs.
Notes

1 In discussing James’s account of the will, there is a tendency for commentators to focus on his so-called “Will to Believe” doctrine. The sections of The Principles of Psychology where he examines the role of the will in the fixation of belief stand or fall independent of that doctrine. Neither here nor elsewhere does James hold that we can simply will our beliefs into existence. The will’s role is not to wish for or to attempt to cause beliefs but to endorse them. It is also necessary to keep in mind that the term “fixation” does not entail that the belief is permanent or that its content is stagnant or immutable. More discussion of the issue can be found in Lecture VI. The term “endorse” can also mislead if it is given an overly mentalist analysis. “Adopt for use” or “work on the assumption that” are often better fits.

2 James is joined here by influential scientists of his time. For example, Pierre Duhem stresses the ultimate importance of “good sense” in scientific inquiry in The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory (New York: Atheneum, 1962), 216ff. Henri Poincare adopts a similar stance with respect to mathematics and likens it to creativity in art: “It may appear surprising that sensibility should be introduced in connection with mathematical discovery, which it would seem, can only interest the intellect. But not if we bear in mind the feeling of beauty, of the harmony of numbers and forms of geometric elegance. It is a real aesthetic feeling that all true mathematicians recognize and this truly is sensibility” (Science and Method (New York: Dover, 1952), 59). See also his chapters, “The Selection of Facts” and “Mathematical Discovery” in the same book. For related comments on psychological influences of physicists, see A. d’Abro, The Rise of the New Physics (New York: Dover, 1951), 106–144.

3 Here, again, James’s view is in accord with the opinion of many prominent scientists of his day.

4 More recent discussion of the distinction between epistemic and non-epistemic values can be found in the papers in Parts 5 and 6 in E. D. Klemke et al., eds., Introductory Readings in the Philosophy of Science (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1998). The boundaries and significance of this distinction will loom large in understanding and evaluating the status of James’s religious hypothesis.

5 James, though, somewhat churlishly admits regret at the growing use of statistical methods in psychology [PP I, 192].


8 A good place to find a fuller picture of what James has in mind is the Conclusion and Postscript of Varieties. James’s conception of God and the religious

