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“William James on Belief and the Horns of Determinism”

In William James’ “The Will to Believe”, he lays out three categories of belief which he calls alive or dead, forced or avoidable, and momentous or trivial. The first category, alive or dead, refers to the relationship any given belief has with a particular person. A hypothesis or belief that is alive is only considered alive when it has a likelihood of being believed by a particular person. And likewise, a dead hypothesis is meant to reference those beliefs that are not plausible to a person. What is interesting about this is the kinds of beliefs that are dead to one group may very much be alive to another and vice versa. An example of this is the belief in Greek mythological gods. This belief in James’s categories is considered to be a dead hypothesis for most people. This is because the evidence provided by modern science leads to the conclusion that there is no correlation between lightning striking on earth with human behavior. This same hypothesis was alive in the time of the ancient Greek people because of the collective understandings of science and the world around. This made the idea that Zeus punished them for behaving wrongly in his eyes a plausible belief. Even more interestingly, a secluded society that is disconnected from modern science and other advanced civilizations may find the belief plausible. This shows the importance of this category in the pragmatic sense. A belief that is dead for one people may not be for the next depending on many moving parts. One does not have to look for beliefs today and centuries ago to see this, rather there are real scenarios where dead beliefs of the past and dead beliefs for a particular people can be considered alive in present contexts.

The second category of belief is the forced or avoidable category. This category is straightforward in its meaning. A belief is considered forced if it is taken up without choice to put it off. It is a kind of

ultimatum between beliefs that James describes as having “no standing place outside of the alternative”. (The Will to Believe pg.2) On the other hand, a belief is avoidable if the choice presented to you can be put off to another time.

The third category of belief is the momentous or trivial category. For a belief to be momentous, it is one that is unique and carries weight with it. This may be a belief that if one is wrong about, it would have lots of serious ramifications. Then the opposite can be said of trivial beliefs. They are the things where nothing great is at stake such as if Santa Claus is real. If one person believes it and another doesn't, the intellectual world does not stop because the truth of the matter is relevant or has any practical value. Reasons for why this category of belief is important is because it puts responsibility on humans. We cannot simply abandon choosing something to believe for fear we are wrong or because of uncertainty. On the other hand, this theory of belief also gives some sort of breathing room to put off things that are small and insignificant to us.

These categories of belief lead James to have disagreements with Pascal and Clifford who both held to a view of emotions in belief. In regard to Clifford, James sees his view too extreme because Clifford denies the role of emotions entirely. He believes that all beliefs should only be believed with sufficient evidence. This clearly poses a problem for James because if this is the case most beliefs will not be able to be taken up by people. The momentous beliefs are put on hold, and we are left with only trivial beliefs on those matters we are mostly certain of. James holds a more middle ground between the two because James believes that our personal preferences and psychology matter in the equation, just not as much as Pascal does. Pascal holds a view where anything that works, we should hold meaning there is too much of an emphasis on emotions in James view. This is mostly seen in Pascal's belief in God which is based on a risk-reward assessment. This does not sit well with James because he believes that some people view the existence of God as a dead hypothesis in relation to other evidence regardless of

the high-risk high reward of believing in him. James believes personal psychology plays a part in what we find plausible in the first place and therefore has a major role in our beliefs.

In the "The Dilemma of Determinism" James argues that beliefs in either determinism or free will are ultimately based on our psychology and that there is no more rational side that is backed up by more evidence. However, he believes that believing in free will is more practical and does not have the same dilemmas as determinism. This dilemma is that to hold on to the belief of determinism one must either choose to live as a pessimist or a subjectivist. The reason why one must be a pessimist is because although a person may wish for a world where something better could have happened, they cannot believe in that world and are always stuck with the fixed timeline of reality. James uses the argument of a murder or of a suicide. If one is a determinist, one cannot hope or believe that these people could have done differently because to do so would be to say there was a chance for another outcome. Instead, the determinist must always conform to what has happened regardless of feelings of regret and always long for a better world that can never be attained or acted towards. The other "horn" as James calls it is subjectivism. What he means by a determinist having to choose to be a subjectivist is that any person who is a determinist and does not want to be pessimistic must look at the world as indifferent and disconnected from the ideas of good or bad. I believe that by this one believes that the bad things in these actions or scenarios of a murder or suicide are no inherent in the scenario or action rather are apart of our connection to them. What this does is allow the determinists to not feel regret and pessimism for the world they are stuck in because these feelings arise only from the relation with human consciousness and our ideas of good and evil. These horns of the dilemma leave James to oppose determinism for the reason that it violates morality. Opposing determinism is to oppose a world that has no morality since we disregard the feelings that make us understand good and evil.