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What Pragmatism May Learn from Common Sense

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I thank the two reviewers for their helpful comments.

“We cannot live or think at all without some degree of faith.” James, *The Sentiment of Rationality*

“As faith in things divine is represented as the main spring in the life of a Christian, so belief in general is the main spring in the life of a man.”

Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*

- 1 In a letter to Schiller, James wrote that “from the pragmatistic point of view an ode has yet to be written to common sense.”<sup>1</sup> James knew that pragmatism inherited some of the concepts and methods of common sense. But he apparently did not refer to the Scottish common sense championed by Reid. When he alludes to the “philosophy of the Scottish school,” he underlines the lack of “*prestige*” of this eclectic philosophy, which is a “thing of compromises.”<sup>2</sup>
- 2 Yet Reid’s common sense philosophy and James’s pragmatism partake of the same spirit of reconciliation. No doubt Reid would have endorsed James’s description of pragmatism. For the latter, philosophy is not torn between science, empirical facts, scepticism and pessimism on the one hand, religion, first principles, dogmatism and optimism on the other hand. The challenge that pragmatism should take up is to reconcile “the scientific loyalty to facts” with “the old confidence in human values” (P, 1, p. 20). In other words, pragmatism must “be a happy harmonizer of empiricist ways of thinking with the more religious demands of human beings” (P, 2, p. 69). The same may be said for common sense philosophy: “let us remember how common the folly is, of going from one faulty extreme into the opposite.”<sup>3</sup> Reid pledges allegiance to the principles of experimental philosophy, but he is also highly sensitive to our propensity to trust. Common sense and pragmatism

both develop a kind of “mediating philosophy” which should not tear men into parts, but should try to reconcile their different aspirations.

- 3 However some aspirations seem difficult to reconcile. This is the case for beliefs. On the one hand, we consider that we should not believe on the basis of insufficient evidence; but on the other hand, we hold many beliefs despite the lack of evidence. Are we irrational? When epistemic evidence is lacking, can our beliefs be grounded on practical reasons? If so, may we not suspect that these practical reasons miss the point, that they do not bring us what we want, namely reasons in favour of the epistemic accuracy of our beliefs?
- 4 My contention is that the Reidian answer, while compatible with a pragmatist perspective, may get some hearing from evidentialism. Reid and James share the same suspicion towards the requirement not to believe anything beyond the evidence at hand. In this respect, they subscribe to a kind of anti-evidentialism and, in the contemporary debate between evidentialism and pragmatism, they take a stand for the last: when there is no definitive and proper evidence that supports the belief that  $p$ , non evidential considerations may nevertheless constitute genuine reasons to believe that  $p$ .
- 5 For James, this is the case of empirical beliefs, but also of moral and religious beliefs. For Reid, it concerns empirical beliefs as well as epistemic principles.<sup>4</sup> I intend to test how far James’s view on these beliefs is similar to Reid’s view. James’s strategy against the scientist may indeed be compared to Reid’s way with the sceptic. At first sight, the Jamesian dilemma (for instance, either you embrace the hypothesis of God’s existence, or you refuse it; either you accept that you will climb the mountain, or you dismiss this possibility) is analogous to the Reidian one (either you stick to your confidence in your faculties, or you suspend your judgment). In both cases, we must choose on insufficient evidence. And to some extent, Reid and James offer the same type of answer: for want of sufficient evidence, it is practically rational to hold these beliefs if they play a central role in our lives.
- 6 But Reid’s strategy differs from James’s in decisive ways. James’s dilemma supposes that we are in a position to choose. But when the reliability of our faculties is at stake, are we really in a position to choose? Moreover, is pragmatism the inevitable consequence of the abandonment of the evidentialist requirement? If some of Reid’s arguments are pragmatist in spirit, his argumentative strategy cannot be reduced to it. Actually, Reid subscribes to a kind of evidentialism. He does not simply leave the epistemic scene in favour of a different (practical) perspective. To put it metaphorically, he cultivates evidentialism in an externalist garden. Finally, if Reid and James both insist on the role of trust which is so robust that it outdoes sceptical doubts, they do not have in mind the same kind of trust.
- 7 Thus Reid and James share the same anti-intellectualist approach. They subscribe to a permissivist ethics of belief. I begin to outline this line of thought (I). Then I show that their views are not motivated by the same conception of evidence (II) and trust (III).

## I. What is a Permissivist Ethics of Belief?

- 8 At first sight, a “permissivist ethics of belief” has a contradictory ring to it. An ethics of belief supposes there are norms for belief-formation we should strive to respect. To be permissive in matters of beliefs seems to imply that we need do nothing for our beliefs to

be well-grounded. They are all welcome, even though we do not hold them in virtue of the consideration of specific norms.

- 9 Yet being permissive in matters of belief does not entail doxastic slackness. To make it clear, let's consider the evidentialist rule: even if Reid and James have serious reservations about it, that does not sound the death knell for an ethics of belief.

## 1.1 The Evidentialist Principle

- 10 Basically, according to evidentialism, a belief is well-grounded if and only if it is based on adequate evidence.<sup>5</sup>

(*Evidentialism*) "A belief that *p* is epistemically justified for *S* at *t* if and only if *S* has evidence that *p* at *t*."

- 11 As such, evidentialism is a mere descriptive thesis. It does not prescribe any attitude to the subject. Moreover, it does not specify what it means for a subject "to have evidence" (does it imply that he holds that *p* in virtue of his consideration of the available evidence?). Finally, it does not specify how far the belief that *p* must fit the evidence the subject has for *p* for it to be epistemically justified.

- 12 To be sure, Reid and James are not reluctant to accept evidentialism. As Reid notes: "We give the name of evidence to whatever is a ground of belief. To believe without evidence is a weakness which every man is concerned to avoid, and which every man wishes to avoid." (EIP, 2, 20, p. 228). Reid states a minimal rule: we should avoid to believe *without* evidence, which does not imply that we should avoid to believe on *insufficient* evidence. Later, James acknowledges that "as far as the facts will allow," our beliefs must not be influenced by something extraneous to the "coercive evidence."<sup>6</sup>

- 13 Reid and James are not critical about evidentialism *per se*, but about evidentialism construed as a prescriptive thesis that should be applied anywhere at any time. This kind of evidentialism is vigorously expressed by two philosophers they discuss with circumspection: John Locke and William K. Clifford. Locke and Clifford tie evidentialism so strongly to a deontic conception of epistemic justification, and they state it so firmly in an absolutist language, that it is thought to be its paradigmatic form. The evidentialist norm is cast in such a deontic and universal mould in Clifford's *The Ethics of Belief*:

(*Clifford's Principle*) "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

- 14 It is morally and epistemically wrong to believe anything with a degree of firmness that is not proportioned to the available evidence. What matters for our concerns is that the evidentialist norm aims solely at truth. For Locke, we must obey it for the love of truth, "for truth's sake," and not for the sake of our passions or interests. In this respect, *evidentialism* is a species of *alethism*:

(*Alethism*) The only normative reasons there are for or against believing any proposition are epistemic ones – i.e. reasons that are in some way relevant to getting at the truth and avoiding falsity.<sup>7</sup>

- 15 What counts as a reason to believe is necessarily something which connects the belief to its truth. Any consideration related to our affections is a disturber of truth and must not be taken into account. More specifically, we must proportion our assent according to the evidence (*Essay*, IV, 15, §5, p. 579). This rule of proportionality requires that we make "as full and exact an inquiry as [we] can make" (*Essay*, IV, 16, §1, p. 581). A rational belief results from an uncompromising inquiry, during which the mind examines all sides of the

question and leaves no evidence unseen. It is only if we realise this preliminary investigation, that we will have the assurance that there is no surplus of assent and that we have done our epistemic best.

- 16 In order to integrate these elements, let's distinguish the *simple evidentialist thesis* (which corresponds to what I have so far labelled *evidentialism*) from the *strong evidentialist thesis*.  
 (*Strong Evidentialism*) Anyone must always, everywhere, proportion his assent to the available evidence. It is forbidden to give one's assent upon insufficient evidence.

## 1.2 The Non-Evidentialist Alternative

- 17 If evidence alone should regulate our beliefs, what should we do in case we do not possess sufficient evidence?
- 18 According to *strong evidentialism*, we must obey the “agnostic imperative” and suspend our assent. As James presents it: “Follow intellectualist advice: wait for evidence; and while waiting, do nothing.”<sup>8</sup>
- 19 For James, we should on the contrary give our assent. In the case of many beliefs, we cannot wait until we have sufficient evidence in their favour, because the suspension of our assent amounts to rejecting them practically (“not to act on one belief, is often equivalent to acting as if the opposite belief were true, so inaction would not always be as “passive” as the intellectualists assume,” SPP, p. 223). So we cannot take refuge behind the curtain of ignorance. We have to make a decision for or against the belief. And if the belief is practically appealing (because it is an “invaluable instrument of action,” P, 6, p. 201-2), to decide against it would be irrational from a practical point of view.
- 20 According to Reid, the first option is not only irrational from a practical point of view, it is also psychologically impossible. For immediate beliefs,<sup>9</sup> we cannot but stick to the second option. Though the sceptic scolds him (“you ought to resolve firmly to withhold assent, and to throw off this belief of external objects, which may be all delusion,” IHM, 6, 20, p. 169), Reid is not impressed by such a recommendation: “I will never attempt to throw it off [...] because it is not in my power [...] My belief is carried along by perception, as irresistibly as my body by the earth.” (IHM, 6, 20, p. 169). It is psychologically unrealistic to pretend that we could give our assent only after due consideration of the evidence. Most of our beliefs are the natural products of our constitution. Moreover they are so essential to our lives that we cannot but live according to them right now.
- 21 So Reid's and James's non-evidentialism comes to this:  
 (*Non-Evidentialism*) For some beliefs, we are allowed to believe that *p*, even if we lack the support of definitive and conclusive evidence for the belief that *p*.
- 22 *Non-evidentialism* allows a *permissivist ethics of belief*: that is to say, it allows us to hold a belief even if we do not possess sufficient conclusive evidence. Facing a lack of epistemic evidence, a strong evidentialist recommends us not to give our assent, while a permissivist allows us to go on with our beliefs. For instance, you have an important date, but while hurrying up in the street, you realise that you have lost your watch. You ask the time to a passer-by, who – after a mere glimpse at his watch – gives you the time. In such a situation, *strong evidentialism* requires you to rely on sufficient evidence for your belief to be justified, and here it is clearly not sufficient (you don't have the assurance that his watch is in good working order, he may want to mislead you, etc.), as a consequence, the strong evidentialist prudential rule requires you not to believe what he tells you. But *in a permissivist epistemology* you are entitled to believe what the passer-by tells you, even if

you have not submitted his watch to the thorough investigation of an expert or even if you don't have the guarantee of his trustworthiness.

- 23 For an epistemic permissivist, the challenge is to show that a permissivist ethics of belief does not amount to promoting doxastic laxity. And as it happens, it is not deprived of epistemic norms. These norms boil down to four principles:

### 1.2.1 The Ultimate Epistemic End is to Hit the Truth

- 24 Reid and James both take upon trust that we are so made as to know truths ("The postulate that there is truth, and that it is the destiny of our minds to attain it, we are deliberately resolving to make" WB, p. 12 ; "the truth and fidelity of our faculty of judging is, and must be taken for granted in every judgment," EIP, 7, 4, p. 570). In such a climate of confidence, the epistemic requirement is to maximise our chance to hit truths. The strong evidentialist veto is driven by a different ultimate end: it is motivated by the fear of being mistaken. The wish to escape error is stronger than the appetite for truth. In this climate of suspicion, everything must be submitted to the evidentialist test, even if it means that we miss some truths that do not pass the test.
- 25 As a consequence, the more weight we give to the goal of "avoiding error," the more sensitive we will be to reasons to doubt. We are also more likely to suspend our judgement. On the contrary, the more weight we give to the goal of "knowing the truth," the more liberal we will be towards how much evidence is sufficient to justify our belief that *p*. We will not wait to have overwhelming evidence to consider that we are justified in believing that *p*. Depending on our cognitive goals, we do not respond in the same way to the same body of evidence: a strong evidentialist withholds a belief, while an epistemic permissivist swallows it.<sup>10</sup>

### 1.2.2 Our Beliefs Are Innocent Until Proven Guilty

- 26 In a permissivist ethics of belief, a belief is justified if nothing speaks against it. It is presumed epistemically innocent (that is to say: true) until it is proven guilty (until there emerges a reason to doubt it). As we can see, a permissivist ethics of belief also recommends that we make sure that our belief that *p* fits the available evidence. But the "available evidence" does not correspond to a piece of evidence that definitively establishes that *p*, it corresponds to a defeater for *p*. Depending on the doxastic policy, we are not required to be sensitive to the same data.
- 27 What is more, when we subscribe to a permissivist ethics of belief, we do not refer to obligating or coercive norms, but to permissive norms. These norms entitle us to keep our beliefs so long as we are not aware of anything that rebut them. Reid resolutely takes this permissive path. First principles, on which we find a universal agreement, are taken for granted until we can show a specific reason to doubt them.
- A consent of ages and nations, of the learned and vulgar, ought, at least, to have great authority, *unless we can show some prejudice*, as universal as that consent is, which might be the cause of it. (EIP, 1, 2, p. 44, my emphasis)
- 28 Thus Reid appears to endorse a kind of conservatism, that leaves our doxastic set as it is.
- (Conservative non-evidentialism)*<sup>11</sup> We are justified in believing that *p*, if we do believe that *p* and if we are not aware of any defeaters for *p*.

- 29 The no-defeater condition is decisive. It helps stifle an objection. Indeed Reid keeps on noting that many beliefs naturally arise (“It is not in our power to judge as we will. The judgement is carried along necessarily by the evidence, real or seeming, which appears to us at the time.” EIP, 6, 4, 452). Our assent seems to function like an epistemic thermometer which naturally covaries with what we take as evidence. But how can we be epistemically responsible if we are swept along by evidence?
- 30 Actually, even if some beliefs do not obtain their rationality after a hard fight, we are still required to be attentive to the presence of undermining evidence. We are bound to question our beliefs, if we face good reasons to doubt them. “When this can be shewn to be the case” that the presupposition that human faculties are truth-tailored is erroneous, “I acknowledge it ought to have its due weight” (EIP, 6, 4, p. 466). But as long as we are deprived of such proof, this presupposition is *prima facie* justified. The absence of any cogent reason to doubt amounts to an “epistemic pass.” On this matter, the burden of proof is on the sceptic’s side. As Reid claims about testimony:
- It is evident, that, in the matter of testimony, the balance of human judgment is by nature inclined to the side of belief; and turns to that side of itself, *when there is nothing put into the opposite scale.* (IHM, 6, 24, p. 194, my emphasis)
- 31 Nature has equipped our minds so that we will not have to wait for a positive and distinct piece of evidence that our interlocutor has spoken truth to be entitled to believe him. If it were not so, we would be in a condition of intellectual and practical paralysis. To be allowed to believe their veracity, being unaware of a reason to doubt is sufficient. By way of compensation, “when there is something put into the opposite scale” (in the scale of disbelief), we have to adjust our assent. This is made easy by the fact that we are highly sensitive to the loss of evidence: it is not “in a man’s power to believe any thing longer than he thinks he has evidence” (EIP, 2, 20, p. 228). If we realise we no longer have evidence for a belief, we do not keep it (which does not amount to say that we cannot believe anything unless we think we have sufficient evidence for it).
- 32 On the whole, the entitlement to believe in the absence of positive epistemic evidence does not make the justification of beliefs an all-too-easy matter. A permissivist ethics of belief commits the agent to the epistemic duty to be vigilant for the presence of potential defeaters. It does not state a norm for belief-formation, but a norm for belief-relinquishment. Its function is to revise *prima facie* justified beliefs.
- 33 Some beliefs need not be based on positive evidential support to be justified. As Reid remarks about first principles: “There’s no searching of evidence, no weighing of arguments.” (EIP, 6, 4, p. 452). These principles immediately impose on us. Although they do not result from a specific epistemic achievement, we deserve some credit for them. Our responsibility lies in our being open to the possibility of facing some factor which leads us to consider anew their epistemic status.
- We do not pretend that those things that are laid down as first principles may not be examined, and that we ought not to have our ears open to what may be pleaded against their being admitted as such. Let us deal with them, as an upright judge does with a witness who has a fair character. He pays a regard to the testimony of such a witness, while this character is unimpeached. But if it can be shown that he is suborned, or that he is influenced by malice or partial favour, his testimony loses all its credit, and is justly rejected. (EIP, I, 2, p. 46-7)
- 34 We find the same doxastic conservatism in James’s writings: our beliefs resist change, they possess “a kind of inertia” (“in this matter of belief we are all extreme



conservatives,” P, 2, p. 60). It does not mean that they may not be rejected in the face of new facts. But so long as we do not have any positive reasons to disturb them, we are allowed to preserve them. As a matter of fact, we generally believe “for no reasons worthy of the name” (WB, p. 9). To be epistemically entitled, it is sufficient that “our thoughts and beliefs pass, so long as nothing challenges them, just as bank-notes pass so long as nobody refuses them” (P, 6, p. 207). We do not possess any positive and singular fact in favour of them, “the negative fact that nothing contradictory [...] comes to interfere” (P, 6, p. 213) is sufficient to give us the right to integrate them in our doxastic set. The absence of any “clash and contradiction” of our beliefs with our experience and well-entrenched beliefs amounts to an “indirect verification” (P, 6, p. 215).

### 1.2.3 The Evidentialist Requirement is not to be Applied Always, Everywhere and for Anyone

- 35 The permissivist ethics of belief is pluralist, for the way we respond to epistemic evidence is context-sensitive. What is problematic with Clifford’s injunction is that it is stated from an abstract and transcendent point of view, without taking into account the specificity of the context and the beliefs.
- 36 In ordinary contexts, the strong evidentialist standard does not rule our doxastic practices. “No man thinks of asking himself what reason he has to believe that his neighbour is a living creature.” (EIP, 6, 5, p. 483). Yet he is convinced of this. It is only in a well-circumscribed context, in which specific reasons to doubt emerge, that we may look for evidence to determine whether we should maintain this belief or not (let’s say, if we evolve among android creatures like “hubots,” human robots). But in normal circumstances, though we may be aware of “the weakness of the reasons [we give] for [our] belief,” it does not “make [us] in the least doubtful” (EIP, 6, 5, p. 483).
- 37 If our belief does not waver, it is because it “stands upon another foundation than that of reasoning.” Reid is sensitive to the plurality of our beliefs: we must distinguish “things which require proof, from things which [...] being self-evident, do not admit of proof” (EIP, 1, 2, p. 41). The mistake of the strong evidentialist demand is to put all the beliefs on the same level. On the contrary we should give a specific consideration to immediate beliefs which are not governed by evidence in the same way as derived beliefs. The strong evidentialist requirement is relevant for beliefs which are grounded upon reasoning, but ineffective for immediate beliefs. It supposes that evidence gives epistemic support to beliefs which are otherwise in bad epistemic standing. However, in the case of immediate beliefs, “their evidence is not demonstrative, but intuitive” (EIP, 1, 2, p. 41). As a consequence, there is no separate evidence to bring out.
- I seem to want that evidence which I can best comprehend, and which gives perfect satisfaction to an inquisitive mind. (EIP, 2, 20, p. 233)
- 38 Reid blames the “inquisitive minds” for making us feel guilty when we do not manage to give the so-called appropriate reasons for our beliefs. There are some beliefs which we do not hold in virtue of the consideration of specific and conclusive evidence.<sup>12</sup> As we will see, it does not mean they are believed without evidence. We lack a certain type of evidence, but we do not lack evidence altogether.
- 39 On his part, James underlines that in some cases we have the right to endorse beliefs even though the evidence does not sufficiently speak for them. In such situations, the available evidence is not sufficient to decide between two hypotheses (let’s say between



agnosticism and Christianity if you wonder whether God exists, or between believing that “it is on the right” or “that is is on the left” if you wonder where the guesthouse is located, while you are at a junction in a desert land). In such cases, contradictory beliefs may be compatible with the same body of indeterminate evidence. To settle the question, something else must step in: “our passion and volitive nature” (WB, p. 4). The evidence is outstripped by “personal preferences,” some “good will” (SPP, p. 221-2) or what James also calls our “faith-tendencies” (SPP, p. 224). When the strong evidentialist requirement leaves us at a loss, our willing nature completes the evidence and enables us to decide between one of the two horns of the dilemma.

- 40 So Reid and James are both sensitive to the fact that, even if some beliefs cannot play the strong evidentialist game, we are not irrational to hold them. For such beliefs, there is no process of “evidence searching.” As Wittgenstein says, they “lie apart from the route traveled by inquiry” (OC, §88).

### 1.2.4 Fallibilism

- 41 The fact that some propositions are off the route of inquiry does not make them eternally immune from reasons to doubt. Propositions of common sense, though strongly held, are defeasible. Reid and James admit that what we take as “petrified” truths (P, 2, p. 66) may be questioned. In other words, the permissivist ethics of belief shared by common sense and pragmatism is a fallibilist one.
- 42 To be sure, fallibilism is acknowledged at varying degrees. It has even been questioned whether Reid’s epistemology is fallibilist.<sup>13</sup> Yet, Reid is ready to admit that our system of first principles may evolve. He recognises the tentative character of his set of first principles and aims at a “clear explication and enumeration of” them (IHM, 7, p. 216). It is precisely in the course of settling controversies about them that we may discover that, because of some extended prejudice or bias of the mind, what we took so far as a first principle was only an honoured opinion. When we try to distinguish real first principles from fakes, first principles are put under scrutiny and the flavour of dogmatism (which often sticks to common sense) fades away: first principles are not taken as granted any more, they are proposed to our understanding and they wait for our assent.
- 43 We then face a paradox: the enumeration of first principles is a necessary step for the improvement of knowledge, but when we do this, first principles do not immediately commend our assent and lose their privileged status. Reid admits it when he distinguishes the ordinary context, in which first principles “force assent in *particular* instances,” from the philosophical context in which – while they are “turned into a *general* proposition” (EIP, 6, 5, 482, my emphasis) – they force our assent less powerfully. This is why, in the context of a discussion with a sceptic, when they are considered as truths to be verified, their evidence is less compelling. It is probably in such an artificial context that there is some movement in the river-bed, some of the channels becoming momentarily fluid. During the discussion with the sceptic, the desired stability of our system of knowledge looks more like a moving stability. Nevertheless, we can presume that its overall integrity is saved, as long as first principles are not challenged *all at the same time* and are not expressed in general propositions *all at the same time*. If there is some leeway for fallibilism in Reid’s epistemology, it is restrained, since *all* first principles cannot be *at the same time in the foreground*, functioning as propositions to be tested, and *in the background*, functioning as channels for empirical judgments.<sup>14</sup>

- 44 James's distinction between our "stock of old opinions" and "new opinions" is concordant with the Reidian perspective.<sup>15</sup> Our old opinions are generally left "untouched," but new ones may "graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter" (P, 2, p. 60). James calls these long and fondly held beliefs "beliefs of common sense." It is as if some thoughts were so sedimented that it would be impossible to throw them out. He describes them in the fifth lesson of *Pragmatism*, entitled "Pragmatism and Common Sense." In this lesson, common sense is associated with a "stage of thought" which delivers tried and tested useful concepts (like "thing," "minds," "bodies," "causal influences"). These concepts have efficaciously linked parts of our experience for ages. They constitute a kind of metaphysical instinct which has resisted changes. Like Reid's first principles of truth, James's categories of common sense may be cast in a propositional form: "Things do exist, even when we do not see them" (P, 5, p. 181), there is one Space "in which each thing has its position" (P, 5, p. 177), etc.
- 45 At first sight, the stock of beliefs of common sense can only grow. James speaks of a "process of truth's growth" that is "an addition that involves no alteration in the old beliefs" (P, 2, p. 62). But although our beliefs are like "primitive ways of thinking" (p. 169), they are not infallible. Common sense categories may be modified with the advance of science and philosophical thought. Their "consolidation" and "augustness" are not "decisive marks of truth" (P, 5, p. 188). James's thought seems even more attuned with fallibilism than Reid's: he admits a degree of slack in our system of fundamental beliefs ("To a certain degree, therefore, everything here is plastic," P, 2, p. 61). If our beliefs "pass so long as nothing challenges them," we must be ready to let a challenger override them ("we have to live today by what truth we can get today, and be ready tomorrow to call it falsehood," P, 6, p. 223)
- 46 So, Reid's and James's non-evidentialism frees us from the all-too-stringent requirement not to believe anything on insufficient evidence. It is a matter of necessity and rationality: if we stuck to this requirement, we could neither act nor reason. It would be the symptom of a "lunacy" (Reid) or a "morbid mind" (James, P, 8, p. 201). But there are still some questions to elucidate:
1. What does it mean for a subject to *have* sufficient evidence? Must he have a reflective access to it? And what is the nature of this evidence (demonstrative proof, mental state, or anything a belief is responsive to, including facts that are not in the head)?
  2. Do Reid and James hold the same kind of permissivist ethics of belief? Between a rule that entitles us to believe in the absence of sufficient evidence (Reid), and one that prompts us to believe in spite of the lack of evidence (James), there is some leeway. Moreover, a rule that allows us to believe while we are not conscious of a sufficient amount of epistemic evidence does not entail that the only remaining option is to believe for practical reasons.
- 47 As we can see, to settle the debate between evidentialism and pragmatism, the appeal to permissivism is not the end of the story. Epistemic permissivism can indeed be applied in two different ways. It divides in two trends: a *pragmatic permissivism* and a *common-sensist permissivism*. As a consequence, the rejection of evidentialism in favour of permissivism does not automatically commit one to pragmatism (construed as a thesis about our reasons to believe). Let's see how they differ.

## II. Two Views on Epistemic Permissivism

- 48 When Reid notes that some beliefs are “guided by instinct, that is, by a natural and blind impulse,”<sup>16</sup> it seems that evidence is totally absent. Yet, as we shall see, he does not promote a crude non-evidentialism. What about James?

### II.1 James: Practical and Epistemic Reasons

- 49 As previously noted, James thinks that for some beliefs, we must go ahead of evidence. In such cases, the positive consequences of the beliefs constitute practical reasons to believe. Practical reasons are subjective reasons which have a positive impact on our moral and emotional state. Sometimes they greatly outweigh our epistemic reasons which are ludicrously weak. So construed, pragmatism corresponds to practical non-evidentialism:

*(Practical non-evidentialism)* Non evidential reasons can count as reasons for beliefs.

If believing that  $p$  has benefits for you, you are allowed to believe that  $p$ .

- 50 Practical non-evidentialism breaks with alethism: pragmatism has “no prejudices whatever, no obstructive dogmas, no rigid canons of what shall count as proof” (P, 2, p. 79). Anything can count as a good reason to believe, as long as it enhances our life. If we face a lack of epistemic evidence, we are not condemned to withhold our assent, we are allowed to go on with a belief... but not for no reasons at all, or simply in virtue of the available evidence. We are allowed to hold a belief for practical reasons. For instance, I am allowed to believe that “I will recover,” in spite of the lack of sufficient medical data to ground my belief. I give my assent for a practical reason (my desire to see my daughter grow up). What is more, I am conscious of this reason, at least in the sense that I notice that the mere consideration of it has positive emotional consequences on me (it triggers my will to act, to struggle against the disease and to conscientiously follow the medical advice).
- 51 Practical non-evidentialism does not fall into irrationalism: what prompts the belief that  $p$  is the fact that its mere contemplation raises a “sentiment of rationality.” It is a sentiment of harmony and unity which triggers our active impulses. It is a “strong feeling of ease, peace, rest” which enables us “to think with perfect fluency.”<sup>17</sup> Rationality does not consist in intrinsic properties of reasoning but in subjective affections. A belief is rational if it “fits, in fact, and adapts our life to the reality’s whole setting” (P, 4, p. 213).
- 52 Though striking, we must not be misled by statements like these: “As a rule, we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use” (WB, p. 10), we must believe “what pays” (P, 6, p. 230). James circumscribes the conditions under which we are allowed to believe that  $p$  when the evidence is not complete. He neither licences any belief nor recognises a right to believe *ad libitum*. We have the right to believe that  $p$ , we are even required to believe that  $p$ ,<sup>18</sup> if the belief is justified from a practical point of view, that is to say if it is a live hypothesis which triggers our willingness to act and gives us a sentiment of rationality. As we can see, the belief that  $p$  is “good” for “definite, assignable reasons” (P, 2, p. 76). We are not allowed to believe what we want: our belief must still be compatible with the body of epistemic evidence at hand; and it is only when this body of evidence is compatible with a living, forced and momentous option, that practical reasons come in (“Yet sometimes alternative theoretic formulas are equally compatible with all the truths

we know, and then we choose between them for subjective reasons.” P, 6, p. 217). It is precisely on this point that pragmatism appears as a kind or sub-set of permissivism. Like permissivism, *practical non-evidentialism* (or pragmatism construed as a thesis on our reasons to believe) considers that there is no unique way for a belief to be rational or justified. They both reject *uniqueness*, that is to say the idea that – given one’s available evidence – we can adopt only one rational doxastic attitude towards any proposition.<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, given the epistemic available evidence, if the latter is not sufficient, someone may adopt a belief while another may not, and both be rational. Pragmatism adds: it depends on the practical reasons you have. In any case, given the same available evidence, there are different ways to hold a rational belief. Evidentialism is not the unique route to rationality.<sup>20</sup>

- 53 According to evidentialism, this move to the sphere of “subjective reasons” in effect excludes epistemic considerations from doxastic deliberation.
- 54 Indeed, beliefs are not examined according to the sole criterion of truth, independently of the criterion of action. Actually, truth and action are interwoven. For James, a belief is true if it makes us go ahead. Truth is defined in terms of potential for action. It is “an affair of leading” (P, 6, p. 210). More precisely, to determine whether a belief is true, we have to examine its consequences, not its ground (“Not where it comes from but what it leads to is to decide,” WB, p. 17). A belief is true if it satisfactorily links one part of our experience to another, if it coheres with other facts and enlarges our doxastic set. On the contrary, evidentialists consider that “the attractiveness of a belief does not tell for or against the truth of *p*” (Shah 2006: 487) and that to determine whether to believe that *p*, we must only determine whether it is the case that *p*, independently of the question whether it is in our interest to believe that *p*.
- 55 Of course, practical reasons are not totally indifferent to the norm of truth. For instance, when I believe that *p* (“I will succeed in a perilous leap”),<sup>21</sup> I believe that *p* not only because I consider that it will have a positive effect on me (and make me succeed my leap), but also because I think that it is at least possible that *p*. My bet is far from being truth-irrelevant. But as James makes clear, in such cases we are deprived of relevant evidence (“Being without similar experience, I have no evidence of my ability to perform it successfully,” SR, p. 96). As a consequence, we cannot determine whether *p*. Even if it is plausible that *p* (for instance if I am not well known for my susceptibility to vertigo), it remains the case that nothing warrants the truth of *p* (because I do not know anything about my capacity to make such a jump). If epistemic reasons are not a pure nothing, they are therefore prior but withered and insufficient evidence which must be completed by practical and overwhelming reasons.<sup>22</sup>
- 56 Finally, what is presented as a fault by the intellectualist, is turned by James into a rare quality, possessed by some lucky geniuses. Far from being the symptom of an inattentive mind, the capacity to “outstrip scientific evidence” (SR, p. 96) may be the sign of an acute responsiveness to evidence. Some people are able to extend a certain body of evidence. Why shouldn’t they make use of this capacity just because of the “mental nullity” of other men (SR, p. 93)?

But what is the use of being a genius, unless with the same scientific evidence as other men, one can reach more truth than they? [...] In short, if I am born with such a *superior general reaction to evidence* that I can guess right and act accordingly, and gain all that comes of right action, while my less gifted neighbor (paralyzed by his scruples and waiting for more evidence which he dares not anticipate, much as he

longs to) still stand shivering on the brink, by what law shall I be forbidden to reap the advantages of *my superior native sensitiveness*? (SR, p. 92-94, my emphasis)

- 57 For James, believing for practical reasons is not the symptom of epistemic carelessness, it is often the capacity of some well-endowed minds to see beyond the mere tentative epistemic evidence. These minds are so sensitive to evidence that they are able to perceive the possibilities of action it outlines. When the strong evidentialist sees dumb evidence, the practical non-evidentialist sees a project, a future.

## II.2 Reid: External and Internal Evidence

- 58 As for James, Reid notes that practical reasons may be a substitute for epistemic reasons, when the latter are wanting.

### II.2.1 The Pragmatist Argument

- 59 When he comes to epistemic principles, Reid notes that even if we do not believe them for specific reasons, we are allowed to take them for granted. To the insistent sceptic who asks for a reason, Reid answers that “although the sober part of mankind will not be very anxious to know [his] reasons,” he indulges in giving some (IHM, 6, 20, p. 169). One of them is that we are entitled to hold these beliefs from a practical point of view. To enlighten this point, Reid appeals to the thought experiment of someone deprived of these beliefs. What would have happened if, as a child, I had not believed them? And what would happen now if I resolved to throw them off? Reid shows that it would have resulted (or would result) in epistemic and practical disaster. These beliefs are indeed necessary to the development of our reasoning faculties and thanks to them we gain considerable social benefits. Had we the power to withhold them, we would be required not to do so, at least for prudential reasons.

I think it would not be prudent to throw off this belief, *if it were in my power*. If Nature intended to deceive me, and impose upon me by false appearances, and I, by my great cunning and profound logic, have discovered the imposture; *prudence would dictate to me* in this case, even to put up this indignity done me, as quietly as I could [...]. For *what do I gain* by resenting this injury? You ought at least not to believe what she says. This indeed seems reasonable, if she intends to impose upon me. But what is the consequence? I resolve not to believe my senses. I break my nose against a post that comes in my way; I step into a dirty kennel; and, after twenty such wise and rational actions, I am taken up and clapt into a mad-house. Now, I confess I would rather make one of the credulous fools whom Nature imposes upon, than of those wise and rational philosophers who resolve to withhold assent at all this expence. (IHM, 6, 20, 169-170, my emphasis)

- 60 So even if we discovered that Nature deceives us, it would be rational (from a practical point of view) to keep on believing. For we would not gain anything by intellectual integrity. Worse, we would lose a lot: our sanity. And the state of madness is simply not a live hypothesis for us. The same conclusion is drawn from consideration of children’s education.

Were our belief to be withheld till we are capable, in any degree, of weighing evidence, we should lose all the benefit of that instruction and information, without which we could never attain the use of our rational faculties. (EAP, 3, 1, 2, p. 111)

- 61 It makes a significant practical difference for us to stick to our beliefs of common sense rather than refrain from them.

- 62 These considerations sound extremely pragmatic, but they are not without difficulty.
- 63 Firstly, it seems that we cannot qualify as “rational” for holding a belief we could not have chosen not to accept. The pragmatist argument presupposes a “decision-theoretic” model. For practical reasons to be efficient, we must really have the power to decide between accepting a belief or refusing it. Yet in what sense could we be rational in believing things we cannot prevent ourselves from believing? The Reidian thought experiment comes only to asking “whether it would be rational for us to stick with what we have, *if we had a choice*” (Alston 1991: 168). Its purport is therefore limited. It is nevertheless one of our sole argumentative resorts until we have new faculties “to sit in judgment upon the old” (EIP, 7, 4, p. 571).
- 64 As it happens, Reid moves to the pragmatist argument, because he is well aware of the epistemic circularity involved in any attempt to give an epistemic reason for an epistemic principle.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, what epistemic reason could he give to someone who challenges – let’s say – the epistemic principle of perception? If we are committed to this epistemic principle, it determines the kind of evidence we are sensitive to. So it is no surprise that the epistemic reason we will give to our objector for adopting it (for instance, cases of correct perceptions) will not be recognised as valid by him: the sceptic will consider it as stamped by the very epistemic principle he wants to be independently justified. In such cases, we might as well give a practical reason. However, the pragmatic “way out” will not satisfy someone asking for an epistemic justification. Practical reasons do not show how epistemic principles are linked to truth.<sup>24</sup> Is it not theoretically frustrating to content ourselves with practical rationality?
- 65 According to Lynch, “these reasons may not be the glittering diamonds of certainty that Descartes dreamed of by his fire, but they are reasons, and human” (2013: 359). They are human because being a human is being an epistemic *and* a practical agent.
- One cannot, it appears, be an epistemic agent without at the same time also being a practical agent. At the root level, your practical and epistemic commitments cannot be disentangled. [...] if we enter epistemology through the doorway of epistemic agency [...] we find that epistemology involves norms that are intertwined with practical norms. (Lynch 2013: 359)
- 66 I think that Reid has precisely seized this point. When he describes common sense, he presents it as a degree of judgment which especially manifests through our actions (“Common sense is that degree of judgment which is common to men with whom we can converse and transact business,” “It is this degree of reason, and this only, that makes a man capable of managing his own affairs, and answerable for his conduct towards others,” EIP, 6, 2, p. 424, p. 433). Common sense is inseparably theoretical and practical, it is what makes us deal with our fellows and the world. Being endowed with common sense means being both an epistemic and a practical agent. It does not mean being a pure intellectual mind. As a consequence, practical rationality is tied to epistemic rationality. And since epistemic principles are the products of common sense, it is not inopportune to mention practical reasons to justify them.<sup>25</sup>

## II.2.2 The Evidentialist Argument

- 67 Actually Reid does not put much stress on practical reasons either. As we have seen, in normal circumstances, people are not “anxious” to know their reasons to believe. His view is that immediate beliefs are well-grounded although they are not held for any reason. How is it possible?



- 68 As it happens, Reid opposes *strong evidentialism* because, as it is promoted by Locke, it is tied to internalism. This is the universal requirement of *this* feature that Reid rejects. By “internalism,” I refer here to an epistemological theory about the type of access we have to evidence. According to it, a belief that *p* is justified for a subject if and only if the evidence for *p* is accessible (actually or potentially) from the subject’s perspective.<sup>26</sup> *Strong evidentialism* presupposes this awareness requirement. The motivation for it is to prescribe the possibility of having beliefs “we don’t know how,” beliefs which could as well have been acquired accidentally. But Reid’s *simple evidentialism* is not unconditionally tied to the awareness requirement. So if Reid is not “anxious” to spell his evidence for his immediate beliefs, it is not that evidence is not there, it is simply because we do not have access to it.
- 69 Our immediate beliefs are indeed the effects of our constitution, they come “from the Mint of Nature” (IHM, 6, 20, p. 168-9), and we do not have access to Nature’s core. In accordance to his mysterianism, Reid notes that the natural principles from which immediate beliefs result are not disclosed to ourselves. On this matter, we are left in an “impenetrable darkness.” We can only state that such principles are “parts of our constitution” (“That our sensations of touch indicate something external, extended, figured, hard or soft, is not a deduction of reason, but a natural principle. The belief of it, and the very conception of it, are equally parts of our constitution,” IHM, 5, 7, p. 72). Once this is stated, there is nothing else to say. Our immediate beliefs are grounded on our constitution, but we do not have God’s eyes to testify that our constitution is attuned to the world (“If we are deceived in it, we are deceived by Him that made us, and there is no remedy,” IHM, 5, 7, p. 72).
- 70 However, this externalist feature does not tell the whole story about Reid’s way with evidence. Actually, Reid interweaves externalist considerations with internalist ones. In a few words, he develops strands of internalism in an externalist framework. When certain beliefs are at stake, we must have a specific access to their evidence in order to be entitled to hold them. This is the case of beliefs which are the conclusions of a demonstration.
- In all reasoning, there must be one or more premises, and a conclusion drawn from them. And the premises are called the reason why we must believe the conclusion which we see to follow from them. That the evidence of sense is of a different kind, needs little proof. No man seeks a reason for believing what he sees or feels; and if he did, it would be difficult to find one. (EIP, 2, 20, p. 230)
- 71 The evidence of sense does not work in the same way as the evidence of reasoning: it supports perceptual beliefs even if the subject is not able to specify it. Of course, in order to believe that “the magnolia is blooming,” I have to perceive the blooming magnolia. My belief is grounded on a sensation, and I am aware of that sensation. Yet this awareness is not a stringent requirement: apart from mentioning the fact that “I distinctly see the magnolia in the garden,” I can say nothing more (“This is all I can say,” EIP, 3, 2, p. 256). I do not know how this sensation functions as evidence. I cannot explain why it induces me to believe that “the magnolia is blooming.” After all, this sensation could have been designed so as to be the sign of something else (let’s say of a rough table). Moreover this evidence does not testify for itself: it does not show that it proceeds from a reliable power of mind. Now if I were being asked why I believe that what I see really exists as I see it, I should prove that my sense perception is reliable. However, I do not apprehend this fact of my nature independently from its outputs. Therefore a man “can give no reason for believing his senses” (EIP, 2, 20, p. 230). He cannot give an independent and decisive



reason for it, he does not have a reflective access to “the work of the Almighty,” a fact that should be laid before his eyes in order to answer the sceptic’s demand.

- 72 Things are different when we deal with the conclusion of a demonstration: here, the evidence of reasoning must be “fairly laid before” the subject in the premises (EIP, 2, 20, p. 229). To sum up, “for Reid, not all types of [...] evidence work the same way. Some types [...] require conscious awareness if they are to function as evidence for certain beliefs and if they are to produce the beliefs. But other types of evidence do not.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, in a demonstration, evidence takes the form of an argument that must be specifically considered by an attentive mind. But evidence can also prompt the assent without being examined in a preliminary step. This is how the evidence of sense mostly works. For instance, if some sensory evidence must appear to us in order to be entitled to believe that “the magnolia is blooming,” we do not have access to the proper functioning of our constitution, and this is yet what accounts for the connection between the sensation and the belief. Part of the belief’s ground is left hidden to us.
- 73 What should be clear now is that Reid does not oppose evidentialism *per se*, he opposes the strong evidentialist’s requirement to always have a reflective access to the main part of one’s evidence. We are entitled to hold immediate beliefs, even though it is not in virtue of the specific consideration of their main evidence. It does not preclude evidence from being there and doing its grounding-job.
- 74 Reid’s common-sensism constitutes a second kind or sub-set of permissivism: according to it, there are some beliefs (the immediate products of our consciousness, memory and perception) which we are justified to hold even if we don’t have access to the whole body of epistemic evidence that grounds them. This insufficiency is not compensated by invoking explicit practical reasons, but by instinctively trusting the veracity of our intellectual faculties.<sup>28</sup>

### III. Two Views on Trust

- 75 Reid and James both underline that we are rational to hold some beliefs in spite of the lack of evidence. But while James considers that evidence is wanting because such beliefs cannot “be decided on intellectual grounds” (WB, p. 11), for Reid evidence is there but simply not discerned. What remains to be shown is what will take over and complete the wanting *grounds* (for James), or the absence of *awareness* of the grounds (for Reid).

#### III.1 James: Trust as a Leap of Faith

- 76 For James, there are some circumstances in which “our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions.” It is the case “whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds” (WB, p. 11). We have to do with a *genuine* option when we are faced with an option “of the forced, living, and momentous kind” (p. 3): there are two hypotheses which have some appeal to us, we cannot but choose between them, and the choice has significant consequences for our life. This is the case with moral and religious options (like between being vegetarian or carnivorous, agnostic or a Christian), but also with more trivial empirical beliefs (when for instance I have to decide between someone loving me or someone not loving me). While we face such a tremendous choice, if we are deprived of sufficient scientific

evidence to make a decision with full knowledge of the facts, our “passional character” gives us the strength to bet for one hypothesis. This passional nature acts like a motive for our will. It includes our subjective preferences and emotions and corresponds to what James calls “faith.” Our faith gives us courage to “run ahead of scientific evidence” (p. 25) and to bet on the hypothesis which seems to enlarge our potentialities of action. Thanks to this “trusting spirit,” we are bold enough to “take a leap in the dark” (p. 31).

- 77 As we can see, this leap of faith is an affair of human temper: whereas a pessimistic temperament craves for security and definitive truths, a confident and passionate temperament dares venture in indeterminate matters, without any assurance. Better to be endowed with such a passional nature because life in its entirety is a risky matter (“In the total game of life we stake our persons all the while,” SR, p. 94). Thanks to this “precurse trust,” we dare “jump with both feet off the ground into or towards [this] world” (SPP, p. 230) and we are hopeful that our jump will be met by the world. Faith makes us act unhesitatingly, even when the success of the action is not warranted.

Faith means belief in something concerning which doubt is still theoretically possible; [...] faith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance. [...] In the average man, [...] the power to trust, to risk a little beyond the literal evidence is an essential function. (SR, p. 90-1).

- 78 Faith compensates the lack of evidence. It is the human way to fill the evidential gap and trump epistemic reasons. Insofar as we constantly face risky situations, faith is not a frivolous attitude but “one of the inalienable birthrights of our mind” (SPP, p. 225). It is the germ of our “most elevated” beliefs. For such beliefs, the will is a “complement” to evidence: “as regards this kind of truths faith is not only licit and pertinent, but essential and indispensable” (SR, p. 96).

### III.2 Reid: Trust as a Natural Propensity to Take Things for Granted

- 79 Reid also underlines the constitutive role of faith. Yet for him, faith is not an impulsion of the will to bet for a peculiar hypothesis: it is a natural propensity to take general principles for granted.
- 80 Firstly, faith is not an attitude specific to a kind of temperament: it is a universally shared tendency inherited from infancy. By growing up, this extensive faith is progressively adjusted and corrected.
- 81 Secondly, trust is “implicit” and “instinctive” (IHM, 6, 20, p. 170): it is not a conscious and explicit commitment. We do not decide to trust, but we find ourselves trusting.
- 82 Thirdly, trust sustains our most general and shared beliefs, like the beliefs that “our intellectual faculties are truth-oriented” or that “our parents speak truth.” It supports necessary beliefs, not one hypothesis among others.
- 83 Fourthly, when we trust the veracity of our parents or the fidelity of our intellectual faculties, we do not make any bold step. We do not hope our faculties will be attuned to reality. We do not muster all our courage so as to venture in risky situations. We rather act and judge on this ground with complete peace of mind. This presupposition, held with assurance, is not a specific belief for which we explicitly take a stand. It is the background of our judgments and actions. Trust is not a supplementary act of the mind that gives us the impulsion to adopt a belief instead of another. It is a default disposition which is tied to the powers of our mind. It is a kind of primitive attitude.

- 84 This animal trust is epistemic, not only because its object (the reliability of our faculties, the veracity of men) is epistemic, or because it is a means to an epistemic end (to gain truths), but also because it is embedded in our powers of knowledge. We cannot make use of any intellectual power without taking its reliability for granted. This taking for granted does not result from reasoning or patient observation. Our faith in the reliability of our judging faculties is not a superadded propositional attitude towards our faculties: it is the way we make use of them. We are constituted so that when we act and judge, we are committed to such a belief. Being committed to the epistemic principle that “our sense perception is reliable” means therefore to trust our sense perception. This is the way human beings use their sense perception. As it were, trust is fused into the foundations of our intellectual powers.
- 85 Finally, trust is not what compensates the lack of evidence. Evidence is indeed mostly there, but it is not discerned. Trust is what enables us to think and act until our intellectual faculties become more mature and we put a specific attention on the available evidence. Trust makes us act and think with certainty in spite of our lack of attention to evidence.

When we consider man as a rational creature, it may seem right that he should have no belief but what is grounded upon evidence [...]. If this be so, the consequence is, that, in no case, can there be any belief, till we find evidence, or at least, what to our judgement appears to be evidence. I suspect it is not so; but that, on the contrary, before we grow up to the full use of our rational faculties, *we do believe, and must believe many things without any evidence at all.* [...] If there be any instinctive belief in man, it is probably of the same kind with that which we ascribe to brutes, and may be specifically different from that rational belief which is grounded on evidence ; but that there is something in man which we call belief, which is not grounded on evidence, I think, must be granted. We need to be informed of many things before we are capable of *discerning* the evidence on which they rest. [...] Children have every thing to learn; and, in order to learn, they must believe their instructors. They need a greater stock of faith from infancy to twelve or fourteen, than ever after. But how shall they get this stock so necessary to them? If their faith depends upon evidence, the stock of evidence, real or apparent, must bear proportion to their faith. But such, in reality, is their situation, that when their faith must be greatest, the evidence is least. They believe a thousand things before they ever spend a *thought* upon evidence. Nature supplies the want of evidence, and gives them an instinctive kind of faith without evidence. (EAP, 3, 1, 2, p. 110-2, my emphasis)

- 86 We may be quite disturbed by Reid’s statement that “we do believe, and must believe many things without any evidence at all.” Actually he means that we do believe and must believe without *discerned* evidence. We do not have a reflective access to evidence, but it does not imply that our beliefs are not grounded on any evidence. This is what makes the difference between instinctive beliefs and rational beliefs: they are based on the same body of evidence, but it remains undiscerned in the first case. Instinctive beliefs make us act and think so long as our rational faculties (our powers of attention and reasoning) have not developed. We are irrational in this respect, but it is rational for us to believe without waiting for the growing of our rational faculties.
- 87 Therefore, faith supplies the want of discerned evidence. As Reid notices, faith does not progressively proceed from evidence, it is not gained through the collection of different reasons to trust. It is the other way around: faith supplies the want of evidence, that is to say the want of discerned evidence. Evidence is there, but we do not “spend a thought” on it. That’s why our faith is the “greatest” when “the evidence is least”: when we do not

have the power to discern evidence, our faith is at its utmost. It bridges the gap of “evidence awareness.”

- 88 Of course, when one is aware of the evidence, faith does not disappear. On the contrary, it gains support from the new (discerned) evidence. When we use our reason, we yield to epistemic principles “not from instinct only, but from confidence and trust in a faithful and beneficent Monitor, grounded upon the experience of his paternal care and goodness” (IHM, 6, 20, p. 170). It is no more an instinctive and primitive faith, but a conscious and reflective faith. Afterwards, we are able to give reasons to hold epistemic principles, even if we have not held them for any reason so far.

## Conclusion

- 89 Reid and James both propose a permissivist ethics of belief, according to which it is rational to hold some beliefs on insufficient evidence. I have shown that, even though they agree on this core point, they do not for the same reasons.
- 90 For James, the permissivist policy mainly concerns beliefs which are a matter of choice and which (given the epistemic evidence) are undecidable. When the strong evidentialist method leaves us indeterminate between two hypotheses, the “subjective method, the method of belief based on desire” (SR, p. 97) gives us assistance and makes us choose thanks to a leap of faith.
- 91 For Reid, there is no “leap” because he is concerned with immediate beliefs. With such beliefs, we are not in a situation of epistemic indifference at all. Our assent is weighed down with evidence, though undiscerned. As a consequence, we are not in a position to decide to hold them for non evidential reasons, because we are simply not in a position to choose.
- 92 Thanks to his subtle view on evidence, Reid is able to counter some evidentialist attacks. Whereas James considers that we are entitled to hold a belief that  $p$  for practical reasons, evidentialists do not recognise practical reasons as genuine reasons to believe that  $p$  is true. This is where their profound disagreement with pragmatism lies. Although Reid’s permissivist ethics of belief integrates pragmatist aspects, it is liable to convince the evidentialist camp. Briefly, for Reid as for James, it is rational to hold some beliefs even if we do not hold them for epistemic reasons. But, according to Reid:
- 93 1. *It is not because epistemic reasons are absent:* they are there, they are simply not yet discerned. Reid’s way of construing evidence is qualified: by “evidence,” he does not necessarily refer to a ground of belief we are aware of.
- 94 2. *Practical reasons do not substitute for epistemic reasons to believe.* Even if we can give practical reasons for our immediate beliefs, we do not hold them for practical considerations. Reid does not break with alethism; and far from triggering our beliefs, practical reasons only serve to enlighten the indispensable role of epistemic principles in our epistemic and practical lives.
- 95 3. *Instinctive trust substitutes for the absence of discerned evidence.* Trust is not an act of the will that gives us the impulse to accept a belief, it is a natural propensity to take some things for granted. For James, trust is like a springboard to jump into the unknown. Its connexion with our willing and emotional nature is obviously what frightens evidentialists. For Reid, trust is not a subjective component of the mind, it belongs to the

human constitution. What lies at the bottom of our doxastic practices are not particularly heroic and courageous actions. Instinctive trust is an implicit attitude which impregnates our behaviour and mental atmosphere so much that the possibility of other alternatives does not occur to us. It is neither a risk-taking behaviour nor a personal run-up. It is the pre-reflective background of our beliefs and actions, and it can do without any reason.

- 96 On the whole, Reid's ethics of belief may help escape the contemporary stalemate between evidentialism and pragmatism. Far from simply dismissing the evidentialist demand, it combines a subtle evidentialism with pragmatist strands. What is more, Reid's view is in some sense more permissive than the evidentialist's (because it allows beliefs to be justified, even though we don't have access to a specific evidence that grounds them), while being less permissive than the pragmatist's (because it allows some cases<sup>29</sup> that James is interested in, while showing that they have undiscerned evidence behind them after all). This middle way is made possible because Reid abandons the internalist aspect of the evidentialist demand, whereas James still ties evidentialism to internalism and considers that practical reasons meet the internalist requirement. This is on this score that pragmatism may learn from common sense: Reid's common sense teaches the externalist lesson.
- 97 If pragmatism is currently held to "cast valuable light on the philosophy of common sense"<sup>30</sup> (ridding it of its dogmatic flavour), I conclude the other way around: the Reidian epistemology of common sense, while compatible with pragmatism, gets round the danger of a loose ethics of belief. Epistemic permissivism does not open the floodgates to subjective and idiosyncratic beliefs.

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## NOTES

1. (10 September 1903) Perry (1935: 501).
2. P, 1, p. 18 (P = *Pragmatism. A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*).
3. EIP, 6, 4, p. 464 (EIP = *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*).
4. Epistemic principles ("first principles of truth") state the good-working laws of our intellectual powers. We find for instance the principle of perception ("those things do really exist which we distinctly perceive by our senses, and are what we perceive them to be," EIP, 6, 5, p. 476), the principle of reliability ("the natural faculties by which we distinguish truth from error, are not fallacious," EIP, 6, 5, p. 480), the principles of veracity and credulity (men have "a propensity to speak truth" and "a disposition to confide in the veracity of others," IHM, 6, 24, p. 193-4 [IHM = *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*]).
5. The most famous contemporary defence of evidentialism is in Conee & Feldman 2000.
6. WB, p. 19, p. 22. WB = *The Will To Believe*.
7. See Leary 2016. For a defence of evidentialism construed as implying alethism, see Shah 2006. For a criticism of this brand of evidentialism, see Rinard 2015, Leary 2016: they defend the view according to which practical reasons may be genuine reasons to believe that *p*. In the following, I take pragmatism to be a thesis on the nature of our reasons to believe. Briefly, it is the view according to which purely pragmatic considerations can constitute genuine reasons to believe. We are not constrained to evidential or epistemic reasons.
8. SPP, p. 229. (SPP = *Some Problems of Philosophy* [Appendix: Faith and the Right to Believe]).
9. Immediate beliefs are beliefs which are not grounded on antecedent belief or reasoning. They include epistemic principles (like "my sense perception is reliable") and corresponding natural judgments (the immediate doxastic outputs of consciousness, memory and perception, like "There is a table in front of me").
10. See Kelly 2014.
11. The terminology is from Chignell 2016.
12. Reid's distinction may be compared to Wittgenstein's warning not to consider all the propositions in a uniform way. In *On Certainty* (= OC), Wittgenstein distinguishes hinge propositions which constitute our "picture of the world against which [we] distinguish between true and false" (OC, §94), from empirical propositions which may be tested or refuted. It is senseless to ask for a reason to believe the first. Hinge propositions are like "hardened propositions" which function "as channels for empirical propositions" (OC, §96). This background makes possible the evidentialist quest of reasons, but it is itself taken away from such a quest.
13. According to Lundestadt (2006: 135) Reid sticks to infallibilism, and therefore his philosophy is unpragmatic. Sackson (2014: §§36-42) contests this point: Reid hopes that men will come to unanimity about first principles, although it is probable that there will always be disagreements. Rysiew (2015: 190) recognises a fallibilist strand in Reid's philosophy: Reid is ready to admit that what we are strongly inclined to believe may be false. Thus Putnam is wrong to consider that "the unique insight of American pragmatism" is perhaps that "one can be both fallibilistic and antisceptical." Reid saw that too! According to Baumann (1999: 54), the more Reid's theory of common sense is compatible with fallibilism, the more it escapes the dilemma between dogmatism and scepticism.



14. Reid alludes to this in EIP, 6, 4, p. 460-1: when the truth of first principles is the object of a controversy, it “labours under a peculiar disadvantage.” For if we want to test the tester, we need another tester. The test consists in showing the connexion or repugnancy of a proposition with first principles.
15. Of course, James’s talk of beliefs of common sense as ways of thinking which are “discoveries of exceedingly remote ancestors” (P, 5, p. 170) can seem at odds with Reid’s taking the first principles as part of the human constitution. But we should not take James too literally. In accordance with his openness to the evolutionary thought, such “discoveries” are better thought as “fortuitous adaptations,” so that they are as much part of the human constitution for James as they are for Reid.
16. EAP, 3, 1, 2, p. 110-1 (EAP = *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*).
17. SR, p. 63-4 (SR = *The Sentiment of Rationality*)
18. Truth is “what would be better for us to believe” (“It comes very near to saying ‘what we ought to believe’”), P, 2, p. 77.
19. See White (2005: 445) for a presentation and a defence of *Uniqueness*.
20. For a criticism of *Uniqueness* and a defence of a permissivist ethics of belief, see Kelly 2014. Kelly presents *permissivism* as the view according to which there are cases where there may be some “slack” between the available evidence and what it is reasonable to believe given the evidence. In other words, our rational beliefs may exceed what the evidentialist rule allows.
21. James’s example: “Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain...” (SR, p. 96).
22. As a matter of fact, there is no settled opinion on James’s position in *The Will to Believe*. For a view which attributes *practical non-evidentialism* to James (and criticises it in the name of evidentialism), see Aikin 2014. For a view which shows the import of James’s essay to contemporary epistemological issues (contextualism, conservatism and virtue epistemology), see Hookway 2011.
23. “It is evident, that every argument offered to prove the truth and fidelity of our faculties, takes for granted the things in question, and is therefore that kind of sophism which Logicians call *petitio principii*” (EIP, 7, 4, p. 571).
24. See Baumann (2004: 75).
25. According to Rysiew (2015: 189), Reid’s point is that the fact that epistemic principles play a central role in our epistemic lives amounts to a kind of epistemic justification. Practical considerations are not “entirely cut off from epistemic ones.” Their epistemic justification lies in what they enable us to do as epistemic agents. They are like the “fixed point” upon which our cognising rests (EIP, 6, 4, p. 454).
26. Internalism may also refer to an ontological theory about the nature of evidence, according to which evidence is a mental state. One may accept the epistemological theory without subscribing to the ontological theory (though it seems easier to have access to evidence if evidence is a mental state – a belief, a sensation, etc. – that can be apprehended. For Reid, the different forms of evidence cannot be reduced to “any common nature” (EIP, 2, 20, p. 229). Consequently, evidence may be internal or external to our mind: it may be some propositions, states of consciousness, sensations, memories, somebody’s saying, or facts of the external world. If the sort of thing which is evidence is not necessarily mental, it gives support to the idea that evidence – though present – is not necessarily something one is aware of.
27. Van Woudenberg (2013: 83).
28. I also think that if common-sense epistemology is in tune with permissivism, it is due to its particularist twist. Briefly, *particularism* is a thesis about the aim we pursue in epistemology. According to it, we don’t start with epistemic norms and go on to measure the extent of our knowledge, but we start with what we know, that is to say with particular judgments we take as instances of knowledge, and then we formulate criteria of knowledge. I guess that the adoption of this methodological starting point paves the way for permissivism. Indeed, common-sense

philosophers (like Reid, Moore in “Proof of an External World”) take their certainty of some particular judgments as that from which they evaluate the plausibility or the absurdity of a thesis or philosophical argument. And as they take many natural empirical judgments as well-grounded independently of considering whether they have sufficient epistemic evidence for them, this very fact discredits the strong evidentialist requirement. On this aspect of common-sense philosophy, see Lemos (2004, chap. 1 and chap. 6).

29. Probably not all the cases that James is interested in (like specific moral and existential beliefs), but at least many ordinary empirical beliefs.

30. Lundestad (2008: 175).

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## ABSTRACTS

We generally consider that we should not believe on the basis of insufficient evidence. Yet there are many beliefs which are deprived of adequate epistemic evidence. In such cases, James recommends the “subjective method” which allows us to hold beliefs for practical reasons. This pragmatist move is rejected by evidentialists who think that beliefs must be grounded on adequate epistemic evidence. My contention is that Reid’s approach to irresistible beliefs we do not hold for epistemic reasons offers a persuasive means to escape the contemporary stalemate between evidentialism and pragmatism. Are we rational in holding beliefs for which we don’t possess sufficient epistemic evidence?

Reid and James subscribe to a permissivist ethics of belief, according to which we are allowed to hold a belief even if we cannot show its epistemic credentials. Yet I show that the abandonment of the stringent evidentialist requirement (which is tied to a form of internalism) does not necessarily commit one to a pure form of pragmatism (which offers practical reasons instead of epistemic ones). If Reid proposes arguments built on a pragmatist line, he does not reject the evidentialist demand *per se*, only its internalist form. Moreover, in his view, immediate beliefs are carried by a kind of instinctive epistemic trust. On the whole, pragmatism and common sense do not defend the same kind of epistemic permissivism.

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