

The Will, the Will to Believe, and William James: An Ethics of Freedom as Self-Transformation

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ABSTRACT William James's doctrine of the will to believe is one of the most infamous arguments in modern philosophy. Critics frequently interpret it as a feeble defense of wishful thinking. Such criticisms rely on treating James's ethics of belief independently from his moral psychology. Unfortunately, this separation is also implicitly assumed by many of his defenders. James's *ethics* of willing, I here show, relies on his robust *psychology* of the will. In his 1896 essay, "The Will to Believe," James carefully circumscribes those situations in which willful belief is defensible in a way that closely matches his description of decision by effort in the "Will" chapter of his 1890 *The Principles of Psychology*. Explicating this match helps show why the will to believe is not a defense of wishful thinking, but rather a naturalistic account of the value of sculpting our habits, or of what I describe as Jamesian self-transformation.

KEYWORDS William James, will to believe, ethics of belief, moral psychology, habit, will, naturalism, freedom, self-transformation

I. THE DIVERSITY OF JAMES'S MORAL WRITINGS

WILLIAM JAMES'S WRITINGS ON MORALITY form a vexed collection. Most philosophers regard James as having contributed primarily to epistemology, metaphysics, and psychology, viewing his moral philosophy as secondary, derivative, and accordingly uninteresting for contemporary debates. Among James's writings on moral matters, surely the most infamous is "The Will to Believe." Often read as primarily a contribution to epistemology or philosophy of religion,¹ a number of critics spanning well over one hundred years of readership argue that "The Will to Believe" attempts to foist an incredible ethics of belief, one that is problematic in that it defends believing in precisely that which has not been credited as being

¹For a recent treatment of "The Will to Believe" (hereafter 'WTB' in notes) focused on the epistemology of belief, see Aikin, *Evidentialism*, pt. 2; for a recent treatment focusing on specifically religious belief see Slater, *Ethics and Faith*, pt. 1.

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true.² Against a long line of critics, I argue that James's will-to-believe doctrine is defensible (as well as much more intriguing and relevant) if we shift its problematic from the domains of epistemology and religion to the terrain of ethics.³ Such a shift, I show, invites us to consider James's most infamous contribution to normative ethics in light of his earlier moral psychology.

Recent revisionist scholarship has begun to pursue the wealth of ethical resources found throughout James's corpus by treating his thought as primarily, and not merely derivatively, focused on matters of ethics. Some scholars now argue, I think rightly, that James was through and through a moral philosopher.⁴ Pursuing a companion strategy to this scholarship, I here adopt a wider view of the moral significance of James's contributions to other branches of philosophy. In so doing, I suggest that it is quite striking that, in spite of the enormous attention "The Will to Believe" has received, commentators (even sympathetic ones) have almost universally treated James's provocation in an isolated fashion that leaves it

²The critical literature on WTB is a sprawling affair. Bertrand Russell penned an early and still influential criticism: "contrary to many of the plainest facts of daily life" ("Pragmatism," 264). So did L. T. Hobhouse: "by believing a thing we make it true . . . we can believe in a thing without asking ourselves seriously whether it is true or false" ("Faith and the Will to Believe," 91). As did also two of James's former students, Dickinson Miller ("the will to deceive—to deceive one's self," ["Duty to Doubt," 173]), and George Santayana ("a thought typical of James at his worst," [*Character*, 88]). More recently, we find strident criticisms even among some of James's sympathetic commentators. Gerald Myers unreservedly mocked what he called the 'need-to-believe' doctrine: "No philosopher has ever proposed a more outrageous premise for faith than this. Because we want the world to be a certain way, our desire actually makes it so" (*Life and Thought*, 461). Among more recent work, Richard Gale's criticisms are forceful ("Willfulness of Belief"). Worries about wishful thinking in James can be instructively viewed as an instance of that larger criticism of pragmatism to the effect that this philosophical outlook is but a half-hearted form of idealism in which we find nothing outside of our beliefs to check them against. But James has not been without his defenders. For a now-dated survey of defenses see Jones, "Reinterpreted." Recent defenses that anticipate in some ways my positive reinterpretation of James's ethics of belief include Marchetti's discussion of Jamesian "self-constitution" (*Ethics and Critique*), Welchman's essay on Jamesian "self-experimentation" ("Self-experimentation"), Uffelman's essay on Jamesian "self-cultivation" ("Forging the Self"), and McGranahan's work on Jamesian "self-transformation" (*Darwinism*).

³I emphasize James's *ethics* of belief, rather than his ethics of *belief* or any particular *contents* of his account of belief. I do so not in an attempt to exclude the epistemological and religious dimensions of the text, but rather to emphasize a broader view of the core problematic within which to situate those concerns. I agree with readers like Haack who argue that WTB is a contribution to both ethics and epistemology ("Reconsidered," 120)—but, whereas Haack and most scholars focus on epistemology, I place a counterbalancing emphasis on ethics. Some will object to my strategy insofar as I do not directly address James's explicit discussions of contents of belief concerning "religious matters" (James, WTB 1). I offer two replies to this. First, I agree with Misak's claim that James's category "encompasses much more than religious belief" (*The American Pragmatists*, 61). Second, more historically, I contend that James frequently crafted his texts for his audiences (as discussed by Stob, *Art of Popular Statement*), and that WTB is no exception to this (as argued by Algaier, "Crafted Texts," based on an examination of unpublished material in the James archives at Harvard). If this is right, then WTB crafts its general ethical discussion of faith and freedom into a specific shape that fit its New England audience of philosophers and theists. I agree with Algaier's argument that James took interest not only in theistic religious faith, but also in other forms of as-yet-unsubstantiated belief such as those of the scientific investigator inquiring into psychical phenomena. To this, I only add that James was also interested in our free belief in our own possibilities for being and acting otherwise. James's ethics of belief was not primarily religious in orientation so much as it was always concerned to mount a defense of what is beyond the pale of the acceptable. That defense carries *both* epistemological and ethical (in the broadest sense) consequences.

⁴For the best recent statement of this approach, see Marchetti, *Ethics and Critique*.

disconnected from his other contributions to philosophical ethics, most notably his efforts toward a naturalistic moral psychology advanced in his early and monumental work, *The Principles of Psychology*.⁵ Specifically, then, I here propose to reread the concept of willing in “The Will to Believe” (published in 1896) in light of the chapter on “Will” from *Principles* (published in 1890).

The ongoing reception and assessment of James’s ethics of belief, without the aid of the moral psychology that informs it, carries at least two unfortunate consequences. First, James’s defense of a will to believe is too easily subjected to dismissive criticism. Commentators have routinely represented James’s argument as a defense of what his contemporary Sigmund Freud criticized as the “omnipotence of thoughts,” or what we today more colloquially call “wishful thinking.”⁶ James’s defense of solid faith in our selves has thus been read as a rather stilted defense of infantilizing fantasy. Second, there is a widespread disregard of how James’s moral psychology directly informs his normative moral philosophy. These (and other) interpretive tendencies continue to influence our reception of James’s ethical writings. It is perhaps unsurprising that this results in a widespread neglect of these contributions by many contemporary moral philosophers. This is unfortunate, not least because James’s perspective on some of our most central moral notions, particularly our conception of freedom, is one which could serve us well today in contexts where the value of freedom itself has been lost sight of or even called into question.

Against the standard interpretive strategy which divorces (even if only implicitly by declining to couple) James’s moral psychology from his philosophical ethics, my approach involves holding together James’s earlier writings on moral psychology and moral philosophy from the 1880s through mid-1890s. In thus emphasizing continuity across domains of moral psychology and normative ethics, I do not adopt a full-scale methodological holism that would seek to establish a unity across James’s entire career of writings.⁷ My argument is only that there are important ethical resources to be found in James’s early psychological writings, and that the ethical resources featured in later moral essays ought to be read in conjunction with the categories previously established by his moral psychology.⁸ This strategy of seeking continuity is not mine alone, for James himself explicitly affirmed a connection between his naturalistic psychology and his educative ethics. In the context of defending the right to believe in 1896, James appealed right off to “the actual psychology of human opinion.”⁹ And, in his descriptive psychology in 1890, he clearly asserted that, “the physiological study of mental conditions is thus the most powerful ally of hortatory ethics.”¹⁰

⁵See my discussion of the existing literature below (501, n. 44).

⁶Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 94.

⁷James was neither a systematic philosopher, nor was he the cast of philosopher who firmly held to his positions throughout his career. He was, as Gale emphasizes in *Divided Self*, an inveterately divided thinker. My strategy of tracking James across familiar intellectual and disciplinary divides follows in the main that excellently elaborated by Bordogna in *Boundaries*.

⁸James’s early writings on moral psychology include *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), his *Psychology: The Briefer Course* (1892) and his *Talks to Teachers on Psychology* (1899). The latter two are abridgements-cum-revisions of the earlier book. In referring to James’s early contributions to moral philosophy, I have in mind most of the essays collected in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (1896).

⁹James, WTB 4.

¹⁰James, *Principles*, I.127 (citations to this work are according to volume and page number).

Indeed, I here argue, the exhortative and normative fruits of James's descriptive moral psychology in *Principles* are particularly manifest in his infamous defense of willing to believe. The persistent misreading of this essay as a defense of believing whatever we wish misses in entirety the problematic to which the essay was a response. James's essay, I argue, is best read as assuming as its starting point the common sense, and correct, view that we frequently lack control over our lives and the world, including doxastic control over what may be the case. Whenever we find ourselves in such situations, James argues, we ought not to give in to the demoralizing debilitations of inaction. The message of "The Will to Believe" is thus the following: where the self lacks control, it need not give up entirely, but can gain something by way of self-transformation in the face of doubt. The will to believe is not about omnipotence, but about the possibility of reflexive potency. It speaks directly to an important idea that runs throughout James's various philosophical elaborations of freedom: *self-transformation*.

I proceed as follows: I begin by describing self-transformative freedom as it appears in James's moral psychology (section 2) and in his writings on the ethics of belief (section 3). In these sections, I focus on hitherto-unnoticed resonances between James's discussions of willing in each context. This allows me to argue that James's conception of freedom in both areas is properly understood as an ethics of what I call 'willful rehabilitation,' an ethics that I suggest is best captured for us today in terms of what I call 'self-transformation.' Following this interpretive revision of James, I turn, in the final section, to a discussion of the potential philosophical value of his conception of freedom as self-transformation (section 4). My concluding discussion can only be brief, and largely consists in summarizing further investigations pursued in a separate companion paper.¹¹

2. SELF-TRANSFORMATION IN JAMES'S PSYCHOLOGY OF WILL

To convey the value of the ethical conception of freedom featured in James's naturalistic moral psychology as developed in *Principles*, I shall attend to that book's two central chapters, those titled "Habit" and "Will."¹² In his chapter on habit, James develops a conception of the subject of ethics; namely, what ethics is about. His claim is that ethics is about the character of the self as construed as a quivering bundle of habits. The chapter on will forwards a conception of the work of ethics; namely, how we achieve the ethical reformation of a habit-constituted character. Taken together, these two chapters present a two-ply idea I will call 'willful rehabilitation.' Willful rehabilitation, I shall be arguing, is all about transforming ourselves by adopting an experimental attitude that affirms possibility rather than a dogmatic attitude that demands certainty. Willful rehabilitation, I suggest at the end of this section in anticipation of the next, involves the work of what can also be called 'self-transformation.' I offer these two labels to help make sense of James's potential contributions to the much-misunderstood modern moral category of freedom.

¹¹See Koopman, "Transforming amidst Chance."

¹²I am in agreement with Myers on the close conceptual proximity of these two chapters (*Life and Thought*, 199).

The first thing to note in any discussion of freedom as featured in *Principles* is that James, in that book, sought a de-metaphysicalized and de-transcendentalized moral psychology. He employs what we might today describe as a naturalistic approach. In describing James in this way, I mean to attribute to him a methodological naturalism, according to which inquirers adopt orientations committed to offering empirical explanations in public terms that all could reasonably accept. This contrasts with a more robust substantive naturalism, which holds that naturalistic explanations represent the very language of reality itself, such that explanations couched in non-naturalistic terms are by default incorrect. It is crucial to be clear that James was not of the temperament that would seek to rule out of court any religious hypotheses or metaphysical speculations. Rather, James employed a methodological naturalism only so as to evade certain traps and snares set by metaphysical questions which do not *always* need to be asked.

This methodological naturalism characterizes much of James's early work (up until around 1896), including all of the work here under survey. In his later writings (beginning around 1897), James came to express some misgivings about his own prior evasions of metaphysics.¹³ Later misgivings notwithstanding, it is worth noting that, even in many of these later writings on metaphysics, James continued to hold that his more recent yearnings did not apply retroactively to his earlier psychological researches, which he continued to defend as valid without the support of a metaphysics. On one such occasion, he insisted, "I have found myself more than once accused in print of being the assertor of a metaphysical principle of activity. Since literary misunderstandings retard the settlement of problems, I should like to say that such an interpretation of the pages I have published on Effort and on Will is absolutely foreign to what I meant to express."¹⁴

To explore James's naturalistic account of willful rehabilitation, I begin with his chapter on "Habit" in *Principles*. This is one of the earliest chapters in the book, and it appears in the division of the book concerned with physiology. James here plainly tells his reader that the self just is a collation of habits: "When we look at living creates from an outward point of view, one of the first things that strike us is that they are bundles of habits." He then immediately advances a physiological conception of habits as rooted in an "organic material" that expresses the remarkable quality of "plasticity" or changeable form (or trans-form-ability).¹⁵ Work on the self (which, I will argue, is just what ethical work is for James) is work on the plastic material of our nervous system in which are set our habits: "The great thing, then, in all education, is to make our nervous system our ally instead of our enemy."¹⁶

For James, we can make our nervous system our ethical ally in at least two ways. Ethical work on the self can take the form of either building up habits or of

¹³On this shift in James's career from an early avowedly anti-metaphysical perspective to a more pro-metaphysical speculative philosophy, see Bordogna, *Boundaries*, Algaier, "Epistemic Sensitivity," and an older contribution by the historian of psychology Leary, "Self and Personality," 116–19.

¹⁴James, "The Experience of Activity," 289; this is James's 1904 Presidential Address to the American Psychological Association.

¹⁵James, *Principles*, I.104–5.

¹⁶James, *Principles*, I.122.

breaking them down. These two forms of habituation can, of course, be related. Ethical character development for James is found wherever we “make automatic and habitual, as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can, and guard against the growing into ways that are likely to be disadvantageous to us.”¹⁷

A crucial point for both kinds of reflexive rehabilitation as understood by James is that this work on habits cannot itself be habitual. James’s view was that wherever habits reinforce or undo themselves by themselves, the development of character or selfhood is non-reflexive, and so non-intelligent. On this view, it is only when we reflexively work on our habits in non-habitual fashion that we can even confront the possibility of ethical action. Ethics for a predominantly habitual creature thus requires what James called ‘effort.’ In his 1899 *Talks to Teachers*, James wrote: “We forget that every good that is worth possessing must be paid for in strokes of daily effort. We postpone and postpone, until those smiling possibilities are dead. . . . By neglecting the necessary concrete labor, by sparing ourselves the little daily tax, we are positively digging the graves of our higher possibilities.”¹⁸

As James elaborated these ideas across his psychological writings, he focused on willing as the name for the effort required for the purposes of rehabilitating ourselves. James’s most developed account of willing is found in the second of the two central chapters in *Principles*, titled “Will.” This chapter, in sum, develops a functional and non-entitative specification of willfulness in terms of effort. James’s key point is that willing is a *function*, not a *thing*.¹⁹ James construes willing as a reflexive process whereby the self works on itself in a way that is not wholly reliant upon existing habits. There is no monarchy of the will over the self here, but only a conception of willing as a reflexive relation of self to self.

James’s account is philosophically provocative because it is an attempt at a rigorously naturalistic account of will, whereas a great deal of metaphysical speculation accompanies the appearance of the idea of will throughout the history of philosophy. The naturalist James argued that such speculation was not necessary in explaining what will does, or even how it arises.²⁰ Despite his explicit insistence on this point, his theory was regularly accused of metaphysical voluntarism, a criticism that he sought to remedy for years. These accusations persist among contemporary commentators, including many sympathetic to James. For instance, Owen Flanagan worries that James’s account of will does not remain within the bounds of naturalism: “One reason James is not—indeed, cannot be—a naturalist has to do with his commitment to voluntarism.”²¹ Flanagan locates this critique precisely at the intersection that I am here interrogating; he discerns inconsistencies between the “determinism” of the psychological texts and “belief in freedom of the will” in the ethics of belief writings.²² In contrast, I argue for attributing to the full

¹⁷James, *Principles*, I.122.

¹⁸James, *Talks*, 62.

¹⁹James would retain this functionalism throughout his career. In his later, more robustly metaphysical, mood in his radical empiricist essays, James was still decisive that traditional philosophical categories of mind are functional not entitative. In asking, “Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist?” James answers in the negative: “Let me then immediately explain that I mean only to deny that the word stands for an entity, but to insist most emphatically that it does stand for a function” (“Does ‘Consciousness’ Exist,” 170).

²⁰See James, *Principles*, II.517–18

²¹Flanagan, “Consciousness,” 38; see also *Problem*, 115.

²²Flanagan, “Consciousness,” 27.

range of James's moral writings the style of naturalism endorsed by Flanagan and contemporary pragmatist naturalists like Philip Kitcher.²³ If I am right about this, then James's ethics of belief do not contradict his naturalistic moral psychology. Rather, they enact it. Understanding this requires that we first grasp a point that Flanagan (but not all critics) in fact affirms, namely, that James's innovative analysis of the will in *Principles* is thoroughly de-transcendentalized. In exploring James's psychology of will, the key idea to keep track of is his signature conclusion that willing exists as function, but not entity.

The first step in the argument begins with James's own taxonomy of willing: "desire" is the genus of which "*wish*" and "*will*" are two species.²⁴ In wishing, we operate with a future end-in-view that is both determinate and unattainable. By contrast, will involves working from where we are and launching ourselves toward an end-in-view that is not yet fully determinate (such that its attainability is not evaluable with full certainty). For James, there is a precise functional situation in which willing, as distinct from wishfulness, plays its crucial, even if evanescent, role. According to this view, willing occurs as a phenomenon of overcoming an ideational impasse where two alternative courses of action present themselves with comparatively equal force. In playing its functional role in the face of such an impasse, willing involves action whose ends are not yet fully determinate. Willing itself is a kind of work to make determinate, but always in the face of indeterminacy (where wishing, by contrast, always knows in advance just what it wants).

To understand this precise specification of the situation of willing, we need to get a grip on a theory of action that had gained some prominence in the late nineteenth century prior to James's consolidation of it in *Principles*.²⁵ In the background of James's theory of willing is the ideo-motor theory of action. This theory holds that ideas always discharge themselves in motor action. James's own summary held that, "[w]herever movement follows *unhesitatingly and immediately* the notion of it in the mind, we have ideo-motor action."²⁶

James combined the ideo-motor theory with a theory of mental complexity. On this latter theory, minds frequently find themselves occupied with a teeming multiplicity of ideas interacting with, and influencing, one another. Usually, these ideas are themselves complex ideas not of simple actions, but of abstract plans that cannot simply discharge themselves into any single motor act. In explicitly affirming mental complexity, then, James could endorse the ideo-motor theory in a form according to which ideas always immediately discharge themselves in motor action *only when* they are not in the presence of conflicting ideas: "The determining condition of the unhesitating and resistless sequence of the act seems to be *the absence of any conflicting notion in the mind*."²⁷ This, of course, raises the question of what occurs when a conflicting idea is present in the mind. It is in his description of this type of situation, which in the actual psychological life of most persons must be one of our most common states, that James qualifies the

²³See Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*.

²⁴James, *Principles*, II.486.

²⁵For a helpful short history of the theory of ideo-motor action see Stock and Stock, "Short History."

²⁶James, *Principles*, II.522.

²⁷James, *Principles*, II.523.

ideo-motor theory in such a way as to set up a functional (but not an entitative) requirement for willing.

James focuses his discussion on instances in which two ideas in the mind conflict in such a way that neither idea can immediately and unhesitatingly discharge in action. I think of raising my leg to get out of the chair and walk into the kitchen, but then also of the pain of raising my leg due to a recent injury. Which idea prevails depends, James argues, on volition. More importantly, it is precisely this work of settling impasses between competing beliefs that defines, for James, the functional role of will: "Volition, in the narrower sense, takes place only when there are a number of conflicting systems of ideas, and depends on our having a complex field of consciousness."²⁸ Those situations in which willfulness is necessary for resolving conflicts of ideas are, for James, characterized by "that peculiar feeling of inward unrest known as *indecision*."²⁹ Indecision takes us into a state of "*deliberation*," where we supply ourselves with "*reasons or motives*" in order to "*decide*."³⁰

In *Principles*, James outlines five types of decision: reasonable deliberation, acquiescence, recklessness, changes of heart, and decision through effort.³¹ It is the fifth type that is pertinent to his account of the will as voluntary attention. These are cases in which a conflict of ideas is settled by effort, more specifically, by the intensity and duration of the attentive effort we might sally forth in situations of indecision. What form does this effort take? Here is James's radical answer: it involves nothing more nor less than holding our attention fast to one of the conflicting ideas rather than the other: "*The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most 'voluntary,' is to ATTEND to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind.*"³² Convalescing with an injured leg, I attend to the pain that will result from flexing the muscle, and so I forego the short trip to the kitchen. Or, contrarily, I attend to the advice of my physical therapist to walk just a little bit every day, and so I rise up despite the pain with hopes for healing. Whichever idea prevails depends on nothing mysterious, but only on focusing on one idea rather than the other.

Thus, for James, willing just is the functional effort of attention whereby psychological spontaneity is agent rather than impotent. This clarifies the otherwise elusive definition of willfulness James forwarded in *Principles*: "*Effort of attention is thus the essential phenomenon of will.*"³³ The process of willing is not that of choosing, or selecting, or preferring, but is rather that of attending. Will just is voluntary attention to one of a conflicting set of ideas available to our attention.

The crucial idea in this account is that the functional process of willing goes on, indeed positively must occur, just insofar as we sometimes find ourselves in that psychological situation which James described as indecision and then later also find that we are not still stuck in that state. If you grant both that you are sometimes rendered temporarily impotent by a conflict of ideas in which no automatic or rational resolution of the conflicting tendencies occurs, and that such conflicts are

²⁸James, *Talks*, 119.

²⁹James, *Principles*, II, 528.

³⁰James, *Principles*, II, 528.

³¹James, *Principles*, II, 531–34.

³²James, *Principles*, II, 561.

³³James, *Principles*, II, 562.

sometimes resolved by way of attending to just one idea, then you have granted everything that James needs to offer you a functional account of the will.

This amounts to a rather minimal conception of will, to be sure. But this would be an advantage for the early James in that he sought a de-transcendentalized, or methodologically naturalistic, account of moral life.³⁴ And though it is modest, this account is nonetheless sufficient to give us a sense of the potency and value of our own initiative. Such potency is a critical condition of possibility for any moral action whatsoever, and so it was of enormous importance to James as a moral philosopher.

The effort of attention, as well as the various forms it takes and the practical strategies facilitating it, is a site rich for inquiry.³⁵ For my rather modest purposes of connecting James's moral psychology of the will to his voluntarist conception of belief, it suffices to have shown how James's psychology of willing can be pared down to the following: where you feel the *need* to decide, you must muster the *will* to believe, in the precisely-specified sense of the *effort* of *attending* to one amongst a conflicting set of ideas. Putting the point this way helps underscore that James never sought to prove the existence of such a thing as the will, just as he never sought to prove that we are free. James sought, instead, to provide a functional account of what willing does, or at least can do, in our lives. He did not seek to demonstrate that we all possess an innate capacity for will. Rather, James only wanted to specify what work is done when we exhibit the functional exercise of will.

One desideratum of any such functional account is to specify the value of willfulness in terms of the difference that it makes in our living well. James, accordingly, aimed to explicate the function of willing such that we could come to recognize the value this function might have in the context of our constantly having to negotiate those myriad probabilities and possibilities we confront in moral modernity. These confrontations regularly throw us into a psychological state of indecision. Will describes the process by which we work through the indecisions we face so that we do not become swamped by uncertainty. This is important just insofar as James was correct that, as he wrote in the "Habit" chapter of *Principles*, "[t]here is no more miserable human being than one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision."³⁶ At the center of the psychology of the self that would not become swamped in indecision is a functional relation between habit and will. This relation

³⁴Thus, I conclude that James's view actually resonates remarkably well with naturalistic approaches to ethics like Flanagan's (*Problem*, 105, 110), despite his concerns noted above (see 496, n. 21). Other naturalists, such as behavioral neuroscientist Schulkin, explicitly acknowledge James's influence on their conceptions (*Effort*, xii).

³⁵For James's own inquiries, see the "Attention" chapter of *Principles* (vol. I, ch. 11). Also of interest is his proposal in the under-discussed 1906 Presidential Address to the American Philosophical Association for a "methodical programme of scientific inquiry" into our uses of our energies: "We need a topography of the limits of human power, similar to the chart which oculists use of the field of human vision. We need also a study of the various types of human being with reference to the different ways in which their energy-reserves may be appealed to and let loose. . . . This would be an absolutely concrete study. . . . It is replete with interesting facts, and points to practical issues superior in importance to anything we know" ("Energies of Men," 674, 683). For a more contemporary perspective describing an analytic of practices of attention vis-à-vis James, see Shusterman, *Body Consciousness*, 161–5.

³⁶James, *Principles*, I.122.

of willful rehabilitation involves attending to oneself with an eye toward willfully reworking whom one will become.³⁷

The relation to self I have been referring to as ‘willful rehabilitation’ could also be usefully described as ‘self-transformation.’ This latter label perhaps better prompts us to consider the idea of freedom as it informs James’s more explicitly normative and exhortative moral writings. Before turning to such an examination, I first need to justify the connection I am proposing between James’s psychology and his ethics. Recall that, on James’s naturalistic view, we are on the physiological level nothing more and nothing less than bundles of habits.³⁸ Now, our bundled selves are often knocked about by all manner of external causes that provoke changes in us (e.g. the rain shivers us or the sun warms us). But sometimes a change in a bundle of habits is provoked from within. One kind of internally-caused change involves willing. In such cases, we change our bundled selves by the effort of attention. Thus it is that sometimes we will ourselves into becoming a different person (e.g. we quit an addiction or become a better friend). Importantly for James, the effort of attention *always* involves this internal modification of our habits. There is never a case of willing that does not work, in however small a physiological and psychological manner, on the bundles of habits that we are. Thus, willing is *always* a reflexive affair for James. On this view, willing is paradigmatic of the relation of self to self.³⁹ Insofar as this reflexivity involves reworking or reconstruction, it is also transformational. Thus, willful rehabilitation is the work of the transformation of the self by the self. This is the key to a connection between James’s psychology of willing and his ethics of willing to believe.

3. SELF-TRANSFORMATION IN JAMES’S ETHICS OF BELIEF

The idea of willing is not only featured in the title of “The Will to Believe,” but James’s particular adumbration of that idea in *Principles* is also at the heart of the essay’s argument.⁴⁰ As explicated in *Principles*, the primary value of willing is

³⁷The account I am offering could be formalized as a three-place function between ‘form,’ ‘objects,’ and ‘means.’ The ‘form’ (or ‘mode’) of willful rehabilitation is ‘reflexiveness’ in that it involves the self working on the self. The ‘objects’ (or ‘targets’) of this process are our ‘habits’ which get reworked. The ‘means’ (or ‘techniques’) of this process involve the ‘efforts’ loading our doings through which we are able to rework our habits, or, as I am putting it, transform our very selves.

³⁸See James, *Principles*, I.104.

³⁹See James, *Principles*, II.568 as discussed below (507–8).

⁴⁰One potential objection to the entire framing of my argument would begin at the fact that James himself later had misgivings about the usefulness of the word “Will” in his essay’s title. For example, in a 1901 letter to James Mark Baldwin, he suggested that the title was “unhappy” and he should have called it “Critique of Pure Faith” (*CWJ* 9:552; references to volume and page); in a 1904 letter to L. T. Hobhouse, James notes that it “should have been the *right* to believe” (*CWJ* 10:449); and in *Pragmatism* (1907) he wrote of the essay “unluckily called the *Will* to Believe” (*Pragmatism*, 124). Some might also point to James’s posthumously-published notes collected under the title “Faith and the Right to Believe,” intended for the volume he was working on before he died. However, these same draft notes caution us from reading too much into James’s misgivings about his title (and note that he never expressed misgivings about his argument), insofar as James here continues to describe his point in terms of a “challenge to our will to produce the premise of fact required” to bring about the conclusion sought after (“Right to Believe,” 740). I shall argue that James’s focus in WTb and its later variants explored further below is about both the right to believe as well as the willing that is sometimes requisite to transform who we are as believers (or disbelievers). James’s misgivings over his title are understandable, but also distracting from his central argument about the will (cf. O’Connell, *Courage to Believe*, 84).

that it enables us to escape from the dreaded grip of indecision. This problem precisely—the indecision of inaction—is the challenge to which James’s will-to-believe argument forms an invigorating response. In this section, I read “The Will to Believe” (along with other companion writings by James from the early 1880s through the 1890s up to his 1906 *Pragmatism*) as working out one aspect of the moral subtext of the psychology of *Principles*.

It is instructive to note that, in his discussion of effort in *Principles*, James at one point practically defined moral action in terms of effort in the sphere of conduct. He wrote: “If a brief definition of ideal or moral action were required, none could be given which would better fit the appearances than this: *It is action in the line of the greatest resistance.*”⁴¹ In his *Talks to Teachers*, James also spoke of the moral matter of “the education of the will,” and told his teachers that, “[y]our task is to build up a *character* in your pupils; and a character, as I have so often said, consists in an organized set of habits of reaction.”⁴² This is from the chapter of *Teachers* entitled “Will,” in which James offered the following strong claim about moral effort:

Our moral effort, properly so called, terminates in our holding fast to the appropriate idea. If, then, you are asked, “*In what does a moral act consist* when reduced to its simplest and most elementary form?” you can make only one reply. You can say that *it consists in the effort of attention by which we hold fast to an idea* which but for that effort of attention would be driven out of the mind by the other psychological tendencies that are there.⁴³

James’s view throughout his psychological writings was that willing is essential to the self-transformative work of moral action just insofar as this work is frequently difficult to muster in the face of our entrenched habits.

Shifting now to James’s ethics of belief, it is remarkable to observe how precisely his psychological conception of willfulness matches the specification of the challenge developed at the outset of “The Will to Believe.” What is most striking about this, in part because it has yet to be affirmed in the secondary literature on James, is the degree of resemblance between the functional work of willing in the will to believe and the functional process he describes as willful effort in *Principles*.⁴⁴ In both cases, we have a functional specification of a situation

⁴¹James, *Principles*, II, 549.

⁴²James, *Talks*, 125.

⁴³James, *Talks*, 126.

⁴⁴I am not aware of any sustained discussion of this particular resonance in the literature on James. I find this rather surprising, given how closely the two texts line up. Indeed, though the idea of reading James’s will-to-believe argument through the optic of his idea of willfulness seems a devastatingly obvious strategy, only a very small number of commentators have offered sustained discussion of the relation between the two texts. In considering these limited discussions, I am struck by two things. First, only *one* scholar (to my knowledge) has explicitly registered the remarkable proximity of the carefully-qualified will-to-believe situation and the fifth type of decision marked off in the moral psychology of willing (Franzese, *Energy*, 47, 121). Second, *none* (to my knowledge) have explored in detail what would follow for the cogency of the will to believe argument by constraining its account of willfulness to these precise terms of James’s moral psychology. There are, of course, numerous commentators who place James’s moral philosophy and moral psychology in conversation in more general terms (for one excellent recent example, see Dianda, “Depths,” ch. III). Among this broader set, Gale (*Divided Self*) seems to come closest to my approach of interrogating the status of willing in the will to believe. His discussion of this potential connections is, however, too brief to dig into the textual resonances that are my focus. He also persists in a traditional reading of WTB as divorced from the resources of *Principles*. He even argues that *Principles* could have saved WTB if only James had employed it there (*Divided Self*, 67), but, since he did not, WTB is ultimately “a disastrous response” (*Divided Self*, 68;

in terms of a conflict of ideas whose resolution is not automatic (e.g. cannot be brokered by evidentialist appeals or any other rational criterion available within the situation) such that something outside of the mutually-inhibiting ideas must intervene to break the deadlock. In his psychological writings, James names this function ‘will’ and psychologically construes it in terms of the effort of attention. In his ethics of belief writings, he calls the same function by such names as ‘faith’ and ‘belief,’ and construes it in moral terms as a matter of self-transformation. In the psychological writings, as we saw above, he defines will functionally just as that which resolves the incapacitated state of indecisive doubting. In his more explicitly ethical writings, he tells us that, “[f]aith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible,” thus specifying belief as a merely possible resolution.⁴⁵ Further striking is that the highly-circumscribed context in which James defends the deployment of willful belief (i.e. a context in which two rival beliefs form a “genuine option” insofar as both are “live,” the choice between them is “momentous,” and the decision to choose is “forced”)⁴⁶ describes quite well the carefully-distinguished contextual situation which appears in the *Psychology* as the fifth form of indecision produced by conflicts between two ideas that inhibit one another.⁴⁷ The live, momentous, and forced conflict of belief is precisely the psychological conflict of indecision where it is of genuine moral import. Recall that, in *Principles*, James was most interested in tracing the contours of that type of decision where strenuous effort breaks the impasse of conflict, such that we have there a context of a live option. And though it is true that the psychological context of willing adumbrated in *Principles* need not always be momentous and forced, those critical cases in which the difference between decision and indecision is of great moral import would indeed exhibit these two further qualities. For James, these pressing moral matters were exactly why willing matters and why the will makes a pragmatic difference to our conduct.

If all of this is right, then we should read James’s chapter on “Will” and his essay “The Will to Believe” as offering two different analyses of the same moral phenomena. In “Will” James analyzed the phenomena in psychological terms and in “The Will to Believe” in normative terms. In “Will,” he referred to the function of overcoming the phenomenon of mental paralysis as decisive ‘effort’ or ‘will,’ and in “The Will to Believe” he referred to the same function as freeing ‘faith’ or ‘belief.’ In his chapter in the 1890 *Principles*, James is working out background conditions of moral psychology, and in the infamous 1896 essay, he is drawing out an aspect of the foreground morality that takes shape within such a psychological context.

“Willfulness,” 88). Later in the book, in a chapter-length discussion of “WTB” (*Divided Self*, ch. 4), Gale does not once invoke textual evidence from *Principles*. All this noted, one could perhaps describe my approach here as taking up in a more textual mode Gale’s philosophical speculation concerning the possible benefit of James’s moral psychology for his moral philosophy.

⁴⁵James, “Sentiment,” 90.

⁴⁶James, WT B 3, 11.

⁴⁷James’s three criteria specifying a genuine option are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for the justifiability of the will to believe—in the same way James’s description of psychology indecision describes the necessary and, where indecision cannot long persist, sufficient conditions for the work of the will.

The resemblances I am noting point toward patterns of affinity between James's exhortative moral philosophy and descriptive moral psychology that extend beyond his discussion of willing. To see how, allow me to explicate one further aspect of the shared stance toward willing that James assumes in both "Will" and "The Will to Believe." The defense of faith in "The Will to Believe" takes as its conclusion a defense of willful belief despite the absence of compelling evidence either for or against the reality of the object of our faith. James thus argued that faith is the type of thing that we must just assume, for if you have an argument for something, then you do not need faith in it. Similarly, James argued, in his psychological writings on will, that willful effort just must be mustered.

This view informing "Will" and "The Will to Believe" is reminiscent of, as well as being internally related to, James's writings on that most central of all moral concepts, namely freedom. Wherever he wrote of freedom, James refused to offer an argument on behalf of the existence of our freedom. As he put it in *Principles*, "the question of free-will is insoluble on strictly psychologic grounds," and so it is on ethical grounds that we must answer the question without any direct backing from, but also without conflicting with, moral psychology.⁴⁸ In his 1884 essay, "The Dilemma of Determinism," we find the moral mate of this psychological claim in James's claim that, "I thus disclaim openly on the threshold all pretensions to prove to you that the freedom of the will is true."⁴⁹ Rather than arguing for the existence of freedom, James offers an argument on behalf of the value of our acting freely in the absence of any proof or disproof. Acting freely without a proof of our own freedom just is to assume our freedom in such a way that it might be valuable. Thus, James's frequently-repeated view was that assuming something, at least in the case of freedom, makes it so.⁵⁰

In light of the resonances described above, I can now directly confront the charge with which I began, namely that James's morality of willing is a defense of wishful thinking. One place to begin this confrontation is with a theme that appears time and again in James's moral writings, though of course not only his; the idea that the very possibility of being ethical at all depends on our assuming our freedom. Freedom is a condition of possibility for ethics. A subtle corollary of this view is that there is something unfree and merely instrumental about any action undertaken out of determining reasons or motives. If I know for certain what the outcome of a given action *X* will be, then I have a prima facie justification for undertaking *X* (or not). In such a case, I have no need for the freedom of effort in order to undertake *X*. The justification of *X* provides a determination of *X*. But where *X* remains unjustified and so undetermined, then I need something beyond the available evidence to actively undertake (or resist) *X*. James thought about free actions as those which we choose even where outcomes are as yet indeterminate.

⁴⁸James, *Principles*, II, 572.

⁴⁹James, "Dilemma," 146.

⁵⁰Three representative quotations help illustrate: "The very first act of a will endowed with freedom should be to sustain the belief in the freedom itself. I accordingly believe freely in my freedom" (James, *Talks*, 129). "Freedom's first deed should be to affirm itself" (James, *Principles*, II, 573). "Our first act of freedom, if we are free, ought in all inward propriety to be to affirm that we are free" (James, "Dilemma," 146).

Free action involves acting under such conditions of indeterminacy, uncertainty, and chance. For James, the importance of freedom thus has to do with the value of a certain chancy confidence in our selves. I can only note in passing that this theme appears in James's writings both on the moral register and on the epistemic register, such as in his considerations bearing on the role of hypothesis formation in the sciences.⁵¹

Across philosophical contexts, from moral theory to epistemology, James conceptualized the self as an acting thing whose beginning would be its own deed. Action, or conduct, was what was ever central for James.⁵² As he put the point in an early discussion of the psychology of the will that was published nearly a decade before *Principles*, "[t]he willing department of our nature, in short, dominates both the conceiving department and the feeling department; or, in plainer English, perception and thinking are there only for behavior's sake."⁵³ The self that interested James was the striving selfhood of Hamlet more than the passive temper of a purely ratiocinating or purely perceiving subject.⁵⁴ Action, for James, is always a mobility—doings that shuttle between perceivings and conceivings.

In some of these respects, James bears instructive comparison to Kant.⁵⁵ In considering the modern moral notion of freedom, both suggested that all we can do is to simply assume our freedom, to put ourselves into an orientation of "acting as if it were true," as James says invoking the famous Kantian construction.⁵⁶ James, like Kant, understood freedom as something that we assume just by assuming a responsibility to our selves. Yet James and Kant clearly adopted different strategies for assuming such freedom. For Kant, we assume our freedom by disciplining ourselves to the moral law within, that law being the very essence of our exercise of our own practical reason—reason achieves freedom *because of* the requirements of duty pure practical reason imposes on itself.⁵⁷ This is why freedom for Kant involves a pious ethics of control that places freedom under the sign of necessity. For James, by contrast, we assume freedom in a form that involves an ethics of transforming the self. This is a view that begins with the idea that there is nothing in us or of us that speaks necessity—everything human is fluxive and evolving. When James assumes freedom, then, he assumes it not in the form of Kantian sovereign self-control, but rather in the form of self-transformation, or self-experimentation, or self-education, or even (if we can hear the label without certain contemporary connotations) self-improvement. When James writes of our will to believe, he is

⁵¹See recent work on hypothesis formation in James by Klein, "Science, Religion."

⁵²Action, or conduct in my preferred terminology, is the central term in James's philosophy, or at least in James's early philosophy (up until around 1897). Elsewhere (Koopman, "Conduct Pragmatism"), I turn to James's early writings in order to pursue the advantages of *conduct pragmatism* as a preferable alternative to more standard efforts in *experience pragmatism* and *linguistic pragmatism* about which I have written previously (Koopman, *Transition*).

⁵³James, "Reflex Action," 114.

⁵⁴Leary writes, "*willful behaving is what true, 'strenuous' living—being an experiencing self and a responsible person—is all about for James*" ("Self and Personality," 113). On the Hamletism that was very much a part of James's historical milieu, see Livingston, *Pragmatism*, ch. 5, and Cotkin, *Public Philosopher*, ch. 3.

⁵⁵On connections between James's and Kant's conception of freedom as mediated by the French Kantisms of Renouvier and Lequyer, see Viney, "French Connection."

⁵⁶James, "Dilemma," 146.

⁵⁷See Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*; see discussion in Brandom, *Reason*, 54, 60.

writing of a faith in our selves such that this faith can facilitate the work of freely transforming our selves. Reading James's "The Will to Believe" through this self-transformative lens gains further plausibility when we recognize that this is by no means his only essay that presents faith as a kind of freedom.

The contrast between Jamesian self-transformation and Kantian self-legislation also helps make sense of the most crucial moment in what is generally regarded as James's most extended contribution to moral theory, his 1891 essay "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life." The moral theory elaborated there has less to do with Kantian considerations about verdicts on the rightness or wrongness of actions than it has to do with concerns about self-fashioning with regard to how we can practically address ourselves to the inevitable clash between shining moral ideals; a conflict that creates a tragic moral condition in which, as James famously put it, "some part of the ideal must be butchered."⁵⁸ James's crucial response to the tragic challenge of ideals in conflict comes in two steps.

In the first step, he asserts that the "guiding principle" in ethics is to "satisfy at all times *as many demands as we can*."⁵⁹ This first step has led many commentators to read James's moral theory as a kind of demand-satisfaction-maximizing variant of utilitarianism.⁶⁰ But, by stopping at this first step, we limit ourselves to a reading of James that makes him sound too much like he is playing Kant's (and Bentham's) game of theorizing a determining rule that entails pronouncements about how we should act. Such a reading fails to take note of James's metaphilosophical ruminations on the status of the moral philosopher in the preceding paragraph. There, James is clear that the moral philosopher's job cannot be to "rule out any ideal from being heard," which is why he concludes the paragraph saying that, "better chaos forever than an order based on any closet-philosopher's rule."⁶¹

It is therefore crucial to proceed with James to the second step of his response. If the first step counsels an abstract guideline of "awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions," then the second step concerns the pragmatic question of how we might work toward less and less butchering.⁶² James's emphasis is on the work of novelty, creation, and construction. In "praying" for "the more inclusive side" and "the more and more inclusive order," James counsels that moral philosophy at its best takes as its task an imperative to, "[i]nvent some manner of realizing your own ideals which will also satisfy the alien demands,—that and that only is the path of peace!"⁶³ James is not a 'maximizer,' who would select the largest quantity from out of a static set of alternatives, so much as he is an 'increaser,' who urged the ongoing and always unfinished work of creating ever more moral orders. It is easy to overlook the significance of James's claim for the importance of invention in morality. But consider now what the work of fashioning more inclusive ideals

⁵⁸James, "Moral Philosopher," 622.

⁵⁹James, "Moral Philosopher," 623.

⁶⁰Gale, for instance, glosses James's view as holding that "we are always morally obligated to act so as to maximize desire-satisfaction over the other options available to us" ("Willfulness," 71); see also Slater, *Ethics and Faith*, 80.

⁶¹James, "Moral Philosopher," 622–23.

⁶²James, "Moral Philosopher," 622.

⁶³James, "Moral Philosopher," 622.

involves; James's counsel concerns both the transformation of the *ideals* we hold and also the transformation of *we* who hold these ideals. For our ideals are, like our deepest faiths, not external things from which we are detached. Our ideals are special to us in that they guide us in living, and acting, and in making meaning out of both.⁶⁴ James's chief contribution to moral philosophy, in short, takes as its highest task the work of transforming ideals so that they may be "more and more" inclusive. In so doing, James thereby shows that the moral life is one of continuous self-transformation. Morality requires, or rather just is, an ongoing transformation, or rehabilitation, of our inherited selves.

Consider now a much earlier example of the self-transformative cast of James's thought. In his 1882 essay, "The Sentiment of Rationality," James focuses his attention on the idea that any philosophy that leaves us with a feeling of impotence is a philosophy that is not going to work well in our lives. The essay is an explicit defense of any philosophical outlook that saves room, or better yet makes room, for our faith, particularly where the truth of the matter turns on our faith itself: "The truths cannot become true till our faith has made them so."⁶⁵ This is one of James's earliest statements of the transformative impulse that would come to define his (often misunderstood) pragmatic theory of truth. This is also almost precisely the view that would, fourteen years later, be at the heart of "The Will to Believe" and its defense of faith: "There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. *And where faith in a fact can help create the fact*, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is 'the lowest kind of immorality' into which a thinking being can fall."⁶⁶ The point of both of these essays is to defend such faith freely assumed. James's claim in "The Will to Believe" is not that we can make our salvation real by believing in it. That would be but wishful thinking. His claim is better understood in terms of the idea that we might yet find a way of acting to better ourselves by believing in the possibility of our own betterment.

Despite the oft-rehearsed criticism of the will to believe argument, James does not in fact anywhere suggest that faith literally manufactures fact. His point is only that faith is—and then only sometimes—a part of what makes real. James's willful belief—and only in those carefully specified cases where we lack decisive evidence either way—is best seen as a way of preparing ourselves such that we can confidently act so that we may find out. James's point is that willing belief enables us to possibly transform ourselves through action such that we can facilitate some facts without pretending to fabricate facts where there are none. The will to believe, thus, does not make true by turning falsities into truths, but rather readies us to actively verify what will be true, that is, to set about the difficult labor of the verification

⁶⁴See James, "Moral Philosopher," 615.

⁶⁵James, "Sentiment," 96; on the value of "Sentiment" as a frame for understanding WTB see Jones, "Reinterpreted."

⁶⁶James, WTB 25; this passage recalls the earlier claim that, "in every fact into which there enters an element of personal contribution on my part, as soon as this personal contribution demands a certain degree of subjective energy which, in its turn, calls for a certain amount of faith in the result—so that after all the future fact is conditioned by my present faith in it—how trebly asinine would it be for me to deny myself the use of the subjective method, the method of belief based on desire!" ("Sentiment," 97).

of verities. The will to believe is thus all about readying the self for action amidst a shaking and quaking uncertainty.

Understanding this requires first understanding that conduct or action is the proper context for James's account of willing to believe (and everything else Jamesian).⁶⁷ James followed both the Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain and his friend Charles Santiago Peirce in holding that beliefs are "rules for action."⁶⁸ From this, it would follow that the will to believe, just like belief itself, could not all on its own *prove*, could not by itself even *verify*, anything. By contrast, James in every instance took verification or proof to be a practical process. The will to believe is thus about how we ready ourselves to set about verifying or proving. It is at the front end, and not the back end, of the process of truth production. And that, the truth, was for James a process that decidedly involves both *us* and *world*. All of this is clear enough in James's exposition of his pragmatist conception of truth in his 1906 *Pragmatism* lectures. James there wrote, "[t]he truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *verification*."⁶⁹ James's much-maligned theory of truth tends to be misread in almost exactly the same terms as his willing-to-believe, namely as boiling the processual search for truth down to make-believe. These all-too-common misreadings fail to observe that James would have taken it for granted that finding the truth or forging a faith are anything but easy, simple matters of mere wishing.

The perspective James adopts across his writings is that of looking forward from the crest of the onrushing wave one is now riding, not back toward the calmer ocean on which one was previously floating. James's philosophical writings so often expressed a "strenuous" attitude: "The pragmatism or pluralism which I defend has to fall back on a certain ultimate hardihood, a certain willingness to live without assurances or guarantees."⁷⁰ Such strenuous willingness is a condition of possibility through which we prepare ourselves for the difficult work of learning, verifying, improving, including, inventing, and transforming. Such strenuous willingness knows about itself that it believes in that which can never be guaranteed in advance. James's pragmatism, to put the point differently, is about as far from idealism as one can philosophically get.

James's doctrine of the will to believe is about the always-difficult work of reworking the plastic or transformable materials of the self. It is not about the sometimes-easy work of shaping something outside of the self. Under a moral analysis, James's naturalistic psychology of willful rehabilitation appears as a naturalistic ethics of self-transformation. James wrote in his "Will" chapter that, "I want more than anything else to emphasize the fact that volition is primarily a relation, not between our Self and extra-mental matter (as many philosophers still maintain), but between our Self and our own states of mind."⁷¹ If the will

⁶⁷Thus my disagreement with Gale ("Willfulness," 85, 91), who holds that Jamesian belief is always analyzable as a propositional attitude.

⁶⁸James, "Philosophical Conceptions," 348.

⁶⁹James, *Pragmatism*, 97.

⁷⁰James, "Strenuous," 124.

⁷¹James, *Principles*, II, 568.

here specified is the same will at work in willful belief, then “The Will to Believe” is about a will to transform the self, and in such a way that transformation is explicitly distinguished from full sovereign control of either environment or self. The will brought into focus throughout James’s writings just is the work of reworking a complicated self. Across his normative ethics and moral psychology, James elaborated a compelling theory of one of the most remarkable possibilities of our human being; our capacities for reflexivity-within-plasticity.

4. FREEDOM AS SELF-TRANSFORMATION

I have been arguing that the centermost idea in James’s moral psychology and philosophical ethics is that of self-transformation. This is not a Jamesian idea only.⁷² But in James it receives a characteristically pragmatist inflection that deserves our attention. Self-transformation, for James, is an ethics for conducting ourselves in the midst of uncertainty, chance, risk, and indeterminacy. These are, one might presume, the situations where morality matters most.

The multiplicitous idea of self-transformation performs its work through the link it forges between two aspects of conduct; reflexiveness (self-) and reconstruction (-transformation). As to the first aspect, it is quite telling that James often wrote of volition as an essentially *reflexive* process. Volition is a facility for turning the self; it is the process by which we educate the selves that we will become. The will is thus at the heart of morality, for James, insofar as it makes possible the moral activity of transformation in the sense of willful rehabilitation or purposive recharacterization. This helps specify the second of the two aspects of self-transformation, namely *reconstruction*. Morality involves our being willful about our selves, which just are bundles of habits. Willfulness here should not be construed as aiming at the realization of some pre-conceived desire or law in such a way as to exert control over our selves, others, or the world. The reflexive willfulness of transformation is not the unbeatable control of the supposedly sovereign subject. It is, rather, a process of working willfully upon the reconstruction of the self we find ourselves given to—a process of transforming our very selves.

The active practice of reflexively remaking ourselves, what we might also call *the conduct of our conduct*, is the central idea in James’s moral philosophy and psychology.⁷³ I would argue that it is an idea that deserves more attention today. For it is not only what freedom was all about for James, but it might also form

⁷²An ethics of self-transformation is discernible in other pragmatists such as Dewey and Du Bois, in philosophers from other traditions ranging from Foucault and Deleuze to Cavell to Williams, and earlier in the history of philosophy in Spinoza, Hume, Mill, and Nietzsche. About these connections, I can here only remain suggestive. Previously, I have explored connections between pragmatist moral philosophy and the ethics of Foucault (see Koopman, *Genealogy*, ch. 6) and Cavell (see Koopman, *Transition*, ch. 5). In a companion piece to this paper (Koopman, “Transforming amidst Chance”), I further explore the fecundity of Jamesian self-transformation in its historical context as informed by Foucault’s work. That piece can be most concisely glossed as an effort to take seriously the historical connection between Foucault’s genealogies of discipline (see Foucault, *DP*) and James’s provocative ethical affirmation that “our undisciplinables are our proudest product” (“The True Harvard,” 77)—my hypothesis is that this homonymy is anything but accidental.

⁷³I refer here to Foucault (see also n. 72 above), who characterized his signature (and much-misunderstood) notion of power as an analysis of the “conduire des conduites,” or the “conduct of conduct” (“Le sujet et le pouvoir,” 237).

part of what freedom can come to be about for us today. To motivate this idea, I conclude by drawing together some of the suggestions occasioned above into two considerations on behalf of taking James seriously as a philosopher of freedom.

Firstly, a Jamesian conception of freedom as self-transformation avoids some of the more puzzling and contentious implications of the idea of self-legislation. These well-known problems have been articulated in familiar pragmatist, poststructuralist, and other critiques of the transcendental, metaphysical, or otherwise substantivist notions of selfhood supposedly rooting the very possibility of the self-sufficient and self-mastering subject. At minimum, James's de-transcendentalized ethics of will deserves attention because of its lean theoretical requirements. The advantages of deflationary and quietist philosophy are, of course, debatable. But in our current context, the debate seems rather already (though of course only temporarily) settled, insofar as the history of attempts to articulate a robust metaphysical conception of the will by and large fail to convince. The history of the metaphysics of the will quite easily reads as a history of begging questions that never needed asking. But perhaps there is more of a debate to be had here than I presume. If so, then consider instead a less theoretical and more historical way of bringing the advantage of James's conception of freedom into focus.

Secondly, whereas the standard modern conception of freedom as self-legislative autonomy was perhaps suitable for an earlier historical context in which certainty still loomed large in our moral lives, perhaps most notably in the form of unshakeable religious convictions, a humbled and naturalized conception of freedom as self-transformation may prove more suitable for the historical context that characterized James's day, and which continues to characterize ours. In our historical trajectory, certainty has surely been sundered by the emergence of uncertainty as the reigning attitude within which we live our moral and scientific lives. This largely negative point about the loss of certainty can also be put positively in terms of the proliferation of practices making increasing use of ideas of probability, techniques of chance, and technologies of risk. Ian Hacking, in *The Taming of Chance*, masterfully charts some of the nineteenth-century variants of the practices of probability with which James would have reckoned.⁷⁴ Hacking concludes his history of sciences of chance with a discussion of Peirce as among the first generation of thinkers for whom probabilities gain epistemological self-consciousness—one could also envision a history of moralities of chance concluding with James as one of the first figures who seriously confronted the moralities of uncertainty.

James, Peirce, and many of their contemporaries devoted themselves to the difficult task of accommodating matters of vital import concerning the increasing saturation of life in probabilities, risks, and chances. Consider James writing to James Mark Baldwin, in response to criticisms of "The Will to Believe": "The only discussion which is of practical importance is discussion of *probable* things; and if any general laws of value can be laid down as binding individuals in their relations to such, I have yet to learn them. 'Don't guess' would abolish three-quarters of life at a stroke; and probably condemn us in advance to lose the truth in most

⁷⁴Hacking, *Taming*; see also Croce, *Era of William James*.

cases.”⁷⁵ Amidst myriad probabilities of action, how do we maintain and deepen our freedom? This question is as alive for us in the twenty-first century as it was for James in that blooming moment of the late-nineteenth century. For his part, James seems to have come to believe what he argued in “The Will to Believe” and elsewhere, namely that freedom is of greatest value in a may-be world when it takes the form of self-transformation.⁷⁶

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⁷⁵James to Baldwin, ca. early 1899, in Baldwin, *Between*, II.213.

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