

*Ex Nihilo*

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The Undergraduate Philosophy  
Journal of the University of Texas at  
Austin

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The Undergraduate Philosophy Association  
Volume II, 1997

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# *Ex Nihilo*

The Undergraduate Philosophy  
Journal of the University Of  
Texas at Austin

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Volume II, 1997

# Contents

Editor's Foreword ..... 5  
 The Algorithm I ..... 7  
 Jamesian Faith ..... 9  
 Error In Descartes ..... 27  
 Why Eternal Recurrence? ..... 35  
 Title in Geneva 18 ..... 49  
 In Defense of a Progressive Military ..... 53  
 A Modernist and Postmodernist Approach to *Notes From  
 The Underground* ..... 63  
 Against Popper ..... 71  
 Lament of the Furniture Makers ..... 85

*Ex Nihilo*: The Undergraduate Philosophy Journal of The University of Texas at Austin, Volume II, 1997.

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*Ex Nihilo* was produced by the Undergraduate Philosophy Association of the University of Texas at Austin. The UPA web site contains an on-line version of this publication as well as information concerning the organization.

## Editor's Foreword

To the reader:

*Ex Nihilo* is a publication which provides a forum to explore philosophy for undergraduate students at the University of Texas at Austin. It is the final result of the effort of many people: the students who produced it, the faculty members who advised, and the students who submitted their work. I would like to take this opportunity to thank all of them.

This volume contains reflections concerning faith, science, ontology, and society. Since all philosophical thought is not contained in hard essays, several poems and a short story have been included among the works presented. Philosophy is a discipline whose history spans millennia and several continents, possessing a diversity which we hope is reflected in this volume.

The second volume which you hold in your hand or see on your monitor is a testament to the dedication of the University of Texas undergraduates for the pursuit of knowledge. May there be many more in future years. *Philosophia Regina!*

Christopher Smith  
Austin, Texas  
Summer 1997

# The Algorithm I

*Christopher Cade Mosley*

The mass is panting, seething amongst the distant roar of the near past,  
Waiting and wallowing in a hollow, black following,  
Never crossing their thoughts or scat or whim.  
They look up towards the dais, raised a hundred feet . . .  
Stare blankly at the hazed faces they swore they'd never meet,  
And stomping to the front, as the drapes around applaud,  
A solitary figure took his stand amongst them all.  
There was yelling and curse  
Within rhythm and verse,  
Within translucent words about honors, and nations, and crushing, and  
patience.  
No syllable was split so no ear discerned  
The relatively genius words among the rhetoric'l turn.  
Every withe was willing, surfacing as worms.  
The mass shut out the wisp of what was once before  
And opened up their hearts to pride as their conscious slammed the  
door.

## Jamesian Faith

Jesse Bailey

(Winner: Matchette Essay Contest,  
Hibbs Scholarship)

In the end it is our faith and not our logic that decides such questions, and I deny the right of any pretended logic to veto my own faith." --William James

William James, in his lecture entitled *The Will to Believe*, outlines a method for determining our beliefs based upon faith in the belief's validity. In that essay, he states that this method is applicable to determining our beliefs in religious issues. The purpose of the first part of this paper is to outline James's method, and test its applicability to the religious question. The second part of this paper is going to require a change of gears. The primary purpose of this section will be to determine whether or not the kinds of arguments that James' makes for faith, and the kinds of arguments that I use to critique him, are applicable to the real question of faith, as it applies to people's lives. To do this, we will be taking a step away from James' views on faith, and take a more general approach to the subject.

The first step that James takes in laying the groundwork for his views on faith is to draw the distinction between live and dead hypotheses. A live hypothesis is one which seems to articulate a real possibility to a person. If a hypothesis does not appear as a possibility to a person, then the hypothesis is dead for that person. A hypothesis is dead for a person if the person sees that the hypothesis contains a fallacy or contradiction, and thus they reject it on rational grounds. It could also be dead if, because a hypothesis is foreign to the thinker, they view it as not being a possibility, even though it is coherent and non-self-contradictory. For example, if I present you with the theory of the "Chicken God", who created the world in such a way that there would be no evidence for its existence, and I am its only prophet, you would probably consider this a dead hypothesis. Thus, even though the theory may be worked out to the most minute detail, it can still be dead for the thinker because it holds no appeal to the individual.

It is important to note that the liveness or deadness of a hypothesis is dependent upon the perspective of the individual thinker. Whether or not a hypothesis is alive is not a matter merely of what is claimed by the

hypothesis, in the sense of it being a quality inherent in the hypothesis, but rather its liveness stands in relation to the thinker considering the hypothesis. It could be argued that surely some hypotheses are objectively dead, i.e. for all thinkers these hypotheses do not present a real possibility. For example, it would seem that the hypothesis that the world is flat is an objectively dead hypothesis. However, even this hypothesis, which for virtually all educated people is really dead, may present itself as a real possibility to some thinkers. For example, a totally uneducated African tribesman might not only see it as a possibility, but may never even think to doubt that it is true. For the tribesman, the hypothesis that the world is flat is certainly live, even though, unbeknownst to the tribesman, it has no possibility of being true.

James continues to lay the groundwork for his theory by drawing the distinction between forced and avoidable options. An avoidable option is one where it is possible to avoid making a decision on the option at hand. For example, if I ask you to either agree or disagree with US policy towards the Catawba Indians in the eighteenth century, you can avoid this option by remaining ignorant to the facts of the case, and refraining from any judgment on the policy. On the other hand, if I ask you to learn about the Catawba Tribe, or to remain ignorant, you have no choice but to choose one or the other option. Even if you refuse to decide, you will consequently not learn about the tribe, and thus will have, in effect, made your decision. This is an example of a forced option. A forced option is one where even by refusing to decide, your actions will accord with one option or the other, and thus you will face the same risks that you would face had you chosen the option you are forced into acting in accord with.

James then makes the distinction between momentous and trivial options. A momentous option is one where there is a valuable good to be gained or lost by your choice, or one where the option offers you a unique opportunity at gaining a good. A trivial option is one where the good to be gained by your action is insignificant, or where you will be presented the opportunity to gain it again, i.e. it is not a unique opportunity.

With these preliminaries established, James defines a *genuine* option as a choice between two living alternatives, which is both forced and momentous. James then states his thesis,

Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passionate decision,-

just like deciding yes or no,-and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (Will to Believe, 11)

We will refer to this assertion as Jamesian faith, and letting our "passionate nature" decide our beliefs in such cases as the method of faith. James sets up this thesis in opposition to what we call the skeptical attitude. He characterizes this attitude with the skeptical statement made by Clifford, "... It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." (Will to Believe, 9)

James begins his attack on the position stated by the skeptical statement by drawing the distinction between what he calls the absolutist and empiricist views of truth. The absolutist view states that not only can we attain to knowing truth, but that we know when we have reached truth. The empiricist view states that while we can attain truth, we cannot infallibly know when we have reached truth. James contends that while most of us are absolutists by instinct, we should realize that we are in fact fallible, and adhere to the empiricist view of truth; "...the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be truth or no." (Will to Believe, 16) He states that the enormous vacillations in the theories throughout history which have been labeled 'true' only to be later rejected, and the fact that no single standard for deciding objective truth has ever been agreed upon, should lead us to realize that we are fallible. We cannot know for sure when we have reached truth, and thus we should espouse the empiricist view of truth.

James then states that there are two ways of looking at our duty in fashioning our beliefs. The first is that we must seek the truth, and the second, that we must avoid error. These are not the same decree. Which of these we see as primary to our system of belief colors much of our intellectual life. The skeptical attitude, as the statement by Clifford reveals, implores us to the latter course, that of avoiding error. James characterizes this attitude as being fearful of "being duped". Contrarily, James argues that the risk of erring is small when compared with the blessings of real knowledge. By stating the difference between his own position and the skeptic's in these terms, he has accomplished two things: First, he has reduced the skeptic to the position of being controlled by one of his/her passions, namely fear. This is relevant because one of the major weapons that the skeptic had on his side against James is that James seems to be formulating beliefs based not on his intellect, but upon the emotion of desire to believe. Thus the beliefs seem irrational. However, James has here shown that the skeptic, too, is letting one of his emotions, namely fear, decide his belief. Secondly, he has made his position seem very

appealing by stating the dilemma in these terms, in the sense that no one wants to admit to believing something out of fear.

James goes on to state that in cases where it is possible to avoid error by suspending judgment, we should wait for evidence upon which to make our decision. However, there are certain cases where we are unable, by the nature of the dilemma to wait for such evidence. In cases where the option is forced, and the cost of losing the truth is momentous, we have no choice but to make a decision. James uses moral questions as an example of such a case. He states that in any moral dilemma, we are forced to make a decision, and do not have the luxury of waiting for evidence to arise that will tell us which is the right choice to make. Moreover, in most moral dilemmas, such evidence is not forthcoming, i.e. it is irrational to wait because we have no reason to expect such evidence to arise at all. Therefore, moral cases are an example of genuine options, where we cannot reasonably hold the skeptical attitude, and wait for certainty.

James further states that there are cases where our faith actually helps bring about the fact that we are hopeful for. One example that he uses is interpersonal relationships. For example, if we are to go on a picnic with complete strangers. We cannot know before hand whether or not we are going to get along with the strangers, but unless we act *as if* we knew that we would get along, unless we give them the benefit of the doubt and have faith that things will work out, a positive result cannot occur. If we stand aloof and venture no trust, we are sure to ruin the picnic with our lack of faith. James states that examples such as this prove that there are times in life where our faith in some fact, without sufficient evidence to convince us of its truth, actually helps create that fact. James states that since such cases exist, any position that cuts us off from realizing such truths, such as the skeptical attitude, should be rejected.

James then takes the decisive step in his argument by attempting to apply this method of faith to religious questions. James states that since the method of faith only applies when both alternatives are living, that for any person who is a hard-line atheist- to whom religion and spirituality offer no appeal- he has no answer. He speaks to "the 'saving remnant' alone", i.e. to those who see religion as a possible truth. James further states that the religious question is a momentous option. The good to be gained- salvation- is vital, and religion is our only, unique opportunity to achieve this good. He then states that the religious question is a forced option. He states that by being skeptical towards the question and suspending judgment, we lose the good as surely as if we had chosen to be atheists. In other words, we either live our lives as if there existed a spiritual reality, or we do not, and the middle is excluded. James thus

states that the religious question is a genuine option, and, in his opinion, unsolvable on purely intellectual grounds, and thus the method of faith is applicable.

James goes on to state that following a logic that excludes belief based upon our faith is shown to be even more illogical when it is considered that to some the eternal, i.e. religious, aspect of the world is seen as not just an impersonal *it*, but as a *thou*, or a personal being of some sort. In this light, James completes the analogy to interpersonal relationships by stating that if, in fact, the eternal aspect of the universe is a personal being, we may lose our opportunity to gain the good that religion offers if we refuse to meet the hypothesis "halfway". In other words, if we attempt to stand aloof and not venture our trust in any religious reality until evidence presents itself, we may be cutting ourselves off from the realization of existent, spiritual truths. These truths might, in fact, be made more readily apparent to us if we venture our faith before hand, without waiting for such evidence to come to us. Just as in earthly personal relationships, where we often need to trust that we will be accepted, without any evidence to that effect, before our acceptance even becomes a possibility.

The first point of contention that I have with James is in the applicability of his method of faith to the actual choice of a religious faith. We shall use for our example the choice of whether or not to be Christian. For the method of faith to be applicable this would need to be a forced option.

The first question to be asked is what to we mean by "being Christian"? The obvious answer is : to follow the dictates of Christianity, as presented in the Bible. This answer is insufficient, in that we do not know which ones we necessarily must follow to be Christian. Surely the different denominations within the heading of Christianity : Protestantism, Catholicism, etc., all follow different dictates, yet the followers of each are referred to as Christians. Surely, then it is not necessary to follow *all* the dictates of the Bible to be considered Christian. But then the problem arises : which dictates must one necessarily follow to be Christian? If there is no set rule to answer this question, then the option between following the dictates of the Bible, i.e. being Christian, or not is not a forced question; it could be avoided by following *some* of the dictates. It can be seen that developing such a decisive set of beliefs is near impossible with any religion, Christianity included. If we tried to narrow it down to one belief which delineated Christians from non-Christians, for example, belief in the divinity of Christ, then perhaps the question would be a forced

