

TERM PAPER

on

For and Against Religion

in

William James: "The will to believe", "The varieties of religious
experience."

and

Jhon Dewey: "Human Nature and Conduct: An Introduction to Social
Psychology."

Course: Empiricism and Pragmatism

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Introduction

In the following paper, I have gathered together some key viewpoints on the subject of religion as discussed by William James and John Dewey - two of the main figures of the Pragmatism movement in the American philosophic tradition. James precedes Dewey in time in the development of the Pragmatism from its original form given by Charles Sanders Peirce, later redefined by James and distorted further to Instrumentalism by Dewey. For this reason, James may be seen as a 19th-century thinker, while Dewey echoes with a more modern sound in my ears. Despite this, I chose the topic because I find the work of both men still relevant today. My analysis is short and glimpses briefly over the topic pointing out only the basic line.

William James on the role of religion

According to James, the religious phenomenon is a product of the individual's realisation of his weakness, fear, need for help and understanding. If it were a purely intellectual being contemplating the Universe, it would not need the thought of God. (Сарълиев, 2002:108-109) Referring to this Supreme Being, the individual experiences something that could be called mystical. This experience is highly specific, personal and diverse so as to satisfy each of its practitioner's needs. Therefore, as many the practitioners, as many the resulting religions would be. Unlike scientific results, which replicate if attained under the same conditions. What is in common among these different ways of religious practice is the positive influence on the practitioner:

'Inflow of spiritual energy occurs, elevation and expansion of the spirit, life is in blossom. The soul is transformed, filled with exaltation, happy, triumphing and ready to perform feats. The emotional centre is moved to feelings of love. The believer feels as if participating in life greater than the one of casual, petty, egoistic worries and interests; he has one not only intellectual but sensual conviction in the existence of an ideal and friendly power, conscious and personal just as much as we are. The believer has the consciousness that he is in a mental contact with this power. At times, it seems to him that his personality is its continuation and is pouring itself into it. He devotes himself to it voluntarily, obeys its control and feels that under its influence his life is transformed, purified, uplifted and ennobled, a new identity is being created from within. This is what the religious experience is like at the core of which stands the feeling of presence or direct perception of a supernatural spiritual realm, a sense and perception which bring peace to the soul and fill it with love and joy. To this state, some arrive without pains, others only after a deep and often dramatic crisis.'
(Сарълиев, 2002:108-109)

This friendly help offered to the mortal man by a supreme source is only possible if it is not indifferent to our suffering and is manlike in order to be able to understand and to be compassionate. As a doer of good, this supernatural being is moral and supportive of the misfortune, weak and isolated. What is more, this power is not responsible for the existence of evil but fights against it together with its supporters – believers. Although surpassing the capacity of man, the God

that man 'contacts' with is not powerful enough to have total control over evil. To James, it is more important God be perceived as moral than to be perceived as omnipotent. In this situation, only he could be trusted, and our actions could make a difference. Moving a pile of bricks from one corner to another in an empty room under the instruction of God does not contain enough sense to justify the value and need of religion.

The spreading of God's instructions and the revelation of the strategy for the fight against evil flows like a champaign-shower on top of which is a 'religious genius' – a person with extreme sensitivity to the concrete revelation:

'...in their soul religion is being created: from there like a fountain it flows [and spreads] among mankind.' [...] their experience [of the religious geniuses] are being repeated and imitated from others: to them [these experiences] later are been added [all] the intellectual validations, theological dogmas, the conceptions of philosophers; around them [the experiences or the religious geniuses] institutions are being gradually formed.' (Саръилиев, 2002:109)

If the mystical experience is the core of all this later development, it is of crucial importance these experiences to be categorised in relation to the psychological phenomena and their explanation. In the fashion of the 19th century this explanation, James suggests, to be the subliminal consciousness/ subconsciousness/ psychic field that is 'enabled' in the course of the human contact with this super-human being and its realm, which our individual consciousness is part of. (Саръилиев, 2002:119) Despite this quite spiritually oriented understanding of the source of institution's genesis – the individual's believes, James stays true to the pragmatic concept of truth and experience. He does not engage himself in giving proofs of the existence of manlike God in a logical, mathematical or rational way because the persuasiveness of the religious experience is 'immediate' – attained throughout personal experience and test:

'Proofs for the existence of God that have been offered for ages by philosophers are convincing only for those who have been convinced already in a different way – personal experience. They are of no influence on the rest [they are death options]. Strictly speaking, they do not prove anything. They only strengthen our understandings that have been created in a different way.' (Саръилиев, 2002:127)

All the above review of religion, as done by James, can be summarised in the following sentence by St. Anselm: 'Faith does not need the support of reason, but it will be negligence to do not use reason to support faith.' (Саръилиев, 2002:127)

Why 'For' religion according to James

As seen by James, the unity of all beings within the divine that every believer accepts as the natural state of things is helpful for the society, its cohesion and better performance of collective duties:

'Indifferent to whether it was painless, in the case of the optimist, or after a cataclysm, in the case of the pessimist, once the religious state has been achieved consequences of high importance are prompt to follow benefitting both the individual and society. The religious state is presented as having great social value due to the favour-disposed soul of the believer and his altruistic feelings. It contributes to the happiness of the individual and for the strengthening and development of social life. [...] The fraternal love and compassion are also common fruits of the religious experience. They follow logically from the confidence in God's love and mercy and his role of father to all people. The religiously uplifted soul is filled with love towards God and towards the whole of humanity. The usual barriers separating people are melted by this love. This [loving] soul is closed for envy, spite and revenge. The religious one loves even his/her enemies and sees a brother even in the repellent beggar.'(Саръилиев, 2002:114)

This is the more holistic effect of religion on society. A more specific one is observed when dealing with day-to-day problems when no plan for action is available. Then is the time for the believer to test the reliability of his beliefs. (As he/she may not be alive or in a position to see the result of the holistic effects, it is history that speaks to man instead of his memory) Whatever this belief is like, it is either confirmed or rejected by the result of his/her actions that have been motivated by the belief in question:

'Evidently, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions. There are passional tendencies and volitions [...] Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.' (James, 1897:11)

'We must know the truth; and we must avoid error' (James, 1897:18)- it is up to our will to decide and 'are in any case only expressions of our passional life'. We choose the quest for the truth to come first and the avoidance of error – second, or vice versa but 'what proof is there that dupery through hope [in the truthfulness of religion] is so much worse than dupery through fear? ' (James, 1897:27) [fear of the untruthfulness of religion] It is thus obvious that to James faith and hope are prerequisites for the beginning of any activity contributing to the collection of evidence 'for' and 'against' a particular hypothesis. In this sense, will, hope and faith are closely related and together precondition the development of every (scientific) (re)search.

What is important to James that has been derived from the above is that will is crucial because of both the believer and the sceptic risk the obtaining of truth equally, but the first makes use of hope while the second lives in fear of being cheated. In this situation the believer is more likely to take action and if the truth is to be traced in practice than he takes for certainty precedence over the sceptic. As a pragmatist, James does not have any doubt about it but what is specific, according to him, is that the pragmatist depends on the presence of faith in order to start his quest. He has accepted the impossibility of objectivity but does not reject the possible existence of truth. This

suggests that faith is not related to truth directly but via the probation of action, unlike all a priori concepts. It is interesting that even when James gives credence to the mystical experience, it is not a direct revelation of the final truth but a suggestion, inspiration to give direction for the realisation of the potential of the inner thirst for knowledge. Religion and the religious feelings are not The Truth but a motor-generator for the undertaking of action towards its illumination. For the empiricist and the pragmatist, the 'protectionism' of the sceptic is restrictive and useless.

In addition to 'inspiration' for experiments, religion is truthful not because it tells the truth but because it fulfils the pragmatist requirement for truthfulness – to have satisfactory results:

'According to the pragmatic theory for truthfulness, every belief which has happy consequences, which fulfils, in the broadest sense, is a truthful belief. 'According to the pragmatic principles - James says – if the hypothesis for God works satisfactory, [...] it is truthful [...] And experience [history] shows that it works satisfactorily' (James, 1907:299) in Саръилиев, 2002:116); [...] every individual credo is truthful if it satisfies the moral and intellectual needs of the one who is professing it.'(Саръилиев, 2002:128)

Of course, this final argument, trying to defend religion, is subjective. Neither James nor anyone can have the retrospective view of own memory to judge first-hand feelings like happiness and satisfaction. They are quite personal. Instead, it bases its judgment on other people's chronicles, and this is what makes the results evaluation quite partial, subject to place and time in history and not having the universal beneficial character as James presents it from his position. Regardless, according to him, history proves the fruits of religion edible, so to speak, maybe due to the fact that it is still in exploitation and neither scientific innovation nor progress has managed to erase its traces and let it disappear, possibly because some people find it just as practical. For James, this is enough of an argument.

John Dewey against religion

As it has been discussed above, according to James personal religious experience is the core of the transformation of society towards better days because this religious experience inspires and ignites the desire for testing it in practice, which in time accumulates greater understanding. However, according to Dewey at the core of this accumulation of understanding it is education and democracy in the place of religion because man is a social being the existence of which is impossible outside a social group. Therefore, he gives priority to the external over the internal factors and, in fact, to him something as an internal factor does not exist. He calls impulse what the energetic source of all action is. However, by being solely energetic, this 'battery' is not independent, self-conscious, a God-like element within the individual and cannot be observed in pure form but always as modified in shape it takes after elaboration. This cultivation, Dewey suggests, is most efficient when using the instruments of education in the climate of democracy. If impulses are not observable but, more importantly, they are indifferent (energy is energy, there is no good energy and bad energy), there is no need to ponder upon them. All it matters for the individual is his interaction in/with/against the social and natural environment where every action is a reaction in relation to existing objects that

cannot be dictated by individuals' purity of heart: 'We must work on the environment not merely on the hearts of men.' (Dewey, 1922:22)

In this context, the individual religious feeling as understood by James has no place but only religion - the social institution. On the negative impact of institutionalised religion, both James and Dewey agree. They see the church as a dogmatic institution, which operates through implanting ready-made ideas into its members' heads rather than through feedback. This conduct of transferring one-way recipes for good life takes away from the person his/her authentic aspirations and initiative and makes the person a manipulated and paralysed by a transcendental moral slave that is left with no instruments for the manifestation of activities, no chance for exploration of reality. As a final consequence, the fixed ideal moral of religion isolates man from his own social and interactive nature. It is the freedom that should be guaranteed so that man has a chance to attain true experience and knowledge. Neither the supremacy of inner strength nor the passive surrender to the environment can do this. It is the clever use of reasoning that supports the fragile particle so that it can survive in dignity:

'In short, there are two schools of social reform. One bases itself upon the notion of morality, which springs from an inner freedom, something mysteriously cooped up within personality. It asserts that the only way to change institutions is for men to purify their own hearts, and that when this has been accomplished, change of institutions will follow of itself. The other school denies the existence of any such inner power, and in so doing conceives that it has denied all moral freedom. It says that men are made what they are by the forces of the environment, that human nature is purely malleable, and that till institutions are changed, nothing can be done. Clearly, this leaves the outcome as hopeless as does an appeal to an inner rectitude and benevolence. For it provides no leverage for change in environment. It throws us back upon accident, usually disguised as a necessary law of history or evolution, and trusts to some violent change, symbolized by civil war to usher in an abrupt millennium. There is an alternative to being penned in between these two theories. We can recognize that all conduct is interaction between elements of human nature and the environment, natural and social. Then we shall see that progress proceeds in two ways, and that freedom is found in that kind of interaction, which maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something. There are in truth forces in man as well as without him. While they are infinitely frail in comparison with exterior forces, yet they may have the support of a foreseeing and contriving intelligence. When we look at the problem as one of an adjustment to be intelligently attained, the issue shifts from within personality to an engineering issue, the establishment of arts of education and social guidance.' (Dewey, 1922:9-10)

Why 'For' education and democracy according to Dewey

According to Dewey, a moral in action is not perfect but is real and is being shaped under the constant moral corrections made by the group it serves to. This means that the individual will maintain the same course of action that satisfies them as long as it is not against the wellbeing of the

rest of the group's members. Therefore, the best regulator of moral and the social structure is not the individual inspired by the thought of helping God in the fight against evil who self-assess themselves in terms of satisfaction but the group assessing the individual. This happens most evidently under democratic conditions. Democracy is more important than the religious feeling in the regulation of social moral because moral conduct is a product of habits formed by environment:

'All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they are will. [i.e. there is no internal will but habit, unlike the concept of James where 'will' stems from within rather than composed by external events] They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities. They rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity.' (Dewey, 1922:25)

What comes from Dewey's definition of will is the conclusion that religious feeling as un-socially formed does not form habits. Will and habits are both social functions comparable to the physiological ones (breathing, eating, etc.) because they are engaged with the environment. As there is no breathing in a vacuum, we need more agents. We are not self-sufficient but connected in the same way as breathing - to air, eating - to food, drinking - to water and so on:

'We cannot change habit directly [through revelation, mystical experience or else]: that notion is magic. But we can change it indirectly by modifying conditions, [-] by an intelligent selecting and weighting of the objects which engage attention and which influence the fulfilment of desires.' (Dewey, 1922:20)

The power of man lies in the intelligent choice when enabled to make one. It is the science of the human nature that advises man towards wiser choices of food, for example. Even when environment presents options, man needs to know himself first to be truly free:

'What cannot be understood cannot be managed intelligently. [...] a decline in the authority of social oligarchy [church or another institution] was accompanied by a rise of scientific interest in human nature. This means that the make-up and working of human forces afford a basis for moral ideas and ideals. Our science of human nature in comparison "with physical sciences is rudimentary, and morals which are concerned with the health, efficiency and happiness of a development of human, nature are correspondingly elementary.' (Dewey, 1922:8)

Conclusion

The most general conclusion that could be derived is directly related to the use of the word will. According to James will is a personal/individual 'product' and is exercised outwardly from the inside. 'The will to believe' opens the door to all knowledge accumulation. From there it starts the development of society and environment. Dewey finds this process impossible due to the fact that they [inner forces] are infinitely frail in comparison with exterior forces. According to Dewey will and habit is the same thing - 'product' of external influences. They shape the individual and not vice versa.

Nevertheless, both men support that the freedom of mind from transcendental implants: 'any a priori fixed reference point outside of conduct, such as in God's commands, Platonic Forms, pure reason, or "nature," considered as giving humans a fixed telos' (Anderson, 2014), is a necessary precondition for the conduct of research or any other activity of real value to man and his development.

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