

THE CONCEPTION OF BELIEF IN GUSTAV FECHNER AND WILLIAM JAMES
(THE UNWRITTEN CHAPTER OF *THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*)

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ABSTRACT: The current paper deals with the relation between William James's and Gustav Fechner's philosophical theorizing in the field of religion. The both philosophers aspire to justify faith in narrow and wide sense through rational and pragmatist arguments. While Fechner's argumentation rests upon his ontology, James employs a strategy for defending religious belief on the grounds of religious experience. Gustav Fechner's conception of belief is based on important principles of the Daylight-view, like continuity and analogy. This fact does not mean that Fechner's personal over-beliefs influenced completely his account of belief, for *die Tagesansicht* is essentially an ontology, and not a system consisting of personal values. Despite the similarities found between the both philosophers, it is clear that Fechner was not a predecessor of pragmatism. James adopted only some of the cardinal points of Fechner's panpsychist ontology. Nonetheless, he applied its principles to his own analysis of religious experience.

KEY WORDS: pragmatism, panpsychism, pluralism, monism, belief, ontology

1. Introduction

One of the few issues which have rarely been researched by James's scholars is the influence exerted by the famous scientist and philosopher Gustav Theodor Fechner over the pragmatist. Despite his opposition to ontological monism, and in spite of his harsh criticism of *Elements of psychophysics*, James had a deep respect for the panpsychist metaphysics of Fechner, dedicating it a long chapter in *A Pluralistic Universe*, as well as in some of his letters. In the later stage of his philosophical development, James even was moving towards an alternative version of panpsychism, calling it "pluralistic". Fechner's mystical theory which at some places appears even in the form of monism, based on the conception of the unity of the whole world enveloped by a universal soul, provokes James's imagination until the end of his life.

Besides being a representative of natural sciences, Fechner was a very penetrating metaphysician who was increasingly interested in metaphysics due to his personal experiences. As Michael Heidelberger explains, there is an unjustified prejudice that Fechner was a purely metaphysical and eccentric conceptual poet who produced only untestable philosophical

sayings¹. As we know, his personal belief was pretty different from the traditional Christian belief: the former puts stress on the unity of the world embraced by one cosmic consciousness, and the latter does not. Fechner was probably the first philosopher who depicted the Earth as a living organism, and he was one of the few thinkers who were convinced in the existence of the souls of plants. Interestingly enough, there are striking similarities between the religious philosophies of both thinkers: the empirical and practical argumentation for the reality of the objects of religious belief, and the view of a finite God and a dynamically developing universe. The main research question of the current paper reads as follows: **how, according to Fechner, a belief could be justified?** Furthermore, there is another, additional question: **are there any similarities between the religious argumentation of both philosophers, and, if so, to what extent was James influenced by Fechner?**

In order not to go astray, we will focus our attention only to Fechner's theory of belief and partly to his Daylight-view, as well as to James's conception of religious experience and his arguments in favor of belief. We shall take a look first at Fechner's conception of belief. Afterwards, James's argumentation exposed in *The Varieties* will be examined. At the end, we will discuss at length the changing attitudes of the American pragmatist towards his German colleague and the common characteristics of their conceptions of belief.

2. Fechner's conception of belief

There is a lot of scholarship work on Fechner's psychophysics and panpsychism. Belief, or *glauben*, a fundamental concept for him, will be discussed here, and respectively, the issue about its legitimacy. As an experimental scientist, Gustav Fechner undertook to construct a well-sustained philosophically world-view that would stay away from both the traditional dogmatism of religion and materialist reductionism, very popular at the time. By elucidating and explicating the three motives and grounds for belief, he put stress also on the common attitudes and non-religious beliefs of the regular people. Belief is what is believed to be certain even if it is not proved in the course of experience or by logical conclusions either, Fechner wrote². In its narrow sense, religious belief professes with the highest and ultimate things: God, the hereafter, and the higher spiritual existences. In its wide sense it is related to common convictions and conventions.

Michael Heidelberger has observed various similarities between Fechner's theories and classical pragmatist doctrines³. Heidelberger has noted:

¹ Heidelberger, 2004, pp. 74-5.

² Fechner, 1863, p. 1.

³ He has found more similarities to Peirce. Though, we could see that Fechner's practical argument completely resembles some James's statements in *The Varieties*.

In order to justify the existence of the physical beyond that of one's own individual consciousness, Fechner designed a theory of self-stabilizing methods for hypothetical conjecture ('believing') ... Equipped with this theory of belief quite similar to American pragmatism, Fechner also later tried to lay a foundation for other hypotheses that transcend experience⁴.

In contrast with other researchers, Heidelberger prefers to speak about *belief* instead of *faith*. We could reach the conclusion that there are similarities between Fechner's and James's accounts of belief since we find pragmatic basis of belief besides the empirical and historical (traditional) one. This fact, however, does not imply 'pragmatism' in Fechner, as we will see further.

2.1. *Die Tagesansicht*

The three principles of belief could not work without a panpsychist and thoroughgoing synechist outlook. **While William James elaborated an empirical framework for defending belief and started from the individual and particular experience, Gustav Fechner departed from his wholesome picture of the world, then descending down to the individuals and their concrete beliefs.** He called his religious world-view *Die Tagesansicht*, or Daylight-view. It is different than the traditional Christian doctrine due to two main reasons: first, Fechner was driven by his experience as a scientist to doubt all dogmatic assumptions existing within the framework of religious beliefs; second, he aspired to lay the foundations of a novel conception of belief that **could stand all the challenges posed by the natural science** of the day. The Daylight-view turns upon the assumption that everything in the universe mirrors the other things:

Not only the fact of God's existence, but an idea of the inner relationships in the divine nature is immediately accessible through the inner relationships we find in ourselves. Thereby we see that broadened and exalted points of view are available (...) And when the whole world has become a divinely animated world, the sphere of individual animated beings broadens and extends upwards above us⁵.

There are a number of slight transitions between the various levels of existence in the universe. These are obviously continual and indiscrete. The Night-view (*die Nachtansicht*), on the contrary, maintains the availability of many discrete levels of existence and the lack of continuity- an essential flaw, Fechner believed. Although it is not associated with irreligiosity or atheism, still it furthers our disbelief. In the consequences which the Night-view has for

⁴ Heidelberger, 2004, p. 6.

⁵ Fechner 1879, p. 16.

knowledge it leads away from our faith⁶. Even if it has some relation to faith, it values it only from a practical viewpoint⁷. As a matter of fact, the Night-view was more popular and had adherents among the men of science, Fechner claimed. It was the challenge that he took and attempted to overcome, while elaborating his own ontology.

The German scientist and philosopher was chiefly interested in the objectivity and credibleness of his Daylight-view. In connection with this, he attempted to elucidate how a belief is formed and adhered to. Fechner asked the question: how can we argue for our faith in God, in immortality and in other Christian principles? He proposed a penetrating analysis examining the three motives and grounds for belief, calling them historical (traditional), practical and theoretical (empirical). **If we believe in God, we have to justify our belief.** It should not be conceived as independent from knowledge and truth. Belief should be proved whenever possible. Notwithstanding, **it could not be completely converted into knowledge**, since the most supreme, the ultimate things are not reachable by means of our human reason (except by analogy). This does not mean that belief stands lower than knowledge. **Belief is not imperfect knowledge, but it has relation to objects that could not be subjected to scientific investigation.** Fechner did not have in mind here that religion could be transformed into science, but he strived to demonstrate its right to use reasonable arguments in its defense. Fechner also aimed at showing the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate arguments. We should keep in mind that Fechner's *Tagesansicht* had been formulated first, and afterwards he directed himself towards the question of belief, making distinction between the three motives and grounds for belief. Therefore, had already stated his three principles of belief, he based them (and especially the theoretical one) on his already constructed world-view, which, as we have seen up to here, contains the main characteristics of synechism and panpsychism. Besides, Fechner's arguments are close to Christianity, though in an unorthodox form. Fechner succeeded to distance himself from his own personal beliefs while formulating the three principles of belief thanks to the following reasons: first, the principles were formulated in such a way that any possible belief could be justified through them on condition that their requirements are fulfilled. Second, in spite of the fact that his own over-beliefs resulted from profound religious experience, he made reference to it very rarely in his works. His *Tagesansicht* was deliberately elaborated as an ontology and not as a system of personal over-beliefs. The latter are articulated at the end of *Tagesansicht*. Third, God's being comprises all other existences, there are higher existences over and beyond individual human existences, planet-souls do exist, the Christian doctrines are the

⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

most supreme, the best and the most reasonable⁸. As we can see, some of Fechner's personal over-beliefs are stated there but in a rationalized, intelligible form. Fechner-the philosopher kept visible distance from Fechner-the believer. For that reason one could consider these three principles of belief as working and objective enough in a sense that **they are enough for justifying any belief without the need another principle(s) to be formulated.**

2.2. The three principles of belief

Fechner's conception has its roots in his work called *Zend-Avesta*. It is laid out in more detail in *Concerning souls*, but is most clearly stated three years later, in *The three motives and grounds for belief*. These three principles are not arbitrary formulated because they have their origin in thorough observations on mankind's religious life. Having accepted that the highest and ultimate things are object of both our knowledge and faith, Fechner held that the motives and grounds for believing in those things are not anything other than the belief in any other spiritual existence, but this is a belief which is exalted (*gesteigert*), culminated (*gegipfelt*)⁹. As a panpsychist, Fechner was convinced in the existence of different types of consciousness, not only human, but non-human as well. Starting from the hypothesis that everything in the universe is continuous, in addition to a panpsychist view, the German scientist arrives at the conclusion that we could gain knowledge about the psychic life in the whole universe, though our knowledge will be imprecise and experimentally improvable.

According to Fechner, **the most stable belief must be empirically verified** (even through analogy), **historically perpetuated and practically useful, expedient to both the society and the individual.** We could find only three motives and grounds for believing in the souls of our fellows (a very important belief which is part of the life of every human being):

1. Because belief is implanted in us during our childhood (historical principle).
2. Because we need to believe in the souls of the other human beings, finding in this belief satisfaction. We cannot do without this belief (practical principle).
3. Because analogy and mostly the empirical inferences force us to accept the existence of spirits in the other's bodies that correspond to our own spirit (theoretical principle)¹⁰.

2.2.1. The historical principle

The historical principle rests upon tradition and all that is wide accepted; the practical one-upon the individual needs of the people; the theoretical principle turns upon the inferences through analogy. All three principles are interlaced and could not be considered separately.

⁸ Ibid., pp. 65-8.

⁹ Fechner, 1863, p. 34.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 35-36.

They all lead to the same goal but in different ways. One or another way could be chosen, and belief could be defined only in a definite sense of the method in question¹¹.

The historical principle examines the issue from the viewpoint of the evolution of the human society in which we find forms of religion everywhere. In Fechner's view, no one was born with belief in God, but everyone has natural disposition to belief in anything he is taught. To him it seems completely natural to believe in God¹². He adds that belief in God is a human trait from immemorial times and is found in all peoples¹³. Individual cases of disbelief are very rare, Fechner maintained. According to this principle, religions that are more widespread and durable must be better justified, and from such a point of view- truer than the others. We will see that this argument is frequently used in the sections dedicated to the theoretical principle as well.

A question emerges here: what is the flaw of this principle? Evidently, it resembles the method of authority, precisely stated by Charles Peirce. This is a method for fixing belief consisting in subjection to a given religious or political power. Fechner observed the same fact- the historical principle could legitimate any delusion, not only true beliefs. The fallacies tend to disseminate themselves likewise all true propositions. There is a slight difference between them though: truth is more stable, helping and supporting. Fallacy is weaker in this respect¹⁴. Every belief, even the most erroneous one, has its own grounds, but they are not always correct; on the contrary, they are one-sided, egoistic, particular¹⁵. The conclusion to which Fechner arrives at is that true belief is continuous and is passed on from generation to generation.

2.2.2. The practical principle

The practical principle supplies any believer with another kind of grounds- the usefulness and efficiency of belief, equally for the individual and for the society. Fechner's account here rests upon the suggestion that we believe most in anything that serves us and whose real being satisfies us. Belief tends to give us satisfaction and the tendency itself gives us motives to believe¹⁶. Belief in God is necessary for us; we first need God, look for him and find him, and afterwards we formulate the grounds for our belief¹⁷. Departing from usefulness of faith for the individual alone, Fechner took the course towards its effects on the whole humanity: it is

¹¹ Fechner, 1879, p. 77.

¹² Fechner, 1863, p. 53.

¹³ Ibid., 1863, pp. 69-70.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 62-3.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 66-7.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 82.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 86.

beneficial and practically inevitable for mankind. Faith keeps and makes stronger any community: “All earthly human interests find their climax and goal in it”, Fechner maintained¹⁸.

What about the veracity of a belief? Fechner stated that the greater amount of good done by a given religion, the more justified are its claims for truth. A false religion would do harm or would be useful only for particular people. If Christianity were not true, we would face the bad consequences of that fact. But when we assume that a belief is true and when it has influenced the will, feelings and thoughts of all people in such a way that it leads to the most useful (*segensreichsten*) and most beneficiary (*heilsamsten*) consequences for everyone, then it certainly is the best belief, therefore it is the truest one¹⁹.

In order to bring his argument to its conclusion, Fechner had to oppose another objection: if religion had been useful for the whole humanity, then it would have brought only peace to the world. In such case, we should ask: why mankind witnesses religious persecutions and wars? Why there were the Inquisition, the crusades, the religious wars? Fechner admitted that they had done harm to the mankind, but had been caused only in the name of Christ, not in his spirit. They had resulted from an untrue belief²⁰.

However, it is evident that not always the useful is true. Fechner did not defend a shallow utilitarianism: on the contrary, he held that a belief is true as long as it overcomes the partial, egoistic interests, and the true belief always is widely accepted by as big community of people as possible. Thus, usefulness is only one of the characteristics a true belief must possess. Regarding the second objection, it seems that not everyone confesses any kind of faith in God, but everyone has his/her own system of values that could be associated with the values of the most popular and widespread religions.

2.2.3. The theoretical principle

The practical principle is strongly supported by the theoretical. The usefulness alone is not able to lead our investigations. It is a common conviction that all certain things are experienced directly. What to say about the other things beyond our personal or collective experience? Fechner pointed out in *Zend-Avesta*: „All related to the highest and ultimate things that the current book contains cannot be known directly in experience or known through mathematics, but it stays in the field of belief.”²¹ Where our knowledge could not reach we should confess our belief, the German scientist and philosopher maintained. But even the so-called scientific

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 119.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 115.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 98-101.

²¹ Fechner, 1851, p. 394.

knowledge rests upon assumptions that we *believe* in. When it comes to scientific matters, he wrote, for example the universal validity of gravitation, the existence of atoms, the beginning and the end of history, the number of spatial dimensions, we rely on our own belief.²² Fechner here did not mean to undermine the scientific work of his day, but to put stress on the important role played by belief in the forming of any theory of science. It is impossible to distinguish between scientists' beliefs and knowledge when it comes to spheres that are completely unobservable through the common means of science. We suppose that the farthest regions in the universe are similar to those known by us. Therefore, our knowledge of the nearest objects must be identical with our knowledge of the farthest things. It is a kind of belief. Here we are approaching to the theoretical (empirical) principle, resting upon mankind's experience. It must prove the existence of definite realities, mostly psychic ones. As Fechner pointed out:

One should start from the greatest possible empirical area in the sphere of earthly existence, in order that, by generalizing (*verallgemeinerung*), broadening (*erweiterung*) and exalting (*steigerung*) the viewpoints which are offered here, to form a notion of what is in the other, the wider and higher sphere of existence²³.

In accordance with the theoretical principle, we could prove God's existence in two ways:

1. Starting from our own spirit, we reach the world of spirit in that we believe, as our belief is based on the three foregoing principles, and after that we reach the world of the greatest spirit- God (argument from the spirit).
2. From the observation that our body mirrors our spirit, we conclude that the nature mirrors the greatest spirit- God (argument from the body)²⁴.

In the first case we start from the obvious existence of our spirit and continue to the existence of our fellows' spirits, a fact that is also evident for us. Nonetheless, we usually do not process this inference to its end, namely the existence of the highest spirit. Fechner wrote: "No one sees God. Why to believe in him? But do you see your brothers'souls? And you still believe in

²² Fechner, 1863, pp. 17-8. The similarity between aforementioned Fechner's observation and William James's words in *The Will to Believe* is staggering: "As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why ... Here in this room, we all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress and the duty of fighting for 'the doctrine of the immortal Monroe'." (James, 1992, p. 462).

²³ Fechner, 1863, p. 147; Fechner, 1861, p.116.

²⁴ Fechner, 1863, pp. 149-150.

them. You do not see God in the world. You believe in him less than in your brother's souls."²⁵ If we believe in any invisible thing, indicated experientially as really existing, why not to believe in another, greater and more powerful invisible thing, that is indicated by experience? Fechner expressed one of his analogies as follows:

My house was built by someone, and the world has been built by someone; the world is greater than my house, so someone greater built it. My body moves under the influence of my feelings and will; likewise, the Sun, the Moon, the sea, the wind move under such an influence, though influence of more powerful feelings and will since they themselves are more powerful²⁶.

This principle could not vouch for the truth, Fechner admitted; it is merely a *working principle*²⁷. Envisaging the possible criticism of the inferences from finite to infinite things, from the lowest to the highest entities, Fechner advanced his argument that the infinite consists of finite parts and that the finite things do exist in something infinite. The time of every individual being is a part of infinite time, every body is a part of the infinite world of bodies; every spirit is a part of the infinite unity of all spirits²⁸. We could not grasp the infiniteness with our finite experience, but we could **derive it** from our experience.

The problem is that such a principle could not be universally applied. It is so because every inference by analogy must lead to new observations that would verify it, in order it to be true. Fechner did not draw any demarcation line of validity. Let's take for example the idea of an endless existence of all souls, comprised within a great, universal soul. Starting with the assertion that my fellows possess souls because they behave like I do, and I know that I have a soul, we could go further to the hypothesis that it is possible higher minds than mine to exist, i.e. collective spiritual entities. However, how can we take it for granted that such a supreme entity exists forever? On the contrary, we must even assert that all that exists will disappear someday, as our experience indicates. What is the reason for Fechner then to reach the conclusion that God is real, by using such a principle? If we accept that God is the highest spirit, how can we experientially prove that he is endless and eternal as well?

In such a case, the inference reaches an unjustified extreme, and the reason for that is that there is no demarcation line drawn. It is not clear when the inference by analogy must be considered invalid- is there any experience that could contradict it in the future? Charles Peirce

²⁵ Ibid., p. 34.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁷ Fechner, 1861, p. 128.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 113-5.

and William James would have expressed their fallibilism here through renouncing the absolute validity of any of Fechner's assertions (since it is subject to further rectifications).

At any rate, German philosopher's account of belief lacks the support of a specifically designed logic of investigation, for example Peirce's. William James's strategy is different: firstly, he looks for grounds for belief in God which is verified by its useful consequences, and secondly, he renders it more stable through finding the answer of the question of its objective validity, by pointing to religious experience as its original source.

3. William James: How to legitimate a belief

Pragmatism in the form as elaborated by William James, serves as a mediator between knowledge and faith, science and religion. The American philosopher conceived his pragmatism as a successful way out of the traditional dichotomy. In *Pragmatism* he maintained: "I offer the oddly-named thing pragmatism as a philosophy that can satisfy both kinds of demand. It can remain religious like the rationalisms, but at the same time, like the empiricisms, it can preserve the richest intimacy with facts."²⁹ Educated in religious environment (though unorthodox), James firmly rejected all attempts of the science of his day to push out religion from the field of knowledge. From such a viewpoint, he had to answer the following questions: **what legitimates a given religious belief? How could we consider it true?**

What are its external sources?

3.1. The pragmatist criterion

In his most popular work, James maintained: "On pragmatistic principles, if the hypothesis of God works satisfactorily in the widest sense of the word, it is true. Now whatever its residual difficulties may be, experience shows that it certainly does work."³⁰ This thesis is sometimes misread as if it meant that the useful ramifications of a belief are equal with its veracity. But, as it seems, according to James we should adopt a religious belief *as if* it were true and to act upon this belief.

In his address at Berkeley the American pragmatist demonstrates "pragmatic" reading of some theological issues. It is Berkeley where he talked about religious experience for first time:

If you ask what these experiences are, they are conversations with the unseen, voices and visions, responses to prayer, changes of heart, deliverances from fear, inflowings of help, assurances of support, whenever certain persons set their own internal

²⁹ James, 1987, pp. 500-1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 618.

attitudes in certain appropriate ways (...) What the word 'God' means is just those passive and active experiences of your life³¹.

James opposes the traditional theological understanding of belief as a fixed system of principles and "dry" concepts. Likewise, Peirce, he argued for a "living belief".

As a matter of fact, the definition applied by James could be read otherwise than in a pragmatic manner. Various examples for such kind of experience are described. James theorized about religious experience not with regards to its consequences but to its origin, as Myers has written:

The crucial line of reasoning, in ascertaining the spiritual character of an experience, is not from phenomenon to consequences but from phenomenon to origin. An experience, whether mental or bodily in its introspective content, is spiritual solely because it is the effect of a spiritual cause. This argument hardly resembles pragmatic reasoning³².

James did not state clearly how the religious experience and the positive consequences for the individual are co-related. He rather rendered himself to a phenomenology of religious experience that is not closely related to his formulation of the Pragmatic maxim. This is the reason for maintaining divergent points of view expressed by James's scholars.

It is not consistent to interpret James's religious philosophy only through the viewpoint of his pragmatic criterion for truth. We should keep in mind his disposition towards searching for empirical evidence in favor of the very existence of religious experience. From the very beginning, **James had in mind to prove the reality of religious experience, considering it as a priori useful for the individual**. However, because of the impossibility to prove the veracity of religious experience by intellectual means³³, James appealed to the usefulness of belief. The American philosopher opposed all possible proofs for God's reality formulated by rationalistic philosophers. James maintained that **religious belief is useful, consequently we could take it as if it were true** (on condition that religious experience is real). It is useful because it assists us in making sense of the world and in guiding our conduct.

Therefore, the following key points should be noted in regard with *The Varieties*:

1. The analysis of religious experience tends to show that it exists in reality, though it manifests itself mostly in the dimensions of individual being. Thus, belief finds its objective ground.

³¹ James, 1992; pp. 1090-1.

³² Myers, 1986, p. 467.

³³ James, 1987, p. 408.

2. The usefulness of a given religious belief is closely related to its veracity; but we should take it as true only provisionally, for there is no final truth and any belief is a subject of further rectification.
3. Religious belief functions as a world-view and a system of moral values.
4. The reality of religious experience as well as the usefulness of any religious belief could not prove directly God's existence. In this sense, the issue of his existence is left out.

3.2. How real are the objects of belief?

Evidently, the content of a religious belief is more important than its external and objective source. The penetrating analysis of belief made by James prevents him from going into great detail concerning its main object- God and the divine. God is only our greater fellow in our struggle with evil and suffering. It is exceptionally important for James to show how a belief could be legitimated as long as it does not contradict the course of experience. There could be found a serious flaw in such a mode of thinking: is a belief without object a real belief? Is there such a kind of belief? As Ludwig Nagl asks:

Is James's philosophy of religion merely a mixture of maintaining childish faith and "inconsolable consolation": a forceful compromise which, in the era of increasing criticism of religion, is afraid to continue philosophically to the question of the existence of the object of belief, and therefore, through pragmatic reflection, just advances to a 'belief without object' which is evaluated as 'useful for life'?³⁴

It could be asserted that James attempted to equalize all our psychological experiences with religious experience; in that manner he could have proved that such a kind of experience is completely self-sufficient and merely a psychological consideration of its source is needed. Such criticism is well justified. An account of this kind could lead to the apparently wrong conclusion that the believer is completely independent from the object of their belief. Still, such type of interpretation lacks an important point: in his pragmatism **James constantly affirmed the existence of external reality that corresponds to our beliefs**. These are true or untrue only when related to it. However, as we have said, religious belief must be confirmed or at least legitimated through religious experience. But the latter is not similar to that kind of experience which science deals with. **Religious experience is mostly inner, subjective collection of feelings, thoughts and inner occurrences**. It must be attributed not to the sphere of nature but to the domain of mental and spiritual occurrences, of meanings and values. For that reason it is disputable **whether James really succeeded to elaborate a strategy for defending belief**

³⁴ Nagl, 1998, pp. 78-9.

through experience. Both the pragmatic and the experiential argument are not enough for accomplishing such a task. No wonder, the American pragmatist tried to find further arguments in favor of belief. If a belief is to be true, its objects must be real, said he. "In so far, however, as this analysis goes", James wrote, "the experiences are only psychological phenomena."³⁵ The author of *The Varieties* needed to find external source of religious experience.

3.3. The subliminal sphere as the source of religious experience

The answer was found in the **subliminal sphere**. The believer, as James put it, "becomes conscious that this higher part is conterminous and continuous with a MORE of the same quality, which is operative in the universe outside of him, and which he can keep in working touch with."³⁶ But this "more" is not only outside of us, it is also inside:

The *subconscious self* is nowadays a well-accredited psychological entity; and I believe that in it we have exactly the mediating term required (...) Let me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther* side, the 'more' with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life.³⁷

This *more* must be absolutely objective. That is the way to avoid being a self-isolated subject captivated by a will-to-make-believe. Franzese has observed: "Through Myers's notion of a *subliminal self*³⁸ James is providing an extremely concrete and powerful account of the 'divine', in order to account for the spiritually empowering and dynamogenic effects of faith and prayer and to avoid the self-suggestion and self-deception argument."³⁹ But it is not only Frederic Myers who should take the credit. Here the name of Fechner must be mentioned. James credits him in *A Pluralistic Universe*:

For my own part I find in some of these abnormal or supernormal facts the strongest suggestions in favor of a superior co-consciousness being possible. I doubt whether we shall ever understand some of them without using the very letter of Fechner's conception of a great reservoir in which the memories of earth's inhabitants are pooled and preserved, and from which, when the threshold lowers or, the valve opens,

³⁵ James, 1987, p. 455.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 454.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 457-8; James's italics.

³⁸ Myers considers the subliminal sphere as wider than the supraliminal: "At one end of the scale we find dreams ... At the other end of the scale we find that the rarest, most precious knowledge comes to us from outside the ordinary field, - through the eminently subliminal processes of telepathy, telaesthesia, ecstasy" (Myers, 2011, p. 72). It seems that Myers makes distinction between the both spheres, unlike Fechner, for whom only the supraliminal sphere does exist.

³⁹ Franzese, 2007, p. 148.

information ordinarily shut out leaks into the mind of exceptional individuals among us⁴⁰.

In a sense, the universe is more colorful, full of variety, than we are able to imagine. Looking back to Fechner's threshold of sensation, James could easily observe that our individual sensations disclose merely a small part of a gigantic multiform of being.

3.4. Fechner's personal religious experience

The personal religious experience of Fechner during and after his illness demonstrates how closely belief is connected with making sense of the world. Whether or not there is an objective source of a religious belief, there are no any rules or regulations concerning the way in which faith is formed and fixed. It is a kind of experience that depends on one's personal world-view and mentality. Fechner's mental illness, his difficulties with vision and his hopeless situation made him see the world with new eyes. Having adapted to the darkness, he saw the garden outside his house in different light, even beholding the plant-souls. Coming back into the house, the sense impressions of shining plants and flowers came back into his mind and he thought that he had seen the souls of the plants⁴¹. This experience stimulated Fechner's mind and served as a basis for forming his *Tagesansicht*. In James's terms, Fechner was born twice: the second time he was saved from the crisis by adopting a special world-view. The majority of all twice-born souls have experienced such deliverance through realizing their unity with a vast spiritual continuum. The same happened to Fechner: he felt that each individual part, each soul in the universe belongs to a great world spirit. The sense of salvation made him believe stronger and more confidently. As stated by Franzese: "Thus, the religious sentiment that characterizes human spirituality can be explained as the experience of an individual rooted in the sea of energy, wherein he is connected to all the other human beings."⁴² Such a kind of pantheism does not prove that God does not exist. God is not an object of experience, but is an object of an over-belief, Franzese maintains.

At the same time, Fechner certainly allowed for other world-views being possible and real. If every individual is comprised into a great spiritual existence, we should believe also that every separate way for conceiving the world leads to one and the same final picture, and the more we realize our unity with the souls of the other beings and souls higher than ours, the more we know about the real dimensions of the world and its first principles. When we perceive ourselves as separate beings only accidentally interacting with each other, we are far away

⁴⁰ James, 1987, p. 766.

⁴¹ Fechner, 1848, pp. 391-2.

⁴² Franzese, 2007, p. 148.

from the truth, meaning that our world-view is extremely narrow and even unreal. Fechner is an excellent example of a “twice-born soul”. Despite the fact that he was not referred to in *The Varieties*, Fechner still was introduced to the American philosophical community in a special chapter in *A Pluralistic Universe*. Furthermore, his example shows that in most cases the religious man feels himself/herself like a part of a great whole, exactly as James described it. Thus, the unwritten chapter on Fechner in *The Varieties* was written later in *A Pluralistic Universe*.

4. Fechner and James: Intersection points

As a psychologist, James had interest in Fechner’s theories and especially in his psychophysics. As a matter of fact, the American pragmatist was not enthusiastic at all while referring to the founder of psychophysics. He studied in Germany in 1870s and even met Fechner, but was not impressed too much. Notwithstanding, at the turn of the century James became more curious about the works of his German colleague. From around 1898, and later, he was influenced by Fechner and quoted him at length⁴³. As Perry pointed out, for James there were “two Fechners”: the first was the psychologist Fechner, author of the renowned theory of psychophysics. The “second” Fechner “was the metaphysical Fechner, who conceived the universe as a series of overlapping souls from God down through the earth-soul to man, and from man to the unobservable psychic states that lie below the threshold of his consciousness.”⁴⁴ After reading *Zend-Avesta* and *The Daylight-view against the Night-view* James undertook to bring Fechner’s work into the light of the American auditory. He felt such a deep respect to his soul-mate that he decided to dedicate him a lecture in *A Pluralistic Universe*- “Concerning Fechner”. In “Concerning Fechner”, James told the story of a twice-born soul, passed through very hard circumstances whose philosophy sprang from the real life of a human being. His philosophy healed and saved him: “This illness, bringing Fechner face to face with inner desperation, made a great crisis in his life ... His religious and cosmological faiths saved him.”⁴⁵ The crisis made of Fechner a real prophet⁴⁶. Fechner-the scientist had become more interested in metaphysics, so he had undertaken to elaborate a new ontology on the basis of inferences by analogy and empirical data. James deeply respected his empiricist approach: “Fechner’s ideas are not without direct empirical verification.”⁴⁷ Inference by analogy must not be underestimated: it has its source in the common experience shared by all human beings. “Fechner’s great instrument for vivifying the daylight view is analogy; not a rationalistic argument is to be found

⁴³ Perry, 1936, p. 133.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 586-7.

⁴⁵ James, 1987, p. 696.

⁴⁶ Perry, 1936, pp. 627-8; letter to Bergson, 28 July 1908.

⁴⁷ James, 1987, p. 770.

in all his many pages- only reasonings like those which men continually use in practical life”, claimed James⁴⁸. However, having read such assertions, we could easily ask ourselves whether Fechner was a pragmatist?

4.1. Fechner: A pragmatist before pragmatism?

Speaking again about the practical principle, should we get the impression that it is a thorough pragmatic principle? Could we call the German scientist and philosopher “a pragmatist before pragmatism”? **First**, let’s not forget that the Pragmatist maxim was invented by Peirce as a method for clarifying the meanings of the intellectual concepts; James later worked out the famous pragmatist conception of truth. Therefore, had Fechner been a pragmatist, he would have advanced a pragmatist theory of truth. He did not do so; his practical principle remained only in the sphere of religious belief. **Second**, one of the worst defects of *Die Nachtansicht*, according to Fechner, is its accentuation on the **practical** (only) use of belief. **Third**, Fechner was still far away from the pragmatist epistemology which we meet in Peirce and James. He adhered to the classical (correspondent) theory of truth without considering knowledge as a relative whole of verified or verifiable hypotheses within a conceptual framework, which is liable to further rectifications. Hence, Fechner was not a pragmatist.

Certainly Fechner did not influence James at this point since latter’s works do not contain any reference to Fechner’s theory of belief. As a matter of fact, in spite of the obvious similarities of Fechner’s practical principle to some passages of James’s works like *The Will to Believe* and *Pragmatism*, it seems that the former stood closer to utilitarianism than to classical pragmatism. Fechner could not have been a predecessor of pragmatism because he lived in a different era, within different social and cultural context, in different society.

4.2. Religious experience and the objects of belief

Religious belief must have objective value for the believer. Its external objects must be real. **If one believes in God, then God must exist.** It is not enough just to believe or to cling to believe in something, because, as Fechner observed, our need to believe reflects a real entity:

We would not need religious belief if its object were not exist. Man has created this belief because he needed it, but he has not created the fact that he needed this belief for his well-being. Therefore, the creation of this belief results from the very essence of things. It would be an absurdity if nature had done that man would believe in nonexistent things⁴⁹.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p.698.

⁴⁹ Fechner, 1863, p. 123.

Nature itself has brought about our inclination to believe. Besides, true belief is marked with a long history and wide community confessing it. Thus, it is easy to discern it from the false belief. James elaborated his “will-to-believe”-thesis and a conception of belief and religious experience, keeping in mind that a belief must be stable and well justified. Even if it is impossible for the science to prove the reality of such kind of objects, it is still a well sustained assertion that the religious experience points towards something real which remains invisible for us, or is completely unreachable through scientific methods either. James had showed us that we have the right to believe in God and to act as if religion were true, Edward Moore held. Such an interpretation misses the point that our belief must be justified and to correspond to our experience⁵⁰. It was extremely important for James to formulate a framework for legitimating any belief that does not contradict experience. The religious experience, unlike the usual experience, provokes a philosophical understanding of the world, giving a meaning to the world, finding an ethical sense in it. That is the way in which “the second birth” takes place; it clearly shows that **religious experience has objective value: it does not depend on one’s personal will and desires**. Fechner’s and James’s conceptions converge at this point.

4.3. Panpsychism

James’s pluralistic ontology was worked out around the turn of the century as a result of his re-orientation towards deep philosophical issues. No wonder, radical empiricism stays close to phenomenology and to Ernst Mach’s neutralism. As we know from James’s works, there is no real difference between subject and object. They are one whole, divided only by our intellect. Is it the same with the self and the universe? They also must have the same nature. Is it material, psychic, or neutral?

Discovering intensively Fechner’s ontology from 1904 onwards, William James felt sympathy for his conception of superhuman consciousness, calling it empiricist pantheism⁵¹. Most scholars name such a type of ontology panpsychism, or the view according to which everything in the universe is of psychical nature. In a sense, panpsychism contradicts radical empiricism, since the former prefers speaking about mental entities. Considering the whole universe as a huge continuum full of minds (souls, spirits, in Fechner’s terms) means that reality is not neutral- on the contrary, the mental is the prime source of being, it is an ontological entity of first class. James had not accepted such a view before the acquaintance with *Zend-Avesta*. He

⁵⁰ Moore, 1961, p. 129.

⁵¹ James, 1987, p. 628.

described his former attitude as follows: “We should also have to deny Fechner’s ‘earth-soul’ and all other superhuman collections of experience of every grade, so far at least as these are held to be compounded of our simpler souls in the way which Fechner believed in.”⁵² It resembles the Absolute invented by the British idealists like F. Bradley, T. H. Green, B. Bosanquet, and others. On the other side, Fechner remained a pluralist in spirit, focusing his attention only to the other souls, not to the universal one that envelopes everything within itself. He told about the souls of the plants, of the worms, of our fellows, of the Earth and other planets. James found support of his conception of religious experience in Fechner’s ontology:

The sort of belief that religious experience of this type naturally engenders in those who have it is fully in accord with Fechner's theories ... In a word, the believer is continuous, to his own consciousness, at any rate, with a wider self from which saving experiences flow in⁵³.

Thanks to Fechner’s works, James was inclined to believe in the existing of a superhuman consciousness; he became more open to world-views stating the unity of the world and the wholeness of all human souls. Even pluralist in spirit, James was not tolerating monism and especially the philosophy of British idealism. Thus Fechner’s influence could be found at length in *A Pluralistic Universe*. Hesitating between radical empiricism and panpsychism, James chose the former, at the same time labeling his convictions with the term “pluralistic panpsychism”⁵⁴.

David Lamberth asserts:

James’s radically empiricist world-view is, obviously, closely related to this sort of monistic scheme, substituting ‘pure experience’ taken collectively, however, for consciousness ... Formally monistic, James’s panpsychism is at its core a *pluralistic panpsychism*, pluralistic as to the nature of things which may be psychically continuous⁵⁵.

Therefore, **James did not adopt Fechner’s panpsychist ontology as a whole, but only some of its cardinal points.** Nonetheless, **he applied its principles to his own analysis of religious experience**, demonstrating how this kind of experience is connected with the presupposed existence of superhuman minds and connection between the human consciousnesses. The meeting point between the both philosophers was the hypothesis of a multitude of consciousnesses residing in a universe full of potentialities and chance.

5. Conclusion

⁵² Ibid., p. 722.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 770.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 772.

⁵⁵ Lamberth, 1999, pp. 57-8.

After all, said up to here, we can conclude the following: Gustav Fechner's conception of belief is based on some important principles of the Daylight-view, like continuity and analogy. This fact does not imply that Fechner's personal over-beliefs influenced his account of belief, for *die Tagesansicht* is essentially an ontology, and not a system consisting of personal values and instructions. Such a mode of thinking ascertained the distance required to keep the legitimation of belief on objective ground. Striving for a methodology for legitimation of belief, he formulated three principles: the historical, the practical, and the empirical. The historical principle appeals to the tradition and popularity as a main characteristic of any true belief. The empirical principle is grounded upon the assumption that all things in the world are similar to one another and could be known empirically, whether directly or not. The practical principle anticipates and even resembles James's account manifested in *The Will to Believe* and in *The Varieties*. It would be unjustified to claim that James had been well-informed about Fechner's theory of belief before writing *The Varieties*. Still, it seems that the American pragmatist felt Fechner as his spiritual fellow who had reached similar ideas by walking on another road. Actually, the both moved in opposing directions: **James moved from the individual to the universal**, from the psychology of belief towards a pluralistic ontology, and Fechner- **from the universal to the individual**, from a *Tagesansicht*-ontology towards validation of individual belief. However, their enthusiasm could be very well described by Stanley Hall who was acquaintance of the both: "He revered facts like a true scientist, but revered the visions of his imagination as a true soldier of the Holy Ghost"⁵⁶, words equally referring to James and Fechner.

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