REASON AND FAITH

I am asked to discuss Faith and Reason, but no definite question concerning them is proposed. It is also announced in print that Professor Howison and I will probably oppose each other, but I sincerely hope that this may not be the case. If we do, it will very likely be over the question of Reason's all-sufficiency to reach religious conclusions without the aid of faith, so I will, with your permission, begin by speaking of that point.

Whether Reason be deemed all-sufficient or not will depend on what you mean by Reason. Strictly and technically, Reason is a faculty, not of facts, but of principles and relations. Out of her own resources she can not say what facts exist; but if one fact be given her, she can infer another fact; and she is supposed to be able, by certain principles that she possesses, to lay down in advance what relations facts must stand in to each other; that causes, for example, must precede, not follow, their effects, and the like.

The religious question is altogether one of facts. Does a God exist or not? Is the world actually run by its higher or by its lower forces? To feel things to be higher and lower, but to confess the higher things impotent, would be an irreligious conclusion. If there be a God, Reason can be theistic and say that we exist alongside of him, or pantheistic and say that we are parts of him; but that there is a God, Reason can only infer from the facts of experience, from their character as needing a cause, or from the purpose they display.

If we take Reason in the strict sense of a faculty of inference, nothing is more notorious than her insufficiency to put religious conclusions on a solid base. To say nothing of pantheism and theism and their squabbles, atheism itself has always appealed to Reason for support. The most deeply atheistic book I have seen of late is

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1 In 1906, while lecturing at Leland Stanford, William James accepted an invitation to contribute to a discussion of "Reason and Faith" at a dinner of the Pacific Coast Unitarian Club in San Francisco on February 5th. What follows is a summary of what he said which he himself prepared to be printed in the proceedings of the meeting. It was sent to a printer and galley proof was corrected. The earthquake and San Francisco fire prevented publication. The manuscript and part of the corrected galley were brought back to Cambridge and were recently found there in a bundle of papers among which they had hitherto been overlooked. So far as I can discover, the Unitarian Club address has never been printed.—Henry James.
that *Life of Reason*, by my colleague, Santayana, which I recommend you all to read. For my colleague, Royce, on the other hand, as you all know, God's existence is the one fact that Reason makes secure. Which of these thinkers does genuine Reason actuate? Speaking after the manner of men, and judging by other tests than the religious one, Reason in both of them is far superior to what it is in most of us. Neither can claim a monopoly of it; neither can say that his colleague doesn't use it, but reaches his conclusions by blind Faith.

Men of the world would probably say that Faith has a finger in the conclusions of both men. Their Reason indicates the opening and their faith jumps in. Faith uses a logic altogether different from Reason's logic. Reason claims certainty and finality for her conclusions. Faith is satisfied if hers seem probable and practically wise.

Faith's form of argument is something like this: Considering a view of the world: "It is fit to be true," she feels; "it would be well if it were true; it might be true; it may be true; it ought to be true," she says; "it must be true," she continues; "it shall be true," she concludes, "for me; that is, I will treat it as if it were true so far as my advocacy and actions are concerned."

Obviously this is no intellectual chain of inferences, like the *Sortes* of the logic-books. You may call it the "faith-ladder," if you like; but, whatever you call it, it is the sort of slope on which we all habitually live. In no complex matter can our conclusions be more than probable. We use our feelings, our good-will, in judging where the greater probability lies; and when our judgment is made, we practically turn our back on the lesser probabilities as if they were not there. Probability, as you know, is mathematically expressed by a fraction. But seldom can we act fractionally—half-action is no action (what is the use of only half-killing your enemy!—better not touch him at all); so for purposes of action we equate the most probable view to 1 (or certainty) and other views we treat as naught.

Now the advocates of Reason's all-sufficiency can follow either of two courses, but not both.

They can approve of the faith-ladder and adopt it, but at the same time call it an exercise of Reason. In this case they close the controversy by a verbal definition, which amounts to a material surrender to the opposite side.

Or they can stick to Reason's more customary definition, and forbid us the faith-ladder, as something liable only to mislead. "Brace yourself against its fatal slope," they can say; "wait for full evidence; Reason and facts must alone decide; rule good-will
out; don’t move until you’re sure.’’ But this advice is so obviously impossible to follow in any considerable practical or theoretical affair, and the rationalists themselves follow it so very little in their books and practice, fornicating as they do habitually with the unclean thing which they denounce, that I do not see how it can be seriously taken. Virtually it amounts to forbidding us to live.

I conclude, then, that there is nothing left to dispute about. If the word ‘‘Reason’’ be taken to cover the faith-process, then Reason is, indeed, all-sufficient. But if it is taken to exclude the faith-process, then its insufficiency to found a man’s religion solidly seems to me too obvious for any further discussion to be carried on.

But perhaps I have mistaken your meaning altogether. Perhaps you had Reason versus Experience rather than Reason versus Faith in view. In that case I think that there is something more to be said.

The religious question, we agreed, is a question about facts. From the facts of finite experience, religious rationalism thinks. Reason can infer the Infinite, from the visible she can infer the invisible world.

Now, historically the pretension of religious rationalism has been that all the facts of experience, rightly interpreted, physical facts and moral facts, lead to religious conclusions, and that specifically religious facts, such as conversions, mystical insights, or providential leadings, though they may confirm our religion, are not needed to establish it in the first instance. Common natural facts will do.

But here I have to repeat what I said at the outset. Do the facts of natural experience force men’s Reason, as it concretely exists, to religious conclusions? Certainly men having every other appearance of possessing Reason have been led to irreverent conclusions by the facts of the world. Men will probably always conclude diversely in this matter, as they have concluded diversely up to this hour. Some will see in moral facts a power that makes for righteousness, and in physical facts a power that geometrizes and is intellectual, that creates order and loves beauty. But alongside of all such facts there are contrary facts in abundance; and he who seeks them can equally well infer a power that defies righteousness, creates disorder, loves ugliness, and aims at death. It depends on which kind of fact you single out as the more essential. If your Reason tries to be impartial, if she resorts to statistical comparison, and asks which class of facts tip the balance, and which way tends the drift, she must, it seems to me, conclude for irreligion, unless we give her more specific religious experiences to go by; for the last word everywhere, according to purely naturalistic science, is the word of Death, the death-sentence passed by Nature on plant and beast, and man and tribe, and earth and sun, and everything that she has made.
But religious experience, strictly and narrowly so-called, gives Reason an additional set of facts to use. They show another possibility to Reason, and Faith then can jump in.

Briefly, the facts I mean can be described as experiences of an unexpected life succeeding upon death. By this I don’t mean immortality, or the death of the body. I mean the death and termination of certain mental processes within the individual’s experience, processes that ran to failure, and in some individuals, at least, eventuated in despair. Just as romantic love seems a comparatively recent literary invention, so these experiences seem to have played no great part before Luther’s time; and the best way to indicate their character will possibly be to draw a contrast between the inner life of ourselves and of the ancient Greeks and Romans.

The Greeks and Romans, in all that concerned their moral life, were an extraordinarily solemn set of folks. The Athenians thought that the very Gods must admire the rectitude of Phocion and Aristides; and those gentlemen themselves were apparently of much the same opinion. Cato’s veracity was so impeccable that the extreme incredulity a Roman could express of anything was to say—“I wouldn’t believe it even if Cato told me.” Good was good and bad was bad, for these people. Hypocrisy, which Church-Christianity brought in, hardly existed; the naturalistic system held firm; its values showed no hollowness and brooked no irony. The individual, if virtuous enough, could meet all possible requirements. The pagan pride had never crumbled.

Luther broke through the crust of all this naturalistic self-sufficiency. He thought (and possibly he was right) that Saint Paul had done it already. Religious experience of the Lutheran type brings all our naturalistic standards to bankruptcy. You are strong only by being weak, it shows. You can not live on pride or self-sufficiency. There is a light in which all the naturally founded and correctly accepted distinctions, excellences, and safeguards of our characters appear as absolute childishness. To give up one’s conceit of being good, is the only door to the Universe’s deeper reaches.

These deeper reaches are familiar enough to evangelical Christianity and to what is now-a-days known as “Mind-cure” religion or “New-Thought.” The phenomenon is that of new ranges of life succeeding on our most despairing moments. There are resources in us that naturalism, with its literal virtues, never recked of, possibilities that take our breath away, and show a world wider than either physics or philistine ethics can imagine. Here is a world in which all is well, in spite of certain forms of death, indeed because of certain forms of death, death of hope, death of strength, death of responsibility, of fear and worry, death of everything that paganism, naturalism, and legalism put their trust in.
Reason, operating on our other experiences, even our psychological experiences, would never have inferred these specifically religious experiences. She could not suspect their existence for they are discontinuous with natural experience and invert its values. But as they come and are given, creation widens to our view. They suggest that our natural experience, so called, may only be a fragment of reality. They soften Nature’s outlines and open out the strangest possibilities and perspectives.

This is why it seems to me that Reason, working in abstraction from specifically religious experiences, will always omit something, and fail to reach completely adequate conclusions. This is why “religious experience,” peculiarly so called, needs, in my opinion, to be carefully considered and interpreted by everyone who aspires to reason out a true religious philosophy.

William James.

NOTES TOWARD THE COMPLETION OF A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF THE WRITINGS OF WILLIAM JAMES

ANYONE who wishes to become thoroughly acquainted with the work of William James is greatly helped by so admirable and successful a piece of work as the Annotated Bibliography of the Writings of William James, which we owe to the pains and skill of Professor Ralph Barton Perry. To point out the rare omissions and mistakes, which can easily be corrected in a new edition, is to express one’s esteem for this catalogue. The following are the items which I, for my part, find occasion to add:

I. Four short papers by James not mentioned by Professor Perry:

One should add to the above the Preface of James to The World of Souls by W. Lutoslawski, London, G. Allen & Unwin. 1924.

II. The following French translations:

1 This numbering is that of Professor Perry’s bibliography of James.

2 In the interest of completeness, the editors suggest the addition to the titles mentioned of the article, “Reason and Faith,” published in this issue.