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The Role of Imagination in James's and Dewey's Understanding of Religious Experience

Abstract. Many aspects of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* found their theoretical background in other books of James psychology or philosophy. In this article I try to connect his theory of imagination in *The Principle of Psychology* with his supernaturalism regarding religious experience. Both suppose a theory of the “feeling of reality” that explains how, under the working of imagination, abstract ideas or remote ideals can be perceived as real and lively, becoming motives for action, although they may not have anything to do with sense experience. Although imagination is not mentioned in James's doctrine of the will to believe, it is central in both understanding this doctrine as well as the overall vision of James psychology and philosophy of religion. Similarly, imagination is essential to grasp a better understanding of how ideas and ideals unite with reality in Dewey's thoughts concerning religion. I find it useful, in order to have a better understanding of James position, to compare it with what Dewey has to say about it in *A Common Faith*. Contrasting their theories will show that James's understanding of imagination can only be understood if rooted in a kind of realism about the ‘unseen universe’.

It is well known that pragmatism follows from Alexander Bain's definition of ideas as “that upon which a man is prepared to act”. But pragmatism needs to explain how ideas gain this authority on our action. Ideas may not have by themselves the power to determine or motivate our active nature. Ethical and religious problems are therefore central to the pragmatist anthropology. The *Varieties of Religious Experiences*, where James explore a “deeper level of (our) nature”, showing thus “the inferiority of the rationalistic level in founding belief” (WWJ 1985: 67), describes how imagination brings a sense of reality to ideas, by which we become ready to act upon them. Imagination helps ideas or ideals which look remote and abstract to become absolutely lively, and start to occupy the centre of our consciousness's field. Thus, pragmatism rests upon a fine descriptive psychology of how ideas becomes real and, in that becoming, imagination, far from being a queen of falsehood, is heightened to the status of an “ontological” faculty:

Such is the human ontological imagination, and such is the convincingness of what it brings to birth. Unpicturable beings are realized, and realized with intensity almost like that of a hallucination. They determine our vital attitude as decisively as the vital attitude of lovers is determined by the habitual sense, by which each us haunted, of the other being in the world. (WWJ 1985: 66)

“Ontology” is not one of James's favourite topics. If speaking of “ontological imagination” has a sense, it can only be in connexion with the idea of reality as being not ready-made but “on the making”. How does this “making” takes place in the workshop of imagination? An idea, in order to be a rule of action, needs to be felt as real and for that needs to be imagined. Thus different levels of reality are constructed imaginatively before

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any separation between imagination and perception is possible. In this article, I would like to connect James's theory of imagination in *The Principles of Psychology* with his theory of the religious imagination in *The Varieties*, showing how the first offers a ground for understanding the second. I will also argue that, although James *Will to Believe* doctrine does not mention imagination, the idea is central to give us a better understanding of how religious experiences and religious belief are related. The central problem in James understanding of religion is to go beyond the opposition between affirming in *The Will to Believe* the role of religious belief as the condition of religious experience, while affirming, in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, the primacy and suddenness of religious experience. James's theory of imagination can offer a basis under which the solution should be search. But to offer a better understanding of how this theory is compatible with supernaturalism of the *Varieties*, I propose to contrast it with John Dewey's naturalistic theory of imagination in *A Common Faith*. I would like to show that, although James and Dewey's religious concern share a common refusal to radically differentiate the ideal and the real, the condition under which imagination can be useful in practice is fundamentally different for them, and so is their conception of the ideal. For James, imagination is intentional in the sense that it points towards an object that it poses as real. It has therefore a cognitive content, however minimum. Imagination is a part of his theory of the "feeling of reality" and blends very well with the type of supernaturalism that we find in the *Varieties*, since it is not connected with the senses. On the contrary, according to Dewey, the fact that imagination points towards real entities entices the fallacy of supernaturalism. If for both, ideal and reality are unified by imagination in a religious dimension of experience, I would also like to show that Dewey's naturalist position, although interesting, is partly contaminated by an esthetical spiritualism and a mystical quest for unity, which creates difficulties when he wants to differentiate between the esthetical, the ethical and the religious dimensions of experience. By showing how, in James's theories, imagination can be understood only through a kind of realism about the "unseen world", my aim is also to defend James against those who charged his philosophy of religion of subjectivism.

I. James and Dewey's Reading of Santayana's Definition of Imagination

At the beginning of their reflexion on religious experience, James and Dewey had both meditated upon an interesting definition of imagination by Santayana, and of its role in religious and esthetical experiences. It is therefore a worthy point of departure in order to see more clearly where and how James and Dewey differ. Indeed, *A Common Faith* takes some of Santayana's affirmations as central, while the book acts as a foil for the writing of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. In *Interpretation of Poetry and religion*, Santayana writes:

Imagination and intelligence do not differ in their origin, but in their validity.... Those conceptions which, after they have spontaneously arisen, prove serviceable in practice, and capable of verification in sense, we call ideas of the understanding. The other remains ideas of the imagination. (Santayana 1900: V)

Santayana's conception of imagination is pragmatic in the sense that it affirms the creative aspects of the mind, its spontaneity, and its usefulness in practice. Nevertheless, it seems to entail that what we call the "ideas of the imagination" do not have a practical role.

In fact, Santayana's position is more subtle. Those ideas do have a role in practical affairs since

Religion and Poetry are identical in essence, and differ merely in the way in which they are attached to practical affairs. Poetry is called religion when it intervenes in life, and religion, when it merely supervenes upon life, is seen to be nothing but poetry. (Santayana 1900: 5)

This distinction is crucial for Dewey. It helps him to articulate the religious dimension of experience with ethical and esthetical dimensions through imagination. The specificity of religious experience will be for Dewey, explained by a certain quantity and quality of imagination's play. Commenting on Santayana's distinction, Dewey writes:

The difference between the imagination that only supervenes and imagination that intervenes is the difference between one that completely interpenetrates all the elements of our being and one that is interwoven with only special and partial factors. (LW 9: 13)

For Dewey, our ideals become religious when they are interwoven and integrated in our life in a total way. Following Santayana, it entails that religion cannot be said to deal with matters of fact:

It would naturally follow from this conception that religious doctrine would do well to withdraw their pretention with matters of fact. That pretention is ... the cause of the impurity and incoherence of religion in the soul, when it seeks its sanction in the sphere of reality, and forgets that its proper concern is to express the ideal. (Santayana, 1900, V)

It is then easy to see why James refuses Santayana's approach of religion, since his intention in the *Varieties* is precisely to show that religion is "not a mere illumination of facts already elsewhere given ..." but is mainly "a postulator of new facts as well" (WWJ 9: 407). It is therefore not surprising, if James, in a letter to Palmer on 2nd April 1900, while writing the Edinburgh Lectures writes: "I now understand Santayana, the man. I never understood him before. But what a perfection of rottenness in a philosophy! I don't think I ever knew the anti-realistic view to be propounded with so impudently superior an air" (WWJ 2001: 180). Their disagreement, at the same time, helps James to make his own position more boldly affirmed. That is why he describes, in the same letter to Palmer, Santayana's book as « the great event of my life ». Keeping in mind that James wrote the *Varieties* not only against theories of the absolute but also partly against Santayana's "anti-realistic view", we will be able to read him with a proper realistic stance. The unity of the ideal and the real is for him a living concrete unity. In a draft of the *Varieties*, he writes: "Life comes to me as expressive of result, as dramatically significant, as shot through with an ideality to which I'm bound to be faithful Santayana would that the result is only the contemplation of the significance in the abstract" (CWJ 9: 492).

It would seem that, for James, the distinction between imagination that intervenes and imagination that merely supervenes in our life cannot explain how ideality is "shot through" our life, and how it is embedded in our practical affairs. It perhaps misses a sense of the tragic without which James's pragmatism can't be understood. Before coming back to James position and his underlying theory of imagination, we will go through a closer reading of *A Common Faith*, where Dewey explains the role of imagination in the religious experiences.

II. The Role of Imagination in the Religious Dimension of Experience in Dewey's A Common Faith

In the 30's, Dewey had to defend his pragmatism against its reduction to a kind of utilitarianism. In 1934, he published *Art and Experience* and *A Common Faith*, whose common points lies in the emphasis on the creative dimension of the mind and the role that imagination has in the religious and esthetical dimensions of experience. As we have seen, Santayana helps him to connect those two dimensions. For him, they are not different kind of experiences. This poses two issues which I would like to raise. First, it raises the issue of the relation of perception to imagination. Second, I would like to suggest that it is showing in Dewey's thought an influence of a kind of esthetical mysticism, which is connected to his intense relation to poetry.

Regarding the first issue, Dewey certainly shows that facts are generally not perceived as "brute facts" but in connexion with imagination: "There actually occurs extremely little observation of brute facts Facts are usually observed with reference to some practical end of purpose, and that end is presented only in imagination" (LW9: 14). Imagination thus connects perceptual knowledge of the world to our practice. Nevertheless, however connected and even interwoven with "brute facts", there remains a distinction between the facts of nature and the idealisation of those facts through imagination. Imagination is thus merely a continuation of the observation of brute facts. As we shall see later, it seems that James is more radical in connecting the two, and shows that we can't help believing that our ideals, even though they are idealisations, are not only "ours" but matches with other ideals in an objective moral order. Thus, the sense of "surrender" which in *The Varieties* is a fundamental feature of religious experience that helps to distinguish mere morality from religion, is ruled out by Dewey. For him, to surrender to an already existing being has lead supernaturalistic creeds to weaken the active moral impulse that urges the realisation of the ideal. Ideals should be regarded merely as possible and not as real:

What I have been criticizing is the identification of the ideal with a particular Being, especially when the identification makes necessary the conclusion that this being is outside of Nature, and what I have tried to show is that the ideal itself has its roots in natural conditions; it emerges when the imagination idealizes existence by laying hold of the possibilities offered to thought and action. (LW 9: 34)

How does then Dewey differentiate morality from religion? I will argue that he replaces the idea of surrendering with the experience of an emotional oneness with the universe. A mere emotion of security or of harmony is what we are left with when we refuse the idea of surrendering to some beings that can't help being postulated as real. This operates again largely through imagination, which should be broadly understood as to include some subconscious effects: "The idea of a thoroughgoing and a deep-seated harmonising of the self with the Universe ... operates only threw imagination – which is one reason why this composing of the self is not voluntary ..." (LW 9: 14).

At this point, it should be mentioned that Dewey, throughout his life, found in Wordsworth and Coleridge the expression of a natural piety that made him have a taste of mysticism. The reading of Wordsworth triggered what he described later as "a mystic experience". According to Rockefeller (1991: 67), Dewey explained that his experience was filled with an emotional sense of the unity with the universe. This strengthened his belief that the truth of the universe is an organic unity, not a separation. Along with

Rockefeller, Russell B. Goodman (1990) has shown how Dewey's mind is deeply rooted in 19th century romanticism. More recently, Peter Gale showed the strong presence in Dewey's thought, along with the promethean aspect of his instrumentalism, of a mystical quest for unity. It is therefore justified to suspect, in *A common Faith*, certain naturalised and secularised aspect of the Hegelian idea of God as union of the ideal and the real. We therefore see that, when Dewey tries to differentiate religion from morality, he is bound to compare it with a kind of an esthetical dimension with a strong sense of unity and totality. The difficulty in Dewey attempt is that imagination must unite the real and the ideal, without postulating the ideal as a real being. It entails therefore that imagination mustn't be essentially cognitive or intentional. The same things follow for emotion, but I shall not consider this point here but stay concentrated on the question of imagination. How can we not believe that whatever is imagined is, in a certain sense, real? According to Dewey, we should differentiate between the theoretical faith and practical faith. Theoretical faith is "a belief that some object or being exists as a truth for the intellect" and the practical faith equated to "a conviction that some end should be supreme over conduct" (LW9: 15). Thus it is not imagination which is responsible for the delusion caused by the postulation of supernatural beings: it is a mixture between intellectual or cognitive aspects and imagination. But is religious faith not always mixed up with some intellectual content, however minimum, about some existing fact? Are the practical and the theoretical faith not essentially connected as James says?

III. The Ontological Imagination in William James Psychology and Philosophy of Religion

Before going to a closer reading of some of James's text on imagination, we can sum up few points of departure between him and Dewey. Dewey links imagination with totalities. This, perhaps, shows an influence of monistic tendencies. On the contrary, James, as she shall now see connect imagination with a more pluralistic concept of a multi-layered reality, of a plurality of spaces and times. Dewey explains how imagination and perception are complementary, imagination being a continuation of perceptive experiences on the side of the ideal possibilities of the perceived object. James let the imagination plays a more fundamental role in the constitution of reality itself, refusing a priori distinction between real and unreal, perception and hallucination. Dewey describes religious experience as a harmonisation of the self and the world, while James connects it with adapting oneself to a pluralistic "unseen universe". Dewey reconstructs the object of religious experience and believes that imagination can be free from intellectual or cognitive content. James pragmatist approach links religious experience with a cognitive content expressed in various "world formula". Dewey refuses the idea, central to James, that imagination has an intentionality, that it not only points towards something else than itself, but tends to assert the existence of the reality towards which she points. For James, we may even say that imagination would not have any practical effect unless the ideals which are imagined would be really believed to be part of a larger form of consciousness. As the son of swedenborgian, James's theory blurred the *a priori* distinctions between reality and fiction, between vision and hallucination. If some individuals, whom he calls "religious genius" in the *Varieties* (WWJ 15: 15), are luckier than others, grasping some features of the unseen universe, it is not possible to understand why and how. The value of the religious imagination is known only through its effects but not through its cause. It is of no use rationalising the visions of the mystic. James theory of imagination works for

Swedenborg's visions or for the lunatic hallucination. But the *Varieties* are not only defending such a pragmatist agenda. Perhaps, the most interesting these of the *Varieties* is not his theory of the subconscious origin of religious experience but his theory of the reality of religious experience. Reality, for James, is not an abstract attribute of things but a quality of living, concrete experience. It is therefore necessary to connect what James says in the *Principles of Psychology* about imagination and the feeling of reality and what he says of the "reality of the unseen" in the *Varieties*.

It is well known that *The Principles of Psychology* presents various contradictory theses. On one hand, James look for the neural basis of the mind which is considered as an object in a world of already made objects. On another hand, the mind is seen as a selecting agency carving the objects among a chaotic plurality, a "big blooming confusion". The 18th chapter, who deals with imagination, starts by reaffirming the empiricist credo of a purely reproductive imagination. Nevertheless, it ends by denying that the neural basis of sensation and that of imagination can be radically different. Hence, James starts to prepare the reader to admit a more radical thesis, affirmed in the 19th and 21st chapters, of a strong connection between imagination and perception. James contradictions between naturalism and a more phenomenological approach can partly be reconciled under the umbrella of James's Darwinism which applies the theory of evolution to consciousness. If the progress of art and science can be explained by creativity found in the conceptualising power of the mind,

Why may it not have been so of the original elements of consciousness, sensation, time, space, resemblance ...? Why may they not have come into being by the back-door method, by such physical processes as lie more in the sphere of morphological accident, of inward summation of effects, than in that of the 'sensible presence' of objects? Why may they not, in short, be pure idiosyncrasies, spontaneous variations, fitted by good luck. (WWJ 9: 1228)

Indeed, for James, our knowledge (either perceptual or conceptual) is not a copy or reality. Naïve realism is false: the mind is not a passive mirror of objects independent of it. However, this does not mean that there is no object independent of it but rather that the mind is creative, even at the elementary level of sense perception. This allows James to say that even "the elementary feelings is a recondite history" (WWJ :1228). This history of consciousness, either biological or cultural, is generally ignored, because we live through the experiences of others. However, religious experiencers are those who get some glimpse of the "unseen universe" by having first hand experience of conversion. At that level, the difference between imagination and perception is done through a "feeling of reality". The 21st chapter, who deals with that theory of reality as feeling, starts by stating that « Everyone knows the difference between imagining a things and believing in its existence » WWJ 9: 913) but, later in the same chapter, as James gets closer to a denial of the subject/object distinction, he denies ultimate distinction between perception and imagination, relegating it to some further genesis inside experience itself. The sense of reality arisen by the object, according to our emotional and practical aspects, does not depend on any sense perception but is characterized by a "cessation of theoretic agitation" (WWJ 9: 913), by the stability of an idea and the exclusion of contradictory ideas. According to James, reality "means simply relation to our emotional and active life" (WWJ 9: 924) and the reality of religious experience in the *Varieties* is also shown by connecting it with emotion and action. This feeling of reality is a common feature of all kind of experiences, including sensational experience as well as religious experience. Being

independent of any particular « senses », it can account for the reality of something unseen. In religious experiences, there is something that strikes this feeling of reality, and can even make the conception felt intensely more real than ordinary sense perception:

It is as if there were in the human consciousness a sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception of what we may call 'something there,' more deep and more general than any of the special and particular 'senses' by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed... So far as religious conceptions were able to touch this reality-feeling, they would be believed in in spite of criticism, even though they might be so vague and remote as to be almost unimaginable, even though they might be such non-entities in point of whatness, as Kant makes the objects of his moral theology to be. (WWJ 15: 55)

Although James refers to Kant, his basic argument is fundamentally anti-kantian. He argues against the strong kantian influence in the psychology of his time, showing that reality or “objectivity” is not necessarily awakened by a connexion with the sense data. This is essential to make room for a psychological or empirical understanding of religious experience. However, the battle against idealism, in the *Varieties*, is not an opposition of ‘concept’ against ‘feeling’. It’s rather an opposition of concept as merely thought of and concept as felt. James feels that concepts are by themselves rather powerless unless they are connected with a reality-feeling or with imagination. Objectivity requires an esthetical dimension in concepts as well as a cognitive content of feelings. We find in a draft of the *Varieties* an interesting autobiographical passage on religious imagination:

I cannot find in myself a trace of personal religion in the sense, in which so many possess it nor any live belief in a conscious spirit of the universe with whom I may hold communion. I used to have something like this, but it has gone, beyond the possibility of recall ... The lack in me seems to be an incapacity of actively imagining with any content whatever “another and a better world”. (WWJ 15: 492)

This passage shows how deeply connected are imagination and religious belief and that they both entail an intellectual content. This content may be minimal as the simple affirmation of “another and a better world”. It also points out that imagination, in James’s sense, is not under the control of the will. This is firstly a strong argument against any superficial reading of the theory of the “will to believe” which sees in it nothing but subjectivism. Secondly, it shows that religious belief and religious experience are simultaneous. In other words, the element of surrendering is not caused by a the belief in any divine being, since believing itself required to be already able to imagine actively the content of the belief and cannot be caused by will. At the same time the act of surrendering is not causing the belief since to surrender, we already need to have a belief in some kind of existing being. When James says that feeling is the essential element in religion, he doesn’t mean a feeling free of any intellectual or cognitive content. This is a strong argument in favour of an understanding of the relation between the will to believe doctrine, and the accent put on religious experiences in the *Varieties* which could be read as not presupposing any belief. Imagination makes us experience our beliefs to be of realities; and neither imagination nor belief or our feeling of reality is under the control of the will. This is, as I would like to conclude, what gives us good reasons to believe that reality is not mind-dependant.

IV. Conclusion: Realism Without A Human Face

Without a realistic frame of understanding, several aspects of James's affirmation would not escape being completely subjectivist and fall under the criticism of his critics. Generally, James's pragmatism is not considered as having strong realist tendencies and theories like that of a reality-feeling seems to argue in favour of a subjectivist tendency in his theories. It's a fact that James pragmatism reject naïve realism – the idea that things are the way we think them to be and that theories are mirror of realities. Nevertheless, we can argue in favour of a metaphysical realism in James's position, at least regarding the reality of the supernatural world. This has been recently defended by Slater 2008 against a current reading that sees, under the influence of Putnam, James as defending a kind of internal realism in a Kantian manner. Nevertheless, if we take metaphysical realism not in the elaborated sense given by Putnam but simply as posing the existence of mind-independent objects, there are plenty of evidence of it in James affirmation about the supernatural world. As Slater (2008: 667) as shown, James is a religious realist, believing in an unseen and better world, and understanding religion as a way of adapting oneself with this mind-independent unseen world. Religion is therefore not true only because it has a value for human life but because it puts us into contact with non-human higher form of experience which have a value for our life (WWJ 1985: 408). While it is not clear that James's understanding of our ordinary perception and knowledge, being infused with concepts, entails the existence of objects independent of the mind, religious perceptions must be understood in a realist manner. For example, this passage, at the end of the *Varieties* is clearly realistic about the existence of ideals and of a supernatural world:

The further limits of our being plunge, it seems to me, into an altogether dimension of existence from the sensible and merely "understandable" world. Name it the mystical region, or the supernatural region, whichever you choose. So far as our ideal impulses originate in this region (and most of them do originate in it, for we find them possessing us in a way for which we cannot articulately account), we belong to it in a more intimate sense than that in which we belong to the visible world, for we belong in the most intimate sense wherever our ideals belong. Yet the unseen region in question is not merely ideal, for it produces effects in this world. When we commune with it, work is actually done upon our finite personality, for we are turned into new men, and consequences in the way of conduct follow in the natural world upon our regenerative change. But that which produces effects within another reality must be termed a reality itself, so I feel as if we had no philosophic excuse for calling the unseen or mystical world unreal. (WWJ 15: 406)

Keeping in mind what we have just said regarding imagination, we can say more precisely in what way the "unseen region ... produces effects in this world". It restores our lost faiths, it recreates our shaken hopes, and it gives us a clearer understanding of our own ideals. It adds some spices to our moral life. For, although ethical and religious experiences are clearly different, firstly religion has an essential ethical dimension since the world we imagine is not only "other" than this world but also "better" and secondly, our ideals can have an authority on our action only by being part of a wider ideal world. Besides being a religious realist, James is thus also an ethical realist (Slater 2008: 668). Moreover, any objectivism regarding ethical values is grounded in the sort of religiosity that James argues for in *The Varieties*. If for Dewey, to surrender to a being already there has led supernaturalist creeds to weaken the active moral impulse that urge to the realisation of the

ideal, it is the contrary for James. The postulation of a divine being encompassing our ideals form the basic esthetical condition under which our moral efforts are at best. In the last chapter of *The Moral Philosopher and the Moral life*, James indeed try to show how moral objectivism is not possible on purely naturalistic grounds. Moral objectivity demands the postulating of a God as one of the claimant (WWJ 6: 170). If the entities that are postulated are not imagined as real entities, they lack the power to motivate us. Imagination plays a role thus, in triggering the « strenuous mood » which alone makes ethics supreme. But ideas and ideal, in order to become what we are ready to act on, needs not be picturised in an anthropomorphic manner. The “ontological imagination” picture “unpicturable beings” such as idea or ideal without a human face. Imagination doesn’t creates images but activates the sense of reality. The jamesian pragmatist philosophy of religion and of religious imagination has thus little to do with the « superstitionology » who sees, from Feuerbach to Freud, including Nietzsche or Durkheim, religion as an anthropomorphic projection. It may explain how religious perception thoroughly shaped by imagination cannot be reduced a priori to hallucination, provided they are understood as embedded into a form of realistic supernatural world, without a human face.

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