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ARTICLE



# Reparative agency and commitment in William James' pragmatism

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## ABSTRACT

This paper highlights a central feature of William James' pragmatism to challenge the conflicting charges that his political and ethical thought amounts to either a Hamlet-like impotence or a Promethean-like sovereignty. I argue that James develops an account of reparative agency and commitment which figures in his philosophy of hope as a response to the problematics of action. Reparative agency concerns the possibility of acting in the midst of constraints that frustrate or otherwise inhibit action. Conceptualizing agency in this way entails a reevaluation of the status of commitment in James' thought and the possibility of a more collective practice of hope.

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## 1. Introduction

The status of agency and commitment in William James' work offers a productive, if contested, site for thinking through the limits and possibilities of pragmatism's political and ethical implications. Reflecting on these limits, contemporary scholars like Cornel West have famously depicted James as a deeply uncommitted thinker. Indeed, West goes so far as to argue that James' philosophical perspective is one of "political impotence" (West, *American Evasion*, 60). West follows a line of critics like Lewis Mumford who characterize Jamesian pragmatism as a political "anesthetic" or form of "acquiescence" that endorses a "desire for a comfortable resting place" (Mumford, *Golden Day*, 182, 192).

This interpretation counters the strongly Promethean reading<sup>1</sup> of James at work in W.Y. Elliot's 1928 book, *The Pragmatic Revolt in Politics: Syndicalism, Fascism, and the Constitutional State*. Elliot links the Romantic pragmatism of James with the revolutionary syndicalism of Georges Sorel, arguing that,

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<sup>1</sup>On the Promethean quality of James' pragmatism, see Gale, *The Divided Self*.

"What we may call the 'activism' which inspires James' conception of the moral life becomes, in the hands of his followers, an apologia for the appeal to force, since it is only by force that the final test of survival can be applied" (Elliott, *Pragmatic Revolt*, 56). Responding to this Promethean interpretation, James's student, Ralph Barton Perry, while admitting the presence of "militant self-assertion" in James's moral philosophy, contends that James's "benign traits" of humanity, compassion, and sympathy are "the more fundamental in both theory and practice" (Perry, *Thought and Character*, 231, 370).

Shadowing Perry's line of defense though disputing his political portrayal of James, literary critics like Frank Lentricchia and Jacques Barzun mine James's political activism and sympathetic sentiments for evidence of his thought being neither reducible to political impotence nor to Promethean strenuousness. A host of political theorists have likewise resuscitated the possibilities within James's metaphysical and ethical pluralism to make the case for his contributions to democratic theory and practice (Miller, *Democratic Temperament*), a politics of inclusion without violence (Connolly, *Pluralism*), and an ethics of alterity (Ferguson, *William James*).

Most recently, scholarship by Sarin Marchetti, Alexander Livingston, and Stephen S. Bush has worked to frustrate the overdrawn Promethean and impotent depictions of James's political and ethical thought. Following George Cotkin's portrayal of James as a public philosopher (Cotkin, *William James*), these scholars specify the complex quality of political and ethical conviction expressed in James's writings. While these thinkers tend to approach the problem of commitment in James through his revolution in moral thought (Marchetti, *Ethics and Philosophical Critique*), his subversive critique of American empire (Livingston, *Damn Great Empires*), or his democratic individualism (Bush, *Democratic Individuality*), I argue that we can clarify this problem by attending to the concept of *agency* at work in his psychological and ethical writings.<sup>2</sup>

This paper highlights a central feature of James's pragmatism to challenge the conflicting charges that his political and ethical thought amounts to either a Hamlet-like impotence or a Promethean-like sovereignty. I argue that James develops an account of *reparative agency* which figures in his meliorism or ethics of hope as a response to the problematics of action. Subjects engaging in the work of reparation aim at salvaging possibilities in spite of constraining limits; or, in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's words, they aim at "extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture

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<sup>2</sup>Here I follow Loren Goldman's recent revaluation of James's political and ethical thinking by attending to his concept of agency. While Goldman complicates the strongly Promethean readings of James by clarifying his ethics of energetic receptivity, I focus on what I call the 'reparative' within James's reworking of agency and commitment which emphasizes the simultaneous presence of uncertainty and faith in a single agential position. See Goldman, "William James, Energy, and the Pluralist Ethic of Receptivity".

whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150–1). I draw on the reparative to highlight that James was not divided on the issue of agency,<sup>3</sup> but attempted to repair an agency broken by despair without relying on an inflated sense of confidence in our capacity as agents. Reparative agency concerns the possibility of acting in the midst of constraints that frustrate or otherwise inhibit action. Reparative agency is marked by those risks, hazards, hopes, and surprises that accompany any venture in possibility. This concept maps onto what Sedgwick calls the "middle ranges of agency" – the idea that one can be relatively empowered or disempowered without thereby destroying or being destroyed by another (Sedgwick, "Melanie Klein", 632). Conceptualizing agency in this way entails an account of power as relational, dealing in negotiations and exchanges such that one neither wholly possesses power nor lacks it absolutely.

Reparative agency entails a conception of commitment that escapes the totalizing dilemma of complete conviction or absolute impotence. If one can be relatively empowered or disempowered (and thus neither wholly omnipotent nor wholly powerless), then one can also be committed and yet doubtful (and hence neither totally committed nor totally uncommitted). This type of reparative commitment underscores the simultaneous presence of uncertainty and faith in James's meliorism.<sup>4</sup> We thus ought to read James as investing reparative agency with an affect of hesitant hope.

By turning to James's psychological and ethical work from the 1880s and 1890s, I show how his meliorism functions as a response to certain crises of agency and action. To address such crises, James advances an account of reparative agency in texts like *The Principles of Psychology* and "The Will to Believe". I start with his description of two pathological types of will and their reparative alternative in *The Principles of Psychology*. I then take up his discussion of the 'will to believe' as a form of reparative commitment that negotiates the tensions of paralysing doubt and excessive faith. Finally, I draw out the implications of reparative agency and commitment to suggest that James's meliorism might be framed not only as an individualist project, but also as a collective practice when hope is occasioned by the saving power of others.

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<sup>3</sup>For an example of this interpretation, see Gale, *The Divided Self*.

<sup>4</sup>This type of commitment bears affinities with what Paul J. Croce calls James's "decisive ambivalence" and with what Livingston calls "stuttering conviction". Croce describes James as "refining the burdens of his indecisions in his development of a decisive ambivalence, a decisiveness within his ambivalence" (Croce, *Young William*, 26). Livingston draws on the Deleuzian notion of 'stuttering' to specify a type of conviction which "highlight[s] the ways that faith always involves a dimension of hesitation and self-doubt that is overlooked when conviction is figured as acting on command" (Livingston, *Damn Great Empires*, 106). Building on and departing somewhat from these concepts, my account of reparative commitment is attentive to the way hesitation and ambivalence inform the affect of hope and notion of agency at work in James's meliorism.

## 2. Volition and reparative agency

In an 1895 letter to George H. Howison, James admits, “I am a victim of neurasthenia and of the sense of hollowness and unreality that goes with it” (James, *Letters Volume 2*, 23). Identified by neurologist George Miller Beard in 1869, neurasthenia, or ‘Americanitis,’ was a diagnosis for an assortment of physical and psychological symptoms, including fatigue, depression, anxiety, irritability, neuralgia, headaches, insomnia, and indecision (Beard, *American Nervousness*, 9).<sup>5</sup> Beard referred to neurasthenia as “nervous exhaustion”, a disease emerging from the enervation of the nervous system which drained subjects of their nervous energy. Describing this condition as the “Hamletism” of James’s milieu, Cotkin argues that this paralysed form of agency constituted not simply a personal crisis for James, but a cultural crisis for those similarly positioned (Cotkin, *William James*, 39).<sup>6</sup> Contra West, the problem of inhibited agency was not simply “personal and existential” for James, but functioned as a socio-cultural problem with ethical and political stakes.<sup>7</sup>

The primary problem with neurasthenia can be understood in terms of its effects on what James calls “voluntary action”. In the “Will” chapter of *The Principles of Psychology*, James concerns himself with the physiological and psychological conditions of voluntary action as distinct from both wishes and reflex actions.<sup>8</sup> In the course of identifying its conditions and features, he highlights two types of will that prevent the exercise of voluntary or wilful action. These are the pathological extremes of the ‘explosive will’ and the ‘obstructed will’. Neurasthenia maps onto the obstructed will, which paralyses the agent’s capacity for voluntary action. The opposite of this, the explosive will, discharges energy so impulsively that the subject becomes overconfident in her capacity as an agent. James contrasts the

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<sup>5</sup>According to Beard, neurasthenia affected upper-class American intellectuals and professionals (or ‘brain-workers’) whose close proximity to the demands of modernization – competition, industry, and urbanization – left them vulnerable to ‘nervous bankruptcy’. On this view, the conditions giving rise to neurasthenia were not simply psychological, but were informed by rapid changes in the technological, economic, social, and physical environment. As the disease drained a person’s nervous energy, Beard proposed treating neurasthenia with rest and relaxation.

<sup>6</sup>Hence, contra West’s depiction of James as attending exclusively to the personal and existential, Cotkin writes, “In much of his popular philosophy in this period of cultural crisis, James confronted the problems of inertia and *tedium vitae*, as a prelude to the full development of his own discourse of heroism, individual autonomy, and pragmatism” (Cotkin, *William James*, 77). Similarly, Deborah Coon contends that “James’s social and philosophical concerns were inextricably mixed; indeed, they can hardly be thought of as separate categories”, citing the interconnections between James’s social concern with ‘bigness’ and imperialism and his philosophical concern with absolutism (Coon, “One Moment in the World’s Salvation”, 91).

<sup>7</sup>James can be witnessed addressing this as a social problem in his 1897 Preface to *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* and in his 1892 public lectures on psychology to teachers and students, later published in 1899 as *Talks to Teachers on Psychology: And to Students on Some of Life’s Ideals*.

<sup>8</sup>Voluntary or wilful actions are different from wishes insofar as they treat an end of desire as attainable or within one’s power.

agency associated with these types of will with the agency corresponding to wilful action. In this section, I develop an account of the volitional feature of this reparative type of agency so as to distinguish it from the sovereign agency of the explosive will and the paralysed agency of the obstructed will.

At the backdrop of James's discussion of volition is the theory of ideomotor action. This theory proposes that ideas always discharge themselves immediately and unhesitatingly into movements or "motor effects" (James, *Principles*, 522).<sup>9</sup> In cases where a single idea occupies the mind, that idea will easily pass over into motion "without express decision or effort". These cases map onto James's concept of habit which has the function of simplifying our actions by diminishing the "conscious attention with which our acts are performed" (James, *Principles*, 114). Volition arises in response to more complicated cases where multiple ideas with conflicting motor effects possess the mind. That is, volition emerges when habit – the unhesitating discharge of an idea into a motor effect – is interrupted.<sup>10</sup> The functional role of volition is to settle or decide the paralysing impasses between conflicting ideas through a process of deliberation. These are circumstances characterized by "that peculiar feeling of inward unrest known as *indecision*" (James, *Principles*, 528, italics in original).<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>James summarizes the theory as follows: "The fact is that there is no sort of consciousness whatever, be it sensation, feeling, or idea, which does not directly and of itself tend to discharge into some motor effect" (James, *Talks to Teachers*, 83).

<sup>10</sup>This speaks to the intimate relationship between habit and volition in James's psychology and ethics. Without fully fleshing out this relationship here, I might briefly state that James offers a physiological concept of habit which refers to the relative ability of a material structure to change or alter when it interacts with other material agents. Habits can be categorized as being either more or less mutable. Despite their relative plasticity, habits also have the function of establishing consistency and stability in living creatures such that James refers to them as society's "most precious conservative agent[s]". Because humans are "bundles of habit", James regards habit as simultaneously what makes transformation so difficult and the very material through which such transformation must occur (James, *Principles*, 104). Thus, James spends the last several pages of his "Habit" chapter from *Principles* dedicated to the ethically relevant question of how to alter or transform our habits. In order for such transformation to occur, habit must first be interrupted. This type of interruption can be witnessed, for instance, in the chapter on "Volition" when two conflicting ideas (with conflicting motor-effects) arise in cases of decision, or more concretely, in James's encounter with North Carolina mountain settlers in "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings". The interruption of habit – whether intentionally from within or unexpectedly from without – is a condition of possibility for self-transformation. Volition is conditioned by the interruption of habit and functions as one possible way through which habit can be transformed. As José Medina contends, James himself did not always cultivate an interruption of habit as evidenced by his sexist assumptions and remarks and his relative silence on issues of gendered and racial oppression. This ignorance on James's part reflects his privilege in having opportunities for exercising his will which were not similarly available for those of different social standing. See Medina, "The Will Not to Believe". For more on habit as an ethical category in James, see Uffelman, "Forging the Self"; Colapietro, "Customary Reflection"; Koopman, "The Will, the Will to Believe"; Craig, "Habit, Relaxation"; Welchman, "William James's 'The Will to Believe'"; and Marchetti, *Ethics and Philosophical Critique*.

<sup>11</sup>James uses the language of indecision and hesitation interchangeably. In *Talks to Teachers*, he writes, "Such acts [of will] are often characterized by hesitation, and accompanied by a feeling, altogether peculiar, of resolve, a feeling which may or may not carry with it a further feeling of effort" (James, *Talks to Teachers*, 83).

James gives the example of hesitating to get out of bed on a frigid morning and the conflict of ideas presenting two possibilities of action – to stay in the warm bed or to get up and face the cold. The paralysing struggle between these two courses of action is overcome by the decisive idea or resolve that one “must lie here no longer” (James, *Principles*, 524). Volition thus depends on a prior condition of conflict, hesitation, and indecision concerning the habitual discharge of ideas in movement. Such circumstances are overcome through a process of deliberation whereby one reaches a decision about a course of action that will resolve the dilemma. While James outlines five different types of decision, it is the fifth type that is most important for the account of reparative agency developed here.<sup>12</sup>

The fifth type refers to decisions that settle a conflict of ideas through the “creative contribution” of our “feeling of effort” (James, *Principles*, 534). These kinds of decisions require an agent’s effort of attending to one of the clashing ideas and holding it stably before the mind. To use an example from his own life, when confronted with the vexing dilemma of suicide, James describes attending to a Renouvierian belief in free will to decide his crisis. In his famous diary entry from April 1870, James confesses:

I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the part of Renouvier’s second ‘Essais’ and see no reason why his definition of Free Will – ‘the sustaining of a thought *because I choose to* when I might have other thoughts’ – need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present – until next year – that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.  
(James, *Letters Volume 1*, 147, italics in original)

He exercises effortful attention in holding fast to the idea of free will so as to settle, if only momentarily, an inner tension of conflicting tendencies for action. James performs the will in his very effort of attending to the idea of free will. In doing so, he exercises a type of agency that moves him from immobilizing indecision to embrace a course of action without the promise that this act will save him from his crisis.

The effort of attention names just what James means by the ‘will’. He explains, “*The essential achievement of the will, in short, when it is most ‘voluntary,’ is to ATTEND to a difficult object and hold it fast before the mind*” (James, *Principles*, 561, italics in original). The crucial function of the will is one of attending. Attending requires an awareness and strenuousness whereby one strives to steadfastly commit to a difficult idea (and action) in spite of

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<sup>12</sup>The five types of decision can be summarized as follows: (1) the ‘reasonable type’, consisting in the patient weighing of alternatives in the mind until one reaches a conclusion favoring one alternative over the other; (2) the acquiescing type, whereby one passively and indifferently allows a resolution to be determined accidentally ‘*from without*’; (3) the ‘reckless’ type which are accidentally determined out of the impulsive discharge of nervous energy in one direction of the impasse; (4) the ‘changes of heart’ type, consisting in sudden or abrupt shifts in temperament that involve a wholesale change in one’s values, motives, impulses, and perspective; (5) the effortful type, which are settled by the ‘creative contribution’ of our strenuous effort. See James, *Principles*, 532–4.

the doubt that accompanies one's decision. James poignantly captures the pain and struggle that pervade situations requiring effortful attention, describing them as "desolate and acrid" excursions into "a lonesome moral wilderness" (James, *Principles*, 534).<sup>13</sup> Such decisions are desolate and lonesome because they ensnare us in the tragically painful act of consciously and deliberately destroying a possibility we desire to enact. Whereas the prior types of decision drop one of the alternatives from sight, "here both alternatives are steadily held in view, and in the very act of murdering the vanquished possibility the chooser realizes how much in that instant he is making himself lose. It is deliberately driving a thorn into one's flesh" (James, *Principles*, 534). Notice here the complicated tension between recovery and loss at work in the agency achieved through this process of decision. On the one hand, agency is recovered by deciding on one possibility for action, while on the other, agency is punctured by the loss of another agential possibility, and the agent must negotiate this painful tension.

James contrasts volition through effortful attention with two pathological types of will: the explosive will and the obstructed will. With the explosive will, impulsive energy is discharged so quickly into action that "inhibitions get no time to arise" (James, *Principles*, 537). This type of will has the advantage of executing actions promptly and with ease. James explains, "It is the absence of scruples, of consequences, of considerations, the extraordinary simplification of each moment's mental outlook, that gives to the explosive individual such motor energy and ease" (James, *Principles*, 538). However, with the surplus of impulsive power over inhibition, the explosive will can result in reckless and precipitous actions. The explosive will is troubling precisely because of its sovereign and Promethean relation to agency, producing a sense of mastery over the world that neglects the obstacles and limits hindering action and bypasses the tension arising with inhibition.

The obstructed will, however, faces the contrary problem of resigning to act with the disproportionate presence of inhibition over impulsive power. The obstructed will entails an impotent form of agency which cannot translate its ideas into action. James associates this type of will with melancholic and reflective types who display "a condition of perfect 'abulia,' or inability to will or act" (James, *Talks to Teachers*, 87). Unlike the sovereign agency of the explosive will, the obstructed will paralyzes the agent's capacity for action. Incapable of realizing the motor-effects of their volitional ideas, the obstructed will leaves agents in a perpetual state of hesitation, apathy, and resignation.

In contrast to this, the agency that accompanies effortful attention is one that energizes an agent's capacity to will and act in the face of obstruction.

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<sup>13</sup>See also James's description of Robert Gould Shaw's 'lonely courage' in his oration at the unveiling of Shaw's memorial and Livingston's discussion of this speech in Livingston, *Damn Great Empires*.

This is a type of reparative agency that involves a realistic avowal of both the limits and inhibitions that hinder action as well as the possibilities and impulses that empower it. In the face of indecision, the wilful agent neither impulsively acts nor shirks from action, but attends to both the inhibitions that constrain action and the impulses that stimulate it. Keeping these in view, the agent affirms her ability to act “under an array of inhibitions” (James, *Talks to Teachers*, 88). This does not mean that the wilful agent ignores the hesitations that impede action as the impulsive agent does. Nor does she waver perpetually in inaction as does the agent with an obstructed will. Rather, she attends to such hesitations and finds her energy precisely in *willing to act* in the face of obstruction. As James explains in *Talks to Teachers*,

The highest form of character ... abstractly considered, must be full of scruples and inhibitions. But action, in such a character, far from being paralyzed, will succeed in energetically keeping on its way, sometimes overpowering the resistances, sometimes steering along the line where they lie thinnest.

(James, *Talks to Teachers*, 87–8)

While the explosive will and the obstructed will hinge on an all-or-nothing conception of agency such that one is either completely powerful or powerless, volition through effortful attention involves a more complicated understanding of agency. This is a type of reparative agency that negotiates the tensions of inhibition and conflicting impulses. It is the only type of agency that is marked by both loss and recovery, consisting in the painful recognition that a recovered agency is conditioned by loss – the loss of other possibilities for action which amounts to a loss of alternative futures competing for actualization.<sup>14</sup> James takes an interest in mapping the “limits of human power in every conceivable direction” as well as the “various ways of unlocking the reserves of power” (James, “Energies of Men”, 145). Reparative agency negotiates these limits and reserves, countenancing obstructions to and losses of action with the energy that arrives with affirming other agential possibilities. One does not start out with this type of agency so much as one arrives at it through the struggle of work, effort, and attention. Agency, on this view, is taken as a fragile achievement rather than as a thing one possesses. Hence, it is only through the exercise of the will in the face of hesitation that one becomes a volitional agent energized by what James calls “a new range of power” (James, “Energies of Men”, 136).

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<sup>14</sup>James voices this consequence of a loss of future possibility upon the loss of an agential possibility in his 1882 essay, “On Some Hegelisms”. There is even, he suggests, a loss of possible self involved in this process insofar as “mutually exclusive possibilities ... strive to possess themselves of the *same parts* of time, space, and ego”. The simultaneous presence of loss and recovery arises because there is “an excess of possibility over actuality” (James, “On Some Hegelisms”, 294). Hence, some possibilities will be saved while others are lost.

This type of agency is reparative insofar as it transforms the debilitating reality of indecision into the effort of voluntary attention. The reparative agent recognizes the reality of her action being limited by a variety of hindrances and losses without arriving at the fatalistic conclusion that she is therefore impotent. She attends, rather, to the possibilities that remain open for action. This form of agency consists in an affirmation of agents' *ability* to act and their venture to *actually* act when the occasion arises without the guarantee that their action will stave off all uncertainty or doubt. That is, reparative agency is less about the certain execution of action and more about the possibility of acting in the midst of constraints.

### 3. Belief and reparative commitment

James's preoccupation with the debilitating effects of indecision would inform some of his most important work in moral philosophy, including his 1896 essay on "The Will to Believe". This infamous essay illuminates the type of conviction entailed by a notion of reparative agency developed in the previous section. In his Preface to the volume in which this essay is published, James employs the vocabulary of paralysis and recklessness, which map onto the obstructed and explosive wills respectively, to describe the dual dangers that agents seek to evade in willing to believe. In "The Will to Believe", he translates the agential dangers of paralysis and recklessness into two extreme hazards of belief, which can be understood in terms of either debilitating doubt (i.e. "believing too little") or excessive faith (i.e. "believing too much").<sup>15</sup> He offers wilful belief as an alternative to these extreme forms of doubt and faith. Reparative commitment names the type of conviction that accompanies wilful belief. It constitutes a form of commitment that is simultaneously hesitant and hopeful, cautious and courageous, thus underscoring the dual presence of uncertainty and faith in James's meliorism.

In "The Will to Believe," James proposes:

*Our passionate 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 passionate decision – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.*

(James, "Will to Believe", 11, italics in original)

This thesis defends our right to believe in cases that cannot be decided by intellectual proof or evidence. These restricted cases are decided by our

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<sup>15</sup>Belief is intimately linked to agency for James insofar as he follows Charles S. Peirce who follows Alexander Bain in defining belief in terms of action or habit. See Peirce, "Fixation of Belief" and Bain, *Emotions and the Will*.

passional nature which hazards the risk of being wrong. The term ‘passional nature’ refers to what James calls ‘the will’ in *The Principles of Psychology*. It includes both our more private volitions and affective motivations like fear and hope, as well as social influences that predispose us to certain beliefs. That is, our wilfulness is conditioned not only by such idiosyncratic features as our emotions, dispositions, and drives, but also by features of our social, political, and historical contexts – what James categorizes under ‘habit’ in *The Principles*.<sup>16</sup> Habit both positively conditions and negatively limits wilful belief such that it often stands in need of interruption for belief to spark the attention and effort of the will.

The will energizes belief only under specific conditions that comprise what James calls a ‘genuine option’. A genuine option is one that fulfils the following three criteria – it must be “live” rather than “dead”; it must be “forced” rather than “avoidable”; and it must be “momentous” rather than “trivial” (James, “Will to Believe”, 3). A *live*, as opposed to a dead, option is one that appeals to the belief of the person to whom it is proposed. An option is *forced* rather than avoidable when there is no possibility of not choosing one option or the other. If I said to you, ‘Either come to dinner with me or don’t’, this would be a forced option because there is no alternative that allows you to escape the choice. Finally, a decision is *momentous* rather than trivial when it is potentially life changing. These are unique opportunities with high stakes insofar as they can impact one’s life irreversibly. Together, these three criteria – *live*, *forced*, and *momentous* – constitute a genuine option and supply the necessary and sufficient conditions for wilful belief. This means, moreover, that the contrasting criteria – dead, avoidable, and trivial – function as the boundaries or limits circumscribing wilful belief.

In spite of his careful specification of the conditions under which we are justified to believe, many critics accuse James of defending a version of wishful thinking. One can witness such an interpretation in Dickinson Miller’s mocking suggestion that the essay ought to be titled “The Will to Make-Believe” (Miller, “Will to Believe”), or in Cheryl Misak’s recent critique that the will to believe includes a subjectivist standard of evidence in the form of “the satisfaction of the believer” (Misak, *American Pragmatists*, 63).<sup>17</sup> On this view, James’s account of wilful belief steers too closely to the

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<sup>16</sup>Hence James’s recognition that the afflictions of *abulia* and neurasthenia that debilitate the will are not simply determined by one’s physiological and psychical makeup, but are conditioned by certain technological, political, economic, and social aspects of a specific historical milieu. The economic and technological factors contributing to neurasthenia were especially emphasized by Beard. In *American Nervousness*, Beard attributes the emergence of neurasthenia to the technical and social developments of “steam power, the periodical press, the telegraph, the sciences, and the mental activity of women” (Beard, *American Nervousness*, 18).

<sup>17</sup>On Misak’s reading, James does not so much seek to refute evidentialism in “The Will to Believe” as he tries to expand what counts as evidence for the truth of a belief. While I agree with Misak that James

danger of reckless faith or the hazard of “believing too much” (James, *Will to Believe*, xi). Like the explosive will’s sovereign relation to agency outlined above, a reckless form of faith risks placing an overconfidence in its own willing capacity. This is a form of faith that is uncritical just insofar as it is unaware of its own limits.

James, however, is not defending the omnipotence of belief as an exercise in wishful thinking. As he lays out in the “Will” chapter from *The Principles of Psychology*, wishing is something distinct from willing in that where the former sets aims one cannot attain, the latter desires only what is within one’s power (James, *Principles*, 486). Thus, the *will* to believe realistically targets attainable desires while the *wish* to believe idealistically strives for what it cannot possibly realize.<sup>18</sup> Recognizing the bind between the dangers of paralysis and recklessness in questions of faith, James proposes a type of belief that “hits the right channel between them” (James, *Will to Believe*, xi). This is a critical form of belief that countenances the limits of its efficacy while hazarding to act in circumstances where decisive proof is absent.

For James, the will to believe comes up against limits that obstruct its willing capacity. These limits appear in the form of dead hypotheses, avoidable choices, trivial options, as well as idiosyncratic and social influences that habituate the will toward specific beliefs. If the hypothesis is dead, the will has nothing to decide because no appeal is made to its energizing effort. This situation is much like the one James describes in *The Principles* in connection with the obstructed will. In the lethargic state of the will, “ideas, objects, considerations, which ... fail to get to the will, fail to draw blood, seem, in so far forth, distant and unreal” (James, *Principles*, 546–7). The dead hypothesis would thus need to be transformed into a live one to activate the energy of the will.<sup>19</sup> As James maintains, “*In concreto*, the

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does not aim to refute evidentialism (precisely because he does not think that the ethics of belief is a matter of proof or disproof), I worry that an overemphasis on the epistemology of belief in James’s essay potentially undercuts the ethical significance of *willing* to believe. That is, I agree with scholars like Marchetti, Alexis Dianda, and Colin Koopman who emphasize the import of “The Will to Believe” as an essay in ethics. See Marchetti, *Ethics and Philosophical Critique*, Dianda, “Moral Life”, and Koopman, “The Will”.

<sup>18</sup>James’s critique of idealism here extends to his insistence that optimism or the “healthy-minded” cannot face or admit the evils, damages, losses, and sufferings that mark reality and is thus too “saccharine” (James, *Pragmatism*, 142). His position can be understood in terms of non-ideal (as opposed to ideal) theory. For more on this debate in the context of political philosophy, see Valentini, “Ideal vs. Non-Ideal”.

<sup>19</sup>James highlights such transformations in his discussion of conversion experiences in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. There he articulates how subjects can undergo redemptive conversions from a prior state of melancholy and morbidity which correlate with his description of certain hypotheses being ‘dead’ for agents in “The Will to Believe”. See James, *Varieties*, 196–7. Yet, in *Varieties*, James also states that “Some persons, for instance, never are, and possibly never under any circumstances could be, converted. Religious ideas cannot become the centre of their spiritual energy ... To the end of their days they refuse to believe, their personal energy never gets to its religious centre, and the latter remains inactive in perpetuity” (James, *Varieties*, 204). Hence, while it certainly is the case that James hoped (in addition to providing evidence and reasons) for the transformation of belief –

freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider" (James, "Will to Believe", 29). Likewise, avoidable choices do not demand wilful belief to decide their outcome. And while wilful belief can decide trivial options, these do not quiver with the moral and existential weight of uncertainty at stake in momentous options. Other obstructions like social habits and physical or psychical ailments mark the resistances that the will must face if it is to overcome them. Yet, James leaves open the possibility that there are some resistances facing the will that may not be ultimately overcome.<sup>20</sup>

Just as effortful volition steers between the agential extremes of the explosive will and the obstructed will, James's concept of wilful belief navigates between the dual dangers of recklessness and paralysis facing belief. Wilful belief constitutes a critical form of faith that humbly avows the limits constraining its exercise without thereby yielding to the paralysing impotence of the skeptic disavowal of decisive action. James is especially concerned with the paralysing doubt advocated by intellectuals like William Kingdon Clifford who demand abstention in questions of faith out of a fear of error (Clifford, *Ethics of Belief*).<sup>21</sup> This fear functions as one possible affective response to situations of uncertainty that James contrasts with the *hope* of wilful belief. He writes:

To preach scepticism [sic] to us as a duty until 'sufficient evidence' for religion be found, is tantamount therefore to telling us, when in presence of the religious hypothesis, that to yield to our fear of its being error is wiser and better than to yield to our hope that it may be true.

(James, "Will to Believe", 26–7)

James worries that the skeptical avoidance of reckless belief comes at the price of giving up faith altogether. That is, the skeptic champions doubt at the expense of belief. In doing so, she not only sets up a problematic dichotomy between doubt and belief that clashes with the conception of faith defended by James, but her position also has debilitating agential effects insofar as she opts for a state of perpetual hesitation in waiting for sufficient evidence to arrive. This is to be in the agential position of the

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and action – for his readers and audience, he nonetheless admits that such transformations, whether religious, ethical, or existential, may not always take place. This admission productively underscores the limits of the will and strenuousness so championed by his Promethean readers.

<sup>20</sup>Though James does not explicitly detail such cases, we might consider an example supplied by his sister, Alice, in her diary entry from 26 October 1890. After reading her brother's paper on "The Hidden Self", Alice describes the endless battle between her "body" and her "will" following violent bouts of hysteria and the torment of having to abandon the latter to her bodily inclinations: "As I lay prostrate after the storm with my mind luminous and active and susceptible of the clearest, strongest impressions, I saw so distinctly that it was a fight between my body and my will, a battle in which the former was to be triumphant to the end" (James, *Diary of Alice James*, 149).

<sup>21</sup>For commentary on the debate between Clifford and James, see Aiken, *Evidentialism*.

obstructed will, where agents are incapable of affirming their wilful capacities. In terms of commitment, the skeptic essentially commits herself to being uncommitted.

In contrast to the debilitating doubt of the skeptic, James outlines a form of faith that is simultaneously cautious and courageous. To understand the type of commitment that the will to believe entails, consider his suggestion from the Preface to *The Will to Believe*: "It does not follow, because recklessness may be a vice in soldiers, that courage ought never to be preached to them. What *should* be preached is courage weighted with responsibility" (James, *Will to Believe*, xi). Recognizing the capacity of agents for reckless action, James encourages a kind of cautious courage rather than a complete divestment from action. This courage is cautious in the sense that it is checked by inhibitions and requires agents to take responsibility for risking to believe in conditions of uncertainty. The type of commitment that follows from such courage is one that maintains a relationship to doubt without thereby being overcome by it. Hence, faith for James does not so much *extinguish* doubt as it keeps it open as a possibility. He clarifies in "The Sentiment of Rationality", "Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible" (James, "Sentiment", 90). Whereas the contrary position maintains that one ought not to believe in anything that can possibly be doubted, James argues that one is justified under specific conditions to believe in something *even if* it can be doubted. Belief responds to conditions of doubt without fully overcoming or being overcome by it. The believing subject does not express the full confidence in her faith as does someone for whom faith is the negation of doubt. Rather, the believing subject expresses a trembling confidence, or a "stuttering conviction" in Livingston's words, as she avows the elements of uncertainty and risk that condition and accompany her will to believe (Livingston, *Damn Great Empires*, 106).

James places faith on quivering, unsettled ground. This quivering quality specifies *how* faith is held by an agent. Less a steady resolve to execute actions swiftly and without question, quivering faith maintains contact with the doubt and hesitation to which it is initially responsive. Recall James's description of the willing function as one that responds to the indecision wrought by conflicting impulses that interrupt habit. If conviction is not to become the excessive form of faith that accompanies a reckless will, then it must remain open to doubt, hesitation, and uncertainty. This does not mean that one wallows perpetually in doubt, for to do so is precisely to be without faith and the action it makes possible. Rather, quivering faith is about the movement from doubt to belief and the type of uncertainty that attends such movement. Depending only on a *maybe*, faith trembles in the movement from doubt to belief. It trembles because it bears the traces of doubt that condition its prior movement. Without uncertainty, there would

be no faith and no accompanying risk, for as James contends, faith only decides matters that lack evidence or certainty.<sup>22</sup> Hence, faith is “the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is *not certified to us in advance*” (James, “Sentiment”, 90, italics added). Without faith, however, subjects would remain indefinitely in the torpor of indecision and hesitation, and could not affirm their capacities as wilful agents – as agents capable of willing and acting without the guarantee that they are right in doing so.

The agent who risks believing even when doubtful is one who is cautiously poised. In being cautious, she does not thereby give up being committed, but rather her commitment reflects the caution she maintains in leaving doubt open as a possibility and the responsibility she assumes for venturing to act despite this uncertainty. She places a quivering confidence in her capacity as a believing, and hence, wilful agent.

James’s account of wilful belief entails a form of reparative commitment. This type of commitment is reparative insofar as it posits (and affirms) the *possibility* to believe within specific limits. To be reparatively committed means to at once countenance doubt as that which limits belief and the action it entails and to extract confidence from willing to believe. This is the type of commitment that accompanies reparative agency. In being reparatively committed, the agent places trust in her capacity to act despite the uncertainties that attend her action.<sup>23</sup> I am reminded, for instance, of the quavering in my voice once I get the nerve to speak about an experience of sexual trauma. The quavering refers to the uncertainty I have about speaking, reflects a vulnerability I assume in speaking, modifies how I speak as a subject, and is informed by a legacy of gendered power dynamics concerning speech around sexual violence. This trembling quality bespeaks the kind of conviction I take on as a speaking subject. I am not quite steady, not quite sure, and yet I venture to speak, my words touched with the tremble of hesitation, a hesitation that at once bears the trace of a power differential, but on which I redemptively draw for its different agential power. This is an example of what Sedgwick means by the work of reparation whereby one extracts sustaining possibilities from limits that do not sustain us (Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 150). The caution qualifying my speech does not altogether prevent me from speaking, which would be a

<sup>22</sup>These are cases that cannot be “*decided on intellectual grounds*” (James, “Will to Believe”, 11).

<sup>23</sup>While one might say this placing of trust in one’s agential capacities in spite of uncertainties is an indelible feature of *any* action, I see James as delimiting this feature to the constraints of wilful belief which he specifies in “The Will to Believe”. As discussed above, reparative commitment applies to those delimited cases in which we are justified to believe without evidential proof where the options for belief posed to our wills are forced, live, and momentous. The decision over suicide posed to James’s will fits this kind of case insofar as it involves an option that is forced, live, and momentous. In my own example, the decision to speak about sexual trauma and the reparative commitment involved in such a decision also concerns an option that is live (it appeals to my will), forced (because there is no way to avoid not choosing), and momentous (because what I speak about is of significant consequence for others and myself).

capitulation to the power differential, but it permeates my voice insofar as I speak *from* doubt rather than certainty. This type of agency, while experienced by a gendered subjectivity quite different from the one James writes of or from, nonetheless bears affinities with the one he affirms in his risk to believe in the face of suicidal depression. Like my hesitant venture to speak, James's decision in that context rested only on a 'may be', reflecting an agential position that affirms the hopeful yet vulnerable feature of action under conditions of doubt.<sup>24</sup>

Such agency is not the over-confidence of a Promethean will nor is it the timidity of Hamlet-like indecision. Reparative commitment is located along the middle-ranges of conviction and doubt. It realizes the extent to which one can be simultaneously cautious and courageous, hesitant and hopeful without conviction and possible action being thereby undermined. This cautious courage is indexical of the vulnerability agents assume in risking to believe and act in a world without security or guarantee. The cautiousness does not lead to a position of impotence insofar as the subject places faith in her agential capacities. Without faith, an agent cannot move from the condition of doubt that incapacitates her ability to act. Yet, without being open to doubt, an agent potentially commits herself to a form of excessive faith and a boundless sense of agency. To be reparatively committed, agents must therefore maintain a relation to doubt by remaining cautious and uncertain without giving up their affirmation to hope and *act* on this hope. What results is a position from which it becomes possible to hope so long as one is also open to doubt.<sup>25</sup> Hope thus carries the vestige of hesitation as it energizes reparative agency and commitment.

#### 4. Conclusion

Unlike fellow pragmatists Jane Addams and John Dewey, James's meliorism has been positioned as indelibly individualistic.<sup>26</sup> This individualism concerns both the source and medium of hope as emanating from and exercised through an individual will. This individualism contrasts with those entailed in the explosive and obstructed wills insofar as it realistically attends to limitations and possibilities emerging from within and without. That is, while the individualisms of sovereignty and melancholy threaten to slip into solipsism, inflated or deflated by one's sense of power or powerlessness, the individualism of James's meliorism is relational, conditioned as it is by the embodied

<sup>24</sup>For James's response to suicide as resting on the 'may be' of belief, see James, "Is Life Worth Living", 58.

<sup>25</sup>I take this to be the meaning behind Benjamin Paul Blood's declaration that "doubt and hope are sisters," which James quotes in the Preface to *The Will to Believe*. See James, *Will to Believe*, ix.

<sup>26</sup>James's vocabulary of individualism – the 'strenuous,' the 'manly mood' – is rife with misogynist insinuations and contributes to the idea that James celebrated a Promethean idea of agency. For a discussion of the sexist underpinnings of James's philosophy, see Haddock Seigfried, *Pragmatism and Feminism* and "The Feminine-Mystical Threat".

and social nature of subjectivity.<sup>27</sup> Reparative agency underscores the vulnerability of action in a world where we are given over to others. This feature of vulnerability contests the fantasy of mastery at the heart of sovereign individualism and the acquiescence of defeat central to melancholic individualism.

While my discussion of reparative agency and commitment in this essay has been consistent with the individualistic orientation of James's meliorism, I now highlight, by way of conclusion, how these concepts are compatible with a more outward positioning of hope, one attentive to the collective capacities and practices of plural agents. In highlighting this compatibility, my point is not to suggest that James conceptualized or practiced this kind of hope in any robust manner, but rather that his meliorism bears possibilities whose redemptive realization depends upon the conceptualization and practice of others. That is, the inchoate possibilities of a more collective practice of hope expressed haphazardly in James's writings stand in need of supplementation by other practitioners and theorists of hope if they are to be realized.

In a letter to his friend Thomas Ward from January of 1868, amid the throes of a suicidal depression, James confesses:

All I can tell you is the thought that with me outlasts all others, and onto which, like a rock, I find myself washed up when the waves of doubt are weltering over all the rest of the world; and that is the thought of my having a will, and of my belonging to a brotherhood of men possessed of a capacity for pleasure and pain of different kinds ... Every thought you now have and every act and intention owes its complexion to the acts of your dead and living brothers. *Everything* we know and are is through men. We have no revelation but through man.

(James, *Letters Volume 1*, 130–1)

In addition to the thought of the will, James testifies clinging to his communion with his fellow humans for hope amid neurasthenic doubt. Indeed, even the thought of the will, he admits, owes its appearance to the acts of his dead and living kin. Elsewhere he describes borrowing the saving thought of free will from Charles Renouvier after reading his second *Essais* (James, *Letters Volume 1*, 147).<sup>28</sup> The hope expressed by James in this letter reflects something more communal than the volitional decision of a lone individual who places faith in their own agential capacities. What James appears to confess is that even his hope in the will is a hope borrowed from (and communicated to) others.<sup>29</sup> This is an example of what I call 'hope from without', a hope that further frustrates the Promethean subjectivity of a will longing for mastery and control.

<sup>27</sup>For James's account of the embodied and social conditions subjectivity, see Chapter 10, "The Consciousness of Self" from *The Principles of Psychology, Volume 1*.

<sup>28</sup>On the connection between James and Renouvier, see Viney, "William James on Free Will".

<sup>29</sup>In addition to the social nature of this letter, as Paul Stob has recently observed, James delivered most of his essays as lectures or 'popular statements' which he carefully crafted with his particular audiences in mind. This social dimension of James's writings underscores the idea that his individualism is relational rather than atomistic or solipsistic. See Stob, *William James*.

To concretize this type of hope which James only obliquely intimates, we might look to James Baldwin, who like James, describes a hope born of an encounter with suicidal depression. Confronting a decision over suicide at four o'clock in the morning, Baldwin derives a hope from the saving power of other human beings which he calls the "miracle of love" (Baldwin, "Nothing Personal", 700–1). This hope, he writes, is an ancestral heritage, one he learned through "descending, as it were, into the eyes of my father and my mother" (Baldwin, "Nothing Personal", 705). Baldwin's response to the question of suicide does not so much reflect James's contention that one can make life significant if one wills it but insists on the connection of human life. He asserts:

What one must be enabled to recognize, at four o'clock in the morning, is that one has no right, at least not for reasons of private anguish, to take one's life. All lives are connected to other lives and when one man goes, much more than the man goes with him.

(Baldwin, "Nothing Personal", 701)

More than just the loss of *a* life, suicide, as Baldwin notes, amounts to the loss of connection and the lives tethered by that connection. The agency conditioned by this connection bespeaks a vulnerability that recognizes not only the fragility of *my* hope, but of *our* hope for there is much that undermines our saving of one another.

Hope from without is a hope borrowed or realized from others, reflecting the relational quality of a reparative agency achieved with the help of others and responsive to the agential possibilities and limits of others.<sup>30</sup> If we take seriously Baldwin's and James's attention to the social conditions of hope, then we must admit that hope may not only be energized by the exercise of an individual will but assumes a more collective complexion when it is borrowed from or occasioned by the saving power of others. Simultaneously cautious and courageous, this hope draws its sustenance from our collective capacities and practices as reparative agents.

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<sup>30</sup>This hope, while not emerging from individual volition, may depend upon individual volition for its maintenance.

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