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A rhetorical analysis of William James's "The Will to Believe"

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English

Signatures have been redacted for privacy

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

1975
William James was accused during his lifetime of being a popular philosopher, one who used a literary rather than a technical style to speak to mankind rather than other philosophers. James seems to have approved of this distinction, for his book that includes "The Will to Believe" is titled *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. The name of popular philosopher fits James; his philosophy was for the public, an attempt to describe in accurate terms the world that the public experiences. And this world was the world which James daily experienced. Thus James's essays are all highly personal and explain his personal world view. But the explanation is usually given in terms appropriate for some particular audience. As James explained in his Preface to *The Will to Believe*:

I admit, then, that were I addressing the Salvation Army or a miscellaneous popular crowd it would be a misuse of opportunity to preach the liberty of believing as I have in these pages preached it. What such audiences most need is that their faiths should be broken up and ventilated, that the northwest wind of science should get into them and blow their sickness and barbarism away. But academic audiences, fed already on science, have a very different need. Paralysis of their native capacity for faith and timorous abulia in the religious field are their special forms of mental weakness, brought about by the notion, carefully instilled, that there is something called scientific evidence by waiting upon which they shall escape all danger of shipwreck in regard to truth.

The focus of James's "The Will to Believe" is the struggle between the passional nature and the intellect, a struggle which is taking place within James as he writes, as an analysis of his rhetoric clearly
demonstrates. The intellect controls the essay, controls the formulation
of the ideas, controls the language he uses to talk to his
audience, and gives him the power to manipulate his audience into
accepting his ideas. But the will, James's own passional nature, keeps
asserting itself in instances such as James's references to science's
apathetic response to telepathy and to Clifford as the embodiment of
a wrong-minded scientist. James gets excited about his subject; and
the intellect, which is trying to simplify the subject matter, loses
to the will which compacts into one sentence the complexity in thought
and structure of a whole paragraph. This conflict between the intellect
and the will is most evident in James's conclusion, where James makes
two applications of his theory—the abstract (the philosophical theory
explained) and the concrete (James's own statement of faith applied).

Recently there has been renewed interest in James as a philosopher
and influencer of thought. The thoughts of James are still relevant
to today, as is shown by the frequent use and misuse of terms such as
"pragmatism" and "tough-minded," originally popularized through James's
lectures. Yet William James the writer has not been studied to any
great extent. Possibly because of his classification as a writer of
non-fiction, the Jungian critics have ignored James. Also, little
critical work on James has been done by the historical critics except
for Warner Berthoff. Rather most critics of James have analyzed the
structural aspects of his writing.

William R. Brown in his article, "William James and the Language
of Personal Literature," shows the struggle in all of James's writings
between the intellectual (respectable scientific research) and the emotional (pursuit of teleology) which results in the setting up of a "tension and ambiguity between these two pulls which is the secret of his (James) literary style and personal appeal." Through his article Brown seeks to define personal literature, "the genre of expository writing, whether in prose or verse, in which language is the medium of feeling." It is Brown's contention that a non-fictional literary work is dominated by an undercurrent of feeling and that this is true of William James's work. To be an essay of personal literature, "the state of feeling in the mind which deals with a subject will always claim an attention which it would have no right to claim in a purely technical work."

To analyze whether feeling is overshadowing fact, Brown examines five areas—digressions, illustrations, rhythms, systems of imagery, and patterns of symbolic expression. In all of these areas, Brown sees a tension existing between the intellectual and emotional. Also, Brown mentions the verbal quality of James's lectures. "They are thoroughly informed by a sense of the presence of the audience ... there always pervades a sense of unexpressed potential dialogue, as in the Socratic dialogues of Plato." Yet, the influence of the audience on James's lectures is not examined in detail; actually, none of the writings of James are examined in any detail. Any analysis done by Brown is hindered by the impossibility of closely defining "feeling" and feeling is the basis for his definition of personal literature. The analysis of the struggle between the intellectual
and emotional works well for Brown because it does point out the importance of James's personal feelings in his writings.

Another way of examining William James's style has been to look at his imagery. Barbara B. Lawn in her dissertation, "Vision and Voice: The Art of William James," explains that the argument of "The Will to Believe" is not based on logic as much as on its dramatic imagery, particularly the imagery of mountain climbing. "But the power of 'The Will to Believe' does not rest on logic at all, as James knew very well when in his Preface he urged us to see them (the essays) as 'illustrations' rather than as 'argumentations . . . for validity.' The force of the essay rests upon the personal drama it develops."

Ms. Lawn notes a personal element in James, the active relationship that exists between James and his audience. "But just as in mountain climbing one should not go alone, we have not been alone: James has served as the traditional guide, leading us inward and then outward psychologically, and upward spiritually. Like Dante's Virgil, James has led us into ourselves where the heart has reasons which reason cannot know, the centers of 'dumb' feeling which motivates us all."8 James is the guide of our spiritual journey in Ms. Lawn's analysis, a view indicating that James is consciously, intellectually, manipulating his audience towards a particular goal and that goal is not an intellectual goal but a passional goal. This overlapping of the intellectual and passional areas is precisely the subject of "The Will to Believe."

Ms. Lawn does suggest that conflict and resolution is a method of
development used by James, but she does not relate this specifically to "The Will to Believe."

Warner Berthoff in his section on William James in The Ferment of Realism places James's thought and style within the context of the history of ideas and literature. He quotes from James's critics, in particular Charles Sanders Peirce and Ralph Barton Perry, to support his own thesis that James was "continously alert . . . to the moral aspect of words." Recalling Peirce's criticism of James that he was too easily understood, Berthoff suggests James was "ambiguous by an excess of idiomatic clarity; he was colloquial, familiar, and personal precisely where strictness of terminology was most desired."  

In Berthoff's opinion, James's writing style was an offshoot of his conversational style as well as a result of James's own personality. "Yet as of Emerson so of William James it may be said that instead of evolving a style to serve his philosophy, he created a philosophy to serve his style, which from the first was a vitally responsive mode of moral and cognitive action." Although Berthoff is speaking here specifically of life style, the life style does affect the writing style, causing James "to find concrete terms for those actually experienced states of mind in which the problems of life—and of philosophic argument—are faced most intensely." James was attempting to put into concrete, colloquial terms the life he was experiencing and to do this he was "drawing as need arose on that long-established American tradition of practical eloquence which Emerson, in particular, had perfected." Thus Berthoff places James as a descendent in thought
and style of Emerson and as a forefather of modern American thought through his recognition of consciousness.

Another writer who has examined William James is Walker Gibson in his book *Tough, Sweet and Stuffy*. Gibson analyzes such things as the size of words, the frequency of modifiers, the number and repetition of nouns, the concreteness of the imagery, the size and structure of sentences, and the usage of the definite article to formulate his three broad classifications of writing style—tough, sweet, and stuffy. The tough writer uses short, simple sentences with little subordination and colloquial patterns from oral speech to create a tense intimacy with his audience. The sweet writer also uses a simple sentence structure but with a more elaborate vocabulary. By the use of the rhetorical devices of informal speech, the sweet writer becomes intimate with his audience. The stuffy writer is usually the committee who writes a group report using passive verbs and abstract nouns to avoid personal responsibility.

After establishing the broad outlines of his three categories, Gibson examines paragraphs by several writers, including William James, to determine how each paragraph should be classified. Gibson attempts this classification very systematically by looking at sixteen factors in rating each piece. After examining the first paragraph of "The Will to Believe," Gibson classifies James as a combination of the tough and sweet styles with a score of tough-7, sweet-8, and stuffy-2. The reason for this classification was simply stated as being James's "easy contact" with his audience and helpful punctuation.
Another of the critics of James is his biographer, Gay Wilson Allen, for Allen does comment on James's style while presenting his life. Yet to Allen the biography is most important, and he emphasizes James's own interest in understanding the lives of philosophers to explain their philosophies. The analysis of James's style is neither detailed nor clearly defined but does present insight into James's development as a writer. Reasoning how James developed a literary rather than a technical style, Allen notes that "perhaps it was fortunate that he (James) did his early writing for these literary magazines rather than for scholarly or professional journals, because almost at the beginning of his career he learned to write for the general public in non-technical language—though his own personality was the main source of his clarity and pungency of style." Allen attributes the development of James's style, therefore, to two factors—his early writings for a non-philosophical public and his own personality.

This emphasis by Allen on personality seems particularly significant, considering the fact that, in Allen's opinion, the personality gave clarity and pungency to James's writing. Allen elaborates on this idea: "William James felt his thought, and from his own experience he had discovered that even so-called abstract thought is more indebted to the thinker's emotions than he usually realizes." This tying together of thought and emotion is a vital aspect of James's "The Will to Believe"; and although Allen does not formulate any conclusion as to the definite effects this link has on James's writing, he does state that the link exists.
Allen, when discussing why James was termed a popular philosopher, refers to the attitude toward his audience which distinguishes James from other philosophers: "... he was less concerned for ultimate truth than immediate usable truths: doctrines or conclusions of personal use to his readers or hearers, such as calming their fears, giving them incentive for effort, enlisting their active support in building a better society, and, not least, in making life more enjoyable." Allen assigns James an active role in relationship to his audience—to calm, to give, to enlist, and to make. This is another feature of James's style, a directed effort on James's part to involve the audience as an active member in the process of communication.

Stuart Hampshire, Leo Stein, and Ralph Barton Perry are similar to Gay Wilson Allen in their analyses of William James's style. In his book, *Modern Writers and Other Essays*, Hampshire seeks to find a connection between the philosophy of James and the writing style of James. Leo Stein, writing in 1926 when few writers were seriously considering James as either a philosopher or a writer, defends James by noting: "It is the distinction of William James that he not only didn't know precisely what he meant but knew that he didn't know, and made no attempt to state it precisely." Perry asserts that it was James's personal temperament and upbringing which resulted in his writing "The Will to Believe." These writers do not attempt to criticize James from a literary standpoint but simply want to present a clear interpretation of James's thought and character. They leave the literary criticism to writers such as Walker Gibson and Warner Berthoff.
The articles by Berthoff and Gibson present the two extremes in the literary approach to James's writings. Berthoff seeks to emphasize the similarities between James and other American philosophers; thus he sees James's essays as a small part of the larger continuum of American philosophical writing. Gibson, on the other hand, seeks to look at James's essays as a whole entirely on their own. By just looking at the syntax of James's sentences, Gibson analyzes James's writings. Barbara B. Lawn and William R. Brown combine some of the ideas of both Gibson and Berthoff. Particularly Lawn as she narrows the scope of her investigation to primarily James's imagery is similar to Gibson, but she sees a correlation between James's use of mountain climbing imagery and the use of the same type of imagery by other writers of that century. In his article, Brown combines an analysis of James's syntax with an analysis of James's content.

Brown's case for personal literature centers around the conflict between the intellect and the emotions. He describes personal literature as literature that is supposedly technical or non-fictional in which the personal feelings of the author dominate the essay. Although I agree with Brown to a certain extent, especially in his description of the conflict between the intellect and emotions in James, I do not wish to use his category of personal literature. Rather, in James's "The Will to Believe" the element of the conflict between these two opposed forces dominates because both content and style, as complementary units, describe this conflict. The subject matter is not dry or dull for the audience because James has made it alive for them, just as
this conflict is alive for James. And aliveness is the reigning metaphor of the essay. Each question brought before the audience is examined for its aliveness. James is very conscious of his audience and he spends a great amount of time in the essay capturing his audience's interest, making them feel the conflict, for James is persuading his audience through the areas both of the emotions and the intellect.

II

"The Will to Believe" offers an excellent example of James writing for a specific audience. Originally, the essay was an address delivered at the "Summer School of Ethics" in Plymouth, Massachusetts, in the summer of 1895. It was later delivered to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities in 1896 and then published in the *New World* in June of 1896. The copy of the essay that I examined was published in James's book *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* in 1898 by Longmans, Green and Company. Although neither Allen nor Perry comment as to whether the published version of the essay is a word-for-word copy of the address, internal evidence indicates that the essay is quite similar to a spoken version, probably the one given to the two universities' philosophical clubs. First, the essay includes many sentence adverbial modifiers, such as "of course" and "after all," which are acceptable, almost necessary, for good public speaking but unnecessary for formal writing. Second, in the first
paragraph of the essay James mentions his audience in contrast to Harvard. "In the midst of our Harvard freethinking and indifference we are prone to imagine that here at your good old orthodox college . . . ."

James defines his audience more specifically in terms of subject matter reaction in paragraph two, but again the definition is in contrast to Harvard.

I have long defended to my students the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith; but as soon as they got well imbued with the logical spirit, they have as a rule refused to admit my contention to be lawful philosophically, even though in point of fact they were personally all the time chock-full of some faith or other themselves . . . . Perhaps your minds will be more open than those with which I have hitherto had to deal. (p. 2)

James defines his audience in terms of faith and how they individually respond to faith. Notice the contrast James sets up in his first sentence between "voluntarily adopted faith" and "well imbued with the logical spirit." Faith versus logic is one of the primary contrasts used by James throughout the essay. Here James speaks of faith as being adoptable; a person can voluntarily choose to accept or reject faith. Not so with the logical spirit. It imbues or penetrates a person. With faith, a person makes a choice, an action; whereas the logical spirit does the work of embedding certain beliefs within the person.

The students who have the logical spirit have two characteristics: they refuse to admit James's contention and they are chock-full of
some faith or other. Not only are the students with the logical spirit non-actors, but also they are non-thinkers. They are closed to the idea of considering James's contention as possible—they are closed-minded. And they have a faith while they protest that they do not have any faith—they are hypocritical. This is the description of the Harvard students given by James, and he challenges his audience to be more open.

Later in the essay (Section X), James challenges his audience again—"If for any of you religion be a hypothesis that cannot, by any living possibility be true, then you need go no farther. I speak to the 'saving remnant' alone." James is very conscious that his audience's attitude toward his subject matter is one of non-belief or antagonism; therefore, he challenges his audience to be open-minded toward religion, to see religion as a live hypothesis. The challenge has come through an open attack upon the logical spirit, which is later defined by James as encompassing the whole 'truth' of science, and through James's definition of open-minded, which he has taken out of the context of scientific investigation and has redefined as an action of daily life. For the challenge to be effective, James must see a quality of willingness on the part of his audience towards the ideas he is proposing.

Considering what James has said about his audience in the Préface, that they have "... their special forms of mental weakness, brought about by the notion, carefully instilled, that there is something called scientific evidence ...," then one must decide how James's presentation
of his theory has been altered to suit the particular needs of his audience as he has defined that audience. The struggle between faith and logic, or religion and science, must be continually referred back to the question of audience. In this struggle, also, the emotions and the intellect are involved. Since James has analyzed his audience as being possessed by the faith of logic, he attempts to show them the emotional quality inherent in logic and the logical quality of faith based on feeling. Logic pertains to reason and faith pertains to trust; but our minds makes some connotative connections. We associate logic with the intellect rather than the emotions and we associate faith with the emotions rather than the intellect. James must sever and then reconnect these ideas of logic, faith, intellect, and emotion to present a convincing argument.

III

James's "The Will to Believe" is a persuasive argument with two directions. In one direction, James is moving toward a practical approach to studying systems of philosophy as opposed to presenting his own absolute system. Thus, the essay builds to its logical climax, which is the giving of the abstract and concrete applications by James in the conclusion. Until the conclusion, the movement of the essay has been accomplished through the use of conflict and resolution as Ms. Lawn suggested in her dissertation. After the first two sections, the essay moves through a series of conflicts all of which follow a
similar pattern of a question raised, two solutions given, the wrong solution eliminated, the right solution discussed, and the conflict resolved. Through the use of conflict and resolution, the twelve sections of the essay can be reorganized into six sections.

**Introduction and Section I:** definition of audience, topic, and terms

**Sections II and III:** conflict between intellectual and non-intellectual natures

**Sections IV, V, and VI:** conflict between absolutists and empiricists

**Section VII:** conflict between truth and error

**Sections VIII, IX, and X:** conflict between those who maintain the passional nature should not have an influence and James who maintains the passional nature does and should have an influence in some decision making

**Conclusion:** application and reference back to the introduction

There is also a circular motion to the essay. The conclusion and its quote from Fitz-James Stephen refers back to the introduction and the anecdote about Fitz-James Stephen which begins the essay. Also, the conclusion of Section X is reminiscent of Pascal's argument which James paraphrases in Section II. Pascal's argument in which he compares belief in religion to the odds in gambling is ridiculed by James in Section II as he begins discussing the conflict between the intellectual and non-intellectual natures. But as James discusses this conflict, Pascal's argument takes on more significance until James resolves the conflict with—"There are passional tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief, and it is only the latter that are too late for the fair; and they are not too late
when the previous passional work has been already in their own direction. Pascal's argument, instead of being powerless, then seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith in masses and holy water complete." James's essay can be seen as the passional foundation that is laid for the non-intellectual nature to accept his argument for belief which he proposes in Section X.

This feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods (although not to do so would be so easy both for our logic and our life) we are doing the universe the deepest service we can, seems part of the living essence of the religious hypothesis. If the hypothesis were true in all its parts, including this one, then pure intellectualism with its veto on our making willing advances, would be an absurdity; and some participation of our sympathetic nature would be logically required. I, therefore, for one, cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game. I cannot do so for this plain reason, that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule. (p. 28)

James bases the truthfulness of the religious hypothesis upon the fact that there is this feeling that belief in gods is the deepest service we can do the universe. To test the truthfulness of this feeling requires a belief in gods. To reject the claims of agnosticism, James must assume that the hypothesis is true and that agnosticism, which disallows belief to prove truthfulness, will never realize the truthfulness of the religious hypothesis. The final phrasing of James's argument with its inclusion of "if those kinds of truth were really there" refers back to the original question of whether the religious
hypothesis is true, a question James never answers. Although James assumes the truthfulness of the religious hypothesis, he is not arguing for the agnostics or his audience to accept faith but rather to accept a method of investigation which stresses action. The actor, though, to complete the action, must assume that his investigation will result in the finding of truth, which, in this instance, means the acceptance of faith.

In this passional appeal, James suggests that his audience should follow his action of rejecting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking. James sets himself up as the example to follow, and this example is worthy of a following only if James has made it worthy through previous passional work. This statement, then, presents the emotional climax of the essay, as the proposed applications present the logical climax. The two types of organization in the essay do conflict with each other, because they are making two different appeals to the audience. But the appeals are interrelated so that the two organizations also support each other. James's passional appeal to his audience to follow his example of acting upon feeling is James revealing the logic of faith to his audience. James's concrete application in his intellectual conclusion repeats James's insistent plea to recognize that logic is based on emotion. The two appeals are two branches of the same basic argument, that the intellect and emotions cannot be separated.
James is attempting to write both an intellectual and emotionally persuasive argument. As the overall structure of the essay shows, there are two forms of organization combined in the essay—a conflict-and-resolution organization and a circular organization. The organizations work together to move the essay forward because the conflict between the intellect and emotions, which is the subject matter of the essay, is repeated in the organization. Also, James uses rhetorical devices to show this conflict. James uses writing itself as a tool to promote communication between writer and audience; therefore, such devices as syntax, punctuation, active verbs, rhetorical questions, parallelism, imagery, extended metaphor, vocabulary, and comparison show the audience the relationship between the intellect and the emotions.

As James develops both of his organizations, his paragraphs and sentences become more complex. One sign of complexity is the length of some of James's paragraphs and sentences. In Section X, the most diversity in paragraph length is shown. This section, which also includes the emotional conclusion, contains six paragraphs. The section includes two one-sentence paragraphs and another paragraph consists of only two sentences. Also, included in Section X is a paragraph which is twenty sentences long and which includes one sentence eighty words long, longer than the combined total of the two one-sentence paragraphs.

However, one cannot generalize and say that James uses only long paragraphs or long sentences. Short sentences and short paragraphs
serve a purpose in his writing. They include his more generalized thoughts and usually, therefore, appear at the beginning of a section or a paragraph to perform the role of topic sentence or topic paragraph. They also work as transitional sentences or paragraphs. James is often-times very obvious in his use of transitions and points out to his audience that they have finished one section and are to begin another, a rhetorical device borrowed from the spoken version. Also, the short sentences and paragraphs are used for emphasis and for breaks in James's thought, as in Section X.

Another sign of complexity in James's writing is the punctuation. The more complex the thought, the more complex is the punctuation, with an abundant use of dashes, parentheses, semi-colons, and colons. Notice the following example of James's punctuation.

It matters not to an empiricist from what quarter an hypothesis may come to him: he may have acquired it by fair means or by foul; passion may have whispered or accident suggested it; but if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true. (p. 17)

Periods could have been used instead of the colon and semi-colons. Instead James chooses to push the thoughts together, since they are highly related, to emphasize the conclusion—"that is what he means by its being true." The colon works as a division between the generalized, negative statement of the thought in the first part of the sentence and the development of that statement in positive and more specific terms. Another break is formed by the "but if" which makes
the first generalized statement conditional before allowing James to draw his conclusion about an empiricist's truth.

The complexity of that sentence is easily understood. Not all of James's complex sentences are just statements compounded. Take for example the following sentence from Section X.

If religion be true and the evidence for it be still insufficient, I do not wish, by putting your extinguisher upon my nature (which feels to me as if it had after all some business in this matter), to forfeit my sole chance in life of getting upon the winning side,—that chance depending, of course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passional need of taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right. (p. 27)

"I do not wish" is the kernel clause of this complex mass which includes fourteen embedded independent clauses. The embedding process has been accomplished through the dropping of the continually repeated subject "I," thus the sentence is connected through the verbs. The verbs used by James are: "be," "wish," "put," "feels," "had," "forfeit," "get," "win," "depend," "will," "run," "act," "may," and "take." Except for "be," "had," and "may," the verbs are extremely active and thereby emphasize the role of doing or acting upon belief. Three verbs, though, are semi-active verbs—"wish," "feels," and "will." "Wish," "feels," and "will" all describe an emotional action or response rather than a physical action.

The complexity of this sentence is such that it becomes understandable only through its punctuation, which puts slightly subordinate thoughts between commas and highly subordinate thoughts in parentheses. The dash emphasizes the parallelism between "my sole chance" and "that
chance" and effectively subordinates and coordinates the ideas. Also, his use of "sole" emphasizes the passional nature of the act by its being a pun on "soul." The structure of this sentence is further complicated by James's use of the sentence adverbial modifiers "of course" and "after all." James's use of active, concrete verbs helps to stimulate the imagination of the audience so that they can picture the action of the sentence, and his use of punctuation helps to clarify the meaning of the sentence so that the audience can understand the action. But although James attempts to make his writing concrete and understandable, he is forced into using passional words such as "wish" and "feels" to explain the major premise of the sentence—I do not wish because my nature feels. Even so, there are no active, concrete verbs and no forms of punctuation which can explain this passional response to the world (See Appendix for a diagram of this sentence.).

James has a reputation for writing long, complex sentences; therefore, it is remarkable that the majority of James's sentences are neither very long nor very complex. Look for example at the first paragraph in Section II.

The next matter to consider is the actual psychology of human opinion. When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions. When we look at others, it seems as if they could do nothing when the intellect had once said its say. Let us take the latter facts up first. (p. 4)

This paragraph has two simple sentences and two complex sentences, none of which is complex in the use of punctuation or exceptionally
long. The sentences are easily understood. James is not always so precise in his writing. Often he will put a comma between a subject and verb for no reason except to show a slight pause, a pause to take a breath while reading a long sentence. "But practically one's conviction that the evidence one goes by is of the real objective brand, is only one more subjective opinion added to the lot." James's punctuation, therefore, is not always grammatical and can serve a rhetorical purpose of showing a pause or a change in intonation.

Complexity of sentence structure corresponds to a complexity in thought structure; James uses both simple and complex sentence structure. Through his use of punctuation and active verbs, James attempts to make the most complex thoughts understandable. The punctuating is controlled and is explainable even in its most eccentric usage, as when a comma appears between a subject and its verb. The choice of active verbs is an attempt by James to make philosophy concrete, and in this essay the attempt fails. Examining the essay, one sees that James continually uses active verbs primarily "acting" and "living." But James also has to depend on verbs like "willing," which is an action of the will or passion. The essay is about the will; and James is forced into using verbs that describe passional actions, actions that occur in the center of feeling with no outward manifestation. Unlike philosophers who develop their own technical terms to describe life, James puts his philosophy into the common language of people. This language is subject to misunderstanding because James sees life in a new way which the old vocabulary cannot
describe accurately. James's attempt to make his philosophy concrete fails because his vocabulary fails him.

Besides using an active vocabulary and punctuation, James also uses features such as rhetorical questions and parallelism to develop his ideas. When James has a point to make, he will often place it in the dramatic context of a rhetorical question. "But if a pyrrhonian sceptic asks us how we know all this, can our logic find a reply? No! certainly it cannot." The rhetorical question makes the reader become involved, makes him take upon himself the answering opinion of the speaker, for James asks us, the reader, whether our logic can reply and then does not allow our logic time to think or answer the question. He assures the reader that there is no answer, disabling logic in its pursuit of an answer. The rhetorical question is a device that gets his audience involved in the issues presented in that the audience appears to have an opportunity to respond to the question.

Throughout the essay parallelism is also used by James to emphasize various points. Because James uses parallelism at the end of the essay, immediately before he begins the quote by Fitz-James Stephen, the sentence takes on a dramatic intensity investing the words with a voice of their own.

We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom; then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have the spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism's glory; then only shall we live and let live, in speculative as well as in practical things. (p. 30)
The words James uses are abstract—"intellectual republic" and "spirit of inner tolerance"—and have meaning only because of the previous passional work done by James. Then he builds to the words "live and let live," a concept and an image which has been working throughout the essay. The sentence begins with mental freedom and moves to an intellectual republic and a spirit of inner tolerance. The concepts of intellect and spirit are balanced against each other as they have been throughout the essay; but spirit slightly outweighs intellect with spirit's placement closer to living, its development into two noun clauses where intellect has no clause development, and its connection with empiricism, and not only through being connected to empiricism but also in being the glory of empiricism.

V

The last clause of this sentence can be contrasted to the last paragraph of the essay which is a quote from Fitz-James Stephen: "'Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.'" Nearly all of James's imagery is associated in some way with life and death. His metaphors come from the experiences of all people and refer to such things as "the great boarding-house of nature," "getting upon the winning side," and "spark . . . light up our sleeping magazines of faith." All questions center around whether the answer results in life or death, an approach which James initiates with his definition of a hypothesis. "Let us
give the name of hypothesis to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of live and dead wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either live or dead. Much of the essay then is a description of what is alive or dead as hypotheses to us personally. Because the religious hypothesis is examined, life and death also refer to spiritual life and death.

We can only believe in a live hypothesis. "The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is a willingness to act at all." Liveness equals willingness to act equals belief. Here at the beginning of his essay, James has tied together four key words: live, will, act and belief. The essay is in support of life and action, which results from a willingness to act on belief. James does not propose wish fulfillment, although he uses the word "wish" throughout the essay. "Wish" describes the lowest type of willful action, acting on belief while not allowing anyone else to. "This very law which the logicians would impose on us—if I may give the name of logicians to those who would rule out our willing nature—is based on nothing but their own natural wish to exclude all elements for which they, in their professional quality of logicians, can find no use." This is the problem James sees existing in science.

The action of "The Will to Believe" is a conflict between religion and science, and James draws from both scientific and religious vocabulary to explain his ideas. The vocabulary of science emphasizes primarily the intellect, logic, objective certitude, and empiricism.
The vocabulary of religion includes concepts such as absolutist, dogmatism, justification, sermon, eternal, moral, and faith. In the first paragraph of the essay, James brings out the religious significance of his essay, "... like a sermon on justification by faith to read to you,—I mean an essay in justification of faith." His justification of faith is an attempt to balance faith with the empirical method of truth seeking. Faith is the willingness to act (belief) even though all the evidence for truth has not been established. "In truths dependent on our personal action, then, faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly an indispensable thing." James has gotten to this point by declaring a greater logic than that of scientific truth-seeking. "And where faith in a fact can help create the fact, that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the 'lowest kind of immorality' into which a thinking being can fall. Yet such is the logic by which our scientific absolutists pretend to regulate our lives."

Faith wins the conflict with logic, or objective certitude, which is the logic of the scientist. James has established his own logic based on faith, which is evident from his 'emotional' conclusion.

I cannot do so for this plain reason, that a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule. That for me is the long and short of the formal logic of the situation, no matter what the kinds of truth might materially be. (pp. 28-29)
Objective certitude and faith cannot coexist, for objective certitude says that faith is not logical, cannot be proven, and cannot be true. Although James has given up objective certitude for the greater logic of faith, he has not abandoned empiricism for objective certitude and empiricism have been disassociated from each other by James. "But please observe, now, that when as empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude, we do not thereby give up the quest or hope of truth itself." For the empiricist the quest for truth is most important since it is the only thing that differentiates an empiricist from an absolutist. "The absolutists in this matter say that we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can know when we have attained to knowing it; while the empiricists think that although we may attain it, we cannot infallibly know when." Both the empiricist and the absolutist are seeking truth; but the absolutist finds his truth in a philosophical system, whereas the empiricist is continually seeking. James replaces objective certitude with faith as the alternative method for empirical truth seeking in the area of morals.

Another interesting aspect of James's diction is his choice of foreign phrases. Although James uses German, French, and Italian phrases, he primarily draws upon Latin. There is one paragraph in Section V which can only be understood if one knows Latin.

The final ground of this objective evidence possessed by certain propositions is the *adaequatio intellectus nostri cum re*. The certitude it brings involves an *aptitudinem ad extorquendum certum assensum* on the part of the truth envisaged, and on the side of the subject a *quietem in cognitione*, when once the object is mentally received, that leaves no possibility of doubt behind; and in the
whole transaction nothing operates but the \textit{entitas ipsa} of the object and the \textit{entitas ipsa} of the mind. We slouchy modern thinkers dislike to talk in Latin,--indeed, we dislike to talk in set terms at all. (p. 13)

Although James jokes about the "slouchy modern thinkers," the passage shows a distinct attitude on James's part. Except for this passage, the language of the essay is not difficult or technical. The few words James lists as technical, "hypothesis" and "genuine option," are technical only within the limited sense in which James uses them. This section, wherein James uses Latin, is the only place in "The Will to Believe" where James uses a foreign language extensively, although James was proficient in several languages. The clue to understanding his use of Latin lies in the last sentence of the quote. James was not a slouchy thinker but had a clear, precise mind. Yet, he associates himself with the "slouchy modern thinkers" and his audience by his use of "we." Clearly James is consciously trying to build a rapport with his audience. James also gives a reason for using Latin--"to talk in set terms." This is the one place in the essay where James establishes some definite terms, besides Section I. The avoidance of formal terminology shows James's effort to avoid establishing an absolute philosophical system. At this point in the essay, though, James does set up terms to describe his theory of the reception of ideas, an indication of James's philosophical stance.

James does not draw upon philosophical jargon to explain his ideas but rather puts his thoughts into a language understandable to all people. In so doing, James frequently uses colloquialisms: "Our
next duty, having recognized this mixed-up state of affairs, is to ask whether it be simply reprehensible and pathological, or whether, on the contrary, we must treat it as a normal element in making up our minds." The phrase "mixed-up state of affairs" is emphasized because of its informality, especially when compared to "reprehensible" and "pathological." Some discontinuity results because of this switching from informal to formal diction. At times, James's use of informal language works well in pointing out a particular viewpoint such as in the following: "The talk of believing by our volition seems, then, from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile." Vile takes on added meaning because of its being paralleled to silly. Here the contrast between the informal and formal diction gives added force to the words; but, generally, James's use of informal diction is a method of establishing rapport with his audience.

Yet, James is very precise in his choice of words, and the discontinuity in diction is a natural result of trying to accomplish his two distinct purposes of making an emotionally persuasive argument and an intellectual argument for acceptance of a method of investigation. The precision with which James selects his words is illustrated by this example from Section II.

The talk of believing by our volition seems, then, from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile. When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences, and sees how it was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men be buried in its mere foundations; what
patience and postponement, what choking down of preference, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact are wrought into its very stones and mortar; how absolutely impersonal it stands in its vast augustness,—then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths, and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream! Can we wonder if those bred in the rugged and mainly school of science should feel like spewing such subjectivism out of their mouths? The whole system of loyalties which grow up in the schools of science go dead against its tolerance; so that it is only natural that those who have caught the scientific fever should pass over to the opposite extreme, and write sometimes as if the incorruptibly truthful intellect ought positively to prefer bitterness and unacceptableness to the heart in its cup. (p. 7)

I have already mentioned James's use of the informal word "silly" and how its parallel relationship to "vile" causes "vile" to be emphasized. From this comment on one's acting by belief alone, James begins an image of the physical sciences as a magnificent edifice that is being built. If one begins to picture a beautiful building similar in design to the Coliseum or the Parthenon, one is disgusted by the description of the foundation which has thousands of lives buried in it. Although at first I saw thousands of men screaming in agony as cement was poured over them, this is not the case. The men are not screaming, but neither are they happy. They are just disinterested. Like good martyrs, they are living with patience, choking down preference and submitting to icy laws. Yet, how absolutely impersonal and unadmirable the structure stands in its vast augustness. James goes on to explain that this attitude of martyrdom is the scientific fever which causes the person afflicted to prefer bitterness and unacceptableness to the heart as its daily provision.
James uses contrast exceptionally well here. Balanced against this magnificent edifice of science is the little sentimentalist who can only blow smoke-wreaths. It is when one remembers those thousands of bodies lying in the foundation of science, dying from the icy cold and the undigestible bill of fare, that the moral scale tips in favor of the sentimentalist. A key phrase in the development of this contrast describes science's reaction to the sentimentalist. "The whole system of loyalties which grow up in the schools of science go dead against its tolerance . . . ." "Dead against" seems to be another of James's colloquialisms and seems to mean directly opposed; but because of James's use of dead and alive throughout the essay, the phrase can also be read as meaning that science will become dead when contrasted to something that is tolerant. Science's intolerance will eventually cause science to die. It is tolerance which James is advocating, for tolerance is life. "We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to respect one another's mental freedom: . . . then only shall we have the spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless, and which is empiricism's glory; then only shall we live . . . ."

James states that science has an attitude of intolerance, which will result in death rather than life. He also shows science's intolerance by relating science to Catholicism, which for his Protestant audience from Protestant-affiliated universities was the epitome of intolerance. One instance of this comparison between Catholicism and science occurs when James is describing empiricism: "The greatest empiricists among us are only empiricists on reflection: when left
to their instincts, they dogmatize like infallible popes." The second half of this sentence clearly states how absolutist empiricists are. Soon after this, James takes another facet of science and relates it to the Catholic faith. "When, indeed, one remembers that the most striking practical application to life of the doctrine of objective certitude has been the conscientious labors of the Holy Office of the Inquisition, one feels less tempted than ever to lend the doctrine a respectful ear." To a Protestant audience that is enthralled to the scientific doctrine, this connection between Catholicism and science must have affected them emotionally, for James is drawing upon prejudice rather than logic to discredit science. This linking of science to Catholicism accomplishes something else for James. Intolerance is killing science, and this intolerance is actually science's inability to accept any hypothesis as alive that cannot be proven scientifically. James sees this as a rejection of the religious hypothesis. By comparing science to Catholicism, James has reconnected faith and logic.

It was an English philosopher, W. K. Clifford, who had helped disconnect faith and logic by supporting the supremacy of logic and proof before belief. It was the agnosticism of men such as Clifford that James is refuting in his essay. In writing "The Will to Believe," James personifies the theory he is refuting so that it becomes Clifford. Because James clearly draws a line of distinction between Clifford's ideas and his ideas, the audience is forced to choose a side. James manipulates his audience in two ways to accept his ideas rather than those of Clifford's.
The audience is forced into James's camp, first, by the terminology James uses to describe Clifford. He begins by calling Clifford "that delicious enfant terrible." It is Clifford whom James uses as an example throughout the essay to show how absolute an empiricist can be. "When the Cliffords tell us how sinful it is to be Christians on such 'insufficient evidence,' insufficiency is really the last thing they have in mind." Here James uses Clifford's name to represent all empiricists who are truly absolutists. Also, in Section VII when James presents the option of seeking truth or shunning error, it is Clifford whom James mentions as the proponent of the course of shunning error, the non-active course. Clifford embodies all the traits of an empiricist gone wrong; he is an empiricist who is really an intolerant absolutist and a fearful non-seeker after truth.

Another way James subtly convinces the audience to join his camp is through setting up distinctions between himself, Clifford, and the audience. The essay jumps from using "I" to "you" to "we" to "he" and "they." But this jumping is very conscious on James's part. As an example of this, a portion of Section VII is worth examining.

You, on the other hand, may think the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford. We must remember that these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life. Biologically considered, our minds are as ready to grind out falsehood as veracity, and he who says, 'Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!' merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe. (p. 18)
Notice that James begins this section by referring directly to his audience by using "you." He is showing them the option between Clifford and himself. Then he gives his own opinion on the matter, using "I," which has all the force associated with James being a distinguished philosopher and lecturer. James switches to "we" in the next sentence. He is identifying with his audience—the "we" suggests that the audience and James look at the situation similarly. Our minds are alike, he seems to state, in their ability to grind out both truth and lies and he who is fearful. James could not use "I" or "we" because this is an action James condemns, one he could not possibly participate in. He could have used "you," indicating that the audience in general will do this type of action and that they are wrong. He could have used "you"—your own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe—but James doesn't because throughout the essay he avoids any reference that might indicate that he believes his audience is made up of fools. They are thinkers. He gives his audience options; he examines these options before his audience; and, although he may manipulate his audience, he has a respect for them as the final choice-makers. If someone is going to be fooled, it is a "he" not the audience, and that "he" usually refers to Clifford, who is not a choice-maker but an absolutist.

James used "I," "you," and "we" in his essay because he was personally involved in what he was saying and he wanted to involve his audience also. An example of this total involvement is the type of digressions which can be found in the essay. In Section III, James argues against science, which does not allow a place for the will.
He mentions Clifford, Huxley, and Newman as being men who disbelieve all facts and theories for which they have no use. In this discussion, James mentions science's rejection of the claims of telepathy. James makes the point that scientists have rejected telepathy because they have no use for it; he uses this rejection as an example of science's intolerance. Although telepathy was a subject which interested many people, it was of particular interest to James, who was at one time president of the British Society for Psychical Research. Because he draws upon all of his interests to explain his world view, a basic unity is achieved in the piece.

VI

As the writer of "The Will to Believe," James is primarily a manipulator, for this essay is a persuasive piece of writing. It does not set up a system of philosophy, an absolutist system; the whole piece is a rejection of that type of philosophical investigation. James does not give answers; rather he is looking for a new way of phrasing the questions. The persuasion, therefore, is a plea for a regeneration of the audience's ways of thinking. And the audience is of primary importance to James. Whom James is attempting to persuade is as important as how he is attempting to persuade. From the very first paragraph James attempts to weave his philosophy into a persuasive piece, and he begins by stating his purpose as "an essay in justification of faith" and by contrasting his audience to the closed-minded
Harvard students. In this introduction James suggests to his audience that "perhaps your minds will be more open." And this is the challenge of the essay, to be open-minded toward all systems.

But the essay concentrates on being open-minded about the question of religion, and James appears to be making an appeal for religious faith. In his preface, James stated that emphasis was laid on religious faith because, for his audience, this was a subject that they had closed their mind to. This suggests again that for James the method of investigation was more important than the end result. And yet he is advocating faith, but only after he has wrenched it out of its normal meaning. "Our faith is faith in some one else's faith . . . ." This is James's description of most people's faith, whether religious or scientific faith. But in describing the similarities between absolutists and empiricists, James describes another type of faith. " . . . the faith that truth exists, and that out minds can find it . . . ." This faith in the existence of truth is a belief held both by absolutists and empiricists and is a necessary feature of the empirical method of truth-seeking.

Because James has stated the purpose of his essay as a justification of faith, it is important to determine exactly what James means by faith. In the second paragraph of the essay, James gives two definitions of faith. "I have long defended to my own students the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith; but as soon as they have got well imbued with the logical spirit, they have as a rule refused to admit my contention to be lawful philosophically, even though in point
of fact they were personally all the time chock-full of some faith or other themselves." Faith can be voluntarily adopted; or as in the case of James's Harvard students, who are imbued with a faith in logic, faith can penetrate an individual so that it is involuntarily accepted. This last type of faith could be described as faith in someone else's faith, a faith that has penetrated our being to the extent of causing us to take action without conscious thought or decision-making. It is a faith that is not questioned by us so that it is an absolutist's faith. The voluntarily adopted faith is the empiricist's faith, because it is a definite act of the will to adopt faith. The empiricist accepts faith before all the validating evidence is in but always continues questioning to find the truth.

Examining James's conclusion, one should be able to determine which faith James is supporting, although it would seem that James would only support the empiricist's faith. I have shown that there are two conclusions in "The Will to Believe"—the emotional conclusion and the logical conclusion. The emotional conclusion—"I, therefore, for one cannot see my way to accepting the agnostic rules for truth-seeking, or wilfully agree to keep my willing nature out of the game."—is the clearest example of a statement of personal belief on James's part showing his passionable rejection of agnosticism. This rejection is based on feeling on James's part, not on a voluntarily adopted faith. James bases his whole theory of voluntarily adopted faith on the need to follow feeling. "This feeling, forced on us we know not whence, that by obstinately believing that there are gods . . . ." The belief
in gods can be voluntarily adopted but not the feeling which would make this a live hypothesis. In his preface, James explains that his emphasis on religion was due to his audience, but the emphasis on feeling is from James personally. For James, the reason that the religious hypothesis could be a live hypothesis is based on its possible truthfulness. Although James advocates that the empiricist should question everything in his search, there is a basic passional premise which James makes that the empiricist must also make—truth does exist. This faith in truth is not a voluntarily adopted faith; it is a faith that must imbue the spirit of the empiricist. Thus James's acceptance of religion is a voluntarily adopted faith, but his need to believe in truth and his rejection of agnosticism shows his absolutist tendency.

It is only reasonable that James's emotional appeal to his audience should be influenced by James's own passional interests more than by the logical conclusion wherein James makes two applications of his method. The abstract application is James's philosophical theory explained—"that we have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will." Belief for James is the willingness to act on a live hypothesis. This is a challenge to the audience to act on their beliefs, but it also a clear, precise restatement of what it means to voluntarily adopt faith.

The concrete application is not a restatement of James's thesis but rather a passional statement in support of a life of action. "Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act as we should if we did
believe it to be true. The whole defense of religious faith hinges upon action. Action and the need for action in daily life are never questioned by James. Again, it is one of the givens, life truth. Thus, the essay is based on James’s own passional need to act as if truth existed, which is not a voluntarily adopted stance but imbues his spirit as the logical spirit imbues his Harvard students.

James attempts to show his own approach to philosophy as the pure empirical method, but the method which James shows us is as twisted by his own basic absolutist tendencies as the scientists’ empirical method. James has a need to equate life with an active seeking of truth, and his philosophy is based on that premise. The rhetorical devices used by James help to express his view. Some devices are carried over from the spoken version, including the direct transitions and the punctuation between subjects and verbs in long sentences.

His essay does not set forth a philosophy for other philosophers to argue with, but a method of investigation which will help individuals to combine the claims of logic (science) and faith (religion). The persuasive element of the essay is obvious in James’s use of a generally simple sentence structure and a non-technical, often colloquial, vocabulary which makes the thoughts understandable even for non-philosophers. Always James is trying to get his audience involved in the conflict between faith and logic and he does so through the use of rhetorical questions and active verbs. The metaphors are drawn from everyday occurrences, the most frequent metaphor being that of living. James
makes his subject interesting and understandable for his audience through the use of such devices.

But the subject matter, because of its nature as philosophy, requires complexity of vocabulary and structure. James struggles with his tendency to make his method of investigation into an absolute theory; his use of Latin in Section V to make some set distinctions is where James comes closest to so doing. But fortunately, James does not allow himself to do this throughout the essay. Rather he uses a vocabulary drawn from science and religion to describe his method. Because of the distinctions which our minds make between science and religion, the distinction which causes within us a conflict between faith and logic, James is continually revising his vocabulary. Even though James redefines much terminology, he is still forced into using words such as "will" and "believe," abstract words, to define his basic ideas. His method of investigation is based on a few absolute ideas which are basic to James's view of life such as the assurance of the existence of truth and the necessity of action and tolerance, and these basic ideas of James can only be described in abstract terms.

James, who was a medical doctor and a psychologist before becoming a philosopher, was imbued with the logical spirit, also. He attempts in this essay to explain faith in scientific terms and to show science its foundation in faith. There is a basic need in James to act as if truth exists, truth which he cannot explain scientifically but only accept, as there is also a basic need in him not to be satisfied with an absolute system of philosophy. The strength of James's essay is
that his intellectual inquiries gave him a method for investigating his passioned nature and translating into a persuasive, understandable format the results of that investigation.
Footnotes


5Brown, p. 155.

6Brown, p. 161.


8Lawn, pp. 99-100.


10Berthoff, p. 164.

11Berthoff, p. 166.

12Berthoff, p. 166.

13Berthoff, p. 167.


15Gibson, pp. 71-89.


17Gibson, pp. 156-57.

18Allen, pp. 197-98.

19Allen, p. 198.

20Allen, p. 516.


23 Brown, p. 155.

24 Allen, p. 375.

25 A collation of the texts of the essay (New World 1896 text and Longmans, Green 1898 text) shows a greater use of commas, semi-colons, colons, and dashes in the 1898 text. The variety of punctuation and its more frequent use suggests that James was attempting to show length of pause through his use of punctuation. Also, James has compounded many of the simple and complex sentences of the 1896 text in the 1898 text.

26 A collation of the 1896 and 1898 texts shows that James added the words "after all" to the 1898 text. This suggests that the sentence adverbial modifiers serve the rhetorical purpose of emphasizing the next phrase in the sentence besides making the text less formal in diction.
A Selected Bibliography


1. If religion be true
2. and the evidence for it still be insufficient.
3. I do not wish

4. by putting your extinguisher upon my nature

5. (which feels to me)

Kernel sentence (S3) and embedded sentences 1, 2, 4, and 5.
The method of diagraming used is that discussed by Roderick A. Jacobs and Peter S. Rosenbaum in their
book *English Transformational Grammar*.
6. as if it had after all some business in this matter.

7. to forfeit my sole chance in life

8. of getting upon the winning side

9. the winning side

10. that chance depending, of course, on my willingness

Embedded sentences 6-10.
11. on my willingness

12. to run the risk of acting

13. of acting

14. as if my passionale need might be prophetic and right

15. of taking the world religiously

Embedded sentences 11-14.