

The Contribution of Emotional Experience to Religious Belief and Practice: a Theological and Philosophical Analysis, with Particular Reference to the Thought of William James

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## Abstract

The thesis begins by distinguishing a number of theories of emotion in the work of William James. In 'What is an Emotion?' and *Principles of Psychology* [PP], James argues that all of our emotional feelings begin in the body. From this point of view, the emotions are connected directly to behaviour and evaluation, rather than having their origins in theory or a mere description of the world. In 'The Will to Believe' [WTB], James suggests that religious belief can make pragmatic sense, rather as choosing a path down a mountainside when uncertain of the correct route makes good practical sense. So here again, James's account of emotion is related to the requirements of action rather than theory. In 'The Sentiment of Rationality' [SR], James connects the emotions to action, only here the action is thinking itself. So in this way too, the emotions have a key part to play if we are to orient ourselves properly in the world. Finally, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* [VRE], James turns explicitly to the role of emotion in religious contexts, and thinks of the emotions as providing the ultimate source of religion and of theological reflection. These issues are addressed in the first chapter of the thesis.

In Chapter 2, I review the modern literature on emotion, and consider its relationship to James's thought. Two central conclusions emerge. First, bodily feelings do indeed have an integral part to play in our emotional life, as Antonio Damasio and Joseph LeDoux have proposed. Secondly, as Peter Goldie and John Deigh have argued, we need not think of emotional feelings as simply directed towards the body. As Robert Solomon has noted, these two sides of our emotional life can be connected because responses of the body can themselves imply some understanding of the world, and what sort of practical response to the world is appropriate.

In Chapter 3, I consider some theological literature on the emotions, and consider how James's ideas may be understood in the light of this literature. John Henry Newman allows us to see how the idea of 'feeling towards' can be applied to experience of God. And Jonathan Edwards agrees with James that religious belief is inherently emotional and practical. Rudolf Otto's approach agrees with James in placing emotional feeling at the root of religion, rather than doctrine or non-emotional perception.

In Chapter 4, I consider how the models of emotional experience that I have identified in James's works PP, WTB, and SR can all be confirmed in some way by using the examples of emotional experience that he provides in VRE. The overall conclusion of the thesis is James's account of the relationship between emotion and religion is still of relevance today, and can still help us to understand particular examples of religious experience. James's approach can be corroborated, and extended, in various ways, using the philosophical and theological literature; and it can be confirmed by reference to some of the firsthand accounts of religious experience that James himself provides in VRE.

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## CHAPTER 1 WILLIAM JAMES: SURVEY AND APPROACH

### 1.1 Introduction

The concept of emotion plays an important role in the philosophy of William James (1842–1910). My purpose in this thesis is to set out what James says on these matters in a number of his works and to explore whether there are useful lessons we can draw from his approach, which may be applied to the question of the relationship between emotion and religious belief in particular. In this chapter I shall categorise and compare James' various writings on these themes in chronological order, exploring the development of his ideas and outlining the main thrust of his approach.

James trained as a medical doctor, and broke new ground not only in philosophy but also as a physiologist and psychologist. He established an international reputation in psychology before his main focus turned to philosophy, and many of his philosophical views have their roots in his psychological studies. He wrote three classic books, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), and *Pragmatism* (1907), and all three works continue to prove influential in their fields.<sup>1</sup>

In this thesis, I am going to concentrate on James's treatment of the emotions in four of his works: 'What is an Emotion?' (1884), 'The Sentiment of Rationality' (1879), 'The Will to Believe' (1897) and *The Varieties of Religious Experience*.<sup>2</sup> I shall begin with a brief sketch of some of the main concerns of these works.

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<sup>1</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1890); *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 1985); *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner Press, 1948).

<sup>2</sup> James, 'The Sentiment of Rationality', in William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Watchmaker Publishing, 1919), pp. 63-111; 'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Watchmaker Publishing, 1919), pp.1-31; 'What is an Emotion?', *Mind* 9 (1884), pp. 188-205 [no place of publication given].

## 1.2 Some main themes in James's work

James is probably best known for his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, which derived from his Gifford Lectures of 1901-02. This work is an exploration of personal narratives about religious experience. James's central question is how one might discover happiness within oneself and in one's relations with others. For our purposes there are two important claims in this book. First, James argues that there are no specifically religious emotions. What might be seen as religious emotions are no more than ordinary human emotions elicited in religious contexts. James also argues, secondly, that abstractly speculative philosophical claims have their origins in states of feeling.

In 'The Sentiment of Rationality', James explores how feeling is related to thought. He notes how feeling leads us into thought, and tells us when it is appropriate to stop thinking. He also examines the case of the 'Alpine climber' in which an agent's emotional commitment leads to a particular material outcome. To escape serious difficulty the climber must execute a dangerous leap that he has not performed before. If he is engaged by the emotions of confidence and hope, he is more likely to perform a feat that would be otherwise impossible. Fear and mistrust, on the other hand, are likely to lead to hesitation, and this will increase the probability that the climber will miss his foothold and fall to his death. Whichever emotion is engaged will be commensurate with a particular outcome. Emotion is not the opposite of reason, then, but can help us to shape our practical possibilities. So one role of emotion in practical conduct is to enable an action that would be inhibited if we were to rely on logic or calculation alone.

In 'The Will to Believe', James examined the problem of belief in cases in which no decisive evidence exists on which to base belief. He concluded that in the area of

religious commitment, the emotions can make a difference to whether the adoption of religious belief where there is limited evidence can be pragmatically rational.

Finally, in his earlier essay 'What is an Emotion?', James argued that all of our mental feelings actually begin in the body. For example, he suggests that we feel sorry because we cry, rather than vice versa. Typical of his work, James's evidence consisted of vivid examples, such as a person encountering a bear. As this brief summary of his output shows, James's approach to the emotions varied from work to work, but he is consistently concerned with their evaluative, bodily and practical significance. I am now going to examine these works in a little more detail, taking them in chronological order. My aim here is to expound James's views, and to comment briefly on their plausibility.

## **2.1 What is an emotion?**

In 'What is an Emotion?', James holds that emotion is the mind's perception of physiological conditions that result from some stimulus. Our mind's perception of the higher adrenaline level, heartbeat, and so on for other physiological conditions, is the emotion. Bodily change is prior to emotional feeling and not the other way around.

In the following passage, taken from his *Principles of Psychology*, James spells out this perspective. He notes that there are two possibilities as to how the emotions could be considered: 1. emotion could be thought of as having its own specific sites of cortical localisation, or 2. it could be thought of as connected to events in the motor and sensory centres of the brain.

And yet it is even now certain that of two things concerning the emotions, one must be true. Either separate and special centres, affected to them alone, are their brain-seat, or else they correspond to processes occurring in the motor and sensory centres, already assigned, or in others like them, not yet mapped out. If the former be the case we must deny the current view, and hold the cortex to be

something more than the surface of 'projection' for every sensitive spot and every muscle in the body.<sup>3</sup>

James opts in favour of the latter possibility and he comments:

If the latter be the case, we must ask whether the emotional 'process' in the sensory or motor centre be an altogether peculiar one, or whether it resembles the ordinary perceptive processes of which those centres are already recognised to be the seat. The purpose of the following pages is to show that the last alternative comes nearest to the truth, and that the emotional brain-processes not only resemble the ordinary sensorial brain-processes, but in very truth are nothing but such processes variously combined.<sup>4</sup>

So, James thinks of the emotions as bound up with various sensorial brain processes and he thinks that it is in this way that they are able to keep track of physiological changes in the body.

The idea that certain characteristic patterns of bodily response accompany a particular emotion type had already been discussed by Darwin in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and the Animals* (1874).<sup>5</sup> In his work, James builds on this idea. On one standard, commonsensical view, it is the emotions which come first and give rise to various behavioural responses. Or as James puts the matter: 'the mental perception of some fact excites the mental affection called the emotion, and ... this latter state of mind gives rise to the bodily expression'. Against this view, James offers this picture:

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<sup>3</sup> 'What is an Emotion?', p. 188.

<sup>4</sup> 'What is an Emotion?', p. 188.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).



My thesis on the contrary is that the bodily changes follow directly the PERCEPTION of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion. Common sense says, we lose our fortune, are sorry and weep; we meet a bear, are frightened and run; we are insulted by a rival, are angry and strike. The hypothesis here to be defended says that this order of sequence is incorrect, that the one mental state is not immediately induced by the other, that the bodily manifestations must first be interposed between, and that the more rational statement is that we feel sorry because we cry, angry because we strike, afraid because we tremble, and not that we cry, strike, or tremble, because we are sorry, angry, or fearful, as the case may be. Without the bodily states following on the perception, the latter would be purely cognitive in form, pale, colourless, destitute of emotional warmth. We might then see the bear, and judge it best to run, receive the insult and deem it right to strike, but we could not actually feel afraid or angry.<sup>6</sup>

So according to James, it would be best to say that our perception of some eliciting event causes bodily changes which we then feel, and our feeling of those bodily changes is the emotion. In other words, emotions are feelings of bodily changes. James suggests that this theory is supported by the fact that we never find an emotion occurring without the subject feeling bodily changes. James does not claim, however, that emotions are located in the body. On his view, emotions belong in the mind – they are the feelings produced by bodily changes, not the bodily changes themselves.

We could represent the difference between James's view and the commonsensical view schematically as follows.

What we naturally think:

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<sup>6</sup> 'What is an Emotion?', p. 247.

1. John learns that this project has been rejected => 2. John is angry => 3. John's heart races, he flushes ...

James's view:

1. John learns that this project has been rejected => 3. John's heart races, he flushes..... => 2. John is aware of his racing heart, his flushed face....

Common sense would suggest that feelings come before and give rise to various behaviours. James's theory argues that common sense has the sequence of events exactly backwards: it is bodily response which comes first and which creates the feeling. We feel angry because we scowl, depressed because we sit slumped. On this view, feelings are the perceptions of our bodily reactions.

Various considerations can be cited in support of James's approach:

1. In daily life there are instances which support James' view. For instance when you touch something hot you feel the pain afterwards. Feeling comes after the physical changes. The sequence is thus 1 – 3 – 2.

2. If you dispense with all the physical aspects of an emotion, there would be nothing distinctively affective left. As James says, we would be left with something 'purely cognitive in form'.

3. We are concerned with a complex phenomenon. Complex physiological expressions can cause various emotions and variations in bodily condition can produce different emotion types.

*The Principles of Psychology* includes a chapter on the emotions, in which James defends a similar thesis. He begins, for example, by discussing what he terms the 'coarser' emotions: these are the emotions that nearly everyone believes to involve recognisable bodily changes.<sup>7</sup> Here he writes about the close relationship between action, emotion and the expressive and physiological concomitants of emotion. 'Objects of rage, love, fear, etc.,' he writes, 'not only prompt a man to outward deeds, but provoke characteristic alterations in his attitude and visage, and affect his breathing, circulation, and other organic functions in specific ways.'<sup>8</sup> Here James also made it clear that emotion could be as easily triggered by memory or imagination as by direct perception of an emotion-producing event. As he phrased it: 'One may get angrier in thinking over one's insult than at the moment of receiving it.'<sup>9</sup>

Independently of James, Carl Lange posited a similar theory in 1885, and James's theory of emotion is nowadays known as the James-Lange theory.<sup>10</sup> This theory was one of the major catalysts for future research into emotions. Again, the defining claim of the theory is that an emotion depends on feedback from one's body. For example, more than a century later, in a spirit much like that of James, Antonio Damasio has updated, in contemporary neurological terms, James's theory of emotion as grounded in the body. Damasio opposes the cognitive psychological model of emotions, which claims that they are in the first instance intellectual evaluations. For Damasio, as for James, the evaluation implicit in an emotional response is a consequence of the physiological event that is the basis for the emotion, rather than, as cognitive scientists claim, the physical sensation being a consequence of the intellectual evaluation. Damasio will be further discussed in Chapter 2.

There are also parallels with James's thought in the work of earlier authors. For instance, René Descartes's account of the emotions is similar to James's on certain

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<sup>7</sup> James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1890), pp. 449–53.

<sup>8</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*, p. 442.

<sup>9</sup> James, *Principles of Psychology*, p. 443.

<sup>10</sup> C. Lange, *Om sindsbevaegelser: et psyko-fysiologisk studie* (Kjøbenhavn: Jacob Lunds, 1885).

points. In his *Les Passions de l'Ame*, he sees passions as physical processes which on his dualist view stand in contrast to the soul and its perceptions.<sup>11</sup> Descartes and James share a 'body first' theory of the passions or emotions, according to which sensory stimulation causes a bodily response which then causes an emotion. Both held that this bodily response also causes an initial behavioural response (such as flight from a bear) without any cognitive intervention such as an 'appraisal' of the object or situation.

In other respects, they differ. Descartes proposed that the initial processes that produce fear and running are entirely mechanical. Even human beings initially run from the bear as a result of physiological processes alone, without mental contribution. These physiological processes also cause a mental passion, which is a cognitive representation of the situation (as regards novelty, benefit, or harm), and which motivates the will to continue the behaviour already in progress.<sup>12</sup> According to James, emotions are caused by instinctive bodily responses that are triggered by noncognitive but nonetheless conscious perceptual states. Emotions are bare feelings of internal physiological stirrings that accompany an instinctual response that has evolved through Darwinian natural selection.

Again James is clear that necessarily, there is a bodily component to emotional experience: 'My thesis is that the bodily changes follow directly the perception of the exciting fact, and that our feeling of the same changes as they occur IS the emotion.'<sup>13</sup>

James's approach is open to various objections. One objection might be that it would mean that individuals with spinal cord injuries would not experience emotion, as they would not be able to detect physiological changes, but in fact studies have found that individuals with such injuries are able to experience a full range of emotion.

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<sup>11</sup> *Les Passions de l'Ame* (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J.Vrin, 1649).

<sup>12</sup> Gary Hartfield, 'Did Descartes Have a Jamesian Theory of the Emotions?', *Philosophical Psychology* 20 (2007), pp. 413-440.

<sup>13</sup> 'What is an Emotion?', p. 188.

Accordingly, some critics have concluded that James has ignored the role of experience and over-stated the role of the body.<sup>14</sup> It has also been said that he has overlooked the causal effect of emotion upon behaviour and the role of emotion in cognition.<sup>15</sup> Again, these are matters to which we shall return later.

Although James may have been overly bold in equating emotion with experience of bodily change, his description of the nature of emotion anticipated much of what is commonly held by modern theorists to be characteristic of emotion: the presence of an external or internal precipitating event, physiological change, expressive movement, and a characteristic affective experience.<sup>16</sup>

When we discuss *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, we will note that James regards the source of religion to be personal feelings. And as we have seen he thinks of feelings as primarily subjective sensations of physical reactions. As we shall also see, this way of thinking is similar to that of Rudolf Otto, who attempted to clarify the distinctively religious element in religious experience by attending especially to the nonrational factor, what is left over after the rational elements have been subtracted. This is a theory that will be examined more closely in Chapter 3.

## Summary

In his essay 'What is an Emotion?', James' thesis is that rather than emotions being produced by thoughts, they are perceptions of bodily changes. As we have seen, some modern commentators, such as Damasio, have endorsed the view that most emotions are preceded by changes in the body. In fact, Damasio sees feelings as the

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<sup>14</sup> Keith Oatley, *Best Load Schemes: The Psychology of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p.133.

<sup>15</sup> J.M. Barbalet, 'William James' Theory of Emotions: Filling in the Picture', *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (1999), Volume 29, Issue 3, pp. 251-266.

<sup>16</sup> Robert H. Wozniak, Introduction to *The Principles of Psychology of William James* (1890); previously published in Wozniak, R. H. (1999). *Classics in Psychology, 1855 – 1914: Historical Essays* (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1999), pp. 472-474.

basic function for which consciousness evolved, bringing physiological changes into conscious awareness, and thus making it possible to control the execution of emotional actions. For our purposes, this theory is significant because it brings into clear view the bodily and practical character of the emotions.

## 2.2 The Sentiment of Rationality

In 'The Sentiment of Rationality', James argues that philosophical conceptions of the world have to generate the right kind of emotional response if they are to be acceptable. He notes that:

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. ... But 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. A philosophy whose principle is so incommensurate with our most intimate powers as to deny them all relevancy in universal affairs, as to annihilate their motives at one blow, will be even more unpopular than pessimism. Better face the enemy than the eternal Void! This is why materialism will always fail of universal adoption.<sup>17</sup>

So on James's view if a philosophy represents ultimate reality as a kind of 'enemy' to us or as simply beyond our understanding, then that philosophy or view of life will result in, for example, disappointment and will therefore not prove a satisfactory stopping point for enquiry for us. Even if such a philosophy seems to have lots of evidence in its support at some time, we will continue to try to find reasons for adopting some other view. If a philosophy represents ultimate reality as a 'void', as a

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<sup>17</sup> 'The Sentiment of Rationality', p. 82.

kind of nothingness, in relation to which our lives have no relevance, then again we will not be content with the philosophy. On this kind of view, our projects and concerns can make no practical difference in the long run. They do not even have the kind of meaning that is possible when we resist an 'enemy'. So this case is even worse than the first.

So according to James, in addition to the theoretical adequacy of a philosophy, there is also the question of its practical adequacy, which he defines negatively as a matter of not causing 'bafflement' or giving no role to our 'active propensities'.

It is worth noting that the emotions James mentions here, for example the feeling of disappointment, arise out of some theoretical view, rather than being simply a perception of bodily responses. So to this extent, James is thinking of the emotions in different terms in 'The Sentiment of Rationality' as compared with the account he gives in 'What is an Emotion?'

In 'The Sentiment of Rationality', James also develops the point that emotion can shape reality, through his example of the 'Alpine climber', whose emotional commitment makes a difference to what he is actually able to do. He writes:

Suppose, for example, that I am climbing in the Alps, and have had the ill-luck to work myself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Being without similar experience, I have no evidence of my ability to perform it successfully; but hope and confidence in myself make me sure I shall not miss my aim, and nerve my feet to execute what without those subjective emotions would perhaps have been impossible. But suppose that, on the contrary, the emotions of fear and mistrust preponderate; or suppose that, having just read the Ethics of Belief<sup>18</sup>, I feel it would be sinful to act upon an assumption unverified by previous experience,--why, then I shall hesitate so long that at

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<sup>18</sup> Here James is referring W.K. Clifford's essay 'The Ethics of Belief', reproduced in T. Madigan, ed., *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 1999 [1877]), pp. 70–96.

last, exhausted and trembling, and launching myself in a moment of despair, I miss my foothold and roll into the abyss. In this case (and it is one of an immense class) the part of wisdom clearly is to believe what one desires; for the belief is one of the indispensable preliminary conditions of the realization of its object.<sup>19</sup>

So the climber realizes that his attempt to jump will be less than fully confident, reducing his likelihood of success, unless he can bring himself to believe that he can make the jump. In circumstances like these, one has good reason to adopt the belief on pragmatic grounds, since one's best chance for survival depends on the belief. So the point of the Alpine climber case is that pragmatic belief-formation is sometimes both morally and intellectually permissible.<sup>20</sup> I say 'intellectually permissible' because it may indeed be the case that one can jump the chasm when one believes one can. Such a belief may then be self-fulfilling.

So the emotions also have a role in this regard. If the climber is engaged by the emotions of confidence and hope, she is at any rate more likely to perform a feat than would otherwise be impossible. Fear and mistrust, on the other hand, are likely to lead to hesitation, and this will increase the probability that the climber will miss her foothold.

There is one further theme in 'The Sentiment of Rationality' that is of interest for our purposes. James suggests that it is the feeling of intellectual ease we have that tells us when we can stop the process of thinking. This is the feeling to which he is referring by the expression 'The Sentiment of Rationality'. And it is the feeling of unease which brings us to think in the first place. So feelings give rise to thought, and put a stop to it – and they are therefore integral to our rationality, by framing processes of thought. The case where a world view leads us to feel disappointment illustrates this wider claim. A philosophy which represents ultimate reality as a void

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<sup>19</sup> 'The Sentiment of Rationality', pp. 96-97.

<sup>20</sup> 'The Sentiment of Rationality', pp. 96-97.



will not give rise to a feeling of intellectual ease, or 'a sentiment of rationality', and will therefore lead us into ongoing reflection.

So 'The Sentiment of Rationality' notes the practically self-fulfilling character of some emotional states, and also the close connection between our reasoning and our feeling. As in the case of 'What is an Emotion?', though in a different way, James is suggesting that our emotional feelings are integral to our practical and intellectual relationship to the world.

### **2.3 The Will to Believe**

William James' essay 'The Will to Believe' has been viewed as arguing that beliefs can be justified not only by evidence in favour of their truth, but also by the benefits associated with holding them. Thus even if there is no compelling evidence for God's existence, one's believing that there is a God can still be justified by the beneficial consequences this brings to one's life. The general theme of this argument is evident from a passage from Fitz-James Stephen, which James cites at the end of his essay:

We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still, we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. 'What must we do?' 'Be strong and of a good courage.' Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes... If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.<sup>21</sup>

Under these conditions, James is suggesting, it makes good practical sense to choose a path, even though our evidence is not enough to show which path is the right one. We face a similar kind of choice, James thinks, when it comes to religious

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<sup>21</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 31.

belief. The choice between believing and not believing is 'forced': you either believe or you do not. Similarly the walker in this example faces a forced choice: doing nothing is also a choice, with practical consequences. In both these cases, the choice is also 'momentous': depending on which choice you make, your life will no doubt go very differently. And in the case of Christianity and in the case of the choice of paths, the choice is live for many of 'us': that is, both belief and non belief are possibilities for us. So under these circumstances, says James, it is legitimate to allow our passionate natures to lead us to belief, in the hope that we may be proved right, that is, we may be led by our hopes and aspirations, and not simply by evidence.

Let us look at the argument of 'The Will to Believe' in a little more detail. James begins by outlining several definitions and presuppositions that will be necessary for the argument. The first notion he defines is that of a hypothesis. Hypotheses represent different ways the world might be. James distinguishes between between live and dead hypotheses. He notes: 'A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed.' In other words, a 'live hypothesis' is a psychological possibility for a person. The next definition James makes concerns the decision between two hypotheses: this choice constitutes an option. Here he distinguishes several kinds of options. Is the option living or dead? To be living, both hypotheses must be live. Is it forced or avoidable? And is it momentous or trivial? James calls an option a genuine option when it is forced, living and momentous.<sup>22</sup> Let us examine the sense of some of these expressions a little more closely.

James explains the difference between a living and dead option in these terms:

If I say to you: 'Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan', it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: 'Be

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<sup>22</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 3.

an agnostic or be a Christian', it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief.<sup>23</sup>

So whether an option is alive or dead will depend on the individual person, and their upbringing or temperament for example. Here we can see that James is connecting questions about the rationality of religious belief to questions of the individual's psychology.

He gives this example of whether an option is 'forced':

If I say to you: 'Choose between going out with your umbrella or without it', I do not offer you a genuine option, for it is not forced. You can easily avoid it by not going out at all. Similarly, if I say, 'Either love me or hate me', 'Either call my theory true or call it false', your option is avoidable. You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating, and you may decline to offer any judgment as to my theory.<sup>24</sup>

The same point can be made using the example of the mountain pass. Here the option is forced in so far as the walker has to make a choice. Even standing still will count as a choice of a kind.

Finally, a choice is 'momentous' if it gives a one-off opportunity to gain some very significant benefit. Here James offers this example:

If I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your only similar

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<sup>23</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 3.

<sup>24</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 3.

opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it into your hands.<sup>25</sup>

Similarly in the case of the mountain pass, the walker's choice is momentous, because if he makes no choice of path, or chooses the wrong path, then he will freeze to death.

So James invites us to suppose that the walker on the mountainside acts reasonably in choosing a path, even if the evidence cannot tell him which path is the right one, because he faces an option that is living, momentous and forced. Again, such an option will in James's terms count as a 'genuine option' The same will be true of the choice to hold a religious belief, he thinks, if that choice forms part of a genuine option.

In 'The Will to Believe', James gives a very general account of the nature of religion, so as to show how religious belief may form part of a genuine option. He suggests that the underlying idea of religion has two parts: that 'the best things are the more eternal things', and that 'we are better off now if we believe' this first claim.<sup>26</sup> This way of thinking about religion allows him to represent religious belief as 'momentous', because believing here and now can make a significant difference to your well being here and now. Similarly there is a forced choice here in so far as nonbelief and disbelief both involve a loss of the benefits of religion. Finally, religious 'belief' is clearly a live possibility for many people.

So the choice of religious belief can be like the choice of a path in the example of the mountain pass. In each case the choice forms part of a genuine option, and in each case therefore there is good reason to choose a given path or to choose religious belief, even though the evidence is not enough to settle the question of whether a particular path is right or whether religious belief is true. So James's basic proposal is

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<sup>25</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 4.

<sup>26</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 25.

that, as he puts it, '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; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open", is itself a passional decision, - just like deciding yes or no, - and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.'<sup>27</sup>

It is significant that James speaks here of an option 'that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds'.

So he is clearly not saying that we can believe what we like, regardless of evidence. He is interested simply in the case where the evidence cannot settle the question. Moreover, it is not the case that scientific questions are of their nature impossible to decide 'on intellectual grounds', so in scientific contexts, the 'Will to believe' proposal will not apply. And where scientific questions are concerned, it is almost always the case that the option is not momentous, so even if a scientific question could not be settled by evidence, nonbelief or shunning error may still be the advisable posture.

It is also important to note here James's distinction between empiricist and absolutist notions of truth. The empiricist tendency, representative of science, posits knowledge without absolute certainty, whereas the absolutist tendency, characteristic of philosophy, holds that we can know with certainty that we know. James favours the empiricist view. And on this view, he notes, it would be foolish to suspend belief on some matter in the hope of finally achieving certainty about truth or falsity regarding this matter. This would be to set the standard of evidence too high.

James notes that science is different from religion and morality in these respects. For instance, in human relations, I may have to believe that others will meet me half-way in order to make it at all likely that they will respond positively to me. If I believe you will not like me, my belief may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, he thinks

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<sup>27</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 11.

<sup>28</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 23.

that in religion, the universe is represented in personal terms – so the same rules of pre-emptive trust will apply here. As he notes:

The more perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having personal form. The universe is no longer a mere It to us, but a Thou, if we are religious; and any relation that may be possible from person to person might be possible here.<sup>29</sup>

Given the personal character of ultimate reality, on the religious view, reaching out in trust before the evidence can show that this reality is trustworthy, can make good sense, as in the case of relationships with other human beings.

It is worth recalling the intellectual context of James's work, to see why he was doubtful that evidence could settle the truth of religious questions. James concentrated on the search for the permissibility of religious belief at a time when the intellectual establishment could no longer offer any dogmatic assurance and when philosophical evidence for God was no longer found to be convincing. This was a time in which Darwinism questioned Christianity's account of creation. Rather than relying on the traditional arguments to uphold religious belief, James was searching for the psychological roots of religion.

James's approach can be compared with that of Pascal (1623-1662), who tried in his *Pensées* to give faith a rational foundation. James gives this summary of Pascal's approach:

In Pascal's *Thoughts* there is a celebrated passage known in literature as Pascal's wager. In it he tries to force us into Christianity by reasoning as if our concern with truth resembled our concern with the stakes in a game of chance. Translated freely his words are these: You must either believe or not believe that God is – which will you do? Your human reason cannot say.

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<sup>29</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 25.

A game is going on between you and the nature of things which at the day of judgment will bring out either heads or tails. Weigh what your gains and your losses would be if you should stake all you have on heads, or God's existence: if you win in such case, you gain eternal beatitude; if you lose, you lose nothing at all. If there were an infinity of chances, and only one for God in this wager, still you ought to stake your all on God; for though you surely risk a finite loss by this procedure, any finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain.

Go, then, and take holy water, and have masses said; belief will come and stupefy your scruples, *Cela vous fera croire et Vous abêtira*. Why should you not? At bottom, what have you to lose? <sup>30</sup>

This is an argument that tries to prove that it is to your advantage to believe that God exists. The argument does not try to prove that God exists, but only states that you are better off believing in God. Pascal's argument is a simple one: reason cannot decide the question of whether God exists or not; therefore, it makes sense to choose the option that would benefit us most, taking into account the implications of God existing and also not existing. Pascal's argument in his famous defence of faith may be described as a gamble: if Christianity is right, he says, then you forfeit your soul and eternal bliss by not believing in it, whereas if it is not true, you lose nothing by believing. You must therefore choose to believe, even if the chance that it is true is minimal.

In 'The Will To Believe', it seems that James advances a similar argument for religion – since he also appeals to the connection between believing and doing what is to our advantage. However, James's approach is, as usual, more sensitive to the psychology of religious belief. He is interested in the psychological possibility of religious belief, in whether religious belief of a certain kind is 'live', rather than treating belief as the product of some quasi-mathematical calculation. He comments for example:

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<sup>30</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 6.

If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature, it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead.<sup>31</sup>

So even if the Mahdi were, like Pascal, to promise us infinite benefits if we believe in him, this would make no difference to us, if this hypothesis was not live.

James adopts another perspective on these questions by noting that in forming our opinions, we try to do two things: to know the truth and to avoid error. The sceptic takes the risk of missing the truth because his main concern is to avoid making a mistake. James regards this as a reasonable point of view for all questions which are not of vital importance for us. But a religious doctrine could contain a truth which it is in our greatest interest to believe, because we would miss a great benefit by not believing it. Is it therefore, he asks, wiser to give in to our fear of making a mistake than to act on our hope that the doctrine is true?

If James pays so little attention to probability, this may be because he is moving towards his well-known pragmatic criterion of truth, according to which the truth of a hypothesis is decided in terms of its usefulness for our lives in the broadest sense. And usefulness in this case will be connected to the psychology of the individual. No Turk he notes ever becomes a Christian on the basis of Pascal's logic. On this basis, James concludes that dead hypotheses cannot activate our 'willing nature'.

Responding to W.K. Clifford's claim that 'it is wrong always and everywhere to believe anything on insufficient evidence', James develops his case in these terms:

Believe truth! Shun error! these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by colouring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. ... Believe nothing, he [Clifford] tells us,

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<sup>31</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 2.



keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford. We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passionate life. ... For my own part, I have also a horror of being duped; but I can believe that worse things than being duped may happen to a man in this world: so Clifford's exhortation has to my ears a thoroughly fantastic sound.<sup>32</sup>

Again, the argument here perhaps rests on the thought that evidence cannot settle religious questions in particular. But James's key claim is that even the sceptic is moved by emotion: the fear of making a mistake. Emotion, he seems to be saying, is inescapable in human intellectual life. We are bound to be moved by the hopeful feeling that we might be right or else by the fear of being wrong. James concludes that W.K. Clifford has to be mistaken when he maintains that evidence and not emotion should always guide belief.

Before concluding this discussion, it is worth noting that James's argument in 'The Will to Believe' will only work if we think of the holding of beliefs as like actions, and see the holding of a belief as something that we choose, in rather the way that we can choose which path to take down a mountainside. But an objector might wonder whether the holding of a belief is something we can choose. Perhaps beliefs are produced involuntarily, depending on our assessment of the evidence and our judgement that the evidence makes a certain belief likely to be true? If I think the probability for some belief is less than a half, can I just choose to hold that belief? It may be that James is using the idea of 'belief' in a rather extended sense.

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<sup>32</sup> 'The Will to Believe', p. 18.

What is of special interest for us in James's discussion in 'The Will to Believe' is his suggestion that a person's emotion can make religious belief practically reasonable for them, even in the absence of evidence. It is also clear that he is thinking of religious belief as much in terms of a way of life as a purely mental commitment. And this also points to a role for the emotions in religious life in shaping religious practice.

## 2. 4 The Varieties of Religious Experience

James notes that by 'religion', in this work, he means the feelings, actions and experiences of individual persons on their own, insofar as they are convinced that they are in relation to the divine.<sup>33</sup> So the goal of this text is to describe these 'feelings, actions and experiences'. James was arguably the first to undertake phenomenological research into religious experience per se, basing his ideas on a descriptive study of natural experience unaffected, as far as possible, by any kind of theory or doctrine. In particular James notes that in this text, he is going to describe the original experiences of religious geniuses, religious leaders, who to a greater extent are 'visited' by abnormal psychic phenomena. Without exception these were people of heightened emotional sensitivity. He comments:

Even more perhaps than other kinds of genius, religious leaders have been subject to abnormal psychical visitations. Invariably they have been creatures of exalted emotional sensibility. Often they have led a discordant inner life, and had melancholy during a part of their career. They have known no measure, been liable to obsessions and fixed ideas; and frequently they have fallen into

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<sup>33</sup> He comments: 'Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow. In these lectures, however, as I have already said, the immediate personal experiences will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all.' *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), Lecture II: 'Circumscription of the Topic.'

trances, heard voices, seen visions, and presented all sorts of peculiarities which are ordinarily classed as pathological. Often, moreover, these pathological features in their career have helped to give them their religious authority and influence.<sup>34</sup>

James goes on to cite George Fox as an example of such a leader. So here immediately is one reason for thinking of emotional experience as important in religion – because of its importance, very often, in the lives of the leading figures of religious movements.

In *The Varieties*, James returns to the question of the usefulness of religious belief, or the advantages which it may confer upon the believer. In *The Will to Believe*, he supposed that religious belief did often bring significant benefits, and formed part of a ‘momentous’ choice, but he did not explain at any length why this should be so.

In *The Varieties* James proposes that religion has a natural and biological function, and is vitally important for the healthy psychological functioning of the individual. In particular, religion helps us to cope with our vulnerability in the world, and our state of dependence upon what is beyond our control:

For when all is said and done, we are in the end absolutely dependent on the universe; and into sacrifices and surrenders of some sort, deliberately looked at and accepted, we are drawn and pressed as into our only permanent positions of repose. Now in those states of mind which fall short of religion, the surrender is submitted to as an imposition of necessity, and the sacrifice is undergone at the very best without complaint. In the religious life, on the contrary, surrender and sacrifice are positively espoused: even unnecessary givings-up are added in order that the happiness may increase.

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<sup>34</sup> VRE, Chapter I, ‘Religion and Neurology’.

Religion thus makes easy and felicitous what in any case is necessary; and if it be the only agency that can accomplish this result, its vital importance as a human faculty stands vindicated beyond dispute. It becomes an essential organ of our life, performing a function which no other portion of our nature can so successfully fulfill. From the merely biological point of view, so to call it, this is a conclusion to which, so far as I can now see, we shall inevitably be led... <sup>35</sup>

So here James provides an answer to a question that he only touched upon in '*The Will to Believe*'. What he aims to show in *The Varieties* is that religion is functional from a biological point of view. In this passage, James also notes the role of 'repose' in religious life. So as in 'The Sentiment of Rationality', he is supposing that religious belief is associated with feelings of ease, or rest, and that its attractiveness and appropriateness is bound up with this fact.

In these lectures, James also returns to the idea that the perspective of science is only partial. Just as much as science, so religion grants to some rest, inner balance and happiness, he says. And it prevents some evils just as well as, or even better than science does for people with certain sensitivities. So science and religion are both of real practical benefit for those who know how to use them.

Religion in the shape of mind-cure gives to some of us serenity, moral poise, and happiness, and prevents certain forms of disease as well as science does, or even better in a certain class of persons. Evidently, then, the science and the religion are both of them genuine keys for unlocking the world's treasure-house to him who can use either of them practically. Just as evidently neither is exhaustive or exclusive of the other's simultaneous use.

And why, after all, may not the world be so complex as to consist of many interpenetrating spheres of reality, which we can thus approach in alternation

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<sup>35</sup> VRE, Lecture II, 'Circumscription of the Topic', pp. 51-52.

by using different conceptions and assuming different attitudes, just as mathematicians handle the same numerical and spatial facts by geometry, by analytical geometry, by algebra, by the calculus, or by quaternions, and each time come out right? On this view religion and science, each verified in its own way from hour to hour and from life to life, would be co-eternal.<sup>36</sup>

Having touched on the relationship between religion and emotion, James then sets out to harmonise psychology with theology. Famously, he suggests that religion springs from feeling rather than from theological speculation:

I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue. But all such statements are misleading from their brevity, and it will take the whole hour for me to explain to you exactly what I mean.

When I call theological formulas secondary products, I mean that in a world in which no religious feeling had ever existed, I doubt whether any philosophic theology could ever have been framed. I doubt if dispassionate intellectual contemplation of the universe, apart from inner unhappiness and need of deliverance on the one hand and mystical emotion on the other, would ever have resulted in religious philosophies such as we now possess. Men would have begun with animistic explanations of natural fact, and criticised these away into scientific ones, as they actually have done. In the science they would have left a certain amount of 'psychical research', even as they now will probably have to re-admit a certain amount. But high-flying speculations like those of either dogmatic or idealistic theology, these they would have had no motive to venture on, feeling no need of commerce with such deities. These speculations must, it seems to me, be classed as over-beliefs, buildings-out

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<sup>36</sup> VRE, Lecture V: 'The Religion of Healthy-Mindedness', p. 122-123.

performed by the intellect into directions of which feeling originally supplied the hint.<sup>37</sup>

Here James returns to the question of the relationship between religion and reason, and religion and feeling. Theology or rational reflection on religious questions has a role to play, he says, but it is a secondary role – theological reflections only get going, only have point, because we are already interested in religious questions because of our emotional responses to the world. So James distances himself from traditional dogmatic theology concerned with God's attributes, arguing instead for a focus on the pragmatic and moral significance of religious belief in people's personal lives.

In this passage James notes the role played by the feeling of unhappiness and by 'mystic emotion'. It is because of these emotions that we are first led in the direction of religious speculation. But once we have a set of religious concepts or doctrines, they can then inform a set of religious emotions, so there is a two-way relationship here. James is clear that these emotions are of the same type as emotions experienced in non-religious contexts, though they differ in having a religious object as their focus. But here again, as in 'The Will to Believe' and 'The Sentiment of Rationality' emotional responses have a kind of priority, and provide a context within which belief makes sense.

James develops the idea that there is no special class of religious emotion in these terms:

Consider ... the 'religious sentiment' which we see referred to in so many books, as if it were a single sort of mental entity. In the psychologies and in the philosophies of religion, we find the authors attempting to specify just what entity it is. One man allies it to the feeling of dependence; one makes it a derivative from fear; others connect it with the sexual life; others still identify it with the feeling of the infinite; and so on. Such different ways of conceiving it ought of themselves to arouse doubt as to whether it possibly can be one specific thing;

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<sup>37</sup> VRE, Lecture XVIII, 'Philosophy', p. 431.

and the moment we are willing to treat the term 'religious sentiment' as a collective name for the many sentiments which religious objects may arouse in alternation, we see that it probably contains nothing whatever of a psychologically specific nature. There is religious fear, religious love, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural religions; and similarly of all the various sentiments which may be called into play in the lives of religious persons.<sup>38</sup>

So James's idea seems to be that unhappiness, for example, leads us in the direction of religious questions, and leads us to formulate religious doctrines. But this is not a special religious sort of unhappiness, which in itself is different from other kinds of unhappiness. And once we have those doctrines, other emotions become possible. To return to 'The Sentiment of Rationality', the doctrine that ultimate reality is a void, for example, can lead to feelings of fear. But again there is no special fear here, just ordinary fear directed at a religious object.

In his discussion of a series of topics, James returns to the idea that reason is ultimately subordinate to feeling. He says, for example, that the various philosophical proofs of the existence of God can do no more than corroborate pre-existing belief in the matter:

The fact is that these arguments do but follow the combined suggestion of the facts and of our feeling. They prove nothing rigorously. They only corroborate our pre-existent partialities.

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<sup>38</sup> *VRE*, Lecture II, 'Circumscription of the Topic', p. 27.

Here James reiterates the view of 'The Will to Believe': intellectual grounds alone are not enough to settle the question of religion's truth. In this spirit, he offers this assessment of John Caird's use of argument in theology.

But when all is said and done, has Principal Caird – and I only use him as an example of that whole mode of thinking – transcended the sphere of feeling and of the direct experience of the individual, and laid the foundations of religion in impartial reason? Has he made religion universal by coercive reasoning, transformed it from a private faith into a public certainty? Has he rescued its affirmations from obscurity and mystery? I believe that he has done nothing of the kind, but that he has simply reaffirmed the individual's experiences in a more generalized vocabulary.<sup>39</sup>

James knew that if religion is indeed dependent on emotion, then it will be open to criticism from various points of view. Within a given group, the emotional experience of one person may be different from that of others. And there may be pressure then for the group to exercise restraint on the expression of emotion, to maintain the unity of the group. This is evident in the history of the institutional church which often developed into a dominating group seeking to regulate the emotions, sometimes in a despotic way. The risk that is run in this case is that the once vibrant vital life of the church will be stultified by a more formalised faith, which may degenerate into a dreary religiousness. So we should not be surprised if a proposal such as James's goes unrecognised, and if any appeal to it is criticised in ecclesiastical circles. In James's opinion, heresy should be understood as the unblocking the original stream of faith's emotional source.<sup>40</sup>

In *The Varieties*, James takes a particularly close interest in mysticism, and he comments that:

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<sup>39</sup> VRE, Lecture XVIII, 'Philosophy', p. 453.

<sup>40</sup> VRE, Lecture XIV, 'The Value of Saintliness', p.337.



I think, that personal religious experience has its root and centre in mystical states of consciousness; so for us, who in these lectures are treating personal experience as the exclusive subject of our study, such states of consciousness ought to form the vital chapter from which the other chapters get their light.<sup>41</sup>

James notes that he has no firsthand knowledge of mystical states: 'My own tendencies almost completely exclude me from the experience'. And he notes his inability to participate in other dimensions of religious life too, saying that: 'I cannot possibly pray, for then I feel stupid and artificial'. And yet he writes in *The Varieties*: 'Prayer is the soul and essence of religion.'<sup>41</sup>

For James, God was a vague reality and the Bible offered him no religious authority. His work is a reflection of this, especially in its emphasis on individualism and feeling. To be able to assess the value of an emotion you must have experienced it yourself. But James sees himself as excluded from these religious emotions. It is for this reason that he wanted to observe as closely as possible those who could feel them. To do this he collected a great quantity of personal documents mainly from published sources. A specific characteristic of the documents he chose was that they had been written by people who lived at the extreme edge of life. So these were people with extreme experiences. From these sources, he hoped to establish the character of religious experience. In his *Varieties* he refers to many such sources.

Again, this focus on extreme cases helps to explain the close connection, for James, between religion and states of feeling. For instance, he comments that:

Religion is nothing if it be not the vital act by which the entire mind seeks to save itself by clinging to the principle from which it draws its life. This act is

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<sup>41</sup> VRE, Lectures XVI and XVII, 'Mysticism' p. 379.

<sup>41</sup> VRE, Lecture XIX, 'Other Characteristics', p. 464.

prayer, by which term I understand no vain exercise of words, no mere repetition of certain sacred formula [sic], but the very movement itself of the soul, putting itself in a personal relation of contact with the mysterious power of which it feels the presence, it may be even before it has A NAME by which to call it.

## **2.5 Concluding thoughts on *The Varieties***

Drawing on his knowledge of psychology, William James gave a new view of how to think about human reason and the way we perceive reality and are able to draw conclusions. For him reason and science alone give too one-sided a view of reality. He proposes that scientific research is nothing more than the identification of experiences which agree with more or less isolated systems of concepts which the human mind has constructed, and he asks himself why we should accept that only such systems can be true.

On the basis of all the individual experiences which he documents in *The Varieties*, James concludes that we perceive reality in two ways. There is the reality which we perceive with our ordinary senses, and there is a feeling of reality whereby we experience an objective presence which we may register by saying: 'there is something here'. The invisible world produces results in this world, and therefore we have no philosophical excuse to call this invisible or mystical world unreal or irrational. But its effects are commonly registered directly in feeling, rather than by means of some theoretical construct. So for James, religion doesn't only give a prospect of a hereafter where we shall continue to exist in eternal bliss, but is associated with experiences here and now which make our earthly life more tolerable and happier.

James is asking us, in effect, to think of feeling as a mode of perceiving reality. Of course someone might object that feelings are too subjective to play this role. But whenever different people witness an accident they will all give individual descriptions

of the accident. They are probably all in agreement about the occurrence of the accident but the way in which they as individuals saw it is individually coloured as is their assessment of it. It is the same with experiencing God, James thinks. Countless people have felt that God was present to them. But this experience is individual just as the conclusions which they draw are. In this respect, there is no fundamental difference between our feeling and the other senses which we possess. If we treat our observations on the basis of feeling with as much care as the observations on the basis of our other senses, we will have a valuable extension to what we perceive as reality. So if we add feeling to the range of our other faculties including reason, then this gives us a helpful instrument to make statements about God. And in James's view, there is no philosophic excuse not to do so.

In *The Varieties*, James subjected religious experiences to sober research. In doing so he did not take as a starting point doctrinal assumptions about what the religious person encountered, but rather studied the experiences of people on the basis of their personal accounts. These experiences are, according to James, of great practical importance. In his opinion religious experiences indicate the activities of higher powers, but also the ambiguity of our experience and the temporary character of our insights. As a pragmatist he hoped by the research to be able to approach a number of traditional problems, such as the relationship between consciousness and matter. In our time, when people have an increasing tendency to believe less in authority and try to rely more on their own experience, James's book offers a wealth of data which is waiting to be discovered and recognized.

### **3. Conclusions**

In 'What is an Emotion?', James argued that all of our mental feelings begin in the body. This emphasis on the emotions as tied to states of the body, rather than deriving from abstractly logical reflection, is carried over into James's later work. From this point of view, the emotions are connected directly to behaviour and evaluation, rather than theory or a mere description of the world.

'The Will to Believe' was written in the spirit of a defence of the religious outlook. James believed in the right each individual has to affirm religious propositions upon the basis of emotional preference – but only under certain conditions. The choice confronting the individual must be inescapable, so that even not choosing will count as a kind of choice. The alternatives must be living and appealing possibilities that can be genuinely embraced. And the decision must be momentous – providing a unique opportunity that will make a significant difference in a person's life. So on this view, religious belief makes pragmatic sense, rather as choosing a path down a mountainside when uncertain of the correct route makes sense. So here again James's account of emotion is related to the requirements of action rather than theory.

In 'The Sentiment of Rationality', James argued that a certain sentiment is a mark of rationality. Sentiments of rationality operate not just in logic or science, but in ordinary life. The emotions therefore frame the operation of reason – telling us when to start thinking and when to stop. So here again, James connects the emotions to action, only here the action is thinking itself. So in this way too, the emotions have a key part to play if we are to orient ourselves properly in the world.

Finally, as we have just seen, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, James turns explicitly to the role of emotion in a religious context, and thinks of the emotions as providing the ultimate source of religion and of theological reflection. For the reasons given in 'The Sentiment of Rationality', the feeling of unhappiness, for example, can reveal to us that our current worldview is inadequate and that we need to think further therefore. On this view, religion in particular does not arise out of mere intellectual curiosity but from a need of the soul. In *The Varieties* therefore, as in 'The Will to Believe' and its idea of the choice of religion as 'momentous', it is human need, and associated emotion, rather than anything purely intellectual, that is the basis for religious belief.

The psychology that James introduced addressed all areas of human experience, from brain-stem function to religious ecstasy, from the perception of space to

psychical research from mysticism to biology. He did not separate abnormal, normal, or transcendent experience in his study of a wide range of consciousness. He saw them all as part of a single continuum. In this way by starting from experience, James aimed to make religion possible for educated moderns by his insistence that real religion is not churches, creeds, scriptures, and priests, but the personal religious experience of the individual.

In the next chapter, I will compare James's observations with recent philosophical work on the emotions. I am going to show how a number of James's ideas live on in the modern literature and can be further supported by reference to the modern literature. I shall then consider, in Chapter 3, how his ideas on the connection between emotion and religion in particular relate to the discussion of emotion in the work of theologians.

## CHAPTER 2 JAMES'S MATERIAL IN MODERN CONTEXT

### 1.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to show that James's theories of emotions still have some plausibility given recent theoretical developments. We begin with a brief summary of these new perspectives.

For centuries, many Western thinkers have assumed that emotions are, at best, harmless luxuries, and at worst outright obstacles to intelligent action. In recent years, scientists and philosophers have begun to challenge this 'negative view of emotion'. Neuroscientists, psychologists and researchers now agree that emotions are vital to intelligent action. Evolutionary considerations have played a vital role in this shift to a more positive view of emotion.

### 1.2 Neurophysical accounts of emotions

Antonio Damasio is a pioneer of understanding the human brain and human intelligence. *Descartes' Error* is essential reading for anyone with an interest in these matters. It is a ground-breaking classic of psychology and neuroscience on a scale that can be compared with William James's *Principles of Psychology*. Damasio did not run experiments in a laboratory, of course, but he was able to isolate scientific problems with clarity and debate the merits of a hypothesis. He provides a real model for how to think scientifically in the complicated domain of mind and brain. Damasio's theory is of interest for us because, like James, he is thinking about the emotions' relationship to embodied behaviour and rational choice.

The processes of mind are neurobiological on this account. They are the most complex of all neurobiological processes, to be sure, that being the reason why it is legitimate to designate them by special terms such as 'mental events' or 'mind.' But everything indicates, Damasio argues, that the substance of the phenomena is biological. What

makes them 'different' is their privacy, the fact that they are accessible only from the interior of an organism, from the neurally constructed entity otherwise known as 'the self'. But in order to see this issue clearly, it is important to adopt conceptions of consciousness grounded on the notion of the embodied self, something that is only now beginning to take place.

Joseph LeDoux develops a similar neurologically-based perspective. He devotes a considerable amount of his book *The Emotional Brain*<sup>42</sup> to discussing previous theories of emotion, including William James's theory that emotions are responses to feedback from the body, Walter Cannon's theory that emotions are due to 'fight or flight' responses, and the behaviourist belief that emotions are simply rationalisations people provide for acting in certain ways. His discussion of the changing tides of thought and research in twentieth century psychology is first rate, and his book sets a new standard for quality and readability for popular technical books. He maintains that all animals have some version of this survival system in their brains, but feelings occur only in those that also have the capacity for consciousness. LeDoux followed William James in holding that emotions begin with the unconscious processing of environmental stimuli, accompanied by bodily response, and that one's consciousness notices, as it were, what is taking place in the body and organizes the experience into feelings. He provided substantial physiological research to support such theses.

Now I shall look at Damasio and LeDoux in more detail.

## **2 Antonio Damasio**

### **2.1 The James – Lange theory**

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<sup>42</sup> Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain: The Mysterious Underpinnings of Emotional Life* (London: Phoenix, 1998).

A revival of the James-Lange theory is evident in the work of the neuroscientist Antonio Damasio. He has argued that the phenomenology that accompanies basic emotions is the perception of bodily changes caused by the subcortical circuits that drive those changes. He argues further that these 'somatic appraisals' play important functional roles in cognition and action.

'I think, therefore I am': this pronouncement of Descartes<sup>43</sup> is probably the most influential proposition of a philosopher in the realm of Western science. In Descartes's view, it pointed to the distinction of the mind from the body. The mind, the seat of 'the human ability to reason', is according to Descartes the essence of the human person. It is the greatest good and places human beings above all other forms of life on earth. Cognition enables humans to think about their own behaviour and as a result to consider what is good or bad. This liberates us from directly responding to impulses because we are able to form a rational judgement about what is in the long run good for us. In doing this it is important not to let the reasoning process be influenced by emotions, which would only obfuscate that process. By contrast, Damasio thinks of the emotions as embodied processes and essential to the operation of reason. For example, he cites the fascinating case of Phineas Gage. In September 1848 the railroad construction worker Phineas Gage was working on the railroad in New England. As a consequence of an explosion, a 3 ½ foot iron rod pierced his skull and Gage fell to the ground. Yet a few minutes later, he stood up and was able to speak. Within a few months he could walk, but his character did not survive, and he was left unable to negotiate interpersonal relationships. In short, he lived, but the damage to his brain left him with severe personality changes. Antonio Damasio has written extensively on Gage and has moved from Gage to other patients who have experienced damage to their frontal lobes. He reviews the effect this injury has had on their lives. On this basis he has argued that reason and emotions are both needed in order for sound judgment or prudence to obtain.

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<sup>43</sup> *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), Part 1, article 7.



Damasio backs up his claims with data drawn from patients with various kinds of frontal lobe damage. When confronted with a decision of even the most trivial nature, they may lose themselves in endless musings about the consequences of each possible action, with the result that the decision itself is postponed indefinitely. For example, after one consultation with a patient with frontal lobe damage, Damasio asked the patient when he would like to schedule his next appointment:

I suggested two alternative dates, both in the coming month and just a few days apart from each other. The behaviour that ensued, which was witnessed by several investigators, was remarkable. For the better part of a half-hour, the patient enumerated reasons for and against each of the two dates: previous engagements, proximity to other engagements, possible meteorological conditions, virtually anything that one could reasonably think about concerning a simple date.... he was now walking us through a tiresome cost-benefit analysis, an endless outlining and fruitless comparison of options and possible consequences. It took enormous discipline to listen to all of this without pounding on the table and telling him to stop, but finally we did tell him, quietly, that he should come on the second of the alternative dates. His response was equally calm and prompt. He simply said: 'That's fine'. Back the appointment book went into his pocket, and then he was off.<sup>44</sup>

Damasio argues that emotions, and he means the qualitative, conscious experience of emotions, are 'somatic markers': bodily sensations, whether of a visceral or a non-visceral kind, that are summoned up by particular thoughts or mental images. According to Damasio, the brain maintains a representation of what is going on in the body. The brain also creates associations between body state and emotions and makes decisions by using these associations. For example, the brain may link the image of a tiger with

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<sup>44</sup> Antonio Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain* (Basingstoke: Picador, 1995), p.194.

the emotion of fear. Somatic markers are the repository of emotional learning that we have acquired throughout our lives and that we use for our daily decisions.

So it seems that a lack of emotion would be accompanied by a defect in the ability to make a correct choice, especially in the personal and social sphere. Is it perhaps possible, therefore, contrary to what is claimed in rationalist circles, that the emotions indeed can help the decision making process? Damasio thinks that this is the case. According to him reasoning is a goal-directed process. According to rationalists this thought process is based on chains of reasoning such as a cost-benefit calculation. If one has to make a decision, such logic will lead to the best decision. Damasio actually sees bodily markers as helping to make emotional decisions because they perform a bodily integration of all the complex issues that may be leading to indecision in the conscious, rational processing system of the brain.

According to Damasio, an emotion is in essence the generation of a somatic state as a response to a certain stimulus. Secondary emotions are very personal and based on personal experience. Two different people will thus make very different connections between certain groups of stimuli and the somatic state. Damasio claims that these secondary emotion processes take place in the pre-frontal lobes. So the pre-frontal lobes are also outstandingly suitable for generating the somatic markers. Damasio suggests that whenever one thinks of a possible scenario, a physical signal is simultaneously produced – the somatic marker. This somatic marker causes special attention to be paid to the scenario which is at that moment under consideration. Furthermore the somatic marker gives an emotional value to the thought. Thus at the moment that a negative scenario is taken into consideration, a negative feeling is produced in the body. This serves then as a sort of warning, that the scenario concerned had better not be pursued. So on this view, the patient in Damasio's example is unable to reach a decision because he lacks the somatic marker. When the clinical data are combined with Damasio's claim that patients with frontal lobe damage are emotionally

impaired, this lends some tentative support to the claim that most of us are able to avoid analysis paralysis only because we are emotionally intact.

Damasio's account leaves many questions unanswered. What, for example, is the patient really failing to do? Suppose that Damasio's patient begins to construct a search tree in the typical manner. First, he starts by expanding the initial node of the tree into two states; go on Monday, and go on Tuesday. How he then goes about building up the tree from there depends on his search strategy. The patient does not stop; but why not? According to Damasio's theory, he does not stop because he does not generate an appropriate somatic marker. But the theory does not say exactly why this failure occurs.<sup>45</sup> As will be evident already Damasio's conception of the emotions is influenced by James, who also held that emotions are the feelings of somatic disturbances consequent on the perception of an exciting fact. An emotion, according to James, is not the somatic change, but the agent's perception of it. As we have seen, for James, one cannot abstract from an emotion 'all the feelings of its bodily symptoms' and find anything left behind other than a cold and neutral state of intellectual perception. Damasio himself sees the essence of emotion as the collection of changes in body state that are induced in myriad organs by nerve cell terminals, under the control of a dedicated brain system, which is responding to the content of thoughts about a particular entity or event. The somatic changes are held to be caused by thoughts.

James had argued that feelings are a reflection of a change in the state of the body. Damasio gives a detailed model for this idea: first an external stimulus triggers certain regions of the brain, then those regions cause an emotion, then the emotion spreads around the body and causes a change in the state of the body, and finally the 'mind' perceives that change of state through feeling. So for Damasio, feelings are views of the body's internal organs: feelings are percepts. This follows from his view of what mind

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<sup>45</sup> Dylan Evans, 'The Search Hypothesis of Emotion', *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* (2002), Volume 53, Number 4, pp. 505-506.

is: the mind is about the body. The neural processes that I experience as 'my mind' are about the representation of my body in the brain.

Despite their similarities, the views of Damasio and James differ in a number of respects. First, they have different ideas about the organisation of the brain and how emotions are produced. Damasio states that there is an aspect of the brain that is designed for handling emotions, which involves components of the limbic system. A stimulus is taken in by the senses and processed by sensory areas in the brain. The information is then passed on to the limbic system, which summons an emotion and delivers the information to other parts of the body before going back to the limbic system, where a memory of emotional significance is made. James, on the other hand, did not postulate an area in the brain specifically designed for emotions. Instead, he stated that the brain needs only three previously existing components to carry out emotional arousal: sensory, motor, and association areas.

Furthermore, Damasio and James have opposing viewpoints on the influence of emotions on consciousness. Damasio's theory relies heavily on secondary emotions and the conscious connections that are made throughout an individual's life. These connections, in a sense, serve as reminders to an individual when he or she encounters situations that are not new; furthermore, they allow flexibility of response such that an individual can determine how much emotion is necessary when presented with a particular situation. In contrast, James relies more on instincts and impulses to govern behaviour. An individual who acts on an impulse once and is rewarded, either by external or internal factors, is more likely to act in the same way when faced with a similar experience later on. This is credited to instincts that turn into habits that are acted on without much thought, leaving little room for flexibility of response.

Finally, Damasio and James, to some extent, have different views on how emotions develop. Damasio stated that while some emotions are innate, others are not. Those that are not develop according to both internal preferences as well as external factors,

such as the environment or culture. When internal and external factors conflict, the individual usually adjusts their internal preferences to help them survive within the culture. James, however, did not credit emotional formation to the external environment. In his theory, virtually all of the emotions are programmed into the brain at a young age and leave little room for adjustment. The habits formed early in life become difficult to break when the time comes to accommodate changes in a culture.

Why do such differences exist between the two theories? It appears that many of the differences result from the time that has elapsed between James and Damasio. William James was born in 1842 and died in 1910. In contrast, Antonio Damasio is still an active researcher. Damasio, of course, has had a wealth of neuroscientific research available to him. So his theories could be read as a refinement of James's perspective, drawing on recent experimental data. This means that we can build with some confidence on the central elements of James's accounts of the body's role in emotional experience when we come to consider the relationship of religion and emotion.

### **3 Joseph LeDoux**

LeDoux sees emotions as biological functions of the nervous system, particularly the brain itself. He notes: 'there are many possible solutions to the puzzle of how emotions might work, but the only one we really care about is the one that evolution hit upon and put into the brain'.<sup>46</sup> LeDoux came to emotion research from studying split-brain patients, whose brain hemispheres were severed. He discovered a patient who, when presented with a stimulus to the right hemisphere, could not describe the stimulus, but could describe the emotional impact that the stimulus had on him. The word 'emotion' does not refer to something that the mind or brain really has or does. There is no 'emotional' faculty in the brain: there is not here a specific location where emotion is processed. Animals with backbones and brains share similar emotional behavioural systems as well as biological imperatives of procreation, food, shelter, etc. LeDoux describes the problem of consciousness and feeling as a question of subjective

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<sup>46</sup>Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, p.13.

emotional experience. For him, two things are necessary for such a conscious experience: a specific emotion system and a conscious awareness of its activity. This awareness takes place in the short-term 'working' memory system. This system makes reasoning possible and is dependent on the lateral prefrontal cortex, which only exists in primates. He explains: 'feelings come about when the activity of specialized emotion systems get represented in the system that gives rise to consciousness, and I'm using working memory as a fairly widely accepted version of how the latter might come about'.<sup>47</sup>

Bodily feedback is also important to the conscious awareness of emotion. Although visceral responses in the brain are too slow to be the primary determinants of emotion, other somatic responses are quicker and can have an impact on the conscious awareness of emotion. He concludes: 'Emotions evolved not as conscious feelings, but as brain states and bodily responses. The brain states and bodily responses are the fundamental facts of an emotion and the conscious feelings are the frills that have added icing to the emotional cake'.<sup>48</sup>

LeDoux pays attention to one of the basic emotions, as they are distinguished in psychology, namely anxiety. This emotion and the related reactions appear to have to do with a small area of the cerebrum, the amygdala. LeDoux's experimental approach had shown that emotion can occur without cognitive processing in the cortex. This area, i.e. the amygdala, is the heart of the emotion system. It rapidly assesses situations in respect of threat, and it does this so rapidly that this can sometimes bring about wrong decisions. In such cases we talk of a 'quick and dirty' assessment. An example of this is to be seen in the way in which we involuntarily jerk backwards when a poisonous snake strikes at us, even when it is clear that the reptile is behind a glass panel.

In his recent work, LeDoux sometimes presents an emotion as if it is more or less over and done with in 120 milliseconds and is a preconscious, pre-cognitive, more or less

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<sup>47</sup> Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, pp. 282-283.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, p. 302.

automatic excitation of an affect programme.<sup>49</sup> LeDoux proposes that emotion and cognition should be thought of as 'separate' but interacting mental functions mediated by separate but interacting brain functions. The problem is that LeDoux is not interested in processes that last more than five minutes and have a potential to last five hours, five days, or five weeks, months, or even years. For present purposes, we are interested, instead, in the meanings of life, not short-term neurological arousal.<sup>50</sup>

#### 4 LeDoux –James

The building blocks of emotions are neural systems that mediate behavioural interactions with the environment, particularly those responses that concern basic matters of survival. On this point, Joseph LeDoux found himself in sympathy with the attribution theories of Richard Lazarus.<sup>51</sup> He (Lazarus) also states that all animals have some version of this survival system in their brains, but feelings occur only in those that also have the capacity for consciousness. He followed William James in holding that emotions begin with unconscious processing of environmental stimuli, accompanied by bodily response, and that one's consciousness notices, as it were, what is taking place in the body and organizes the experience in feelings.

Lazarus identifies structures in the hypothalamus, basal forebrain and brainstem as primarily responsible for directing the physiological changes associated with emotion response. The feeling of emotions, however, is associated with neural systems involved in monitoring and sensing changes in the body and brain. Joseph LeDoux, likewise, claims a neurophysiological basis for distinguishing between emotion response and the experience of emotion. Emotion states are responses to situations presented to us by

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<sup>49</sup> Robert C. Solomon, On the Passivity of the Passions, in A.S. Manstead, N.H. Frijda, and A. Fischer (eds.) *Feelings and Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p.19.

<sup>50</sup> Robert C. Solomon, 'Emotions, Thoughts and Feelings: 'What is a Cognitive Theory' of the Emotions and Does it Neglect Affectivity?', in A. Hatzimoysis (ed.) *Philosophy and the Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*, p. 114.

the environment, and they perform these functions independently of our feeling them. Indeed, as both Damasio and LeDoux point out, it is an important feature of certain emotion responses that they occur immediately and automatically – without the need for conscious intervention. The feeling or conscious experience of the emotion occurs *after* the processes of emotional response begin to unfold.

So James seems to have been right in at least one respect: the character of the emotion experience is determined at least in part by the character of the bodily response. If the feeling is a feeling of certain bodily responses, then it cannot be what *causes* those responses. According to the feeling tradition (evident in Descartes and William James), the emotions are special states of consciousness. For example, anger is a state of unpleasant arousal characterized by trembling, increased blood pressure etc. Damasio has expanded the James-Lange theory, whereby emotions were taken to be nothing more than responses to changes in the body.<sup>52</sup> Somatic changes causing emotions now include also changes in for instance hormonal levels. Damasio also denies that emotions are always feelings; he thus allows an emotion to be present as a registration of a somatic change even when it is unconscious. He distinguishes an emotion, which corresponds to the somatic changes, and the feeling of the emotion.

### **Critical remark**

I do not endorse LeDoux' general attitude towards feelings (though I understand well why he holds it). In essence, LeDoux believes the investigative effort in our field should focus on the biological responses that constitute an emotion because these responses can be identified and manipulated in animal experiments, whereas feelings, which are

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<sup>52</sup> The question 'Why should an emotion necessarily be a disturbing conscious experience?' was answered for the first time by William James and Carl Lange, who independently offered the first theory of the emotions grounded in physiology. The thought of the James-Lange theory was that a scientific theory of the emotions required understanding them as essentially physiological and not simply psychic phenomena. See Jezze Prinz, 'Emotion, Psychosemantics, and Embodied Appraisals', in A. Hatzimoysis (ed.), *Philosophy and the Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.70.



the perception of the emotional responses, can be studied only with the cooperation of the self that experiences them. Analysing the concept of emotion shows that in fact an emotion cannot be equivalent to a set of somatic changes. There is certainly a link between somatic changes and the corresponding emotion, but this does not mean that there is equivalence. What makes a person angry is the object of his anger, for instance his being treated unjustly by a colleague at work, not the bodily changes that are aroused by a certain situation. Moreover the word 'fear' is not learnt in the same way as is the word 'toothache'. The former is associated with certain threatening situations or objects. The latter is associated with the body. The concepts related to these words, therefore, have a different structure. When Damasio considers emotions to be cognitive reactions to a somatic condition, as if fear, say, were equivalent to perceiving one's high pulse-rate, he misunderstands emotions. There is indeed a cognitive dimension to emotion. This dimension, however, does not involve the body. It involves a specific object in the world.

LeDoux's theories, like those of Damasio, support a broadly Jamesian perspective, by employing the role of the body in emotional experience. However, LeDoux is mostly interested in brief episodes of emotional experience, and this suggests that his theory may be of somewhat limited use for understanding the longer lasting, and conceptually rich, emotions that arise in some religious contexts.

## **5 Jesse Prinz**

Jesse Prinz is another contemporary emotion theorist whose ideas are broadly Jamesian. In particular, he defends the James-Lange theory that emotions are perceptions of body states. Those who reject 'cognitivism' have tended also to reject the notion that emotions form part of the rational mind. Prinz rejects cognitivism about emotions but argues for a highly unified account of emotions and other mental functions.

Prinz begins by assessing the cognitivism debate. He argues that 'cognitions are states containing representations that are under direct organism control'.<sup>53</sup> This sounds about the same as the view that cognitions are products of the will; but organismic control of the will is itself mysterious. Furthermore, Prinz goes as far as to brave a hypothesis about the brain areas that may be required for direct control: 'I propose that we call a state cognitive just in case it includes representations that are under control of structures in executive systems, which, in mammals, are found in the prefrontal cortex'.<sup>54</sup> With this working notion, Prinz concludes that emotions are not cognitive. Instead, emotions are perceptions of certain kinds of body states. Prinz has no compelling evidence that emotions are embodied appraisals. He defends the claim by reviving the long-disputed arguments of William James and Carl Lange, and reviewing the conflicting evidence regarding emotion intensity among subjects with spinal injury. Prinz tries to improve upon Damasio's theory. He substitutes Damasio's term 'emotional feeling' with 'emotional perception'. Emotional perceptions are perceptions of bodily changes. Emotional perceptions just like visual perceptions can be conscious or unconscious. Prinz explains Damasio's as-if-body-loop as follows. A visual perception of a tree can occur in the absence of causal contact with a tree; this happens in the case of visual hallucinations but also in the case of visual imaginings. In the same way, the perception of bodily changes can occur in the absence of the corresponding bodily changes; such a perception might be an emotional hallucination or an emotional imagining.

Prinz argues that if emotional perceptions can occur without the corresponding bodily changes, emotions do not necessarily involve bodily changes. So he rejects Damasio's identification of emotions with bodily changes and instead identifies emotions with emotional perceptions. Prinz also makes another important clarification. Not all perceptions of bodily changes are emotions. Itches and tickles, for example, are not. Emotions are triggered by unemotional mental states, such as visual perceptions, tactile,

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<sup>53</sup> Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions: A Perceptual Theory of Emotion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 49.

<sup>54</sup> Jesse J. Prinz, *Gut Reactions*, p. 47.

auditory, olfactory, and gustatory perceptions, as well as beliefs, imaginings, and suppositions.

So the work of Damasio, LeDoux and Prinz in different ways confirms James's claim that bodily responses are integral to emotional experience. So in this respect James's perspective continues to be a plausible option in contemporary emotion theory.

### **Alternative approaches**

Various other commentators have been reluctant to give such a large role to bodily response in their account of emotions. One such commentator is Robert. C. Solomon. The view Solomon represents is generally referred to as the 'cognitive theory of emotions', a borrowing from psychology and cognitive science. The cognitive theory has become the touchstone of all philosophical theorizing about emotion, whether one is for or against. Solomon is interested in processes that last more than five minutes and have the potential to last five hours, five days or even years. He is interested in the meaning of life, not short-term neurological arousal. He and other philosophers defend the theory that emotions are evaluative judgements, a view that can be traced back to the Stoics. Let us look now at some of these alternative approaches

### **6 Robert Solomon**

Where William James tried to reduce emotions to a physical symptom, Solomon points in the intellectual direction. According to Solomon you cannot maintain that emotions are concerned with the unconscious. Emotions are formed via judgements and decisions. Solomon proves his theory about 'cognitive emotion' by referring to the everyday use of language about emotions. According to Solomon, an emotion is a judgement or, more correctly, a set of judgements. Nonetheless, it is something we 'do', and not just something that happens to us. But in what way does the emotional judgement differ from other kinds of judgements that we make every day? Emotions are related to values and

to the things that are important to us. Emotions are self-involving, and always take their starting point from our own point of view. For Solomon, my shame is my judgement to the effect that I am responsible for an untoward situation or incident; my sadness, my sorrow, and my grief are judgements of varying severity to the effect that I have suffered a loss.<sup>55</sup> An emotion is an evaluative (or a 'normative') judgement about my situation and about myself and/or about all other people.<sup>56</sup> Just because emotions involve ourselves, they are also always dependent on the individual person and her life story.

So Solomon suggests that the reasoning component of the emotions should not be underestimated. He gives a step-by-step plan of considerations which are made when one is in love. Being in love is in fact a series of decisions. You hang around or you carry on walking. / You go out to lunch or you go to see a film. / You introduce someone to your parents. / You have sex. / You say 'I love you' or not. / You part or you marry and have children. Emotions are never inimitable phenomena of the heart. Emotions have to do with something in the world; they are relational. And emotions also have consequences for relations. Solomon also has an example here. 'We regard it to be unreasonable when someone shows no emotion on the death of a family member. In our culture grief is almost a moral duty. We even speak to others about their emotions and are indignant if people are not grief-stricken after a loss. And in this we can detect the thought which I am proposing: that people exert influence upon their emotional life'.<sup>57</sup>

In seeking for a definition of emotion, Solomon ascertains that there is on the one hand the view that emotion has an inferior role (in that it is unreliable and thus dangerous and must be controlled by reason) and on the other hand there is the view that there is a distinction between reason and emotion per se, as if they are two opposites. The

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<sup>55</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), pp. 125-126.

<sup>56</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *The Passions: Emotions and the Meaning of Life*, p. 131.

<sup>57</sup> Robert C. Solomon, 'From Emotions and Choice', in *What is an Emotion, Classic and Contemporary Readings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 224-235.

definition and the search for what emotion precisely is are, according to Solomon, governed by these two prejudices. He does not place much credence in 'theoretical' approaches; he prefers a practical one, since human beings are confronted day in day out by emotions. Solomon's thesis is based on the fact that emotion is something which is interpersonal, not simply personal, but built up through interaction with others. It seems as if Solomon has applied relativism to emotions – everything is culturally conditioned and embedded.

So in the bulk of his work, Solomon does not regard emotion as a physiological phenomenon and he maintains that it cannot be reduced to one. He claims that this line of reasoning is often used to minimise emotions and their significance for a human being and to dispense with them as simply biological phenomena. So in these respects Solomon parts company with William James, who defended the proposition, in his early work, that emotion is a series of perceptions of bodily states. In some of his later work, however, Solomon seems to come closer to James' view, by allowing that there can be judgements of the body, rather as Prinz supposed:

But as for the various physiological disturbances and disruptions that serve such a central purpose in James's analysis and in later accounts of emotion as 'arousal', I was dismissive as could be, relegating all such phenomena to the causal margins of emotion, as merely accompaniments or secondary effects. I am now coming to appreciate that accounting for the bodily feelings (not just sensations) in emotion is not a secondary concern and not independent of appreciating the essential role of the body in emotional experience.<sup>58</sup>

## **7 Peter Goldie**

Cognitivism is a view of the emotions as playing an essential role in our gaining evaluative knowledge of the world. When we are angry at an insult, or afraid of the

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<sup>58</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *Thinking about Feeling*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 85.

burglar, our emotions involve evaluative perceptions and thoughts, which are directed towards the way something is in the world that impinges on our well-being, or the well-being of those that matter to us. Goldie thinks that this account leaves out two important things about the emotions, each of which is utterly familiar to all of us. The first omission is feelings: feelings of the condition of one's body, such as the feeling of the hairs going up the back of one's neck; and feelings directed towards the object of one's emotion, such as feelings of fear directed towards the strange man approaching one in the dark alley. The second omission is that there is no mention of how profoundly and systematically our emotional feeling can mislead us: of how the emotions can distort perception and reason.

So Goldie's theory like Solomon's later work is to this extent a hybrid theory, giving a role to judgement and to bodily feeling. It might be objected at this point that, even if there is to be a place for feelings in an account of emotion, feelings are surely not going to be the sort of thing that could do anything like mislead us about the way things are – they are just not that sort of thing. Thoughts might mislead us, but according to this objection they have already been included separately within the theory of emotion. The misconception here is that feelings are brute: they can tell us nothing about the world and how to act in the world, and this is because feelings are not about anything, and if they are about anything, they are only about the condition of one's body.<sup>59</sup> Moreover, on this view, feelings are inessential and peripheral to an account of what emotions are. This misconception of the place of feelings – Goldie has called it the ADD-ON view – gives rise to an over-intellectualised view of emotional life. In fact not only are emotional feelings a potential source of knowledge; they also have a tendency to mislead us, and to do so in a systematic way, which cannot be dismissed as merely the tendency to throw up a few 'false positives'.

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<sup>59</sup> Peter Goldie, 'Getting Feelings in emotional Experience in the Right Way', in *Emotion Review* 1 (2009), pp. 232-239.

A bodily feeling, the feeling from the inside of the condition of one's body, is intentional in just this sense: the feeling is directed towards an object, one's body, as being a certain way or as undergoing certain changes. For example, when you feel an intense pain in your elbow, the object of sensation is your elbow, which feels a certain way: agonisingly painful. Many emotions, especially short-term emotions such as fear and anger, involve characteristic involuntary bodily changes – muscular reactions, hormonal changes to the autonomic nervous system, and so on. Bodily feelings can yield introspective knowledge, about the condition of your body, and about the type of emotion that you are experiencing. But they can tell us more than that. They can also yield extraspective knowledge, about the world beyond the bounds of your body. For example, you experience a feeling of cold: this feeling could give you *prima facie* reason to believe that the ambient temperature in the room has fallen, and that the central heating has turned itself off. You might be wrong, however. Your feelings might reveal something about yourself and not about the world beyond the bounds of your body: perhaps you are experiencing the first signs of flu.

When an emotion is directed towards an object, then this is a sort of feeling *towards* the object. The object need not be simply some bodily condition, but can be a thing or a person, or an action or event. When you fear the burglar, the object of your fear is a person; when you are angry about the level of unemployment, the object is a state of affairs. Feeling towards is an unreflective extraspective emotional engagement with the world beyond the body; it is not a consciousness of oneself, either of one's bodily condition or of oneself as experiencing an emotion.

So Goldie's account is a little like James's in so far as he gives a central role to feeling, but differs in so far as he emphasises the idea of 'feeling-towards'. This implies that feelings can be directed at the world rather than the body. So Goldie advocates a return to the close identification of emotions with feelings, on the ground that the divorce between them was based on false premises: in fact, feelings, too, can actually have intentional objects. He resists both reductive theories, which regard emotions as mere compounds of belief and desire, and 'add-on-theories' that view them as beliefs and

desires plus something else<sup>60</sup>. So in order to find a place for feelings in emotional experience, and to understand the intentionality of our emotions, he introduces the notion of 'feeling-towards'. Feeling towards is 'thinking of' with feeling, so that your emotional feelings are directed towards the object of your thought<sup>61</sup>. As Goldie puts the point, feeling towards is 'thinking of with feeling', in which the feeling is not 'added-on' to the thought, but in which it is 'an ineliminable part of the intentionality of emotional experience'. It is 'feeling towards' an object as being a particular way or as having certain evaluative properties or features. Goldie helpfully summarises the main themes of his account in two illustrations. For example when someone has fallen on ice for the first time, they acquire a new 'feeling towards' ice:

Coming to think of ice in this new way is not to be understood as consisting of thinking of it in the old way, plus some added-on phenomenal ingredient – feeling perhaps; rather, the whole way of experiencing, or being conscious of, the world is new.....The difference between thinking of X as Y without feeling and thinking of X as Y with feeling will not just comprise a different attitude towards the same content – a thinking which earlier was without feeling and now is with feeling. The difference also lies in the content, although it might be that this difference cannot be captured in words.<sup>62</sup>

The key point to see here is that emotional feelings can involve in their own right a particular 'take' on the world, rather than just being caused by such a view. Goldie gives another example to make the same sort of point:

Imagine you are in a zoo, looking at a gorilla grimly loping from left to right in its cage. You are thinking of the gorilla as dangerous, but you do not feel fear, as it seems to be safely behind bars. Then you see that the door to the cage has been left wide open. Just for a moment, though, you fail to put the two thoughts – the

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<sup>60</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions*, p. 40.

<sup>61</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions*, p. 19.

<sup>62</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions*, pp. 59-60.



gorilla is dangerous. The cage is open – together. Then suddenly, you do put them together: now your way of thinking of the gorilla as dangerous is new; now it is dangerous in an emotionally relevant way for you. The earlier thought, naturally expressed as ‘That gorilla is dangerous’, differs in content from the new thought, although this new thought, thought with emotional feeling, might also be naturally expressed in the same words. Now, in feeling fear towards the gorilla you are emotionally engaged with the world, and, typically, you are poised for action in a new way – poised for action out of the emotion.<sup>63</sup>

Here we might suppose that the extra intellectual content in the ‘new thought’ involves an integration of the earlier thoughts, and that emotional feelings provide therefore a way of grasping the overall significance of various discrete ideas. This idea might provide one way of thinking about their religious importance, since the religions are concerned with the ‘overall significance’ of things.

## 8 John Deigh

John Deigh is another philosopher who has taken seriously the idea of emotional feelings as directed at the world. I shall discuss his view briefly next. Deigh’s model can be summarized in these terms: in certain ‘primitive’ contexts, we can take stock of the character of the world through feeling, and independently of the mediating influence of any discursive thought. To make this point Deigh notes a distinction between ‘being sensible of something’ and ‘having a concept of it’. For example, a mouse might be transfixed by the gaze of a cat, where this is not a matter of the mouse thinking of the harm that might befall it were the cat to get closer, but a non-conceptually-mediated apprehension of some quality of the cat. In this case, we could say that the mouse is ‘sensible’ of the cat’s scariness without bringing the cat’s appearance under the ‘concept’ of danger.<sup>64</sup> Emotions on this view are more than mere feelings or

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<sup>63</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions*, p. 61.

<sup>64</sup> Mark Wynn, *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 93.

physiological syndromes; they involve cognition, evaluative judgments and engagement with the world. Not all instances of emotion require beliefs and our emotions and beliefs can often conflict with one another. For example, one can experience fear upon looking down from a precipice, even when one knows that one is in no danger of falling. Moreover, animals and human infants experience what appear to be emotions, even though they are incapable of holding propositional beliefs. Robert Roberts has objected to the view of emotions as propositional attitudes that this would have the effect of excluding animals and infants lacking language from the emotional life. In fact, animals seem to have a range of distinguishable emotions that parallel the main types of adult human emotions, while not having the kind of language necessary to formulate the propositions that elicit, express, and structure the human emotions in later life.<sup>65</sup>

So Deigh's view is a little like Goldie's to this extent: he treats emotional feelings as world-directed in their own right. He goes further than Goldie in supposing that emotional feelings can operate independently of conceptual thought, as when we are 'sensible' of something through feeling, without having a concept of it.

## 9 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have reviewed the perspectives of a number of emotion theorists, with a view to showing that James's understanding of the emotions is still broadly viable, even if it requires development on some points. Two conclusions in particular have been identified. First, bodily feelings do indeed have an integral part to play in our emotional life. This is a finding that is central to recent reflection on emotion of the kind that is found in authors such as Damasio and LeDoux. Secondly, we need not think of emotional feelings as simply directed towards the body. Instead, they can be directed at

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<sup>65</sup> Robert C. Roberts, 'Propositions and Animal Emotion', *Philosophy* 71 (1996), pp. 146 – 56.

the world, as Goldie, Deigh and others have insisted. As Solomon has noted in his later work, these two sides of our emotional life can be connected because responses of the body can themselves imply some understanding of the world, and what sort of practical response to the world is appropriate. Having set James's account of the emotions in the context of some recent philosophical discussion of the emotions, I want next to consider how his approach relates to theological literature on the emotions.

## CHAPTER 3 COMPARISON OF JAMES AND THE THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE

### 1 Introduction

Having set out James's views of the nature of emotion, and the relation between religion and emotion, and having shown that his conception of emotion has enduring validity given the recent scientific and philosophical literature on the subject, in this chapter, I am going to compare James's approach with various theological accounts of the religious significance of emotion. In this way we can further assess the importance of James's own discussion. I am going to concentrate on three figures: John Henry Newman, Rudolf Otto and Jonathan Edwards.<sup>66</sup>

### 2 John Henry Newman

John Henry Newman's *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* is a very significant contribution to the epistemology of religious belief.<sup>67</sup> It bears upon some of the most fundamental questions of the philosophy of belief such as: Is belief a passive state of mind, or an active one? Can it be under the influence of the will and how? Are beliefs dispositional or functional states, essentially related to action, or are they independent from it? Is believing a unified mental state, or is it a genus of which there are several kinds? Is belief a relationship to concrete entities, such as sentences, images or representations, or to abstract entities, such as propositions? Do beliefs have degrees? Newman attempts to answer a number of these questions, more or less explicitly. His aim is of course to use his discussion for a philosophical account of religious belief, to which he devotes two specific chapters (Chapters V and X of his book).

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<sup>66</sup> Although I do not engage with their work here, Thomas Dixon's *From Passions to Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) and Geoff Dumbreck's *Schleiermacher and Religious Feeling* (Leuven: Peeters, 2012) both provide important treatments of the contribution of emotional experience to religious life.

<sup>67</sup> *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Image Books, 1955).

One of the most striking features of Newman's analysis of belief in the *Essay* is that he does not talk so much about belief as about 'assent'. For Newman, 'assent' is the generic attitude of which 'belief' is a species. Assent is acceptance of a proposition as true. 'Real' assent always rests upon a particular experience of a thinking subject, such as a perception, although it can be kept in memory. In other terms, it rests upon the apprehension of an individual thing. It is what for Newman is properly called 'Belief'.

Real Assent then, or Belief, as it may be called, viewed in itself, that is, simply as Assent, does not lead to action; but the images in which it lives, representing as they do the concrete, have the power of the concrete upon the affections and passions, and by means of these indirectly become operative.<sup>68</sup>

Notional apprehension and notional assent, on the contrary, are relations to abstract and general entities. Newman explains the distinction between real and notional assent in these terms:

I have in a measure anticipated the subject of Real Assent by what I have been saying about Notional. In comparison of the directness and force of the apprehension, which we have of an object, when our assent is to be called real, notional Assent and Inference seem to be thrown back into one and the same class of intellectual acts, though the former of the two is always an unconditional acceptance of a proposition, and the latter is an acceptance on the condition of an acceptance of its premisses. In its notional assents as well as in its inferences, the mind contemplates its own creations instead of things; in real, it is directed towards things, represented by the impressions which they have left on the imagination. These images, when assented to, have an influence both on the individual and on society, which mere notions cannot exert.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> *Grammar of Assent*, p. 86.

<sup>69</sup> *Grammar of Assent*, p. 76.

So Newman distinguishes between 'things' or 'images' as distinct from 'notions' or the concept of a thing. His view depends then on these contrasts:

things	as opposed to	ideas
things		constructions
things		words
facts		notions
images		notions
reality		theory
reality		notions

Each of these oppositions contains a fine nuance of difference in meaning, but they all have to do with the same fundamental distinction, namely between the concrete and the abstract. This distinction will prove to be a key to understanding Newman's philosophy. Newman distinguishes between ideas which are abstractions of the understanding and things which are concrete. Thus he says, 'What is indicated in the terms of a proposition? Sometimes they simply mean only certain ideas which exist in our understanding, sometimes they mean things which are simply outside our existence and which our intellect has attained to by means of the experiences and information which we have'.<sup>70</sup>

Some contemporary commentators have argued that Newman's distinction between real and notional assent has an important role to play in understanding the relationship between reason and action. Wessel Stoker puts the point in these terms:

The distinction between the logical validity of an argument and its power of persuasion obtains with respect to both religious and secular life. Let us take smoking as an example. 'Smoking kills', it says on my box of cigars. In spite of this, most smokers are not convinced by such arguments, because their passion for smoking is too great. Newman's distinction between notional and real assent

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<sup>70</sup> *Grammar of Assent*, Chapter 1, p. 29.

clarifies this. The smoker will intellectually assent to the logical validity of the argument (notional assent), but that is different from being persuaded by the argument (real assent). Only if the smoker lets go of his passion for smoking can he assent in a real way to the argument against smoking. Given the strong arguments against smoking, the smoker is to be viewed as irrational. We are not dealing here with a commitment that goes beyond the evidence for it, but the choice to smoke is in conflict with strong reasons against it, at least if one sees the choice for life as a positive value.<sup>71</sup>

As we have seen, James thinks of emotions as very often caused by stimuli in the environment. So on this account, first hand experience of an object is integral to emotional experience in the normal case. So on this point, James's account of emotion turns out to be a little like Newman's account of real assent, by which he means emotionally engaged response to an object, rather than merely verbal assent to some proposition. And as Stoker points out here, this sort of emotionally engaged response is often the key to believing of the kind that can lead a person to action.

According to Newman, emotions such as shame, anxiety, etc. are aroused by the conscience. If the object of these emotions does not belong to the visible world, then the object, Newman infers, must be supernatural and divine; and so the phenomena of conscience can involve a perception of a supreme governor. Here we see that Newman's commitment to the connection between emotional feeling and the existence of a correlative object leads him into metaphysics. He explains the point in these terms:

Conscience too, considered as a moral sense, an intellectual sentiment, is a sense of admiration and disgust, of approbation and blame: but it is something more than a moral sense; it is always what the sense of the beautiful is only in certain cases; it is always emotional. No wonder then that it always implies what that sense only sometimes implies; that it always involves the recognition of a

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<sup>71</sup> Wessel Stoker, *Is Faith Rational? A Hermeneutical-Phenomenological Accounting for Faith* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), p. 194.

living object, towards which it is directed.....These feelings in us are such as require for their exciting cause an intelligent being: we are not affectionate towards a stone, nor do we feel shame before a horse or a dog; we have no remorse or compunction on breaking mere human law: yet, so it is, conscience excites all these painful emotions, confusion, foreboding, self-condemnation; and on the other hand it sheds upon us a deep peace, a sense of security, a resignation, and a hope, which there is no sensible, no earthly object to elicit. ...If the cause of these emotions does not belong to this visible world, the Object to which his perception is directed must be Supernatural and Divine; and thus the phenomena of Conscience, as a dictate, avail to impress the imagination with the picture of a Supreme Governor, a Judge, holy, just, powerful, all-seeing, retributive, and this is the creative principle of religion, as the Moral Sense is the principle of ethics.<sup>72</sup>

In this passage, Newman is treating the feelings of conscience as ‘feelings towards’ in Goldie’s terms. He believes that real assent to God’s existence depends on experience of this kind, when God is encountered feelingly in experience, rather than just spoken about in words or creeds. So there is, he would say, a distinction between having a notion of God as judge, and having a real image of God as judge. The second, but not the first, must be based upon first-hand experience, and in particular first-hand experience of the moral emotions which he mentions in this passage. The view expressed in this passage might suggest that in general doctrine comes after emotion, just as the belief that there is a God who is our judge is derived from emotionally informed moral experience. This is exactly the approach that James defends, as we shall see more fully in Chapter 4. But in fact, Newman differs from James in supposing that in general doctrine comes before emotion and serves as an appropriate way of checking it. He comments for example that in emotional experience concerning God:

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<sup>72</sup> *Grammar of Assent*, pp. 100-101.



Knowledge must ever precede the exercise of the affections. We feel gratitude and love, we feel indignation and dislike, when we have informations actually put before us which are to kindle those several hope, or trust towards Him.<sup>73</sup>

Newman also says that in the religious experience both one's imagination and one's affections must be controlled by reason. So Newman is more sympathetic than James to the role of reason, and in turn of course to the role of the Church, in regulating emotion.<sup>74</sup> Unlike James, he does not give emotion a foundational role relative to theology or religions. In sum then, for Newman as for James, true religion implies first hand experience and the involvement of the heart, but whereas James puts emotional experience first, Newman begins, officially at least, with doctrine.

### 3 Rudolf Otto

We have seen that Newman like James emphasises the role of first hand experience of an object in emotional experience. But he differs from James in giving precedence to doctrine over emotional feeling. Rudolf Otto is closer to James on this point. In his book *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Otto approaches religious feeling from a phenomenological standpoint. The phenomenologically distinctive character of religious experience is often ignored. The most specific religious feelings Otto calls numinous feelings, whereby we experience the numinous. These feelings he calls non-rational. He is searching for the association between this irrational feeling and rational religious knowledge or belief. He is of the opinion that the holy is an a priori category of human experience, and that numinous feelings are irreducible to other kinds of feeling.

A central feature of Otto's account is his suggestion that the numinous is experienced first in feeling, and that doctrines come later and never succeed fully in capturing what is

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<sup>73</sup> *Grammar of Assent*, p. 109.

<sup>74</sup> Mark Wynn, *Emotional Experience and Religious Understanding: Integrating Perception, Conception and Feeling* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p.147.

revealed in feeling. However Otto differs from James when he argues that religious experience is unique and not to be confused phenomenologically with other kinds of experience. By contrast James says that religious experience differs in its object but not otherwise. Otto explains the character of numinous experience using the expression the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. The *mysterium* component has two elements.<sup>75</sup> Firstly, the numinous is experienced as 'wholly other'. Secondly, there is the element of fascination, which causes the subject of the experience of the numinous to be caught up in it, to be enraptured.

It is worth noting that the German 'heilig' can be rendered as either 'holy' or 'sacred'. So in the context of Otto's work, for 'holy' it is possible to read 'sacred': the religious experience he discusses is the experience of the sacred. We go on to indicate in concrete terms the experience he is considering. It is the deepest and most fundamental element in all strong and sincerely felt religious emotion.

So Otto's phenomenology of religious experience differs in emphasis from James's account in *The Varieties*. James accentuates the contribution of the feeling of unhappiness and mystic emotion, and both of these seem rather different from the experience Otto is describing. However, Otto and James agree that it is in feeling that our sense of religious reality begins.

J. van Schaijik's argues that Newman, while agreeing with Rudolf Otto on the importance of experience (for Newman, above all the experience of conscience) for knowing God, parts company with Otto in seeing the need to integrate such experience with rational reflection. 'In contrast to Otto', he writes, Newman 'shows that not only is there no real conflict between experiential and rational knowledge of God, but, in fact, each aspect can be genuinely what it is only in intrinsic union with the other.'<sup>76</sup> Although van Schaijik thinks Newman's view is superior to Otto's on this point, it is clear James would

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<sup>75</sup> Rudolf Otto, 'Das Heilige' (Breslau: Trewendt und Granier, 1920), p.13vv.

<sup>76</sup> Jules van Schaijik, 'Newman and Otto on Religious Experience', *Communio, International Catholic Review* (2001), Volume 28, No. 4, pp. 729-744.

side with Otto, in so far as he thinks that the most fundamental religious feelings come before doctrine.

So Otto's approach, like Newman's, helps to bring James's account into clearer focus, and to show how it might be developed on some points. In particular, Otto provides another kind of phenomenology for developing the Jamesian point that it is in feeling that we find the first clue to the nature of religious reality. It is interesting to note that Otto's approach emphasises the transcendence and 'over-againstness' of sacred reality. By contrast, when he says that inner unhappiness and the need for deliverance are the beginnings of religion thought, James places the emphasis more on human needs and concerns. To this extent James's approach is more easily connected to pastoral or therapeutic concerns.

## **4 Jonathan Edwards**

### **4.1 Introduction**

Jonathan Edwards introduced the notion of 'religious affects' or affections into the English-speaking world and using this notion he further elaborated the picture of man established by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. In contrast to the simply physical passions, religious affections are a sort of feeling which arise from 'the knowledge of divine matters', as Edwards expresses it in his *Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* (1746).

In German philosophy this line is continued by Friedrich Schleiermacher, when he recognizes the real sources and origin of religion in feelings. Augustine too had suggested that when the passion of love is correctly tuned it leads man to God and lifts him above his low, sinful nature.<sup>77</sup> This is the same thought which we find in Thomas Aquinas, who recognizes in love towards God the ultimate objective of man's desires.

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<sup>77</sup> Willem van Vlastuin, *De Geest van Opwekking* (Heerenveen: Groen, 2001), p.17.

It is against this patristic and medieval background that eighteenth century Protestant Christianity developed a growing appreciation for the inner life and inner feelings of the believer, for instance in pietism. The role of music in the ritual commemoration of Easter must be understood in this context (e.g. Johann Sebastian Bach's St Matthew's Passion). Music is, as it were, the language of the spirit and the feelings, which supersedes the merely verbal with its own power of expression.<sup>78</sup> In a recent study about human emotions Martha Nussbaum suggests that music allows, in a specific way, access to the human person's emotions more than any other form of art. It is as if by music a dimension of the emotional life is tapped into which remains inaccessible by mere discursive reasoning.<sup>79</sup>

Music played an important role in Edwards's religious experience. His favourite expression of prayer was singing God's praises while walking in the woods. The beautiful harmony of congregational song in the Awakening gave him a new image of heaven: the faithful singing to God and to each other.<sup>80</sup> Harmony brings two or more sounds into union and leads the melody forward; there is a deeper union that these harmonies image for those who love God: the union of diverse chords reflects the union of hearts in loving community.

#### 4.2 Edwards in historical context

Throughout American history there have been revivals. The first of these American revivals, and probably the one by which all others are judged, is known as the Great Awakening (1740-41). After lifelessness in the church, God, the revivalists claimed, was pleased to pour out His Spirit and awaken new life in Christ and fresh love for God. However, along with legitimate spiritual awakenings there were also increasing numbers of

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<sup>78</sup> Willem Lemmens, 'De Passie van het Christendom', *Tertio* (2005), No. 262, pp. 8-10.

<sup>79</sup> Music and Emotion', in Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought*, p. 249.

<sup>80</sup> Willem van Vlastuin, *De Geest van Opwekking* (Heerenveen: Groen, 2001), p. 94.

counterfeit spiritual experiences. Perhaps no one had a greater understanding of this problem than Jonathan Edwards:

On the one hand Edwards wanted to defend the genuine and necessary place of affections in religious experience. On the other hand, he was ruthlessly devoted to objective truth and wanted all emotion to be rooted in a true apprehension of reality.<sup>81</sup>

Edwards' defence of the revivals and criticisms of its excesses culminated in his first major treatise, the *Religious Affections* (1746). Initially Edwards defended many of the odd or unusual experiences of the Awakening against the critics. But he also argued that genuine spiritual life and an illuminated understanding of truth, while involving the emotions, should not result in persons being extraordinarily excited and enthusiastic.

Edwards trod a narrow path between several dichotomous positions: between traditional Calvinist teaching and Enlightenment thinking; between passionate experience and cool intellectual rationality; between intellectualism and personal embodied experience. In these matters, Edwards persistently pursued a middle ground that upheld Calvin's teaching and acknowledged the affections, ideas and possibilities implicit in contemporary culture. For example, Edwards firmly agreed that human reason could, and would, contribute to one's understanding of God through the experience and observation of nature, history and personal experience. He was also clear that the affections were a God-given gift of grace to help us turn towards God, rather than simply dismissing the passions and emotive responses commonly associated with conversion experiences. This represents his essential view of religion. The following passage reflects this same emphasis:

All will allow that true virtue or holiness has its seat chiefly in the heart, rather than in the head. It therefore follows, that it consists chiefly in holy affections. The

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<sup>81</sup> John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory: Living the Vision of Jonathan Edwards* (Wheaton, ILL: Crossway Books, 1998), p. 93.

things of religion take place in men's hearts, no further than they are affected with them. The informing of the understanding is all vain, any farther than it affects the heart, or, which is the same thing, has influence on the affections.<sup>82</sup>

This brings us to the location of affections in the soul. An affection, for Edwards, is a strong inclination of the heart toward an object which the person perceives, for example the delight of the heart in something. As Edwards puts it, 'the affections are no other than the more vigorous exercises of the inclination and will of the soul'.<sup>83</sup> Affections are thus not a separate faculty of the soul; they are a particular activity of the will, which in turn to be held together with the mind by the concept of the heart. Edwards writes:

The will, and the affections of the soul, are not two faculties; the affections are not essentially distinct from the will, nor do they differ from the mere actings of the will and inclination of the soul, but only in the liveness and sensibleness of exercise.<sup>84</sup>

If we study Calvin's teaching about the gifts of the Spirit, the headline news is that he sees them as a sort of sacrament for all times. He declares that God in extraordinary times can give extraordinary gifts. Edwards stresses that the ordinary gifts of the Spirit are more important than the extraordinary gifts. He means the gifts of humility, faith, love, and so on.<sup>85</sup> In Edwards we find a greater openness as far as the emotions are concerned than in Calvin. Edwards sees the human soul as a unity of will and understanding. For the spiritual life affects are of real importance. Calvin approaches this differently. What is of primary importance for him is understanding. As a result of this other approach there is in Edwards more room for experience.

Around the awakening there were and are three positions. First, there are the more rational Christians who maintain that experience is not essential for Christianity. The

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<sup>82</sup> John Piper, *God's Passion for His Glory*, p. 367.

<sup>83</sup> Jonathan Edwards, in John E. Smith, ed., *The Work of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 2, 'Religious Affections' (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 96.

<sup>84</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, Part 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 1971), p.17.

<sup>85</sup> Willem van Vlastuin, *De Geest van Opwekking* (Heerenveen: Groen, 2001), p. 90.

second stance is of the hyper-spirituals for whom all 'head-knowledge' was false. The third group is between these two wings. They acknowledge the work of God in the emotional experiences of during the revival, but they are not uncritical towards all the associated phenomena. Edwards endorses this final view. Emotions and extraordinary experiences loomed so large among the awakened in 1740-1741 that a reaction set in. Not only rationalist opponents of the revivals but tradition-minded orthodox believers were put off by the extremism and began to affirm a more socially oriented form of church life. *A Treatise Concerning Religious Affections* is Edwards's response to this challenge. He denied that 'religious' feelings or 'bodily sensations' are necessarily spiritual, because in themselves they are nothing more than 'the motion of the blood and animal spirits'. Rather, it is not the body, but the mind (i.e. heart, will) only, that is the proper seat of the affections. Spiritual affections will always to some degree produce sensations, because body and soul are united, but 'religious' sensations can be caused by other stimuli than the Holy Spirit and by themselves they tell us nothing about the workings of God in the soul. Still, contrary to those who held that reason and morality defined true religion, Edwards placed 'fervent, vigorous engagedness of the heart' at the centre of Christian faith and life.<sup>86</sup> In short, Edwards's argumentation is that the awakening is a work of God. But he acknowledges that there are also unspiritual features in the Great Awakening. His main theme is that Christians too can have their sins and make mistakes.

It is clear, then, that Edwards distinguishes religious feeling and bodily arousal. James thinks there is a closer connection, since he thinks that feelings are ways of registering changes in the body. Moreover, Edwards like Newman places religious knowledge before religious feeling, since he thinks that religious affections are a response to perceptual data. Here Edwards demonstrates his dependence on John Locke (1632-1704), whose theory of knowledge and psychology of the mind were to become basic principles for Edwards's exposition and defence of the religious experiences manifested during the Great Awakening. In the *Religious Affections*, Edwards offers a defence of the view that true religion is action arising from the experience of religious affections. The

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<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Edwards, *Religious Affections*, p.18.

contents of the mind, according to Locke, are ultimately derived from only two sources: simple ideas are created by our interaction with sensible qualities in things of the sensible world, and out of our mental experience.<sup>87</sup> Locke suggested, then, that real knowledge came through experience, which formed in the mind 'simple ideas', which were then manipulated by the mind to form more 'complex ideas'. All ideas were in some way results of information received from experience. Locke denied any role for the affections in true knowledge, whereas Edwards was clear that when we know God truly our affections are, and must be, inclined to him. This highlights that for Edwards the spiritual sense is definitely not just another sense like taste or smell. Rather it is a sense resulting from the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit, not an empirical sense relating merely to the physical world.

So for Edwards spiritual knowledge is based on a new 'simple idea', an irreducible idea which derives from first hand encounter with God.

...all spiritual and gracious affections are attended with and do arise from some apprehension, idea, or sensation of mind, which is in its whole nature different, yea, exceeding different, from all that is, or can be in the mind of a natural man; and which the natural man discerns nothing of, and has no manner of idea of (agreeable to 1 Cor.2: 14), and conceives of no more than a man without the sense of tasting can conceive the sweet taste of honey, or a man without the sense of hearing can conceive of the melody of a tune, or a man born blind can have notion of the beauty of the rainbow.<sup>88</sup> ... that idea which the saint has of the loveliness of God, and that sensation, and that kind of delight he has in that view, which is as it were the marrow and quintessence of his love, is peculiar, and entirely diverse from any thing that a natural man has, or can have any notion of.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Robert C. Solomon, *Thinking about Feeling: Contemporary Philosophers on Emotions* (Oxford: University Press, 2004), pp. 12-14.

<sup>88</sup> *Religious Affections*, p. 74.

<sup>89</sup> *Religious Affections*, p. 74.



So for Edwards, there is a way of testing whether an emotional experience is religiously authentic. If it is, it will have a quite different character phenomenologically from any emotional experience produced by a natural object. This emphasis on the 'peculiarity' of religious feeling is reminiscent of Otto, but Edwards's approach remains different from Otto's because he supposes that this feeling is produced by a prior perception of God which is not itself affectively toned. On this view, a new apprehension of God generates a new idea of God's loveliness. And that idea generates a new delight in God.

When we taste honey for the first time, we are eager and able to tell others about the sweetness. Edwards's preaching we could say exploded from within his personal experience. He simply wanted for his fellow Christians the sweetness that he and others had already tasted. For Edwards, it is God's attractiveness or 'loveliness' that draws out our emotional response, whereas for Newman it is (sometimes anyway) the knowledge of God as judge, and associated experiences of shame and remorse, that shapes our emotions in religious contexts. However, Edwards' emphasis on the influence of first hand experience is like Newman's view of the need for first hand experience if one is to have a 'real image' rather than just a 'notion' of God.

Alvin Plantinga has described Edwards as requiring the right phenomenology for spiritual knowledge, a phenomenology only available to the regenerate.

In the fall into sin, Edwards thinks, we human beings lost a certain cognitive ability to apprehend God's moral qualities. With conversion comes regeneration; part of the latter is the regeneration (to a greater or lesser extent) of this cognitive ability to grasp or apprehend the beauty, sweetness, amiability of the lord himself and of the whole scheme of salvation. And it is just this cognitive ability that involves the new simple idea. And one who doesn't have this new simple idea – one in whom the cognitive process in question has not been regenerated – doesn't have spiritual knowledge of God's beauty and loveliness.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 299.

So Edwards's position is like James's in so far as both see religious feeling as vital in deep religious conviction. But Edwards's view is tied to this Lockean picture, according to which felt responses generate a new idea of the attractiveness of God. By contrast, as we shall see more fully in Chapter 4, for James, felt responses lead a person into new reflection about religion, by giving them a therapeutic kind of reason to think about, and take an interest in, religious questions.

Edwards's approach is nicely illustrated in the famous account he gives of an experience he once had:

Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view, that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent, with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception – which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears, and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust; and to be full of Christ alone; to love him with a holy and pure love; to trust in him; to live upon him; to serve and follow him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have several other times had views very much of the same nature, and which have the same effects.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>91</sup> *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol. 1 ed. Edward Hickman (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), p. xlvii.

We can see, then, that in religious contexts, Edwards rejects the idea of a neutral intellectual perception with no inclination, but believes that the whole person is involved in perceiving. The heart, the whole person, either loves or hates that which is perceived, and love and hate are affections, as, for example, are fear, hope, desire, joy, sorrow, gratitude, compassion, and zeal. This interest in the relationship between affection and will indicates that for Edwards the affections are tied to conduct. James too, of course thinks of the emotions as action-orienting, and he represents the emotional strand of religious life as connected to behaviour and the choice of a way of life.

Moreover, Edwards argued that knowledge of God without positive inclination would be sinful knowledge, so that true affections are a necessary part of true religion: you cannot rightly know God and not be inclined towards him. Given his greatness, attraction to him is necessary. To be un-inclined to God would be to deny who he is. Hence Edwards argues that the greatness of God requires the exercise of strong affections if we are to know him for what he is:

The things of religion are so great, that there can be no suitableness in the exercises of our heart, to their nature and importance, unless they be lively and powerful.<sup>92</sup>

So for Edwards, we can test the authenticity or truthfulness of religious experience not only by reference to its phenomenology, and its capacity to generate a new simple idea of the loveliness of God, but also by reference to its implications for behaviour. A test of the genuineness of religious experience is the way of life which flows from it, because the right affections will involve the right inclinations to conduct. This interest in behaviour as a test of the real character of religious belief is similar to James's tendency to take action as a measure of belief. For James, belief is typically tied to what a person does whether it is in leaping chasm or following a path down a mountainside. Edwards challenges people of faith by setting the standard of spirituality at the level of vigorous response.

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<sup>92</sup> *Religious Affections*, p.19.

Edwards provides a response to introspective, self-focused religion with his awareness that true affections involve a response to an object, and associated behaviour in relation to that object. Genuine response to God's love must be a loving response: to love God and whatever God loves. It must be more than just assent to true doctrine. Often, evangelical religion today seems to be a celebration of self or of one's own experience. Edwards provides guidelines for keeping the focus on God. For Edwards, reason is capable of knowing God, but only when one's cognitive faculties are rightly disposed. God cannot be properly known by 'objective' reason that has not been enlivened by spiritual experience, and spiritual experience includes the religious affections.

## **5 Conclusions**

In this chapter, we have examined three authors each of whom emphasises the contribution of feeling to religious life. John Henry Newman allows us to see how the idea of 'feeling towards' can be applied to experience of God. So like James, he sees emotional feelings as tightly connected to the intellectual content of religious belief. Jonathan Edwards agrees with James that religious belief is inherently emotional and practical: genuine belief will always show itself in what a person feels, and in turn what they do. Lastly, Rudolf Otto's approach agrees with James in placing emotional feeling at the root of religion, rather than doctrine, or non-emotional perception. Having set James's ideas within a wider intellectual context, provided by philosophical theories of emotions and the work of theologians, we can now return to these ideas to reach a judgement about their usefulness for an account of the relationship of religion and emotion in contemporary debate.

## CHAPTER 4 TESTING THE MODELS

### Introduction

The object of this chapter is to take the four accounts of the emotions that we have considered in earlier chapters taken from *Principles of Psychology* [PP], 'Sentiment of Rationality' [SR], 'Will to Believe' [WB], and the *Varieties of Religious Experience* [VRE] and to see how these accounts can be applied to James's discussion of particular religious experiences in the VRE.

In Chapter 1, I considered emotional experience as a bodily disturbance (PP), emotional experience as starting off discursive thought (SR), emotion as underpinning the will to believe (WB) and the emotions as the ground for philosophical / theological reflection (VRE). In Chapters 2 and 3, I considered how these accounts might be developed or tested, using the wider literature on emotion in Philosophy and Theology. In the present chapter I shall examine some themes from these works and see if they apply to the reports of religious experience James discusses in VRE. I am going to concentrate on the models of emotion derived from James and concentrate on passages in VRE that are relevant to each of PP, WTB, and SR. The next step will be to discuss these texts in VRE and ask whether I can understand these texts using the models I have developed.

So this chapter is divided according to the following themes: the involvement of the body in emotional experience (PP); the emotional benefits of religious commitment and the self-fulfilling character of some expectations or commitments (WTB); and the idea that feeling comes before reason and the idea of salient perception (SR). We shall also examine passages relevant to Goldie's account of emotional feelings and salient perception (Chapter 2), and Newman's discussion of the distinction between a real image and a notion (Chapter 3). The general idea is to test the fruitfulness of these theoretical themes by seeing whether they illuminate the reports James provides in VRE.

## 1.1 Principles of Psychology

Here William James says that in emotions in which bodily sensation is implicated, this sensation is prior to emotional feeling and not the other way around. James is correct that the affective dimension of many emotions is bodily, but there is a distinction between a sensation felt at a particular place in the body and the way the body, as a whole, feels. It is a misunderstanding to say that emotion is only a result of biological processes.

[i] The following passage notes the involvement of powerful bodily sensations in some forms of emotional experience.

The feeling had something of the quality of a very large tearing vital pain spreading chiefly over the chest, but within the organism – and yet the feeling was not pain so much as abhorrence. At all events, something was present with me, and I knew its presence far more surely than I have ever known the presence of any fleshly living creature. I was conscious of its departure as of its coming: an almost instantaneously swift going through the door, and the 'horrible sensation' disappeared.<sup>93</sup>

In 'The Reality of the Unseen' in VRE, James suggests that there are other ways of knowing than the conventional sensory ways. The argument here is that we can experience the presence of a thing without registering it in ordinary sensory terms. The key thing is that these perceptions, which come from another source than sensory input, create beliefs which make a difference in human life. James puts the point in these terms: 'It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call "something there", more deep and more general than any of the special and particular "senses" by which the current

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<sup>93</sup> William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (London: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 59-60.

psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed.<sup>94</sup> In the quoted passage James's source notes how he experienced a localized sensation, but took this bodily feeling to point to some reality external to his body. In this experience emotional feeling is treated as having a bodily location. So on this point the account is like the account James gives in PP. But the feeling is not simply a feeling of bodily condition, but is taken to be a way of recognizing the presence of something outside the body. James relates a number of firsthand accounts of visitations, of instances where reliable people were certain that however improbable it might seem, they were being visited by some indefinable presence. The source just quoted also writes as follows.

It was about September, 1884, when I had the first experience. On the previous night I had had, after getting into bed at my rooms in College, a vivid tactile hallucination of being grasped by the arm, which made me get up and search the room for an intruder; but the sense of presence properly so called came on the next night. After I had got into bed and blown out the candle, I lay awake awhile thinking on the previous night's experience, when suddenly I felt something come into the room and stay close to my bed.<sup>95</sup>

The key thing to note in this passage, as in the first passage, is that the bodily feeling involves some awareness of something outside the person. So here the emotional feeling seems to be both bodily and world-directed. The experience of 'being grasped by the arm' involves a sensation that points to some external source. Similarly, the pain in the chest in the first example points beyond itself to some external source.

This account combines the account we find in PP with Goldie's picture of emotional feeling as feelings towards. Goldie argues that emotional feelings are not just bodily feelings, and proposes an intentionality of feelings, called feeling towards, a thinking with feeling that is directed toward the object of one's thought. As he says:

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<sup>94</sup> VRE, p. 58.

<sup>95</sup> VRE, p. 59.

We first have an emotional response to an object, a feeling which is often quite primitive.... Then, we become reflectively aware of this feeling towards the object of emotion.<sup>96</sup>

In his book *Feelings of Being*, Matthew Ratcliffe says that bodily feelings can also be feelings towards and he introduces 'existential feelings' as a distinct group of feelings, and part of the structure of intentionality. He is building on and also challenging Goldie's distinction between bodily feelings and feelings towards. Ratcliffe explains the idea of existential feelings in these terms. 'For all of us, there are times when the world can feel unfamiliar, unreal, unusually real, homely, distant or close'. He also comments that: 'All experiences have a background, a changeable sense of one's relationship with the world'.<sup>97</sup> In many respects he agrees with James. He notes that James's theory of emotion is often criticized for putting emphasis on bodily feelings, so neglecting the cognitive aspects of emotion, but Ratcliffe clearly thinks that this is a simplistic reading of James. The 'later' James shows that bodily feelings are part of the structure of intentionality. Ratcliffe gives in his book a sort of a rehabilitation of James's account of emotion.<sup>98</sup> It is worth noting that existential feelings in Ratcliffe's sense are feelings of bodily condition which concern the body as a whole, rather than being localized sensations. For example the feeling of being jetlagged is a feeling of the condition of the body as a whole, and not just a localized feeling of discomfort. And when a person is jetlagged the world can appear differently to them. So jetlag is not just a feeling of bodily condition, but is also concerned with the world outside the body, although it is not usually directed at a specific item of experience, in the way that fear of a dog is, for example.

[ii] James describes a second kind of case where the bodily feeling is treated as something which points beyond itself. Here too the bodily feeling points to

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<sup>96</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002) p. 45.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being: Phenomenology, psychiatry and the Sense of Reality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> Ratcliffe, *Feelings of Being*, Chapter 8.



something in the world, but not directly as in perception, but in this case only indirectly, by way of an inference.

At first, I began to feel my heart beat very quick all on a sudden, which made me at first think that perhaps something is going to ail me, though I was not alarmed, for I felt no pain. My heart increased in its beating, which soon convinced me that it was the Holy Spirit from the effect it had on me.<sup>99</sup>

As in the PP model, the experience of bodily disturbance comes first. So this passage like the first involves strong bodily feeling. But unlike the first, the feeling leads in this case to an inference about its cause. So this is not a case of feeling towards. It's simply a bodily feeling which is then explained by thinking about what its cause might plausibly be. The feeling here is not functioning as a mode of perception, but simply provides data which are then explained. The person who had this experience appeals to Paul's letter to the Romans Chapter 8 to explain more fully what he feels.

And it appeared to me just as if the New Testament was placed open before me, eighth chapter of Romans, and as light as if some candle lighted was held for me to read the 26th and 27th verses of that chapter, and I read these words: 'The Spirit helpeth our infirmities with groanings which cannot be uttered.' And all the time that my heart was a-beating, it made me groan like a person in distress, which was not very easy to stop, though I was in no pain at all, and my brother being in bed in another room came and opened the door, and asked me if I had got the toothache.

So here the author understands his groaning by reference to the faster beating of his heart and he uses the text of Paul to associate his experience with the activity of the Holy Spirit. So the explanation in this case uses ideas drawn from scripture.

[iii] James also notes cases of emotional experience when there appears to be no bodily feeling. For example in his discussion of mysticism, he is again interested in the idea

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<sup>99</sup> VRE, p. 191.

that there are ways of knowing other than those of the senses. And here he points to experiences when awareness of the body seems to cease. For example he writes that 'intellect and senses both swoon away in these highest states of ecstasy'.<sup>100</sup> This text suggests that the body ceases to be involved at all directly, at least in the consciousness of the mystic. The religious ecstasy view maintains that freeing the self from the body brings one to truer experience.<sup>101</sup> Physiological changes in prolonged mystical states which are commonly experienced are decreased breathing, pulse, circulation, and brain activity; also the person loses awareness of the body. In such a state of rapture as described by Christian mystics, the body seems to be on the verge of extinguishing. St. Teresa of Avila wrote in *The Interior Castle* that in the orison of union, the soul 'is utterly dead to the things of the world, and lives solely in God. I do not know whether in this state she has enough life left to breathe. It seems to me she has not; or at least that if she does breathe, she is unaware of it'.<sup>102</sup>

So in such states of rapture it seems that the person loses awareness of the body. So this seems to be a state of feeling directed at something outside the body. But it does not involve any feeling of the body. James talks about this condition in these terms. 'In the condition called raptus or ravishment by theologians, breathing and circulation are so depressed that it is a question among the doctors whether the soul be or be not temporarily dissevered from the body. ... To the medical mind these ecstasies signify nothing but suggested and imitated hypnoid states.'<sup>103</sup> It is natural to explain the loss of bodily sensation in these cases by noting as James does here that the body's activity has slowed down or become depressed.

Another state of mystical consciousness is described by J. A. Symonds. Here again the body is no longer involved in the experience.

Suddenly, at church, or in company, and always, I think, when my muscles were at rest, I felt the approach of the mood. Irresistably it took possession of my mind and will... It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space,

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<sup>100</sup> VRE, p. 412.

<sup>101</sup> VRE, p. 419.

<sup>102</sup> VRE, p. 409.

<sup>103</sup> VRE, p. 413.

time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self.<sup>104</sup>

So here again mystical awareness seems to involve a loss of consciousness of the body, since 'sensation' is 'obliterated' in later phases of the experience. This kind of experience is notable also because from the rest of the passage it is clear that Symonds 'dislikes' this state of awareness and does not think of it as being of benefit.

James also discusses the possibility that drug use can induce these states and suggests that nitrous oxide for example can stimulate mystical consciousness. He says he believes that our normal waking consciousness is but one special type of consciousness, and different forms of consciousness lie behind it. He also thinks that these further experiences can reveal some insight into reality.<sup>105</sup> In these cases too, it is clear that normal awareness of the body stops during the experience. So, in conclusion, the body is still involved, from a medical point of view, in these kinds of experiences. But the experience does not involve strong consciousness of any bodily condition. As we would expect, James recommends that the value of mystical experience should be judged not in medical terms but with regard to its fruits for life.

So [i] and [ii] point to the role of bodily awareness in some religious experiences. [iii] suggests that sometimes this role does not apply.

[iv] In Lectures XVI and XVII (Mysticism), James says that mystical states are 'ineffable' and that in this respect they are 'more like states of feeling than states of intellect'.<sup>106</sup>

When James says that mystical states are 'ineffable', he means that the subject of a mystical experience cannot find words to describe it. On the other hand, mystical states also have a 'noetic quality'. The noetic quality of a mystical experience is the fact that the mystic feels the experience to provide a kind of knowledge by way of 'states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect'.<sup>107</sup> This claim fits with James' insistent appeal to mystical states as being the source of an intuitive, non-conceptual knowledge that does not require concepts in order to 'know' the knowledge it

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<sup>104</sup> VRE, p. 385.

<sup>105</sup> VRE, p. 387

<sup>106</sup> VRE, p. 380.

<sup>107</sup> VRE, p. 380.

instils. So although ineffable, they still involve some kind of insight. They are therefore not like brute feelings or mere sensations. James adds that although religious feelings may be ineffable, their content can still be spelled out to some extent.

This suggests that mystical feelings are like emotional feelings as Goldie understands them. Goldie distinguishes two types of emotional feelings: the bodily feelings, specifically conscious awareness of bodily changes that occur during emotions, like muscle activity and hormonal changes, and emotional feelings, called 'feeling-towards'. And mystical feelings seem to involve something like 'feelings towards' in Goldie's sense because Goldie also allows that emotional feelings involve knowledge of the world and are in that sense 'noetic', but also says that it may not be possible to capture the content of these feelings in words. (See again his example of falling on ice.) Similarly James says that 'Feeling is private and dumb, and unable to give an account of itself'.<sup>108</sup> But he says philosophy can play a role in helping us construe our feelings intellectually.<sup>109</sup> So here again the feelings that are relevant to religious experience seem to have some intellectual content or involve potentially knowledge of some sort, despite being 'private and dumb'.<sup>110</sup>

In fact James claims that 'feeling is the deeper source of religion and philosophical and theological formulas are secondary products. .... We are thinking beings and we cannot exclude the intellect from participating in any of our functions.' So philosophy will always have the important task of articulating and systematizing 'private and dumb feelings'.<sup>111</sup> [i] to [iv] point to 4 ways of understanding the role of body. [i] Bodily feelings can function as feelings towards; [ii] they can provide the basis of an inference about some external reality; [iii] they can be suspended in mystical states, but the body will still need to be in a condition of some special kind, according to medical perspectives, if this sort of experience is to be possible, and [iv] in mysticism, religious experience involves a state which is both ineffable and noetic, and this suggests that to this extent feeling or some

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<sup>108</sup> VRE, p. 432

<sup>109</sup> VRE, p. 432.

<sup>110</sup> VRE, p. 432.

<sup>111</sup> VRE, p. 431.

state like feeling is involved here. So far we have been concerned with the role of the body in emotional experience, following the model provided by PP. And we have seen that there are various roles which bodily feeling can play. Let us move now to a further text.

## 1.2 The Will to Believe

In WTB we again find various ideas about the emotions which can be illustrated using experiences described in VRE. Let us look at two in particular.

[i] The emotional benefits of religious belief

In WTB James claims that religious belief makes possible certain emotional benefits. In WTB he does not say what these benefits are, and he does not specify why we should be 'better off even now' if we are religious, but he says that religion claims two things.

'Religion says essentially two things.....the best things are the more eternal things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word. ...

The second affirmation is that we are better off even now if we believe (religion's) first affirmation to be true....'.<sup>112</sup> So in WTB James says that religion is a momentous option, since holding a religious belief can make a big difference to our lives here and now. It is also a live option for some people and it is a forced option, since if we just wait and remain agnostic, we will not get the good that true believers do.

The key here in the discussion in WTB is that these beliefs actually make a difference in human life, and this is what counts for James. In VRE, James gives various examples of how religious belief or something like it can be a source of psychological support. Take for example the following passage. Here James is quoting an account provided by an acquaintance of his.

Whenever I had any trouble, especially when I had conflict with other people, either domestically or in the way of business, or when I was depressed in spirits or

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<sup>112</sup>'The Will to Believe', in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Watchmaker Publishing, 1919), pp. 26-27 [no place of publication given].

anxious about affairs, I now recognize that I used to fall back for support upon this curious relation I felt myself to be in to this fundamental cosmical It.<sup>113</sup>

So here is an example of someone dealing with emotional strain by adopting something like a religious stance or commitment. Here the emotional benefit provided by religious belief is the relief from anxiety or some negative state of mind.

Similarly in his discussion of Saintliness in VRE, James describes what he calls the 'practical fruits' of the conversion process. James mentions that one of the characteristics of saintliness is the 'feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interest'.<sup>114</sup> He notes:

The saintly character is the character for which spiritual emotions are the habitual centre of the personal energy; and there is a certain composite photograph of universal saintliness, the same in all religions, of which the features can easily be traced.<sup>115</sup>

These spiritual emotions are at the heart of religion for James, because they meet our most dire spiritual needs, which are defined by the three great negative experiences of melancholy, evil, and the sense of personal sin.

James expands on the nature of saintliness by saying that 'saints have infinite confidence in God, and of severity for one's self, accompanied with tenderness for others..<sup>116</sup> In summary, the saintly person is distinguished by a certain quality of emotional life, and their emotions are life affirming and of practical benefit. So the role of religion here is to provide at least some protection from negative feelings of anxiety. So on this point, the picture provided by VRE fits with the account in WTB, and gives a more detailed treatment of some themes in WTB.

James also thinks that religion can be beneficial because it is capable of healing the divided self. James describes Leo Tolstoy as an example of a divided self. The unhappiness resulting from inner turmoil forced Tolstoy to search for some unifying principle which could bring order into his life. Tolstoy began with the conviction that life

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<sup>113</sup>VRE, p. 64.

<sup>114</sup> VRE, p. 272.

<sup>115</sup> VRE, p. 271.

<sup>116</sup> VRE, p. 260.

was meaningless, but he later realized that this conviction took into account only this present life. He refused to commit suicide, and gradually came to realize that his holding on to life carried within itself, implicitly, the insight that life is not meaningless. Tolstoy arrived at faith in an infinite God, without whom there would be no life and no meaning.

Turning to the detail of Tolstoy's experience, James describes his experience in these terms.

Tolstoy relates that he began to have moments of perplexity, of what he calls arrest, as if he knew not 'how to live,' or what to do. It is obvious that these were moments in which the excitement and interest which our functions naturally bring had ceased. Life had been enchanting, it was now flat sober, more than sober, dead. Things were meaningless whose meaning had always been self-evident. The questions 'Why?' and 'What next?' began to beset him more and more frequently. At first it seemed as if such questions must be answerable, and as if he could easily find the answers if he would take the time; but as they became even more urgent, he perceived that it was like those first discomforts of a sick man, to which he pays but little attention till they run into one continuous suffering, and then he realizes that what he took for a passing disorder means the most momentous thing in the world for him, means his death. These questions 'Why?' 'Wherefore?' 'What for?' found no response.<sup>117</sup>

From this passage, it is clear that Tolstoy is talking about a kind of emotional crisis. In fact, in this state, the normal emotions which keep our interest in life seem to have gone. And the result is that the world seems 'flat sober'. In this case too, the benefit which is brought by religion is emotional, since religious conversion allows Tolstoy to find meaning in the world again and to find that the world is again emotionally significant for him. As Simmons explains:

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<sup>117</sup>VRE, pp. 152-153.

Tolstoy discovered an answer to his question about the meaning of life: the purpose of life on earth is to serve not our lower animal nature but the power to which our higher nature recognizes its kinship. There is a power in each of us, he asserted, enabling us to discern what is good, and we are in touch with that power. Our reason and conscience flow from it, and the purpose of our conscious life is to do its will, that is, to do good. During the last thirty years of his life Tolstoy labored mightily toward the realization on earth of the kingdom of God, which for him meant the kingdom of truth and good.<sup>118</sup>

As well as describing the emotional benefits which are brought by religious conversion, Tolstoy also describes how he was drawn to God in feeling rather than by intellectual considerations. Here he seems to treat religious feeling as a kind of feeling towards, whose content cannot be captured fully in words.

I can call this by no other name than that of a thirst for God. This craving for God had nothing to do with the movement of my ideas, – in fact, it was the direct contrary of that movement, – but it came from my heart. It was like a feeling of dread that made me seem like an orphan and isolated in the midst of all these things that were so foreign.<sup>119</sup>

So here Tolstoy allows that there can be a kind of ‘craving for God’ which can draw a person towards God without the involvement of intellectual thought.

John Bunyan provides another example of how religion may be a source of emotional benefit. Like Tolstoy, he was led towards religious belief by the experience of melancholy. And in his case too religion provided some degree of relief from his melancholy. James notes that by contrast with Tolstoy, Bunyan’s melancholy is concerned with his particular circumstances rather than with the human condition in general. And he understands his circumstances in religious terms. As Bunyan comments: ‘I could not believe that Christ had love for me...I was sorry that God had

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<sup>118</sup> Ernest J. Simmons, ‘Tolstoy’s Religious, Moral and Didactic Writings’, <http://www.ourcivilisation.com/smartboard/sh> [accessed 25 April 2011].

<sup>119</sup> VRE, p. 156.



made me a man.'<sup>120</sup> So religion here seems to be part of the cause of Bunyan's melancholy as well as part of the cause of its resolution.

In summary, James suggests that religious belief produces certain psychological benefits. In general it gives the person a fuller, richer life from a psychological point of view. It gives as James says:

a new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism.... An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections.<sup>121</sup>

If we follow the picture given in WTB, then we should conclude that the prospect of such benefits is a sufficient reason to believe. Professor Leuba expresses the core of James's approach when he asks: 'Does God really exist? How does he exist? What is he? are so many irrelevant questions. Not God, but life, more life, a larger, richer, more satisfying life, is, in the last analysis, the end of religion. The love of life, at any and every level of development, is the religious impulse.'<sup>122</sup> Here again we see the idea that religion goes along with various practical benefits, where those benefits have an emotional element.

James's discussion implies that religion will be different for people with different temperaments, because differences of temperament imply differences in emotional needs, so that we will never have a situation where there can be one true religion for everyone. In his discussion about 'science of religion', James states that this understanding will never yield the same understanding as a living religion.<sup>123</sup> On James's view, religion has to be personal at the base level.

[ii] The self-fulfilling character of religious commitment.

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<sup>120</sup> VRE, p. 157.

<sup>121</sup> VRE, p. 485.

<sup>122</sup> VRE, pp. 506-507.

<sup>123</sup> VRE, p. 456.

As well as emphasizing the practical benefits of religious belief in WTB, James also emphasizes the self-fulfilling character of some beliefs and notes how this gives us good reason to hold such beliefs. In VRE James cites various examples of belief, which have this self-fulfilling character. For example he notes the belief of the mind-cure movement in the healing power of positive emotions and beliefs. James presents this movement as a key-example of his 'religion of healthy-mindedness'. He defended mind-cure: it is the ability of people to cure others and themselves of horrible diseases by the power of thought. He used the movement's therapeutic claims to illustrate the practical turn of the 'religion of healthy-mindedness.' He claimed that 'mind-cure gives to some of us serenity and happiness, and prevents certain forms of disease as well as science does, or even better.'<sup>124</sup> On this view, some of the emotional benefits of religion, as discussed under [i], can be achieved simply by thought.

In the discussion of PP, I mentioned some examples of feeling coming before thought. Here, when James discusses the mind-cure movement, he gives an example of the opposite relationship, which fit with the feeling following thought model:

In just the degree in which you realize your oneness with the Infinite Spirit, you will exchange dis-ease for ease, inharmony for harmony, suffering and pain for abounding health and strength.

The first underlying cause of all sickness, weakness, or depression is the *human sense of separateness* from that Divine Energy which we call God.<sup>125</sup>

Here the right thoughts have an effect on the feelings or emotional health of the person but also on their wider well being. The idea seems to be that if a person has the right understanding of the universe, and their oneness of the universe, then disease and emotional distress will fall away. The mind-cure movement was due to the fact that medicine did not have much to offer people suffering from anxiety and hopelessness.

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<sup>124</sup> VRE, p.122.

<sup>125</sup> VRE, p.102.

The promise that all you need to do is believe to make things better for yourself and the world is a common response to life's uncertainty, pains, and unfairness. It gives what may be just an illusion of control over things that can't be controlled but which are linked to our well-being and happiness.

Many of today's mind/body therapies continue the mind-cure tradition. Cognitive Behaviour Therapy is an empirically informed approach to the power of thought to shape emotions and behaviour. Paying more attention to the role of conscious thinking in psychotherapy makes common sense to patients and to mental health professionals.

In WTB James gives various examples of self-fulfilling beliefs. For example if you believe that someone will like you, then it is likely that they will in fact do so. So for beliefs of this kind, we can say: live as if the belief were true, and you will be proved right practically. In another example, James notes that we can sometimes afford to await the outcome of investigation before coming to a belief, but in other cases we are 'forced,' in that we must come to some belief even if all the relevant evidence is not in. In 'The Sentiment of Rationality', James notes that if I am faced with an icy ledge to cross, and do not know whether I can make it, I may be forced to consider the question whether I can or should believe that I can cross the ledge. This question is not only forced, it is 'momentous': if I am wrong I may fall to my death, and if I believe rightly that I can cross the ledge, my holding of the belief may itself contribute to my success.<sup>126</sup> Here again we see the role which may be played by the self fulfilling character of some beliefs.

In WTB, James applies this analysis to religious belief, and implies that the same is true in religious contexts, particularly the possible case in which one's salvation depends on believing in God in advance of any proof that God exists. James concludes that whether we choose to believe or not to believe, we choose our own fate. The discussion of VRE fills out this picture by showing how some kinds of emotional well being may depend on thought, and be subject to our direct control to that extent.

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<sup>126</sup> The Sentiment of Rationality', pp. 96-97.

### 1.3 Sentiment of Rationality

So far, we have talked mostly about PP and WTB, and about how some themes in these works can be developed using the examples presented in VRE. The same sort of exercise can be undertaken for SR and the account of the emotions which is presented there. We have already how James uses the example of the climber in SR to show how beliefs may be self-fulfilling. SR also involves the idea that thought can follow feeling. The heartbeat example we discussed earlier is an example of how bodily feeling may lead us into reflection. We begin with a bodily feeling and that sets us thinking, and leads us to the conclusion that God was present. James presents other examples of this type in VRE. For instance, in this example of the walker, bodily feelings seem to come first:

I felt neither fatigue, hunger, nor thirst, and my state of mind was equally healthy..... I can best describe the condition in which I was by calling it a state of equilibrium. When all at once I experienced a feeling, of being raised above myself, I felt the presence of God. I tell of the thing just as I was conscious of it as if his goodness and his power were penetrating me altogether.

The throb of emotion was so violent that I could barely tell the boys to pass on and not wait for me. I then sat down on a stone, unable to stand any longer, and my eyes overflowed with tears.

Here there is a strong bodily sensation, and it leads the person into thought. The walker continues the account as follows:

I thanked God that in the course of my life he had taught me to know him, that he sustained my life and took pity both on the insignificant creature and on the sinner that I was. I begged him ardently that my life might be consecrated to the doing of his will. I felt his reply, which was that I should do his will from day to day, in

humility and poverty, leaving him, the Almighty God, to be judge of whether I should some time be called to bear witness more conspicuously.<sup>127</sup>

Here the strong feeling that is described in the first passage leads the walker into religious reflection. Having had an experience of the felt presence of God, the walker stops walking and starts to reflect in religious terms. So this case seems to be a case of 'feeling giving rise to religious thought' and, again, this is the model described in SR. In SR the particular feeling with which you begin is a feeling of unease and this leads to a process of reflection. Similarly, in the passages above, the feeling of the presence of God perhaps involves a kind of unease, or at least the feeling that it would be wrong to continue the walk and that it is necessary therefore to stop and to think about God.

In his *Warranted Christian Belief*, Alvin Plantinga discusses how the intellect and will relate, and which of these faculties of the mind has priority, or which comes first. Plantinga does not think that there is any reason to believe that either faculty has ultimate priority or primacy, but he sees Jonathan Edwards as having affirmed some type of priority for the intellect. Plantinga attributes this view to Edwards:

The person first comes to this experiential knowledge, and then comes to develop the right loves and hates.....It is the perceiving that comes first; in this respect, therefore, intellect is prior to will.<sup>128</sup>

If we follow Plantinga on these issues, we will say that sometimes feelings lead into thought, and sometimes thought leads into feeling. SR suggests that it is the ability of feeling to lead into thought that allows us to regulate our thought.

#### **1.4 Goldie on emotional feelings and salient perception**

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<sup>127</sup> VRE, p.68.

<sup>128</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), p.101.

So far, we have considered the relationship between the models of emotion that are presented in WTB, PP and SR, on the one hand, and the examples of emotional experience that are presented in VRE on the other hand. In our earlier discussion, we have also considered the views of commentators like John Henry Newman and Peter Goldie. We can also ask whether their approaches can be usefully illustrated by examples taken from VRE.

In Lecture X, 'Conversion Concluded', James introduces the idea of seeing with salience; that is, he brings up the idea of perceiving in a way which accords special prominence to some things in the perceptual field.

As our mental fields succeed one another, each has its centre of interest, around which the objects of which we are less and less attentively conscious fade to a margin... Usually when we have a wide field we rejoice... At other times, of drowsiness, illness, or fatigue, our fields may narrow almost to a point, and we find ourselves correspondingly oppressed and contracted. ... Your great organizing geniuses are men with habitually vast fields of vision...<sup>129</sup>

In this passage, James notes that we can be aware in a focused way of some things in the perceptual field while others 'fade to a margin' in the sense that they are left to the periphery of our awareness. James notes that there is no sharp distinction between conscious and subconscious and that they exist in a continuum with each other. Similarly, Peter Goldie notes that when a person falls on ice for the first time, they may come to a new understanding of the dangers presented by ice, and their consciousness can then be focused on ice in their experience of ice at later times. Experiencing ice in this new way is for Goldie part of what is involved in being afraid of ice. As he notes:

Coming to think of it in this new way is not to be understood as consisting of thinking of it in the old way, plus some added-on phenomenal ingredient – feeling

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<sup>129</sup> VRE, p. 231.

perhaps; rather, the whole way of experiencing, or being conscious of, the world is new...<sup>130</sup>

Although he doesn't exactly say so, it is reasonable to interpret Goldie as saying that what is new in our experience of the world is that ice has a new prominence in our experience – it now stands out for us in a new way as an object of potential danger. So like James, Goldie thinks of emotional experience as connected to the order of the perceptual field. But James makes the additional point that the broader the focus of someone's interest the more positive their emotion will be. And he connects breadth of focus with saintliness. For James, the saint has a special quality of consciousness, which he describes in these terms. The saint, he says, has:

a feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world's selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an ideal power, a sense of a friendly continuity of the Ideal Power.<sup>131</sup>

It is implied in this passage that the saintly person's awareness of the world is not narrowly focused, but extends beyond 'selfish little interests' to reality as a whole. So we could say that the emotional benefits which are made possible by religion (which we discussed above) are partly due to the fact that through religion it is possible to have a wider field of awareness. And this sort of consciousness of the world is evident in the saints especially.

The idea that there is a connection between emotional experience and patterns of salient viewing can also be developed with reference to James's discussion of mysticism. In Lectures XVI and XVII, 'Mysticism', James introduces the expression 'mystical states of consciousness', and describes the characteristics of these mystical states: 'Mystical states ... are excitements like the emotions of love or ambition, gifts by means of which facts already objectively before us fall into a new expressiveness and

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<sup>130</sup> Peter Goldie, *The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 59-60.

<sup>131</sup>VRE, p. 272.

make a new connection with our active life.<sup>132</sup> Here mystical states do not change the facts which we find in our perception of the world, but they can lead us to order the facts in a new way. This idea could be understood as similar to, or even the same as, Goldie's suggestion that we can experience things with various degrees of salience. The mystic, James is saying, sees things in a different way, because they have a different view about what is important in human life. The facts which are most important for a person will be at the centre of their awareness, of course.

In Lectures VI-VII, 'The Sick Soul', James gives a particular example of how emotional feelings can structure our experience of the world. In the following passage, he is discussing Tolstoy's experience of a 'transfiguration of the face of nature' after conversion:

In Tolstoy's case the sense that life had any meaning whatever was for a time wholly withdrawn. The result was a transformation in the whole expression of reality. When we come to study the phenomenon of conversion or religious regeneration, we shall see that a not infrequent consequence of the change operated in the subject is a transfiguration of the face of nature in his eyes. A new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth.<sup>133</sup>

Possibly, this is an echo of 2 Corinthians 5: 17: 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!' (NIV). On this view, our whole attitude and outlook upon life will change following conversion. In the passage about Tolstoy, James seems to be describing something similar. The basic change in the person means that their world has a new character, and there is then a 'transfiguration of the face of nature', so that, as he says, 'a new heaven seems to shine upon a new earth'. Again, this idea can be related to Goldie's idea about emotional feelings as patterns of salient perception. After the fall on ice, a person comes to experience the world in a different way, because ice has a new salience in their experience; and perhaps we could understand James's comments on conversion experience similarly:

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<sup>132</sup> VRE, p. 427.

<sup>133</sup> VRE, p.151.



the person now experiences the world differently because they have a new set of values or a new sense of which facts are important in human life.

### 1.5 Newman and the idea of real image

We have been thinking about the connection between Goldie's view of emotion and some of the examples of emotional experience in VRE. We can also compare Newman's view of emotion and the examples of VRE. As we have seen, Newman suggests that the deeper kind of faith depends upon having a 'real image' of religious reality, and not just a notion of it – that is, we need an experientially grounded understanding of religious reality.<sup>134</sup>

The passage from VRE cited below seems to fit this idea that emotional experience can deepen your understanding of something, so you have a 'real image' rather than simply a 'notion' of it. In this passage, a clergyman is describing a hilltop experience he had one night.

My highest faith in God and truest idea of him were then born in me. I have stood upon the Mount of Vision since, and felt the Eternal round about me. But never since has there come quite the same stirring of the heart. Then, if ever, I believe, I stood face to face with God, and was born anew of his spirit. There was, as I recall it, no sudden change of thought or of belief, except that my early crude conception had, as it were, burst into flower.<sup>135</sup>

We could say that in this passage the clergyman is describing not a change in belief but a move towards a deeper understanding of belief. As he says, 'there was no sudden change of thought or belief'. And this change is made possible, he seems to be saying, because he has had a relevant experience, and has now 'stood face to face with God'. So his belief about God no longer involves just a notion of God, but instead rests on direct experience of God. In the same sort of way, Newman says that someone who has

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<sup>134</sup> John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1955), p.108.

<sup>135</sup> VRE, p. 67.

the notion of God as a judge can come to a deeper understanding of this idea when they have a direct experience of the call of God in the experience of conscience.

This passage could also be related to what Goldie describes when talking about the person who has fallen on ice. In one way, this person's thought about ice does not change: the person continues to think that ice is dangerous. But Goldie thinks the person has now a deeper understanding of the dangerousness of ice, and this understanding comes from their direct experience of the dangerousness of ice, now that they have fallen on ice. It is clear that the passage cited above is also concerned with a deep change in the person's emotions. The clergyman talks of a 'stirring of the heart'. So we might say that his experience is rather like the experiences described by Newman, when he talks about the experience of conscience, and the feeling of remorse for example, and by Goldie when he talks about feeling a new fear of ice. As Newman says of conscience in his *Grammar of Assent*:

Conscience ... considered as a moral sense, an intellectual sentiment, is a sense of admiration and disgust, of approbation and blame: but it is something more than a moral sense; it is always what the sense of the beautiful is in only certain cases; it is always emotional.<sup>136</sup>

From this passage it is clear that Newman thinks of the experience of conscience as emotional; and it is through the emotions that the person arrives at a 'real image' of God, just as it is through the emotions that the clergyman in this passage arrives at a deeper understanding of various religious ideas.

There are other passages in VRE which seem to suggest a similar understanding; that is, they also suggest that emotional experience can lead to a deepened understanding. Take for example this passage which records an experience of Henry Alline in 1775. He writes:

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<sup>136</sup> Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, p.100.

After I sat down, being all in confusion, like a drowning man that was just giving up to sink, and almost in an agony, I turned very suddenly round in my chair, and seeing part of an old Bible lying in one of the chairs, I caught hold of it in great haste; and opening it without any premeditation, cast my eyes on the 38<sup>th</sup> Psalm, which was the first time I ever saw the word of God: it took hold of me with such power that it seemed to go through my whole soul, so that it seemed as if God was praying in, with, and for me.<sup>137</sup>

In this passage, following an emotionally intense experience, Alline finds a new meaning in the words of the Bible. In Newman's terms, we could say that the notion of God which he had before has been replaced by a real image, because he has now had some direct experience of God in an emotionally significant way. Another example of the same sort of change is evident in this comment made by an Oxford graduate: "He that hath the Son hath life eternal he that hath not the Son has not life." I had read this scores of times before, but this made all the difference. I was now in God's presence.<sup>138</sup> This is a quotation from 1 John 5: 12. And again, it is striking that various words have now acquired a new and deeper meaning, following some direct experience of the reality referred to by the words; as this source says, 'I was now in God's presence.' Again, the emotions seem to have an important part to play in this change. As he says later in the passage: 'The stillness was very marvelous, and I felt supremely happy.'

James thinks that this deepening in our understanding of a particular verbal expression is also a feature of mystical experience. As he says:

The simplest rudiment of mystical experience would seem to be that deepened sense of the significance of a maxim or formula which occasionally sweeps over

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<sup>137</sup> VRE, p. 218.

<sup>138</sup> VRE, p. 221.

one. 'I've heard that said all my life', we exclaim, but I never realized its full meaning until now.<sup>139</sup>

Once again we are dealing here with a change in a person's understanding of certain words, where the change is bound up with a change in the person themselves.

James quotes Professor Leuba's view on the role of the emotions in religious belief as follows:

the conceptual belief about Christ's work, although so often efficacious... is really ... non-essential. ... It is to the joyous conviction itself, the assurance that all is well with one, that he would give the name of faith par excellence.<sup>140</sup>

So here the emotions are given a large part in religious faith. In fact, they are given a larger role than Newman would allow. For Newman, it is important of course that the believer adopts the right doctrines about God. Emotional experience can deepen our understanding of these doctrines, but it cannot replace them.

## 1.6 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have seen that the models of emotional experience that we have taken from James's works PP, WTB, and SR can all be confirmed in some way by using the examples of emotional experience that James provides in VRE. We have also seen that the views of Goldie and Newman on emotional experience are also echoed in the examples provided by James in VRE.

So this chapter has in this way tried to support the theoretical account of emotional experience and its relationship to religious life that we have been exploring in the earlier discussion. Our conclusion is then that the works of William James point to a variety of different but not mutually exclusive views about the role of emotion in religion, and that these views can be confirmed and extended by reference to recent work on the philosophy of emotion (see Chapter 2) as well by reference to the work of theologians (see Chapter 3). In the present chapter, we have seen how James's own work when he

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<sup>139</sup> VRE, p. 382.

<sup>140</sup> VRE, pp. 246-7.

is describing particular examples of religious experience also helps to confirm the models he has developed when exploring these questions theoretically. So the view of this thesis is that James's account of the relationship between emotion and religion is still of relevance today, and can still help with our thinking about the theory of emotion and religion, and still help us to understand more clearly particular examples of religious experience.

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