

***8. Round Kant or Through Him? On James's Arguments for Freedom, and their
Relation to Kant's***

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My title is a reference to a famous remark that James makes about Kant:

I believe that Kant bequeathes to us not one single conception which is both indispensable to philosophy and which philosophy either did not possess before him, or was not destined inevitably to acquire after him through the growth of men's reflection upon the hypotheses by which science interprets nature. The true line of philosophic progress lies, in short, it seems to me, not so much *through* Kant as *round* him to the point where now we stand. (WWJ 5:139)¹

This comes at the end of his 1904 essay "The Pragmatic Method," where he is arguing that Kant's critical philosophy is not really much of an advance on the approach of the "English-speaking philosophers," who he sees as the ancestors of pragmatism insofar as they "introduced the custom of interpreting the meaning of conceptions by asking what difference they make for life." "Thus," James claims, "when all is said and done, it was they, not Kant, who introduced 'the critical method' into philosophy, the one method fitted to make philosophy a study worthy of serious men. For what seriousness can possibly remain in debating philosophic propositions that will never make an appreciable difference to us in action? And what matters it, when all propositions are practically meaningless, which of them be called true or false?" Given this

¹ References to James 1975-88 are given with the abbreviation WWJ, followed by volume and page number. References to James 1992-2004 are given with the abbreviation CWJ, followed by volume and page number.

situation, James concludes that “Philosophy can perfectly well outflank [Kant], and build herself up into adequate fullness by prolonging more directly the older English lines” – although he allows that “connoisseurs” will always be drawn back to exploring the “wondrous and racy contents” that make up the “antique bric-a-brac museum” that is Kant’s mind (WWJ 5:138-9).

But does this present a fair picture of James’s attitude to Kant, and of his indebtedness to him? Is it right to see James (and on James’s view, pragmatism itself) as nothing but an extension of the “older English lines” of thought, to which Kant is at best nothing more than an optional and perhaps diverting detour? These are large questions, which have already received a fair amount of discussion.² But here I want to take a somewhat narrower focus, and consider in particular James’s arguments for freedom,³ particularly those offered in his essay “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1897).

While on some readings of both Kant’s idealism and James’s pragmatism which will be discussed below, it may indeed seem that each must be committed to radically different arguments for freedom, I will argue that this essay shows their approaches to be very close, which perhaps suggests that their fundamental philosophical views are not so far apart after all – and that without some influence on him of a Kantian outlook, James could not have got to his final destination, suggesting that Kant is perhaps no mere detour after all.

² For one helpful contribution, see Carlson 1997. See also Evans 1982.

³ In speaking about “freedom” in this context, two cautionary remarks are needed. First, as James makes clear at the start of the article in question, he takes himself not to be arguing for freedom, but rather indeterminism – because he thinks the term freedom has been co-opted by the kind of “soft determinism” that he takes to be incoherent and so abhors, and he therefore says he will eschew the term: “The word ‘chance’ I wish to keep, but I wish to get rid of the word ‘freedom.’ Its eulogistic associations have so far overshadowed all the rest of its meaning that both parties claim sole right to use it, and determinists to-day insist that they alone are freedom’s champions... Now all this is a quagmire of evasion under which the real issue of fact has been entirely smothered... [The issue of fact] is the question of determinism, about which we are to talk to-night” (WWJ 6:117). At the risk of some confusion, however, I will talk about freedom as much as indeterminism, so it should be borne in mind that when it comes to James, it is freedom in this latter sense that is at issue. The second point to note here is that of course this does not necessarily correspond exactly to what *Kant* means in speaking about freedom and (especially) autonomy, so that the conclusions of the two thinkers using the arguments we will consider are not necessarily to be equated. But since my main aim is to focus on the *strategy* they both employ, not the validity of these arguments as such, I will also largely set this complication to one side.

My strategy will be to present two rather contrasting ways of understanding the way in which James as a pragmatist and Kant as an idealist seem to approach the problem of freedom, and then to argue that as we refine their respective positions, James and Kant can be brought closer and closer together, and in a way that shows there to be a fundamental Kantian aspect to James's thinking on this issue, in a way that I hope does credit to them both.

1. Pragmatism and Idealism on Freedom: A First Pass

One way to approach James's account of freedom in "The Dilemma of Determinism" is in the light of "The Will to Believe," which was published in the same year, where that latter essay has been seen as defending a characteristically Jamesian attitude to matters of belief, justification and evidence.

The interpretation of that paper is of course disputed, but on one account James can be read as claiming "that it is foolish not to believe, or try to believe, if one is happier for believing" (Letter from Chauncey Wright; cited in Misak 1993, 63), or slightly more moderately that "one has a *right* to believe ahead of the evidence, if one is happier for believing" (Misak 2011, 262). This way of understanding James's view seems to have been the one that Peirce adopted when he characterizes a religious believer as saying: "Oh, I could not believe so-and-so, because I would be wretched if I did"; and then rejected it with the scornful remark: "When an ostrich buries its head in the sand as danger approaches, it very likely takes the happiest course" ("The Fixation of Belief" [1877], Peirce 1931-58, vol. 5, § 377; cited by Misak 2013, 64).⁴ So, as Cheryl Misak summarizes this approach (which she seems to favor as the correct reading of James): "James

⁴ This cannot be taken as Peirce's response to "The Will to Believe" itself, as it appears almost two decades before James gave his lecture in 1896; but James espouses similar views in earlier publications, while as Misak makes clear, Wright and James had been disputing the issue from 1875, where the dispute was well known to people in their circle, including Peirce.

wants to expand the concept of evidence...to include as evidence the satisfaction of the believer” (Misak 2013: 63) – where to most evidentialists (including Misak, it appears),⁵ this “expansion” is enough to take James out of the evidentialist camp altogether, where this is then said to be James’s aim, and so to lie at the heart of his dispute with Clifford, amongst others.⁶

If this is seen as James’s approach in “The Will to Believe,” this then might suggest the following underlying argument for freedom in “The Dilemma of Determinism”: In this essay, James argues that unless we reject determinism, we will be left with a thoroughly pessimistic view of reality, as we cannot intelligibly regret the bad features of the world, and think they may not be intrinsic to it, as “[o]ther things being what they are, *it* could not be different” (WWJ 6:126). James might therefore be read as taking the gloomy implications of determinism as sufficient grounds on which to reject it, in line with this interpretation of “The Will to Believe.” This, if it were the correct way to make sense of him, would then give us a distinctively pragmatist defense of freedom, which would seem to have little corresponding to it on the idealist side.

Likewise, one could understand Kant’s defense of freedom in an idealist manner that would have little echo in pragmatism. On this approach, Kant could be read as claiming on transcendental grounds that we have no option but to believe that we are free, perhaps because it cannot be doubted from the perspective of an agent, where this then brings in considerations in

⁵ Cf. Misak 2013, 67: “We have seen that one way of thinking of James’s view has it being compatible with evidentialism – with the view that one should believe in accord with one’s evidence. But he has a view of evidence that is anathema to the evidentialist.” Cf. also Misak 2013, 63: “[O]ne of the ways in which James wants to expand the concept of evidence is to include as evidence the satisfaction of the believer. This is something the evidentialist will be loathe to accept. He will argue that the evidence for the truth of a belief cannot come in the form of the belief making me happy, or you comfortable.” Cf. *Principles of Psychology*, volume I, WWJ 8:322: “The reader who finds any comfort in the idea of the Soul is, however, perfectly free to continue to believe in it; for our reasonings have not established the non-existence of the Soul; they have only proved its superfluity for scientific purposes.”

⁶ Cf. “The Sentiment of Rationality,” WWJ 6:80: “Our reasons are ludicrously incommensurate with the volume of our feeling, yet on the latter we unhesitatingly act... [B]elief (as measured by action) not only does and must continually outstrip scientific evidence...”

support of freedom that have nothing to do with the effects of this belief on our happiness or well-being. Here, then, we would have an idealist argument for freedom, which in turn would seem to have little resemblance to a pragmatist approach as outlined above.

If these readings of James and Kant respectively are accepted, therefore, it would seem that there is little common ground between the two of them on this issue. However, it seems to me that both these readings would fail to capture properly their respective positions, where with further refinements they can be brought closer together.

2. Pragmatism and Idealism on Freedom: Further Refinements

A first refinement we can make to James's view is to question whether he really thought the best defense of freedom was that believing in it would increase our satisfaction by making pessimism less likely. For, even when it comes to "The Will to Believe" itself, it is by no means clear that this is his *general* account of justification for belief. For, of course, James places significant limits to the kinds of cases to which he thinks his approach should be applied:⁷ namely when the options in question are *living, forced, and momentous*, and where the question cannot be decided on "intellectual grounds" ("The Will to Believe," WWJ 6:20). In such circumstances, James can be read as arguing, we are not required to sit and wait for conclusive evidence to come in, as we do not have this luxury, while such proof is rarely if ever available anyway; instead he thinks we are entitled to adopt the belief in question, where if we did not, we would be sure to lose the "goods" that accepting it would bring.

Thus, in the religious case, he holds that we cannot ever get into a position of knowing for sure if God exists or does not; and on this basis, James can be taken to argue that it is therefore

⁷ Cf. CWJ 10:449: "I hedged my license to indulge in private faith with so many restrictions and signboards of danger that the outlet was narrow enough."

not necessary for us to wait for such evidence to be available, but instead we can believe in God based on the benefits to us that accepting such belief will entail:

When I look at the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men, and when I think of all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves, then this command that we shall put a stopper on our heart, instincts and courage, and *wait* – acting of course meanwhile more or less as if religion were *not* true – till doomsday, or till such time as our intellect and sense working together may have raked in evidence enough – this command, I say, seems to me the queerest idol ever manufactured in the philosophic cave. (WWJ 6:177)

Like the earlier view, this is still a form of anti-evidentialism, but a more moderate kind than previously, as it is allowing that we can believe p on non-epistemic grounds only in cases where conclusive evidence is hard or not possible to attain – but where James’s fallibilism concerning human knowledge means that in practice this will be most of the time. James’s justification for the view seems to be that on many occasions we must act if we are not to lose the good in question altogether,⁸ where then waiting for further evidence in our epistemic condition is not a rational option to pursue, even at the risk of possible error.

We may then think of this more moderate anti-evidentialism in relation to an argument for freedom, where we could take James to be arguing in the following way: There is no compelling evidence for or against determinism, and it is unlikely that there can even be any, while belief in

⁸ Cf. “Bain and Renouvier” (1876), WWJ 17:326: “This brings us back to our theoretical dilemma about freedom, concerning which we must now bow to the necessity of making a choice; for suspense itself would be a choice, and a most practical one, since by it we should forfeit the possible benefits of boldly espousing a possible truth. If this *be* a moral world, there are cases in which any indecision about its being so must be death to the soul. Now, if our choice is predetermined, there is an end of the matter; whether predetermined to the truth of fatality or the delusion of liberty, is all one for us. But if our choice is truly free, then the only possible way of getting at that truth is by the exercise of the freedom which it implies.” In the same essay, James also follows Ravaisson in insisting that “[t]he ‘assumption’ of a fixed law in natural science” and “the assumption of an ultimate law of indetermination” are positions between which “no man can decide empirically” (WWJ 17:325).

freedom also meets the conditions of being live, forced and momentous, and where rejecting this belief would lead to a pessimistic and life-sapping world view:

[The principle of causality] is as much an altar to an unknown god as the one that Saint Paul found at Athens. All our scientific and philosophic ideals are altars to unknown gods. Uniformity is as much so as is free-will. If this be admitted, we can debate on even terms. (WWJ 6:116)

Now, evidence of an external kind to decide between determinism and indeterminism is, as I intimated a while back, strictly impossible to find. (WWJ 6:117)

This way of taking James's position may then take us closer to a wide-spread way of reading Kant, and his emphasis on "the primacy of practical reason," which can be understood in the following terms: Theoretical reason must leave certain questions undecided, because of the limitations of human understanding, where at this point we are entitled to believe claims about the world on practical grounds instead, i.e. on the grounds that these beliefs are required if we are to act in certain ways and not others, where we take it that such actions bring with them certain "goods," such as more knowledge of the world (as in the case of regulative ideas) or the greater likelihood of moral action (as in the postulates).⁹

So we now appear to have brought James and Kant closer together: On the first way of taking the positions of James and Kant, as based on extreme non-evidentialism and on a transcendental claim respectively, they looked very different. But now they look more convergent, as two forms of what has been called "practical non-evidentialism."¹⁰

⁹ Cf. CWJ 8:275: "*Adopt your hypothesis*, and see how it agrees with life – That is faith. As Kant says I have swept away knowledge in order to make room for Faith; and that seems to me the absolutely sound and healthy position."

¹⁰ Chignell 2013, §6.1. Cf. also Chignell 2007, 323-60, 354-7, and 335, where Chignell comments that the "antievictionalist flavor [of Kant's project] anticipates strands of later pragmatism."

Of course, this doesn't mean they are exactly the same: In particular, their arguments for the claim regarding the impotence of theoretical reason are different: For James in "The Will to Believe" it is mainly a general appeal to fallibilism and the role of hypotheses in inquiry,¹¹ while in "The Dilemma of Determinism" it is more like a claim about theoretical underdetermination: at the highest level, when we are dealing with fundamental world-views, there just cannot be any "objective" or "external" evidence to settle the choice between them:

[F]acts practically have hardly anything to do with making us either determinists or indeterminists. Sure enough, we make a flourish of quoting facts this way or that... But who does not see the wretched insufficiency of this so-called objective testimony on both sides? What fills up the gaps in our minds is something not objective, not external. What divides us into possibility men and anti-possibility men is different faiths or postulates – postulates of rationality. To this man the world seems more rational with possibilities in it – to that man more rational with possibilities excluded; and talk as we will about having to yield to evidence, what makes us monists or pluralists, determinists or indeterminists, is at bottom always some sentiment like this. (WWJ 6:119)

For James, when it comes to these fundamental philosophical choices, "hard evidence" will never settle the issue, which then opens up the space for a different approach.¹² But for Kant, it is the structure of transcendental idealism that opens up this space, with his claims about the limits of our capacity to fully grasp the nature of "things as they are in themselves" – given which theoretical reason has inevitable limits.

¹¹ Cf. Klein forthcoming.

¹² Cf. also "The Sentiment of Rationality," WWJ 6:66.

Nonetheless, notwithstanding this significant difference, it still may now seem that James and Kant are broadly similar in the strategy they adopt for the defense of our belief in freedom.

3. Pragmatism and Idealism on Freedom: Another Step

However, I now want to suggest that this approach to Kant's position on freedom, while pretty widespread and familiar,¹³ is mistaken, and that Kant is much closer to an evidentialist position on this matter than this assumes – where then (if I am right in my account of Kant) the question arises whether James is an evidentialist concerning freedom too, or whether in the end they remain apart on this issue because he takes the non-evidentialist option where Kant does not. Let me begin by giving my reasons for thinking that Kant is a particular kind of evidentialist in his argument for freedom. I will here focus on Kant's discussion in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: as will be considered in §4, problems with my reading may make it necessary to bring in other discussions, which will therefore be dealt with there.

Kant's argument in the *Critique of Practical Reason* centers on the example of a man who is asked to give false testimony, on pain of immediate execution. Kant argues that the man will be conscious that he ought to overcome his love of life, and refuse to give false witness; but because ought implies can, he must also hold that he is free to act in this way, even if in fact he might not do so because he could be tempted to do other than he ought to do:

He would perhaps not venture to assert whether he would do it or not, but he must admit without hesitation that it would be possible for him. He judges, therefore, that he can do something

¹³ For a recent defense of a non-evidentialist reading of Kant, see Marcus Willaschek, 2010, e.g. 168-9: “[I]n several places in his work, most prominently in the Dialectic of his *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant has denied the unrestricted validity of the principle that rational belief requires evidence in favour of its truth. Rather, we can be rationally warranted in a belief even in the complete absence of evidence for it.” Willaschek draws a parallel between Kant and James on these issues on pp. 194-6.

because he is aware [bewußt] that he ought to do it and cognizes freedom within him, which, without the moral law, would have remained unknown to him. (5:30)¹⁴

Kant takes this example to confirm that “morality first discloses to us the concept of freedom” (KGS 5:30), rather than the other way round, and so is the “*ratio cognoscendi* of freedom” (KGS 5:4n): “For had not the moral law *already* been distinctly thought in our reason, we should never consider ourselves justified in *assuming* such as thing as freedom (even though it is not self-contradictory). But were there no freedom, the moral law would *not be encountered* at all in ourselves” (KGS 5:4n). This then gives the moral law the status of a “fact of reason” for Kant:

Consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason, for example, from consciousness of freedom (since this is not antecedently given to us) and because it instead forces itself upon us of itself as a synthetic a priori proposition that is not based on any intuition... (KGS 5:31)

The question I want to raise, then, is how far this argument should be seen as offering a non-evidentialist argument for freedom?

My claim is that it is in fact perfectly evidentialist; all that may make it seem otherwise is that the evidence in question comes not from what theoretical reason tells us, but rather from what practical reason tells us instead. In *this* sense, then, practical reason has priority over theoretical reason: namely, that the evidence we need comes from the former and not the latter –

¹⁴ References to Kant’s works are given according to Kant 1900- (KGS) by volume number and page. The pagination of this edition is indicated in the margin of most editions and translations. I have followed the translation from the Cambridge University Press edition of Kant’s works.

but *not* in the sense that we are moving from evidential theoretical reason to non-evidential practical reason, as on the approach outlined previously.

The basis for this claim is the role that the awareness of the moral “ought” plays in Kant’s argument, either in the individual case (“I ought to overcome my love of life and not give false witness”) or more generally (“I ought to follow the moral law in universalizing my maxims”): Here, I would suggest, Kant is using such awareness to ground the claim that we are free, insofar as *ultra posse nemo obligatur* (no one is obliged to do what it is impossible for them to do, or (in this sense) “ought implies can”), so that the former is then adequate evidence for the latter. This would therefore seem to fit an evidentialist approach, except that the evidence does not come from what theoretical reason tells us about the workings of the empirical world, but from what practical reason tells us about how we should act.

It could be argued, however, that while this “fact of reason” discussion might be understood in an evidentialist manner, Kant’s later treatment of freedom as a postulate in the *Critique* suggests a less evidentialist approach, particularly when Kant says of such postulates that “this is the only case in which my interest, because I *may* not give up anything of it, unavoidably determines my judgment” (KGS 5:143).¹⁵ Indeed, it might seem that it exactly such non-evidentialism that prompts Kant to deal with the worry raised by Thomas Wizenmann, that the need for *p* entitles one to postulate the existence of *p*, where this is also the sort of worry that was frequently raised against James.

Now, much could be said on this topic, but just to mention some relevant points. First, in response to Wizenmann’s objection, Kant in fact argues in an evidentialist manner, again

¹⁵ Cf. Willaschek 2010, 180: “I think it is a major insight on Kant’s part that there can be theoretical propositions that follow from (or, at least, are ‘inseparably connected’ to) practical attitudes – ontological commitments we undertake not by accepting a theory, but rather by wanting or willing something and by accepting practical commands and imperatives as binding. . . For instance, if Kant is correct to claim that we are obligated to realize the highest good, and that this is possible only if God exists, then we are rationally committed to believing that God exists.”

appealing to the principle of “ought implies can”: “It is a duty to realize the highest good to the utmost of our capacity; therefore it must be possible; hence it is also unavoidable for every rational being in the world to assume what is necessary for its objective possibility” (KGS 5:143n). Kant would appear to be arguing that to make sense of this duty, one must grant its necessary conditions, such that the former provides ground for belief in the latter, in contrast to the Wizenmann case of an inclination, where one can of course have a need based on an inclination, without the latter providing any basis for thinking that what makes the inclination satisfiable in fact obtains, as it is not the case that “want implies can.” It might be replied, however, that even if this is so, what the evidence supports here is still not a belief, but something more like a hope, or supposition, or assumption.¹⁶ However, my response to this challenge would be to say that this is not grounds for doubting Kant’s earlier evidentialist argument, but more reflects the fact that here the discussion has shifted to freedom as a postulate in relation to the highest good, rather than in relation to the fact of reason. For, the highest good is an object or goal we are obliged to aim to bring about, where what we are assuming are the conditions that make this object or goal rational to aim for, where something weaker than a belief might suffice; but in the “fact of reason” case, we are deriving the conditions that explain or make possible the moral law as such, as it is actually applicable to us, where something stronger would seem to be required.¹⁷ This then also explains the clear priority Kant gives to freedom over the other

¹⁶ But not a hypothesis: see KGS 5:143, where a “postulate from a practical point of view” is distinguished from a “permitted hypothesis.”

¹⁷ Cf. Beck 1960, 208: “[T]here is a difference in the meaning of freedom as a condition of the moral law and as a condition of the *summum bonum*. Freedom in the latter sense is an object of faith, not a *scibile*; it is the faith (*Vertrauen*) in the achievability of the *summum bonum*, i.e., the belief in virtue (*Glaube an die Tugend*) as adequate to achieve the highest good.”

postulates, and why he gives it a more substantial epistemic status, which then (I would suggest) calls for a more evidentialist approach than for the postulates of God and immortality.¹⁸

Nonetheless, Kant's argument as I understand it does still share an important similarity with the non-evidential approach outlined previously, which is that he needs to "neutralize" the claim of theoretical reason to be able to prove conclusively that we in fact lack freedom – for if this could be established, the argument above could be turned on its head, to show that as we are unfree, we are unable to act morally and so do not fall under the jurisdiction of the moral law. But, the machinery of transcendental idealism ensures for Kant that no such claim of theoretical reason can ever be plausibly established: From the perspective of theoretical reason on its own, it must always remain an open question about whether we are free or not, where then the evidence from practical reason can then be used to tip the epistemic balance in favor of this belief.

It is perhaps also worth noting, that while it may be right to claim that the *Groundwork* differs from the second *Critique* on these issues, so that it might be said that there is a "great reversal" between the two texts (Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, KGS 5:46-8), it is nonetheless the case that in the *Groundwork* there are also suggestions of the kind of argument he will offer in the later work. I would claim that an argument of this sort can be found towards the end of the third section, for example in the following passage:

All human beings think of themselves as having a will that is free. From this stems all judgments about actions such that they *ought* to have been done even if they *were not done*... [R]eason for *speculative purposes* finds the route of natural necessity much more even and useful than that of

¹⁸ Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, KGS 5:3-4: "Now, the concept of freedom, insofar as its *reality is proved by an apodictic law of practical reason* [my emphasis], constitutes the *keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason; and all other concepts (those of God and immortality), which as mere ideas remain without support in the latter, now attach themselves to this concept and with it and by means of it get stability and objective reality, that is, their *possibility is proved* by this: that freedom is real, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law."

freedom: yet for *practical purposes* the footpath of freedom is the only one on which it is possible to make use of one's reason in our behaviour; which is why it is just as impossible for the subtlest philosophy as for the commonest human reason to rationalize freedom away. (KGS 4:455-6)

Kant's position here can be understood as follows: While theoretical reason finds it compelling to view the world in terms of natural necessity, we also possess *practical* reason, which tells us how we ought to act in various ways. But we could not take this practical reason seriously unless we took ourselves to be free, as it is only insofar as we are free that the "ought" could apply to us.¹⁹ Thus, given the practical as well as theoretical nature of our reason, in telling us that there are things we ought to do, we are entitled to believe that we possess the freedom that such oughts require.²⁰ And this argument, far from being at odds with Kant's approach in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, is entirely consistent with it: for of course one of the things practical reason tells us according to Kant, is what we ought to do as moral agents, so that this then becomes the *ratio cognoscendi* of our freedom.

We have seen, therefore, how it is possible to read Kant's final position as involving an evidentialism concerning our freedom, but where that evidentialism takes a practical form, based on the way in which practical reason tells us that there are ways in which we *ought* to act. Kant allows, of course, that if theoretical reason could establish that we lack freedom, then we should

¹⁹ This way of putting the argument of the passage above may seem to reverse the order in which Kant places things, where he might appear to be saying that our judgement concerning our freedom is prior, and from this arises judgements concerning what we ought to do. But of course, if Kant's fundamental point is about the presuppositions we must make before we could be capable of making ought judgements, there is a sense in which thinking that we are free must come first, as a condition of possessing practical reason in the first place. Based on this argument, and the fact that we do face ought claims, we can then infer that we are free.

²⁰ Cf. also *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, KGS 4:458: "The concept of a world of understanding is this only a *standpoint* that reason sees itself necessitated to take outside appearances, *in order to think of itself as practical*, and this would not be possible if the influences of sensibility were determining for a human being..." For an earlier passage that also seems to resemble the approach of the second *Critique*, cf. also KGS 4:410-11: "For the pure representation of duty, and in general of the moral law, mixed with no alien addition of empirical stimuli [is the way in which reason]...first becomes aware that by itself it can also be practical..."

reject the “ought” as it applies to us as illusory or a “chimera” (cf. KGS 4:445); but given that this is not possible, because of the limitations imposed on theoretical reason by the very structure of transcendental idealism, we are entitled to take that evidence at face value, and so come to accept that we are free. Thus, the “primacy of practical reason” here does not mean that it becomes some sui generis source of belief that is not properly epistemic, but rather that it extends the possibility of our rational beliefs (if not certainty) beyond the boundaries of theoretical reason, while at the same time respecting the jurisdiction of the latter.

However, if this is the right approach to take with respect to Kant, does this then put him at odds with James? Does James’s pragmatism commit him to a more thoroughgoing anti-evidentialism which is now no longer apparent in Kant’s strategy as interpreted above? I don’t see why this should follow, for it seems to me that James’s strategy could also be taken along evidentialist lines, without stretching the concept of evidence to breaking-point, as Misak fears. To see why, it may be worth saying a little bit more about the actual structure of “The Dilemma of Determinism” essay than we have done up to now.

James starts by making clear the limits of what he is trying to do, which is that he cannot offer any conclusive proof of our freedom, but that he can give grounds for taking it to be true, and acting on that basis:

I thus disclaim openly on the threshold all pretension to prove to you that the freedom of the will is true. The most I hope is to induce some of you to follow my example in assuming it true, and acting as if it were true. (WWJ 6:115)

And James famously remarks that this is how it ought to be: we don't want to be compelled into believing freedom with a "coercive demonstration," but to freely make our choice based on the evidence (WWJ 6:115).²¹

He also makes a further important preliminary point: That in general, we make and are entitled to make theory choices based on which gives us the greater "subjective satisfaction," but where this means "makes the world appear more rational":

The arguments I am about to urge all proceed on two suppositions: first, when we make theories about the world and discuss them with one another, we do so in order to attain a conception of things which will give us subjective satisfaction; and, second, if there be two conceptions, and the one seems to us, on the whole, more rational than the other, we are entitled to suppose that the more rational one is the truer of the two. (WWJ 6:115)

What is the justification for this approach? It seems to have worked, as a way of finding out about the world:

I cannot stop to argue the point; but I myself believe that all the magnificent achievements of mathematical and physical science – our doctrines of evolution, of uniformity of law, and the rest – proceed from our indomitable desire to cast the world into a more rational shape in our minds than the shape into which it is thrown there by the crude order of our experience. The world has

²¹ The fact that James talks here of "assuming" freedom to be true, and "acting as if it were true" might suggest that James is arguing for a weaker cognitive status for freedom, by treating it as an assumption, a postulate, a regulative idea or a Peircean "hope," as against belief as such – where then to attain this weaker status, various sorts of non-evidentialism may become more plausible. However, unlike Peirce and Kant, James seems to have been less keen to draw this kind of contrast, where of course it is belief that forms the focus of "The Will to Believe," so it is not so clear that this kind of non-evidentialist route is an option for James here, even if it might have made his position less controversial, like Peirce's.

shown itself, to a great extent, plastic to this demand of ours for rationality. How much farther it will show itself plastic no one can say. Our only means of finding out is to try... (WWJ 6:115)²²

This passage can already be said to have a clear Kantian aspect, in claiming that we must go beyond the data of raw experience to bring an order to it and thus our encounter with the world.

But the passage also has a less Kantian aspect: (a) there is no suggestion that this somehow imposes on the world an order it doesn't possess in itself, even though that structure may not be immediately apparent in "the crude order of our experience,"²³ (b) there is no guarantee that the ordering cannot meet with resistance from the world at some point, but no reason to think it has done so up to now (so no call for skepticism), and so no reason to hold back in our inquiries. In fact, James's position here is perhaps most reminiscent of Hegel's famous claim that: "To him who looks at the world rationally the world looks rationally back; the two exist in a reciprocal relationship" (*Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel 1969-71, vol. 12,

²² Cf. James's remark in the Preface to the collection in which this essay appears: "Postulating more unity than the first experiences yield, we also discover more" (WWJ 6:6).

²³ Cf. also *Pragmatism*, WWJ 1:117: "All our truths are beliefs about 'Reality'; and in any particular belief the reality acts as something independent, as a thing *found*, not manufactured." But for a different contemporary view of "the pragmatic method of explanation" and thus perhaps of someone like James, cf. Kemp Smith 1920, 10-11: "Even science, it was contended, is not a form of theoretical insight; it is merely a means to power. Science, rightly understood, never seeks to explain, but only to simplify. By scrupulously careful observation we verify the ultimate coexistences and sequences among our sensations, and under the guidance of elaborate hypotheses, which have a merely subjective value in directing inquiry, we define the coexistences and sequences in exact qualitative terms. Acquaintance with these relations, when thus precisely defined, enables us to predict the future, to construct machines, and so progressively to gain control over our physical environment; but they yield no insight, it is maintained, into the independently real. What is alone truly characteristic of science is not the obtaining of insight, but the acquisition of power. Thought is an instrument developed through natural processes for the practical purposes of adaptation. Its criteria and values are exclusively determined by the instinctive equipment of the species in its adjustment to environment. They have no independent validity of any kind. The human mind, the argument proceeds, is limited to appearances; to attain knowledge in the absolute sense, that is to say through distinguishing between the true and the false, is impossible." Cf. also p. 14, where Kemp Smith contrast "present-day naturalism" (where he mentions J. S. Mill and Huxley) which aims to be more realist, with "the skeptical, subjectivist, pragmatic view of knowledge."

23. Trans. in Hegel 1975, 29; translation modified)– but of course James thinks Hegel’s conception of reason ultimately takes him in a monistic direction, which he deplors.²⁴

James makes clear at the outset that he includes moral issues within the material that we need to taken into account when we “cast the world into a more rational shape”:

Our only means of finding out is to try; and I, for one, feel as free to try conceptions of moral as of mechanical or of logical rationality. If a certain formula for expressing the nature of the world violates my moral demand, I shall feel as free to throw it overboard, or at least to doubt it, as if it disappointed my demand for uniformity of sequence, for example; the one demand being, so far as I can see, quite as subjective and emotional as the other is. (WWJ 6:115-6)²⁵

Now, this may be taken as a form of coherentist evidentialism:²⁶ We should try to generate as coherent a system of beliefs as we can, where a test for belief is whether rejecting it would undermine that system – and where it may turn out that rejecting a moral demand may cause as much damage as anything else, which can then be grounds on which to keep it, *ceteris paribus*.²⁷

²⁴ Cf. James, *A Pluralistic Universe*, where James writes approvingly that “‘The aim of knowledge,’ says Hegel, ‘is to divest the objective world of its strangeness, and to make us more at home in it’” (WWJ 4:10), but argues that ultimately Hegel’s monistic tendencies makes this impossible, at least as evidenced by the British idealists: “Albeit the absolute is defined as being necessarily an embodiment of objectively perfect rationality, it is fair to its english advocates to say that those who have espoused the hypothesis most concretely and seriously have usually avowed the irrationality to their own minds of certain elements of it” (WWJ 4:55).

²⁵ Cf. “The Sentiment of Rationality,” WWJ 6:76: “That nature will follow to-morrow the same laws that she follows to-day is, they [i.e. ‘the scientific philosophers of the present day’] all admit, a truth which no man can *know*; but in the interests of cognition as well as of action we must postulate or assume it.”

²⁶ Reading James this way gives him a response to the criticism of J. B. Pratt (cited by Misak 2011, 264), that James confuses “the ‘good,’ harmonious, and logically confirmatory consequences of religious concepts as such” with the “good and pleasant consequences which come from believing these concepts,” where Pratt argues that “[i]t is one thing to say a belief is true because the logical consequences that flow from it fit in harmoniously with our otherwise grounded knowledge; and quite another to call it true because it is pleasant to believe.” On the reading of James offered here, James can agree with Pratt’s distinction, and opt for the same side.

²⁷ For a flavour of the sort of coherentist view I have in mind, cf. Blanshard, vol. 2, 227: “What really tests [a] judgement is the extent of our accepted world that is implicated with it and would be carried down with it if it fell.” One difference between this approach and Willaschek’s, is that for the coherentist this test does provide a form of evidence in favor of a belief, whereas Willaschek does not seem to see evidence in this way; for example, while recognizing that to come to believe that “I am a brain in a vat” would lead me to give up so many of my other beliefs

James then goes on to draw his well-known distinction between “hard” and “soft” determinism, where he rejects the latter as a “quagmire of evasion” (WWJ 6:117), so that the choice for him comes down to hard determinism and indeterminism, where he reminds us that “evidence of an external kind to decide between determinism and indeterminism is, as I intimated a while back, strictly impossible to find” (WWJ 6:117). He characterizes the difference between the two positions as follows:

[Determinism] professes that those parts of the universe already laid down absolutely appoint and decree what the other parts shall be...Indeterminism, on the contrary, says that the parts have a certain amount of loose play on one another, so that the laying down of one of them does not necessarily determine what the others shall be. Indeterminism thus allows for real possibilities, while determinism does not. (WWJ 6:117-8)

James also insists that (in the terms of “The Will to Believe”) the issue between them is “forced”:

The issue, it will be seen, is a perfectly sharp one, which no eulogistic terminology can smear over or wipe out [cf. ‘soft determinism’]. The truth *must* lie with one side or the other, and its lying with one side makes the other false. (WWJ 6:118)

And he also emphasizes that the empirical sciences cannot settle this dispute one way or the other:

as to reduce me to insanity, he still thinks the belief lacks any evidential basis – which is precisely what the coherentist would deny. See Willascheck 2010, 196. For further discussion of coherentism in this form, see Stern 2004.

Now, can science be called in to tell us which of these two point-blank contradicters of each other is right? Science professes to draw no conclusions but such as are based on matters of fact, things that have actually happened; but how can any amount of assurance that something actually happened give us the least grain of information as to whether another thing might or might not have happened in its place? Only facts can be proved by other facts. With things that are possibilities and not facts, facts have no concern. If we have no other evidence than the evidence of existing facts, the possibility-question must remain a mystery never to be cleared up. (WWJ 6:119)

Ultimately, James argues, what should and will push us one way or the other will be broader considerations concerning which view makes the world a more rationally ordered place:

What divides us into possibility and anti-possibility men is different faiths or postulates – postulates of rationality. To this man the world seems more rational with possibilities in it – to that man more rational with possibilities excluded; and talk as we will about having to yield to evidence, what makes us monists or pluralists, determinists or indeterminists, is at bottom always some sentiment like this. (WWJ 6:119)

James argues that what makes the indeterminist position look rationally problematic is a concern about *chance*, which people can think introduces an element of chaos into our picture of the world that will reduce it to a muddled and incoherent heap:

[M]any persons talk as if the minutest dose of disconnectedness of one part with another, the smallest modicum of independence, the faintest tremor of ambiguity about the future, for example,

would ruin everything, and turn this godly universe into a sort of insane sand-heap or nulliverse, no universe at all. (WWJ 6:121)

James argues against this view, holding that chance can be admitted without any such direful consequences – so he doesn't take there to be any rational grounds to rule it out, in coherentist terms. Nonetheless, he allows that while this may undercut an important argument *against* indeterminism, it doesn't yet give us any argument in *support* of it:

But although, in discussing the word 'chance' I may at moments have seemed to be arguing for its real existence, I have not meant to do so yet. We have not ascertained whether this be a world of chance or no; at most, we have agreed that it seems so. And I now repeat what I have said at the outset, that, from any strict theoretical point of view, the question is insoluble. (WWJ 6:124)

Thus, "after all our tedious clearing of the way," James moves to his non-theoretical argument for indeterminism and the reality of chance.

He begins by emphasizing the importance to us of the notion of *judgments of regret*, or the "wish that something might be otherwise" (WWJ 6:124), such as "acts of wanton cruelty or treachery, for example, whether performed by others or by ourselves" (WWJ 6:125), where James gives as an example a particularly callous murder that took place at Brockton, saying of it: "We feel that, although a perfect mechanical fit to the rest of the universe, it is a bad moral fit, and that something else would really have been better in its place" (WWJ 6:125).

James then claims that the determinist cannot make sense of this feeling of regret:

But for the deterministic philosophy the murder, the sentence, and the prisoner's optimism were all necessary from eternity; and nothing else for a moment had a ghost of a chance of being put in their place. To admit such a chance, the determinists tell us, would be to make a suicide of reason; so we must steel our hearts against the thought. (WWJ 6:125)

The consequence of this outlook, James argues, is that the determinist must be committed to a *pessimistic* view of the universe as a whole: for while they cannot intelligibly regret any particular event (as this could not have been otherwise), they can only feel regret for the “whole frame of things of which the murder is one member”: “I can see no escape whatever from this pessimistic conclusion if, being determinists, our judgment of regret is to be allowed to stand at all” (WWJ 6:126).

James then considers various ways in which the determinist might try to allay this pessimism by extinguishing all judgments of regret – for example, by adopting a Panglossian optimism, or a form of gnostic subjectivism which sees value in what we are taught by the experience of the bad; but James rejects all such options as jeopardizing too much in our system of beliefs:

We have thus clearly revealed to our view what may be called the dilemma of determinism, so far as determinism pretends to think things out at all. A merely mechanical determinism, it is true, rather rejoices in not thinking them out. It is very sure that the universe must satisfy its postulate of a physical continuity and coherence, but smiles at anyone who comes forward with a postulate of moral coherence as well. (WWJ 6:128-9)

James's ultimate defense of his indeterministic approach, therefore, turns on his claim that only this is consistent with our feelings of regret, so that on this basis a rejection of determinism is legitimate:

But this brings us right back, after such a long detour, to the question of indeterminism and to the conclusion of all I came here to say tonight. For the only consistent way of representing a pluralism and a world whose parts may affect one another through their conduct being either good or bad is the indeterministic way. What interest, zest, or excitement can there be in achieving the right way, unless we are enabled to feel that the wrong way is also a possible and a natural way – nay, more, a menacing and immanent way? And what sense can there be in condemning ourselves for taking the wrong way, unless we need have done nothing of the sort, unless the right way was open to us as well? I cannot understand the willingness to act, no matter how we feel, without the belief that acts are really good and bad. I cannot understand the belief that an act is bad, without regret at its happening. I cannot understand regret without the admission of real, genuine possibilities in the world. Only *then* is it other than a mockery to feel, after we have failed to do our best, that an irreparable opportunity is gone from the universe, the loss of which it must forever mourn.

If you insist that this is all superstition, that possibility is in the eye of science and reason impossibility, and that if I act badly 'tis that the universe was foredoomed to suffer this defect, you fall right back into the dilemma, the labyrinth, of pessimism and subjectivism, from out of whose toils we have just found our way. (WWJ 6:135)

As James notes, nothing in this argument proves that we have free will, where he reminds us that “I expressly repudiated awhile ago the pretension to offer any arguments which could be coercive in a so-called scientific fashion in this matter” (WWJ 6:135).

Nonetheless, he clearly holds that his argument from regret is sufficient to make his indeterministic position a plausible one, with greater support than the deterministic alternative – thus adopting what is still an evidentialist strategy based on practical grounds,²⁸ much like Kant's.

4. Pragmatism and Idealism on Freedom: A Step too Far?

I have argued, then, that contrary to various prominent readings of both Kant and James respectively, there is reason to see a convergence between their two positions concerning free will, but not around some form of non-evidentialism, but rather around a form of evidentialism which nonetheless give priority to practical reason in a real sense. In this last section, I want to look at some challenges to my position here, where these can be brought out by considering an argument that there are some weaknesses to James's position that do not apply to Kant's, thereby suggesting that the two are not to be equated after all.

One potential difficulty with James's argument as I have presented it, it could be said, is that it hinges on regret, and the claim that this "moral belief" only makes sense if things could have been otherwise. A first worry might be to deny that regret actually does require this possibility: might I not intelligibly regret the fact that at some point I will die, for example, while (regretfully) recognizing that this cannot be otherwise? However, in response to this it can be said that James here is focusing on something more like "agent regret",²⁹ i.e. regret for things that are

²⁸ Cf. James's summary of this part of "The Dilemma of Determinism" which is included in the contents page of the collection in which it appears: "A world with chance in it is morally the less irrational alternative" (WWJ 6:11). Cf. WWJ 6:137, where James denies that accepting the reality of chance involves "the suicide of reason." Cf. also his comment in a letter to Renouvier: "I believe more and more that free will, if accepted at all, must be accepted as a postulate in justification of our moral judgment that certain things already done might have been better done. This implies that something different was possible in their place" (CWJ, 5:260).

²⁹ This terminological originates with Bernard Williams's essay, "Moral Luck": See [1976] 1982, 27. But Williams uses it to cover regret by the agent for actions they have performed themselves, while I am using it to cover regret for things done by agents in general, but not necessarily by oneself.

seemingly tied to the work of individuals (such as the Brockton murder with which James starts), where this would not apply to my own mortality (hopefully).

However, a second and rather deeper worry might be pressed at this point: namely that it seems conceivable on James's approach that we *could* come to give up regrets of this sort, even though we might find it difficult to do, given the conceptual interconnections that James traces between this belief and many others. But still, difficulty is not impossibility, and "one man's modus ponens is another man's modus tollens," so James's can't really claim to have shown that we might not find ourselves rationally obliged to switch sides on this matter, and so become determinists. In fact, this seems to be an implication of his approach that James is prepared to concede (cf. WWJ 6:135-6).

It is then debatable, of course, how much damage this causes to the Jamesian strategy as I have outlined it. One might take the line (which is James's own) that no greater certainty is possible on such matters, and that at the end of the day an individual can only take up the position which seems correct to him or her given their personal starting points and convictions; indeed, as we have mentioned previously, given that this matter concerns our freedom, James thinks it could not be otherwise, as something more conclusive would take that very freedom away (cf. again WWJ 6:135-6).

It might be useful to very briefly compare James's position as I understand it here to Strawson's in his famous essay on "Freedom and Resentment." Like James, Strawson points to an attitude which we have to each other, namely resentment, and then brings out the close connection between the intelligibility of this attitude and the attribution to others of free will. Strawson then considers the question whether this is decisive, or whether the argument could be reversed, so that one might argue from determinism to the need to drop our reactive attitudes, such that we would then treat *everyone* as we currently treat those who we deem to lack

responsibility for their actions. Strawson's response is to allow that this could happen in some sense; but he emphasizes the great difficulty we would have in doing so given the framework of beliefs, attitudes and commitments which we currently have, in such a way as to render this possibility an essentially empty one from where we stand: "This commitment is part of the general framework of human life, not something that can come up for review as particular cases can come up for review within this general framework" (P.T. Strawson 1982, 70). Strawson's approach would also broadly seem to be a coherentist one, along lines rather similar to those I have outlined for James, where both therefore seem to accept that as a result, the grounds on which they support our belief in freedom does not leave that belief wholly invulnerable on the one hand,³⁰ while they think any challenge to it is highly resistible on the other, given where we currently stand.³¹

However, it might now be argued that this way of putting things brings out an important difference between Kant on the one hand, and James and Strawson on the other, where this difference gives Kant another (and perhaps better) way of handling the problem we have been discussing.

Essentially, this difference may be said to arise because on my account at least, James (and Strawson) still give too great a place to theoretical reasoning in this dispute, by seeing the link between regret (or resentment) and freedom in evidential terms, where this means the

³⁰ Cf. P.F. Strawson 1982, 68: "And our question reduces to this: could, or should, the acceptance of the determinist thesis lead us always to look on everyone exclusively this way [i.e. the way we currently look on those who we deem incapable of free will and thus as inappropriate targets for reactive attitudes like resentment]? For this is the only condition worth considering under which acceptance of determinism could lead to the decay or repudiation of participant reactive attitudes/It does not seem self-contradictory that this might happen. So I suppose we must say that it is not absolutely inconceivable that it should happen."

³¹ So the passage above continues: "But I am strongly inclined to think that it is, for us as we are, practically inconceivable. The human commitment to participation in ordinary inter-personal relationships is, I think, too thoroughgoing and deeply rooted for us to take seriously the thought that a general theoretical conviction might so change our world that, in it, there were no longer any such thing as inter-personal relationships as we normally understand them; and being involved in inter-personal relationships as we normally understand them precisely is being exposed to the range of reactive attitudes and feelings that is in question."

reversal in the direction of argument still remains for them as a possibility (however remote and unlikely they think it is that we would ever commit ourselves to that reversal), by using the truth of determinism to cast doubt on our feelings of regret or attitudes of resentment. It could be said, however, that in Kant's case the position is very different, because for him "the priority of practical reason" precisely means that our beliefs are *impervious* to anything theoretical reason can offer as grounds for change, so that the possibilities for belief revision which James and Strawson seem to allow are closed off to us in this manner.

To see how this might be so, it is useful to move back from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and to consider the *Groundwork*, and an influential account of the so-called "prefatory argument" given in the second sub-section of part III of that work which has been offered by Korsgaard and others. The key claim in this argument is generally taken to be that "every being that cannot act otherwise than *under the idea of freedom* is actually free, in a practical respect, precisely because of that" (KGS 4:448). On Korsgaard's reading, Kant is arguing here that the truth of determinism can make no difference to our deliberations as practical agents, because we must still proceed as if we are free when it comes to making our decisions, so that practical reason has priority over theoretical reason in this more radical sense:

The point is not that you must *believe* you are free, but that you must choose *as if* you were free. It is important to see that this is quite consistent with believing yourself to be fully determined. To make it vivid, imagine that you are participating in a scientific experiment, and you know that today your every move is programmed by an electronic device implanted in your brain... [But] In order to *do* anything, you must simply ignore the fact that you are programmed, and decide what to do – just as if you were free. You will believe that your decision is a sham, but it makes no difference. Kant's point, then, is not about the theoretical assumption necessary to decision, but

about a fundamental feature of the standpoint from which decisions are made. It follows from this feature that we must regard our decisions as springing ultimately from principles that we have chosen, and justifiable by those principles. We must regard ourselves as having free will.

(Korsgaard 1996b, 162-3)³²

On this account of Kant's position, then, practical reason is concerned with determining the will to action, and as such it is entitled to ignore what theoretical reason tells us, even if the latter tells us that in fact a necessary condition for such action does not hold. If a position of this sort could be made cogent, it might seem to put freedom in a less assailable position for Kant than for James and Strawson, and show that his approach to this issue is ultimately distinct from theirs.

There are, however, important difficulties in reading Kant this way, both interpretatively and philosophically.

First, it would leave it hard to see how Kant could be committed to the unity of reason, as it would appear to leave theoretical and practical reason at odds with one another. Second, Kant himself seems more worried by the challenge of theoretical reason than this approach would suggest. So, for example, Kant writes in the *Groundwork* that “[I]f even the thought of freedom contradicts itself, or nature, which is equally necessary, it would have to be given up altogether in

³² Henry Allison (2012, 92) also presents the argument in similar terms: “But while Kant does not preclude such a state of affairs [that our belief in freedom is illusory] on theoretical grounds, he does deny the *practical* possibility of accepting any such thesis on the grounds that it is not a thought on which one can deliberate or act. To take oneself as a rational agent *is* to assume that one's reason has a practical application or, equivalently, that one has a will. Moreover, one cannot assume this without already presupposing the idea of freedom, which is why one can act, or take oneself to act, only under this idea. It constitutes, as it were, the form of thought of oneself as a rational agent.” Cf. also Wood 2008, 130-2, and Darwall 2013, 222: “[In *Groundwork* III Kant] goes on to argue that an assumption of autonomy is essential to the deliberative standpoint and that assuming autonomy commits one to the Categorical Imperative and thus to morality. If that is so, then autonomy and morality really hold, or at least, any rational agent must assume they hold when deliberating about what to do.” Darwall thinks this strategy is more promising than the one pursued in the second *Critique*, for reasons outlined above: “It is only through taking ourselves to be morally obligated that we are forced to conclude that we can act for a reason that is independent of any property of the objects of our desire... But this leaves open the possibility that both morality and autonomy are mere figments. Even if morality and autonomy are a stable reciprocal pair, with each entailing the other, both may be illusions nonetheless” (Darwall 2013, 223).

favor of natural necessity” (KGS 4:456). As Sergio Tenenbaum has observed: “This is very far from the claim that we can act under the idea of freedom independently of what we actually believe about freedom and determinism” (Tenenbaum 2012, 559). Thirdly, it might be asked, how does proving that we must assume we are free, or act as if we were free, or regard ourselves as free, even though we have grounds to think we are not, help settle our worries on this issue?³³ In fact, might it not seem to make them worse, as we now seem to have to assume, etc things about ourselves when we come to act that we otherwise know to be false? And isn’t this the worst kind of skeptical nightmare, locking us into views of ourselves that we cannot escape even when they are in error?³⁴ One response might be that this doesn’t actually matter so much, as what is in question here is not a *belief* that might be false, but some other kind of attitude;³⁵ but nonetheless, it could be replied, unless we are free that attitude would seem misplaced. Finally, given the claim it makes about our freedom, this would seem to leave a gap in the rest of Kant’s argument in the *Groundwork*, at least as this is understood on this approach, which is meant to go as follows:³⁶

1. A rational will must be regarded as a free will
2. A free will is a will under moral law
3. Therefore, a rational will is a will under moral law

³³ Karl Ameriks (2003, esp. 247-8) presses this point strongly, where he uses these problems to argue that they led Kant to change his approach in the second *Critique*.

³⁴ Cf. Robert Stern 2000, 85-6. Cf. also G. Strawson, 2010, 64: “The idea that a certain view may be inescapable and therefore somehow permissible or even correct, despite the fact that we are able to get into a position in which we can see it to be false – or so we think – is very problematic. Surely ‘irresistibility does not entail truth’ – even species-wide irresistibility?”

³⁵ Cf. Darwall 2013, 229: “The idea need not be that one must *believe* that one is free in these respects or that one must disbelieve hard determinism. The point is that deliberation is intelligible only on these *assumptions*.” Cf. also the quote given from Korsgaard above: “The point is not that you must *believe* that you are free....”

³⁶ See Korsgaard 1996a, 24.

For this argument to work, it would seem that (1) requires the rational will to *be* free, where “must be regarded as” doesn’t look like it is strong enough to render the argument valid – unless the conclusion is also modified to the correspondingly weak claim that “a rational will is a will that must regard itself as under a moral law,” which itself doesn’t look strong enough to dispel the threat that morality is in fact a chimera, whatever we may be compelled to think about it.

But if the preparatory argument is not an argument for our freedom of this sort, what *is* its role in the *Groundwork*? My claim is that what Kant is trying to establish here is not that we are free, but that the moral law applies to *all rational beings*, where this is a class that is obviously much wider than the merely human. The concern is therefore whether someone could hold that there might be rational beings who could be said not to stand under the moral law – where if so, Kant’s basic commitment to the universality of that law (which he thinks we all share) would be put in jeopardy. This is a fundamental preoccupation of Kant’s, and one that he frequently claims in the *Groundwork* and elsewhere that he is in a better position to deal with than other moral theorists – and hence it needs to be resolved.³⁷

Kant’s way out of this problem is to argue that we do not have to establish that a rational being *really is* free for the moral law to apply to them, as it is sufficient that they have to *think they are free*, where every rational agent (i.e. every rational being endowed with a will) must think that of themselves:

³⁷ See for example: KGS 4:389: “the command: thou shalt not lie, does not just hold for human beings only, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it; and so with all remaining actual moral laws...”; KGS 4:412: “...moral laws are to hold for every rational being as such”; KGS 4:426: “The question is therefore this: is it a necessary law for all rational beings always to appraise their actions in accordance with such maxims as they themselves could will to serve as universal laws?”; KGS 4:430-1: “This principle of humanity...is not borrowed from experience...because of its universality, since it applies to all rational beings as such and no experience is sufficient to determine anything about them;...” I have also argued that this issue plays a central role in Kant’s account of the Formula of Humanity in section II of the *Groundwork*: see Stern 2013, 22-40.

Now I say: every being that cannot act otherwise than *under the idea of freedom* is actually free, in a practical respect, precisely because of that; i.e. all laws that are inseparably bound up with freedom hold for it just as if its will had also been declared free in itself, and in a way that is valid in theoretical philosophy.... For even if this latter [theoretical] point is left unsettled, the same laws that would bind a being that was actually free yet hold for a being that cannot act otherwise than under the idea of its own freedom. Here we can thus liberate ourselves from the burden that weighs upon theory. (4:448 and note)

So, Kant thinks, the reciprocity thesis can be extended to cover not only beings that are shown *to be* free on theoretical grounds (grounds that we would find it very hard to supply given our limitations and lack of knowledge concerning such beings), but also to beings that must *think* that they are free, which includes *all rational beings which have a will*, and so the universality of the moral law is secured – as of course the moral law would not be expected to apply to rational beings without such a will. How is it that we can extend the reciprocity thesis in this way? I think the answer is that a rational being with a will must take itself to be free, and even if a being merely *takes itself to be free*, then it must take itself to be under the moral law, where this is sufficient to show that it can't repudiate the law, because (given Kant's earlier arguments for the reciprocity thesis) there is no other way this rational being can see its actions as being guided – so it is impossible for any rational agent to be a refusnik when it comes to the moral law, without at the same time repudiating its claim to agency. The universality problem has thus been solved.

It can be argued, therefore, that the *Groundwork's* preparatory argument does not provide an argument for our freedom, and thus a strategy that is somehow different and more radical than the one that we have attributed to Kant in the second *Critique*. If this is right, therefore, we are

entitled to continue to read Kant's approach to the "primacy of practical reason" concerning freedom as operating along the same evidentialist lines that we also attributed to James.

5. Conclusion

We have therefore seen that when it comes to the problem of free will, that notwithstanding certain differences, James and Kant can be viewed as adopting broadly similar strategies – where that similarity suggests that when it comes to this question, at least, James chose not to merely go round Kant, but through him, while taking an route that can be understood more evidentially than has generally been supposed.³⁸

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