

The Ethics of Belief: William Clifford versus William James

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The Ethics of Belief

Dr. Peter Krey, Fall Semester, 2004
Diablo Valley College, Pleasant Hill, CA

In the "Ethics of Belief," William Clifford argued that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." [1] The example that Clifford gives of the immorality of belief without evidence is that of a ship owner, who forgoes an overhaul of his ship, overcoming his doubts, and believing his ship sea-worthy, rather than going through the expense of checking it and making the necessary repairs. This example is one that plays off belief against self-interest. The ship owner overcomes his doubts for the sake of self-interest. He then collects his insurance, while everyone in his ship dies at sea, because the vessel had proven unseaworthy.

Clifford generalizes from this narrative to all matters of belief, where evidence is insufficient. "It is never lawful to stifle a doubt." he writes. When someone retorts, "But I am a busy man; I have no time for a long course of study which would make me in any degree a competent judge of certain questions, or even be able to understand the nature of the arguments." Clifford responds, "Then he should have no time to believe."

In "The Will to Believe," William James argues that we have a right to believe in some cases, when supporting evidence may be inadequate. [2] Moral decisions, for example, are made when two conflicting values present themselves and a choice has to be made between them. Clifford's scientific and skeptical suspension of belief is not helpful in such cases. Religious beliefs would constitute another example.

While Clifford globalizes his mandate for avoiding error, James shows that life's decisions are far more nuanced than Clifford realizes. First of all some issues are alive or dead for a person, like live or dead wires for an electrician. Secondly, some decisions are forced or avoidable, and thirdly some are momentous or trivial. Now when Clifford negates all belief without evidence in order to avoid error, he does not recognize that some decisions are forced and momentous. Not to make a decision is to make a decision in such a case. Not to choose an option brings about the loss of the truth or good that could have been experienced. One can avoid making a decision to go on a trip until it is too late to go.

Religious belief is a forced and momentous option for James because it is like getting married: to delay it indefinitely because one could not be perfectly sure that it would not lead to a divorce, would forfeit the good of the marriage. The analogy is of course, for the good that religious belief brings the believer. Such beliefs bring the realities their assertions refer to into existence. Of course, whether or not one takes an umbrella along in the morning is not a forced option: one could stay home; it is more trivial than momentous. Whether we believe philosophically that mind is a substance or not, is not a live, forced, and momentous decision for most of us. Some decisions, however, are live, forced and momentous and to suspend belief because sufficient evidence is impossible, would bankrupt much of the heart of our lives as we live them. James is writing about areas where clear-cut, objective evidence is unavailable. He does not, of course, advocate ignoring or denying real evidence. [\[3\]](#)

James speaks of the passionate existence of human beings, who cannot live by the skeptical suspension of belief that Clifford

dictates on all of life. James quotes Pascal: "The heart has its reasons that reason knows nothing about." [4] Religion says essentially two things, according to James. "First that the best things are the more eternal things, overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak" [5] and that we are better off even now with the affirmation of religion. [6]

I myself wonder why James does not deal with Clifford's example of the irresponsible ship owner? I believe this example reflects a categorical error on Clifford's part. He represents an issue of ethics as an epistemological issue of belief, doubt, and avoidance of attainable evidence. The ship owner values his money much more than the lives of those, whom he should have served. What Clifford wants to present in order to argue against religious belief is itself a violation of the love and concern for the lives of others that religious belief upholds.

To James's argument I would also add that there is a philosophical sense and a religious sense of belief, which are very different. Philosophically, belief is relegated to opinion and only reasoning has a claim to reliable knowledge. Michael Polanyi argues that personal knowledge is very different from detached and indifferent ways of knowing. [7] One observes from the outside the other from within. That "knowing" in the Hebrew Bible refers sexual intercourse, shows that it comes from commitment, participation, involvement, and even empathy. It is interpersonal and relational as well. Belief in this arena refers to trusting and committing oneself completely to the One who requires our ultimate concern, to use Tillich's phrase. St. Paul puts it this way: faith becomes active in love. The verification of this faith is experienced in life and the

evidence for it becomes real, because belief has the power to change a life into the promises that are believed.

After this is all said and done, even our most cherished beliefs need to be proffered for testing, questioning, and evaluation. Everyone is still called upon to give an account of his or her beliefs.

[1] From Michael Peterson, William Hasker, Bruce Reichenbach, and David Basinger, editors, Philosophy of Religion, Third Edition, (Oxford University Press, 2007), page 109. Clifford's essay appears on pages 104-110.

[2] Ibid., pages 110-117.

[3] Ibid., page 110.

[4] Ibid., page 113.

[5] Ibid., page 115.

[6] Here I am putting James into my own words.

[7] Michael Polanyi, The Study of Man, (University of Chicago Press, 1959), page 38: "The moment the ideal of detached knowledge is abandoned..." Polanyi argues for personal participation in knowledge. I believe that the knowledge which requires personal involvement is complemented by detached knowledge. In his work, Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy, (New York: Harper Torchbook, Harper & Row, Publishers, 1964), on page xi, he speaks of "knowing by indwelling."