**Notes on *Will to Believe* Lecture**

**James especially defends the passional element in thought, arguing for the right to choose to believe in moral and/or religious hypotheses even though there is insufficient evidence in the origin of the idea. For if the idea can be verified by choosing to act according to its practical implications, then it would be unwise to wait for more evidence. The evidence may be available only to one who takes the risk or believing. James defends the right to choose to believe only when our strictly scientific intellect cannot be convinced. Hence if science could prove conclusively that our moral and religious ideas were strictly relative to our cultures or persons, then it would be absurd to defend a right to believe in absolute moral ideals or religious beliefs. But James believes:**

* **that science can only say "that things exist,"**
* **whereas morality says "that some things are more important than other things,"**
* **and religion says essentially two things: "that the more important things are the more lasting things, the eternal things" and "that we are better off now to believe that the more important things are the more lasting things."**

**The sciences both natural and social only tell us what values and beliefs people hold, what natural things are, but they did not tell us what moral values and religious beliefs people ought to hold about what humans ought to be. Hence in trying to determine what ought to be, James sees science as unable to tell us what our basic values ought to be since it deals only with facts. Thus, truths dealing with values can only be chosen with the risk and passion that choice involves. For example, if I am about to be witness to a murder, I must make a choice of values. I must either decide that values are relative, that people can do as they please, or that some values are absolute, that there are some things that no people ought to do. If I refuse to make a choice in this matter of either of those two approaches to values, then I am really deciding that values are not absolute. For in this case, the decision is unrepeatable; and not to decide is to decide 'No!' If I witness the murder without any resistance, then I am really deciding that murder is not absolutely wrong. Hence, James argues it is unwise to put off my decision ln such cases. Even though all the evidence is not available now on the matter, I can take a risk and choose that murders ought not to be; my choice may become part of the evidence which eventually shows that some values ought to be absolute. When more evidence can come through choice and action, then James defends the right to believe.**

**Another more mundane example of the will to believe occurs in economic matters. If people believe that a recession or depression is going to come, then they will fear for their money and will sell their stocks and conserve their cash, restricting their investments in machinery since products will not sell. However, it is precisely such behavior which can precipitate an economic crisis. However, if people have confidence in the economy and believe that they can master its difficulties, they will choose to expand their investments and to increase their debts because the market will continue to expand. It is precisely such choices which enable the economy to become the fact which people have believed in.**

**There are cases where choosing to believe can help create the evidence:**

**Suppose one person wants to love another, but that other does not at first reciprocate that love which is offered. But the continued devotion of the one who is choosing to love may persuade the other to respond to a deep and sincere love**

**However, there are cases, where choosing to believe may not create the fact but only help disclose the true facts:**

**Suppose that a girl loves a young man but he does not know it, and suppose that she will not declare her love until he declares his. But suppose he is fearful that she will reject a proposal of marriage. Then only if he chooses to believe that she can love him, will he declare his love to her. If he does choose to believe, then he will discover what is in fact true, namely, that she loves him.**

**Religious truth for James is partially created and discovered by the choosing-to-believe.**

**It is partially created since the truth of an idea consists in its practical efforts. For deep mystical experiences can be created usually only for those who choose to seek them out by some ascetic means.**

**Primarily, however, religious truth is discovered through choosing to believe since God is not created by the human imagination but rather discovered as the living God through the reality of His effects upon those who choose to believe.**