1. Introduction

Religious concerns pervade the thought of William James. In but a few of his philosophical works are the moral and religious implications of his position ever far from view, and often they provide the most prominent unifying thread of an entire work.[1] Among the most recurrent religious themes that feature in James's writings is that of mankind's deep desire to achieve intimacy with God, and a fair amount of his philosophic effort is expended warring against the forces that he takes to be blocking the satisfaction of this desire. In the span of several of his philosophical works, James grapples with the problems of existential angst,[2] religious pessimism,[3] and suicide.[4] His general diagnosis of each of these problems is the same, and can be traced back to the frustration of a single impulse: *the impulse for rational unity*. According to James, this impulse is what motivates absolutist monist philosophies, and is what must ultimately be denied in order to achieve conciliation with nature, and consequently with God. More precisely, what James argues for in the various works in which these topics are addressed is a sort of delimitation of the rationalistic impulse, or a narrowing of its field of application. Such a move makes room for pluralism, which, "in exorcising the absolute, exorcises the great de-realizer of the only life we are at home in, and thus redeems the nature of reality from essential foreignness."[5] In this essay, I will assess James's

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[1] Consider, for instance, that James presents his metaphysics in *A Pluralistic Universe* in the context of a religious dilemma, and pluralism itself largely as a necessary postulate to account for the universe's indifference to our moral interests.

[2] William James, *A Pluralistic Universe: Hibbert Lectures at Manchester College on the Present Situation in Philosophy* (New York: Longmans. Green, and Co., 1920). See "The Types of Philosophic Thinking," pp. 1-40.

[3] William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a Study in Human Nature* (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 2004). See "The Sick Soul," pp. 119-150.

[4] William James, *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1956). See "Is Life Worth Living?" pp. 32-62.

[5] James 1920,49-50.

arguments for pluralism as a solution to the problems of existential angst and religious pessimism within the metaphysical backdrop that he provides.

2. Existential Angst

2.1 Overview

The feeling that one is a stranger in this world, most often provoked by the discovery of discord between one's internal nature and the nature of the universe that environs him, has long proved an impediment to the exercise of mankind's spiritual impulse. There is a sense, therefore, in which achieving conciliation with nature is a necessary precondition for attaining intimacy with God whose nature we take it in some degree to express. In the introductory chapter to *A Pluralistic Universe*, James invokes Hegel to support his account of the function of human reason: "The aim of knowledge," says Hegel, "is to divest the objective world of its strangeness, and to make us more at home in it."[6] But, as James later reflects, this task requires more than simply discovering order underneath all its apparent chaos. Not only must "an order be made," explains James, "[but] in that order the higher side of things must dominate."[7] For mankind to truly feel at home in his environment, in other words, he must find the "inner life of things [to] be substantially akin…to the tenderer parts of [his own nature]."[8] Throughout the remainder of *A Pluralistic Universe*, James sets out to demonstrate how the doctrine of pluralism can be applied to resolve this problem of existential angst.

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[6] John J. Stuhr, *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy: Essential Readings and Interpretive Essays*, second edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153.
[7] Ibid., 159.
[8] Ibid., 158.

2.2 Diagnosis

At the bottom of mankind's angst over his existence is a single frustrated impulse, the impulse for rational unity. James once referred to this impulse as "the mind's most necessary law,"[9] and describes it as providing one of the primary stimuli for all philosophic activity.[10] As implicit in the previous section's remarks, rationality comes in two species. The first of these is variably characterized as formal, intellectual, and logical, and corresponds to the domain of the theoretical sciences. The impulse for rational unity as applied to our theoretical interests expresses itself in seeking order amidst chaos, especially in the form of logical and mathematical harmonies. The second species of rationality is variably described as sentimental, aesthetic, and teleological, and corresponds to the domain of moral and practical affairs.[11] According to James, it is this latter species that motivates the various spiritualistic philosophies. The spiritual way of thinking is that which underlies all sorts of religious attitude, and is characterized by a kind of insistence that "the intimate and human surround and underlie the brutal."[12] Perhaps a better way to express this sentiment is to say that the spiritual way of thinking imagines external nature to be governed by the same aesthetic and sentimental principles that govern our own internal nature.

Corresponding to each of these rational interests is a distinct species of existential angst, which is precipitated whenever foreignness erupts into either domain and frustrates our activity there. As James writes,

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[9] James 1956, 120.
[10] William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 2003). See p. 56 where James discusses the definition of philosophy as "the quest or the vision of the world's unity."
[11] See, e.g., James 1920, 320.
[12] Stuhr 2000, 156.

> Accidents, either moral, mental, or physical, break up the slowly built-up equilibriums men reach in family life and in their civic and professional relations. Intellectual enigmas frustrate our scientific systems, and the ultimate cruelty of the universe upsets our religious attitudes and outlooks. Of no special system of good attained does the universe recognize the value as sacred.[13]

As I understand it, the species of existential angst that corresponds to our moral and practical interests is of the same basic form as the problem of religious pessimism to be addressed later. Setting these concerns aside, then, for the time being, let us focus on the species corresponding to our theoretical interests.

C.I. Lewis once described the problem that is our present target in the preface to his book, *Mind and the World Order*. In it he writes,

> [Abstractness] and systematic precision go together, and…exact deductive procedures may give rise to no corresponding certainty about empirical nature. Logical integrity and concrete applicability are quite separate matters…[The] analytic character and abstractness of exact systems, which assure to them that kind of certainty which they have, tend to divorce them from that empirical truth which is the object of natural science and the content of our possible knowledge of nature…[I]t appears that we must accept a kind of double-truth: there are the certainties, such as those of mathematics, which concern directly only what is abstract; and there are the presentations of our sense-experience to which we seek to apply them, but with a resultant empirical truth which may be no more than probable.[14]

Highlighted in this passage is the failure of conceptual models of empirical reality to make our predictions concerning the latter perfectly secure. Such models are constructed via abstraction, which is the primary mechanism of man's rational impulse. James understands abstraction to proceed in two phases. The first of these involves the breaking up of the stream of experience into functional objects.[15] Such objects, as James

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[13] James 1920, 89.
[14] Clive Irving Lewis, *Mind and the World Order: Outline of a Theory of Knowledge* (New York: Dover Publication, Inc., 1929), viii-ix.
[15] Stuhr 2000, 188.

conceives them, are mere "mock-ups, pockets, boxes of relations that are snipped and packaged for reasons of utility."[16] The second phase of abstraction involves the creation of conceptual substitutes for these objects, which are then employed theoretically to predict the quality of future experience. Such concepts are said to "know" their objects whenever they can act as effective substitutes for all the practical functions of the object itself, i.e.,

> an experience that knows another [i.e., a concept] can figure as [the percept's] representative, not in any quasi-miraculous 'epistemological' sense, but in the definite practical sense of being its substitute in various operations, sometimes physical and sometimes mental, which lead us to its associates and results. By experimenting on our ideas of reality, we may save ourselves the trouble of experimenting on the real experiences which they severally mean.[17]

While James recognizes that paths that run through conceptual experiences are often highly advantageous paths for thought to follow,[18] he also stresses their inherent limitations.[19] "Most thought-paths," writes James, "are substitutes for nothing actual; they end outside the real world altogether, in wayward fancies, utopias, fictions or mistakes."[20] When these paths fail to terminate where we expect them to, or end outside the real world altogether, this brings our activity to a screeching halt. Such disruptions in

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[16] Stuhr 2000, 146.
[17] Stuhr 2000, 186.
[18] E.g., "Not only do they yield inconceivably rapid transitions; but owing to the universal character which they frequently possess, and to their capacity for association with one another in great systems, they outstrip the tardy consecutions of the things themselves, and sweep us on towards our ultimate termini in a far more labor-saving way than the following of trains of sensible perception ever could" (Stuhr 2000, 186-187).
[19] As one commentator remarks, "The flow of consciousness is whole and continuous, whereas our conceptual formulations tend to break it up into definitions, names, nouns, and other assorted categories. It is true, of course, that to survive, human beings need placeholders, perches, moving points in the flow [of experience], which act as redoubts, way stations, and abodes. Were they not present, we would be carried in the stream as flotsam, rudderless. The task then is twofold: (1) forge those moorings that are most propitious and advantageous for our human needs and (2) avoid becoming trapped and mired such that we confuse our own temporary bunker with the entire fabric of possibility" (Stuhr 2000, 149).
[20] Stuhr 2000, 186-187.

our active lives generate feelings of distress similar to that experienced when the breathing impulse is suppressed, as James explains:

> Just as we feel no particular pleasure when we breathe freely, but a very intense feeling of distress when the respiratory motions are prevented, – so any unobstructed tendency to action discharges itself without the production of much cogitative accompaniment, and any perfectly fluent course of thought awakens but little feeling; but when the movement is inhibited, or when the thought meets with difficulties, we experience distress.[21]

Naturally, relief is sought through the reparation of our conceptual models; i.e., we revise our theories, "making changes as local and minimal as possible,"[22] until our activity is freed again. James, however, sees this project as ultimately futile and argues instead for a decisive delimitation of the rational impulse. Such an impulse, he admits, has many times proven prophetic, discovering logical and mathematical harmonies to truly "lie hidden between all the chinks and interstices of the crude natural world."[23] But these harmonies are forever incomplete, according to James, and only by ultimately embracing pluralism can we definitively exclude foreignness from the theoretical domain.[24]

The only appropriate attitude to take toward such a world as our own, argues James, is one in which every conceptual model of reality is treated merely as a hypothesis. James's own view, which he calls radical empiricism, is built upon just such a principle.[25] "He who takes for his hypothesis the notion that [pluralism] is the

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[21] James 1956, 64.
[22] Kent Bach, "An Analysis of Self-Deception," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Mar., 1981), 358. Cf. James 2003, 26-27.
[23] "Without an imperious inner demand on our part for ideal logical and mathematical harmonies, we should never have attained to proving that such harmonies lie hidden between all the chinks and interstices of the crude natural world" (James 1956, 55).
[24] "Pluralism, in exorcising the absolute, exorcises the great de-realizer of the only life we are at home in, and thus redeems the nature of reality from essential foreignness" (James 1920,49-50).
[25] "Were I obliged to give a short name to the attitude in question, I should call it that of *radical empiricism*…I say 'empiricism' because it is contented to regard its most assured conclusions concerning

permanent form of the world," writes James, "is what I call a radical empiricist. For him the crudity of experience remains an eternal element thereof. There is no possible point of view from which the world can appear an absolutely single fact."[26] Set in stark contrast to this attitude is that of absolutist philosophies, the great claim of which is precisely that the absolute is *no hypothesis*, but rather "a presupposition implicated in all thinking, and needing only a little effort of analysis to be seen as a logical necessity."[27] In the absolutist's universe, consequently, "Advance in thinking…[has] to proceed by the apodictic words *must be* rather than those by the inferior hypothetic words *may be*, which are all that empiricists can use."[28]

Such an approach to philosophical inquiry, as one commentator remarks, is anathema in James's search for truth, meaning, and insight.[29] The religious implications of the absolutist's claim, for instance, include the absurd conclusion that, if God exists, then he is reflected in nature. This, in turn, weds us to the impossible task of trying to reconcile our notion of God with the facts of experience.[30] The theoretical implications are perhaps less severe, but are nonetheless troublesome to James. These primarily include the inability to extricate ourselves from what is essentially a futile endeavor to have our conceptual models match up with the empirical world. In a world such as ours, insists James, "openness to experience, to novelty, to surprise is a cardinal tenet of the

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matters of fact as hypotheses liable to modification in the course of future experience; and I say 'radical,' because it treats the doctrine of monism itself as an hypothesis (James 1956, vii-viii).

[26] James 1956, vii-viii (quoted in Stuhr 2000, 145).

[27] James 1920,51.

[28] James 1920,101.

[29] Stuhr 2000, 147.

[30] As James writes, "we of the 19th century, with our evolutionary theories and our mechanical philosophies, already know nature too impartially and too well to worship unreservedly any God of whose character she can be an adequate expression" (James 1956, 43).

philosophical enterprise,"[31] and no philosophy will ultimately be deemed rational that fails to anticipate these features. Treating our theoretical models as mere hypotheses, however, subject always to revision in light of future experiences, decisively prevents us from passing final judgments on the nature of reality. All conclusions that we might draw within such a system are reduced to mere *maybes*, thus preserving a domain for the exercise of faith in religious and moral possibilities.[32] Furthermore, it allows us to anticipate novelties in experience, effectively neutralizing their disruptive tendencies within our active lives.

2.3 Objections and Replies

By reinforcing the boundary between the conceptual and the empirical, James seeks to preserve indefinitely a domain for the exercise of faith. But, as he admits in *The Will to Believe,* this method is effective only at safeguarding one's faith in those possibilities that have not already been reduced to zero, i.e., those not already determined by the evidence.[33] For example, the fact that future experience may always turn up a white crow safeguards my faith in the belief that "all crows are black" is a false proposition (perhaps indefinitely). But note that the same white crow is sufficient to defeat my faith in the opposite belief, namely that "all crows are black" is true. Therefore,

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[31] Stuhr 2000, 147.

[32] "Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; and as the test of belief is 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 1956, 90). Similarly, James writes, "possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal; and to quote my friend William Salter, of the Philadelphia Ethical Society, 'as the essence of courage is to stake one's life on a possibility, so the essence of faith is to believe that the possibility exists'" (James 1956, 62).

[33] "Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option *that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*…"(James 1956, 11; italics mine). Also, "we are free to trust at our own risks anything that is not impossible, and that can bring analogies to bear in its behalf" (James 1956, 57).

while it is true that certain possibilities will always be available under James's system upon which I may exercise my powers of faith, this is no guarantee that the set of possibilities that are truly important to me will fall among that set.

Turning first to the theoretical domain, it seems that James's solution is almost superfluous. That is to say, when we consider the great successes of science under the guidance of our theoretical instincts, it is not clear that our formal or scientific interests were ever under serious threat from the absolutist's thesis. In fact, adopting pluralism in our theoretical endeavors would seem rather like shooting ourselves in the foot if the world's unity, considered formally, turned out to be complete – which, indeed, seems to be the direction we're heading. In such a case, pluralism would just be one more theoretical model that failed to faithfully represent empirical reality. While we might be happier to be proved wrong in this latter case having expected irrationality and discovered rationality than we would have otherwise been had our hypothesis predicted rationality at the start and then discovered none, this advantage seems trifling.

The more genuine threat, rather, seems to be to our moral and sentimental interests; for while the scientific enterprise continues to thrive under the guidance of our theoretical instincts, our moral ideals appear to languish under the inspiration of our religious instincts. James himself seems to recognize the superior track record of the former to the latter when he writes,

> Without an imperious inner demand on our part for ideal logical and mathematical harmonies, we should never have attained to proving that such harmonies lie hidden between all the chinks and interstices of the crude natural world. Hardly a law has been established in science, hardly a fact ascertained, which was not first sought after, often with sweat and blood, to gratify an inner need…But the inner need of believing that this world of nature is a sign of something more spiritual and eternal than itself is just as strong and authoritative in those who feel it, as the inner need of

> uniform laws of causation ever can be in a professionally scientific head. The toil of many generations has proved the latter need prophetic. Why *may* not the former one be prophetic, too? And if needs of ours outrun the visible universe, why *may* not that be a sign that an invisible universe is there? What, in short, has authority to debar us from trusting our religious demands?[34]

In other words, our theoretical instincts have been tried and proven prophetic; it is our *religious instincts* whose prophetic potential remains questionable. Such considerations should lead us to conclude that pluralism is not really much help to our theoretical interests (and, all things considered, might actually do more harm than good), and that if such a solution is necessary at all, it must be to serve our interests in the moral domain.

Turning then to the moral domain, what reasons do we have to believe that those possibilities that are truly important in supporting our moral interests are among those that James's solution succeeds in preserving? Assume, for the sake of argument, that included among these vital possibilities were Kant's three ideas, *God, freedom*, and *the soul*. Can we not imagine having an experience that would be sufficient to defeat any of these hypotheses, a "white crow" of sorts relative to each of these hypotheses? If such an experience were in principle possible – and I argue in the next section that it *is* – then our moral interests would again fall under threat, and existential angst would reemerge.

James might reply, however, that the hypotheses with which he is concerned do not make such sweeping generalizations concerning the possibilities within experience. Believing in God, for James, is not so much like believing "all crows are black," which, due to its sweeping nature, is highly susceptible to defeating experiences, but rather like believing "*some* crows are black," or perhaps "*most* crows are black," claims that can withstand the discovery of a few white crows. As he writes, "Let God but have the least

[34] James 1956, 55-56.

infinitesimal *other* of any kind beside him, and empiricism and rationalism might strike hands in a lasting treaty of peace."[35] Before we give any more thought to this feature of James's argument, however, let us first turn to consider the problem of religious pessimism to which it more fully applies.

3. Religious Pessimism

3.1 Overview

The problem of existential angst as it manifests itself in the moral and practical domains is deeply intertwined with the problems of religious pessimism and suicide. James addresses these latter issues in various works, the most notable of which include a chapter in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* entitled "The Sick Soul," and in an essay published in *The Will to Believe* entitled "Is Life Worth Living?" In both of these works, he appeals to the resources of radical empiricism – primarily its central feature, pluralism – to resolve the core difficulty.

3.2 Diagnosis

"Pessimism," writes James, "is essentially a religious disease. In the form of it to which you are most liable, it consists in nothing but a religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply."[36] Translated into terms with which we are now more familiar, religious pessimism is the result of our religious instincts failing to guide us into fruitful correspondences with reality – either actively or reflectively. Understood actively, religious pessimism is just the psychic discharge that results from a particular kind of

[35] James 1920, 312.
[36] James 1956, 39.

practical failure. For example, someone might set out in life with some sense of providence, and sensing herself to be guided along by it, might imagine that a certain prospect is guaranteed to her (i.e., if only she does her part). If later, having faithfully kept to the course, circumstances did not subsequently align so as to secure the hoped-for prospect, she might feel that she had been cheated or misled by providence, and her faith in it would consequently suffer.[37] Such disappointments would naturally discharge themselves as distress of a distinctly religious quality.

The reflective sources of religious pessimism are equally potent. In fact, it is they that are responsible for supplying us with those instincts that so often run our active lives afoul. James identifies the great reflective source of pessimism as "the contradiction between the phenomena of nature and the craving of the heart to believe that behind nature there is a spirit whose expression nature is."[38] So understood, religious pessimism bears many of the marks that characterized the angst of our previous section's discussion. Not surprisingly, then, pluralism plays an important role in James's two-stage resolution. As he explains,

> Now this inner discord (merely as discord) can be relieved in either of two ways: The longing to read the facts religiously may cease, and leave the bare facts by themselves; or, supplementary facts may be discovered and believed-in, which permit the religious reading to go on. These two levels of relief are the two stages of recovery, the two levels of escape from pessimism…[39]

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[37] The intimate connection between mankind's felt awareness of providential forces and his aesthetic instinct, as expressed in the quest for the world's "aesthetic" or "teleological" unity, makes this an especially potent example. See James 2003, 62-63.

[38] James 1956, 40. James imagines this contradiction to have the most adverse affect on those who are empirically minded by nature. As he writes, "Now, suppose a mind [of the more strongly empirical type], whose imagination is pent in consequently, and who takes its facts 'hard;' suppose it, moreover, to feel strongly the craving for communion, and yet to rationalize how desperately difficult it is to construe the scientific order of nature either theologically or poetically, – and what result *can* there be but inner discord and contradiction?" (James 1956, 40-41).

[39] James 1956, 40-41.

The initial step towards getting into healthy ultimate relations with the universe, according to James, is the act of rebellion against the idea that a God of nature, simply taken as such, exists.[40] This move involves the rejection of absolute monism, which effectively blocks any final conclusions from being drawn concerning the nature of God from the presence of evil in the world. As James explains, "With evil simply taken, men can make short work, for their relations with it then are only practical. It looms up no longer so spectrally, it loses all its haunting and perplexing significance, as soon as the mind attacks the instances of it singly, and ceases to worry about their derivation from the 'one and only Power.'"[41] The second stage in the recovery process is the adoption of pluralism as our new working hypothesis, and the exercise of faith in a supernatural order.[42] "[W]e have a right," argues James, "to believe the physical order to be only a partial order [and] to supplement it by an unseen spiritual order which we assume on trust, if only thereby life may seem to us better worth living again."[43]

What faith in such a reality would look like in exercise – i.e., what its practical effects would be once adopted – is of supreme importance to our final assessment of this solution. As initially advertised, the second stage of this solution would bring "joy" and the "freer exercise of religious trust and fancy."[44] We are clearly entitled, therefore, to expect this second iteration of faith to work better than its abandoned predecessor – not just reflectively, but actively as well. What this would require, minimally, is (1) that we are not led back into *systematic* practical failure under faith's influence, and (2) that it

[40] James 1956, 44.
[41] James 1956, 46.
[42] James treats religion in the supernaturalist sense, which "declares that the so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world's experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists" (James 1956, 51).
[43] James 1956, 52.
[44] James 1956, 39-40.

provide some mechanism to neutralize the disruptive force of *individual* moral and religious defeats. Failure to satisfy either of these conditions would leave an opening for the pessimistic attitude to reemerge and thus leave our central problem unresolved.

3.3 Objections and Replies

We closed the last section's objections with a quote by James that encouraged us to dilute our religious hypotheses such that they might withstand a few contrary facts in experience. Having explored the problem of religious pessimism, we are now ready to evaluate the full potential of this idea. Our quote read, "Let God but have the least infinitesimal *other* of any kind beside him, and empiricism and rationalism might strike hands in a lasting treaty of peace."[45] Diluting our religious and moral hypotheses to just this extent, argues James, preserves "the maximum amount of rationality practically attainable by our minds."[46] But how so?

James's notion of rationality, if you recall, is tightly bound up with that of congeniality to our spontaneous powers.[47] Several of these powers, e.g., man's theoretical instincts and his capacity for faith, have already been discussed. Taken by themselves, it would seem that the most rational world for humans to inhabit would simply be one in which their theoretical and religious instincts proved fruitful in practice. But James

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[45] James 1920, 312.

[46] James 1920, 319. In explicating this point, James seems to acknowledge that adopting pluralism for its services in the moral sphere comes at a substantial cost to our desire for absolute formal unity. See, e.g., James 1920, 313-314.

[47] "For a philosophy to succeed on a universal scale it must define the future *congruously with our spontaneous powers*. A philosophy may be unimpeachable in other respects, but either of two defects will be fatal to its universal acceptance. First, its ultimate principle must not be one that essentially baffles and disappoints our dearest desires and most cherished powers…[A] second and worse defect in a philosophy than that of contradicting our active propensities is to give them no object whatever to press against…Any philosophy which annihilates the validity of the reference by explaining away its object or translating them into terms of no emotional [pertinence], leaves the mind with little to care or act for" (James 1956, 83). See also pp. 54-55, 77, 82-83, 86-88, 196.

imagines us to possess further powers the exercise of which requires the presence of resistance and opposition. As he reflects, "Need and struggle are what excite and inspire us…Not the Jews of the captivity, but those of the days of Solomon's glory are those from whom the pessimistic utterances in our Bible come."[48] If our moral powers really do thrive best under conditions of struggle and lack, then perhaps pluralism is just what the doctor ordered.

Furthermore, there are a significant number of passages in which James flirts with the possibility of the world's plurality "blossoming" into perfect unity, particularly as a result of men's investments in that direction.[49] Take, for instance, his continuation of the previous thought that our moral instincts thrive under conditions of struggle, applied here to the question of whether life is worth living:

> What sort of thing would life really be, with your qualities ready for a tussle with it, if it only brought fair weather and gave these higher faculties of yours no scope?...This life *is* worth living, we can say, *since it is what we make of it, from the moral point of view*; and we are determined to make it from that point of view, so far as we have anything to do with it, a success…If this life be not a real fight, in which something is eternally gained for the universe by success, it is no better than a game of private theatricals from which one may withdraw at will. But it *feels* like a real fight, – as if there were something really wild in the universe which we, with all our idealities and faithfulnesses, are needed to redeem; and first of all to redeem our own hearts from atheisms and fears. For such a half-wild, half-saved universe our nature is adapted.[50]

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[48] James 1956, 47.

[49] Stuhr 2000, 193. For example, in the conclusion to his essay "A World of Pure Experience," he writes, "The world is in so forth a pluralism of which the unity is not fully experienced as yet. But, as fast as verifications come, trains of experience, once separate, run into one another; and that is why I said, earlier in my essay, that the unity of the world is on the whole undergoing increase" (Stuhr 2000, 193). In another essay, James goes even further and acknowledges, "That there *may* be one sovereign purpose, system, kind, and story [in the world], is a legitimate hypothesis" (James 2003, 63).

[50] James 1956, 60-61. This idea also features in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, where James writes, "[According to the gospel of healthy-mindedness,] evil [need not] be essential; it might be, and might always have been, an independent portion that had no rational or absolute right to live with the rest, and which we might conceivably hope to see got rid of at last…Here we have the interesting notion fairly and squarely presented to us, of there being elements of the universe which may make no rational whole in conjunction with the other elements, and which, from the point of view of any system which those other elements make up, can only be considered so much irrelevance and accident – so much 'dirt,' as it were,

Here, in man's fighting impulse, we have a possible mechanism for neutralizing the disruptive force of individual moral and religious defeats. By taking the possibility of religious failure as evidence that our battle is a genuine one, we can choose to respond to our religious distress constructively rather than resignedly, allowing it to reinvigorate our spiritual lives.

But this mechanism only extends so far, as the inadequacy of the rationalist's brand of faith to sustain our religious lives has already served to demonstrate. A few well-absorbed punches might merely rouse the boxer's fighting spirit, but a sustained series of direct blows will end the fight for even the most dogged fighter. Therefore, while we may appreciate the inspirational nature of James's life-as-a-battle metaphor, we must not allow the emotional force of such words to suffice for their accurateness. James's imagery above will be apt just in case experience meets our moral and religious instincts (exercised in the way James prescribes) with mere resistance, which serves to incite, and not outright defiance, which serves to extinguish. The question, then, is whether James's prescription for the proper exercise of faith will hold up any better than the rationalist's.

As we turn to James's account of how faith is to be properly exercised, however, it's not apparent to me why it should fare any better in practice than that which we previously rejected. First, he defines faith as "belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible." Second, we are told, "as the test of belief is willingness to act, one may say that faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous

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and matter out of place...[A]lthough most philosophers seem either to forget [this notion] or to disdain it too much ever to mention it, I believe that we shall have to admit it to ourselves in the end as containing an element of truth" (James 2004, 123-124).

issue of which is not certified to us in advance."[51] Finally, we are encouraged to *trust our religious demands*, where this is taken to mean "to live in the light of them, and to act as if the invisible world which they suggest were real."[52] It is at this point that we must challenge the aptness of James's battle imagery to capture the reality of our situation. If James intends, for instance, to include among our religious demands the demand for teleological unity, which I suggested before underlies our feeling of being guided by providence,[53] then I think the battle imagery quite misleading, for experience meets this particular instinct of ours with not just rousing provocation but outright defiance. Our sense of providence is a paradigm religious instinct our trust in which leads to systematic failure in our active lives. Therefore, while I acknowledge the potential of James's solution to neutralize the disruptive force of individual defeats in our moral and spiritual lives, I deny that it helps much to render our religious instincts more fruitful in practice or to make chronic failures in this regard less problematic to the project of providing a theoretical defense of faith.

James's solution suffers from two more weaknesses that I will only mention briefly before concluding. First, while the notion of a receding pluralism makes decent sense in the moral realm, in which many of the vital possibilities are intersubjective in nature (and therefore directly adaptive to our influence), I don't see how it is meant to translate into the theoretical domain, in which the vital possibilities are purely objective. Faith in our theoretical instincts may be required to *discover* that the world exists as a complete formal unity, e.g., by making us attentive to the data that would corroborate such a fact, but it certainly doesn't *determine* the outcome one way or the other, as faith

[51] James 1956, 90.
[52] James 1956, 56.
[53] See footnote 37.

in the moral sphere has the potential to do. Second, even in the moral sphere, the efficacy of our faith to determine future states of affairs extends *only* to those vital possibilities that are intersubjective in nature – which not all of them are. Therefore, unless we're ready to reduce God's reality itself to a merely intersubjective possibility, then even the best universe that we might achieve through our cooperative faith will nonetheless be a godless one. Needless to say, such a universe would fall pitifully short of the religious ideal.

4. Conclusion

James's argument succeeds or fails according to its ability to preserve a domain in the realm of experience for the free exercise of faith. However, if the health and functionality of faith as a psychological capacity is dependent on its practical successes and failures when exercised, as I insist it is, then it will not likely survive in a world in which no moral laws actually obtain. Frustration of the religious impulse serves to excite it only to the most minimal extent before it is ultimately overwhelmed and extinguished. In order to grow our religious capacities, the individual moral and religious defeats they suffer must be compensated for with *many more* successes under faith's influence. Therefore, without providing also a rule of practice to guide our religious instincts into fruitful correspondences with reality, we must reject James's solution as ultimately, though however tragically, inadequate.

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