

Florida State University Libraries

Honors Theses

The Division of Undergraduate Studies

2012

The Will and Ethics of Belief: Epistemic Risks and Moral Consequences

Nathan Duddles



Abstract:

(Ethics of Belief, Evidentialism, Faith)

Debate over the ethics of belief has centered around two famous essays: W. K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief," and William James' "The Will to Believe." The former argues that it is never morally right to believe or accept a proposition beyond its evidential support; the latter defends the moral permissibility of a specific class of beliefs, including religious faith-commitments. I present interpretations of both essays, critiques of some contemporary arguments they have inspired and my own account of how to morally evaluate forming belief and acting on propositions. My thesis is that we must take seriously the moral consequences of belief when evaluating and choosing between alternative belief-forming practices and deciding to accept and act upon a proposition.

THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES

THE WILL AND ETHICS OF BELIEF:
EPISTEMIC RISKS AND MORAL CONSEQUENCES

By

NATHAN DUDDLES

A Thesis submitted to the
Department of the Department of Philosophy
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with
Honors in the Major

Degree Awarded:
Spring, 2012

The members of the Defense Committee approve the thesis of Nathan Duddles defended on April 17, 2012.

Dr. David McNaughton
Thesis Director

Dr. Aline Kalbian
Outside Committee Member

Dr. Michael Bishop
Committee Member

Introduction

Debate over the ethics of belief has centered around two famous essays: W. K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief," and William James' "The Will to Believe." The former argues that it is never morally right to believe or accept a proposition beyond its evidential support; the latter defends the moral permissibility of a specific class of beliefs, including religious faith-commitments. In this thesis, I present interpretations of both essays, critiques of some contemporary arguments they have inspired and my own account of how to morally evaluate forming belief and acting on propositions.

I begin with a brief introduction to William James and his published collection of essays defending religious faith. Next, I introduce W. K. Clifford and explain his famous defense of moral evidentialism. I then provide an interpretation of James' counter argument in "The Will to Believe" and three contemporary responses to James that re-affirm some version of Clifford's thesis. In addition to my own criticisms, I consider a contemporary reply to, what I take to be, the most challenging objection to James' defense of belief without evidence. After seeing that this reply fails to meet the objection, I argue for an alternative Jamesian approach to defending the moral permissibility of religious faith. My thesis is that we must take seriously the moral consequences of belief when evaluating and choosing between alternative belief-forming practices and deciding to accept and act upon a proposition.

William James (1842-1910)

William James was born on January 11, 1842 to Henry and Mary James in New York City. James grew up in a unique and talented family; his father was a writer and acquaintance of Ralph Waldo Emerson and his brother the famous American novelist, Henry James. As a young man, William traveled and studied in both America and Europe receiving a solid education in the arts and sciences. While first wanted to be a painter, much to his father's disapproval, he later gave up his artistic ambitions and enrolled in the Lawrence Scientific School at Harvard University in the fall of 1861.¹ There he studied chemistry and undertook his own reading and note taking on a wide range of authors such as the orientalist Max Müller, the theologian Jonathan Edward and the Stoic philosopher Epictetus.² Throughout his life, he continued to read extensively in philosophy and the sciences.

After two years of study, James changed his focus to anatomy and physiology, and ultimately received an M.D. in 1869.³ Following a period of poor health and depression, James accepted an offer to teach comparative physiology at Harvard in 1872 and psychology a couple years later.⁴ In 1880, he was appointed as an Assistant Professor of Philosophy though he continued to teach courses in psychology as well. James continued as an active writer and teacher at Harvard and guest lecturer abroad, making important contributions as a founding figure of both functional psychology and American pragmatism. On August 26, 1910, James died of heart failure at his summer home in Chocorua, New Hampshire.

The Will to Believe – A Defense of Faith

¹ Richardson 2006, 39-42

² Ibid. 48-54

³ Ibid. 57-62, 103

⁴ Goodman 2009, 1

From 1890 to 1899, James spent most of his time traveling around the country giving public lectures and publishing articles in widely read magazines.⁵ Wanting a more popular audience and a better book contract than the one he had received for his *Principles of Psychology*, James published two volumes of essays for the general public; one of these was *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, which came out in the spring of 1897. The most well received essay, for which he titled the collection, was a defense of the “passionate affirmation of desire” for truth and goodness, which he believed necessary for moral and religious commitment. He originally considered calling the essay “The Duty to Believe” or “The Right to Believe;” the former, however, conveyed an unintended sense of obligation and the latter an overly legal connotation, though later conceded the latter was a more appropriate expression of the essay’s main thesis.⁶

One of many popular works on spirituality that came out in the 1890s, this collection of essays was very well received with new printings almost every year for the rest of his life.⁷ In the preface, James identifies religious faith as the subject of the first four essays: “The Will to Believe,” “Is life Worth Living?” “The Sentiment of Rationality,” and “Reflex Action and Theism.” These essays address existential questions of God, an unseen reality, meaning, the philosophical temperament, and religion and science. In the subsequent six essays, James takes up related issues of freewill, moral philosophy, the significance of individual lives, empiricist pluralism vs. Hegelian pluralism, and the psychology of psychic phenomena and religion.

After introducing his book as a defense of faith, he responds to some initial objections. The first is that most people are already overly inclined to accept claims without evidence. James

⁵ Simon 1998, 274-275

⁶ Richardson 2006, 361

⁷ Simon 1998, 276

actually agrees that the mental weakness of many people, i.e. the popular, non-academic crowd, is in “recklessly” following their intuitive beliefs, not being overly critical or cautious. For such a group, he claims, the appropriate treatment would have their faiths “broken up and ventilated that the northwest wind of science should get into them and blow their sickliness and barbarism away.”⁸ However, the young scientists and philosophers he addresses in these lectures have the opposite intellectual vice: their capacity to believe is paralyzed resulting in an inability to act decisively. It is important to remember James’ audience and avoid the interpretive errors of those who have criticized his philosophy for endorsing reckless, wishful thinking.

According to James, this particular cognitive vice results from clinging to an ideal of scientific evidence in an attempt to escape from the risks of believing.⁹ Instead of trusting in some method, scientific or otherwise, to guide between the dangers of believing too little and too much, James argues for, “courage weighted with responsibility.”¹⁰ According to James, as creatures with the faculty of belief we have a duty to face our epistemic situation and to wisely steer the middle course. While it may be tempting to interpret James’ defense of courage and wisdom as duties to ourselves, he makes it clear that there is a social element to our doxastic lives. If our beliefs only affected our own lives, James observes, almost everyone would practically agree on an individual’s right to believe and act at his or her own personal risk. The more contentious issue, however, is our right to beliefs that put others at risk.

In true capitalist spirit, James has in mind the “market-place” expression of faith. He argues that if it is possible for any religious hypothesis to be true and good, and if the expression and competition of such hypotheses is the only test of their truth and value, then we ought to

⁸ James 1896, x

⁹ Ibid. x-xi

¹⁰ Ibid. xi

allow religious hypotheses to be worked out in the public sphere for the public good, provided that the circumstances are tolerant and fair.¹¹ He also accepts that if religious hypotheses are proven false, as some think science has demonstrated, then we ought to censor their public expression and only allow private religious activity.

James puts forth two claims that, if justified, successfully defend public religious expression: 1) “that religious hypotheses *may* prove to be true”¹² and 2) that, if publicly verified as significant and true, they achieve a significant benefit for society. James needs to defend the first claim against those “scientist who would deny that dogmatically, maintaining that science has already ruled all possible religious hypotheses out of court.”¹³ James’ second claim seems to assume a body of sociological and historical evidence that undogmatic religious faith is always intellectually, morally and pragmatically valuable both for individuals and society and both in the present and in the future:

“Religious fermentation is always a symptom of the intellectual vigor of a society; and it is only when they forget that they are hypotheses and put on rationalistic and authoritative pretensions, that our faiths do harm. The most interesting and valuable things about a man are his ideas and over-beliefs. The same is true of nations and historic epochs; and the excesses of which the particular individuals and epochs are guilty are compensated in the total, and become profitable to mankind in the long run.”¹⁴

Before going on to see exactly how James defends the individual’s right to believe, it is important to understand the position he is responding to. Therefore, I will first introduce W. K. Clifford and his “The Ethics of Belief”, the author and essay that James presents as his opponent in “The Will to Believe.”

William K. Clifford (1845-1879)

¹¹ Ibid. xii

¹² Ibid. xii

¹³ Ibid. xiii

¹⁴ Ibid. xiii

William Kingdon Clifford was born on May 4, 1845 in Exeter, England to his mother, who died when he was only nine, and his father, a bookseller and justice of the peace.¹⁵ At fifteen, he began studying at King's College, London, and a couple years later moved to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he joined the "Apostles", a secret society of twelve students that discussed issues in fields of politics, theology, literature and science.¹⁶ Though a devout Anglican in his youth, his study of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution and Herbert Spencer's ethical writings led him away from church, considering it a hindrance to both scientific and social progress.¹⁷

After a fellowship at Cambridge and scientific expedition of the Mediterranean, he was appointed as the Professor in Applied Mathematics at University College, London in 1871. There, he was an active and outspoken freethinker, debunking paranormal and psychic phenomena, helping develop an experimental psychology, joining the Metaphysical Society, a group that met nine times a year to read papers and debate issues on the relationship between religion and science,¹⁸ and founding the Congress of Liberal Thinkers, a meeting of over 400 delegates from Europe, the U.S. and India. Clifford died of tuberculosis at the young age of 33 on March 3, 1879 in Madeira, Portugal where he had moved because of his failing health.¹⁹

"The Ethics of Belief"

On April 11, 1876, Clifford presented a partial version of "The Ethics of Belief" to the Metaphysical Society.²⁰ This essay was read and discussed after four successive papers on the

¹⁵ Madigan 1999, x-xi

¹⁶ Brown 1947, 5

¹⁷ Madigan 1999, xii-xiii

¹⁸ Brown 1947, 10

¹⁹ Madigan 1999, xiv-xx

²⁰ Brown 1947, 180-181

historical evidence and proof of miracles.²¹ Though a central portion of his paper argues against the value of historical testimony for various supernatural claims, in the published version we read today, Clifford extends his argument against religious belief to include a moral condemnation of believing any proposition without sufficient evidence.

J.T. Knowles, then the secretary of the society and editor of the *Contemporary Review*, a religious and philosophical periodical, had this longer version published in the January 1877 edition. “The Ethics of Belief” was so controversial that it probably contributed to the falling out between the journal’s more religious editor and Knowles, who subsequently left his post at the *Contemporary Review* and founded the equally well-known *Nineteenth Century*.²²

Clifford’s essay is divided into three sections. In section one, ‘The Duty of Inquiry’, he presents and defends his moral argument for evidentialism, the paradigmatic expression of which is taken from this first section: “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”²³ Though often interpreted as the summation of his thesis, I will argue that there is much more to Clifford’s essay, both in its normative claims and arguments.

In section two, ‘The Weight of Authority’, Clifford responds to an objection that following his ethics of belief results in an impractical skepticism. He then offers some claims and arguments concerning what count as evidence in matters of testimony, authority and tradition. Section three, ‘The Limits of Inference’, Clifford defends the permissibility of believing based

²¹ Ibid. 329-330

²² Ibid. 180-181, 185-186

²³ Clifford 1986, 24

on inferences that go beyond our direct experiences; he argues that we are justified in believing on the practical assumption, but not belief, that “what we do not know is like what we know.”²⁴

Of the arguments in these last two sections, I will only address Clifford’s response to the objection that his ethics of belief is practically impossible, since it helps to clarify the scope and nature of those claims most relevant to James’ thesis. Clifford’s later arguments deal with the more substantive issue of what counts as sufficient evidence for different sorts of belief, and, while necessary for following his ethics of belief, answering these questions is not required for understanding how and why he thinks we have an obligation to not believe on the basis of insufficient evidence.

‘The Duty of Inquiry’

Clifford opens his essay with a story of a ship owner who believes his ship is seaworthy despite evidence and doubts that it needs to be inspected and rebuilt.²⁵ Before he sends it off on a voyage to carry emigrants across the ocean, he becomes confident that it seaworthy through suspect reasoning (it has been safe all these years, it will be fine this year as well), by dismissing doubts about the honesty of its builders, and by trusting in Providence to protect the passengers on their voyage. When the ship and its passengers go down, he collects his insurance money and says nothing of his prior suspicions.

Did the ship owner do something wrong? Clifford claims that we hold him responsible because “*he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.*”²⁶ Though he believed that the ship would carry its passengers safely across the ocean, and acted with good intentions on that belief, we hold him responsible “inasmuch as he had knowingly and willingly worked

²⁴ Ibid. 36

²⁵ Ibid. 19

²⁶ Ibid. 19, Clifford’s emphasis

himself into that frame of mind.”²⁷ These statements could be interpreted in one of two ways: he is morally responsible for his unsupported belief based on either 1) the *fact* that his available evidence did not guarantee the truth, or at least high probability, of the ship’s safety, or 2) his *recognition* of this fact. This is an important distinction for understanding what Clifford means by “right to believe.” If the ship owner’s doubts are an indication that he recognized his lack of evidence, then Clifford’s thought experiment is meant to show that *knowingly* believing on insufficient evidence is wrong.

In case we think our judgment of the ship owner’s actions depends on an unfortunate case of moral luck²⁸, Clifford asserts, “when an action is once done, it is right or wrong forever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that.”²⁹ Thus, he concludes, we should consider the ship owner no less responsible if his knowingly unjustified belief turned out to be true and the passengers safely across the ocean, than if it was false and resulted in their deaths. For Clifford it is the “origins of his belief... how he got it,” that are the object of our praise or blame, not the truth or consequence of the belief itself.³⁰

As his heading for section one suggests, Clifford argues that we have a duty to form our beliefs in a certain way, not a duty to believe certain propositions. What action, exactly, is Clifford’s ship owner responsible for in believing his ship was safe? Immediately after condemning him because “*he had no right belief*”, Clifford explains, “he had acquired his belief

²⁷ Ibid. 19

²⁸ “Where a significant aspect of what someone does depends on factors beyond his control, yet we continue to treat him in that respect as an object of moral judgment, it can be called moral luck” (Nagel 1979, 59).

²⁹ Clifford 1986, 19.

³⁰ Ibid. 20

not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts.”³¹ And, as already stated, he is responsible to the degree he “knowing and willingly” formed his belief in this way.

Clifford offers a second example of blameworthy believing, in which the party at fault arrived at beliefs, not by suppressing doubt, but by “listening to the voice of prejudice and passion.”³² In this story, a group of agitators make public accusations against the leaders of a certain religious group, who they think are indoctrinating children by unfair and illegal means. When an appointed commission investigates their accusations, it finds that they not only had based their claims on insufficient, but were also ignorant of counter evidence that, if they had researched their claims, they would have easily discovered. Though each of the accusers actually believed the claims he was making, Clifford suggests that, if each one was sensitive to his conscience, he “would know that he had acquired and nourished a belief, when he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him; and therein he would know that he had done a wrong thing.”³³ Thus, Clifford claims that we not only blame someone else, but also condemn ourselves for believing on insufficient evidence by suppressing doubts or by following passions, instead of withholding judgment and making a careful investigation of the evidence.

So far, we have examined Clifford’s two initial thought experiments and his claim that we blame anyone, including ourselves, if he or she forms a belief about some proposition, knowing that they are doing so without sufficient evidence, either by not investigating the available evidence, suppressing doubt about the truth of the proposition, or letting irrational forces produce belief in the proposition. Some interpreters³⁴ have analyzed this thesis as two separate principles. “Clifford’s Principle” is a synchronic prohibition against having a belief that

³¹ Ibid. 19

³² Ibid. 20

³³ Ibid. 20

³⁴ Chignell 2010, 1.1, 4.2

lacks sufficient evidence, and “Clifford’s Other Principle” is a diachronic prohibition against forming beliefs in one of these non-evidential-regarding ways. I, however, interpret a closer connection between these two principles: we are responsible for knowingly holding a belief on insufficient evidence *because* we knowingly formed and/or sustained that belief on non-evidential grounds, which may include suppressing doubts, avoiding investigation or allowing non-rational inclinations to shape that belief. Thus, we might describe the main object of Clifford’s ethics as our *belief-forming practices*, i.e. those actions that produce or influence our beliefs.

An ethics of acceptance instead of belief?

Next, Clifford considers an alternative explanation of why we hold the ship owner responsible: what he did is morally wrong, not because of his beliefs but because of his decision and to accept or act on basis of those beliefs.³⁵ To analyze this possibility, he imagines alternate scenarios in which the ship owner and the accusers recognize that they have an obligation to investigate their beliefs, even though they firmly believe them on what they take to be good evidence. This alternative interpretation maintains that the ship owner is blameworthy for not gathering more evidence before entrusting the passengers’ lives to the safety of ship, and the accusers blameworthy for not researching their case before bringing it to the court and the public’s attention. This view, however, does not entail that they are wrong for *forming a belief* without sufficient evidence, but for *accepting* a proposition that they knew was unsupported by the evidence. Since accepting a claim is choosing to reason and act as though it were true,

³⁵ Clifford 1986, 20-21. While Clifford does not use the term ‘accept’ in this passage, the difference between his rules for believing and for acting on a proposition may be helpful understood as based on the difference between believing and accepting. As L. J. Cohen defines draws this distinction, belief is a disposition to mentally assent to the truth of a proposition and acceptance is a commitment to think and act as though a proposition were true (Cohen 1989, 368).

acceptance is distinct from belief-formation; we may believe a statement to be true but not accept it, or accept a statement but not believe it. The suggestion that we have duties of acceptance, but not belief formation, is a challenge to Clifford's thesis if holding people, such as the ship owner, blameworthy for accepting a proposition is sufficient for judging what they have done wrong.

Clifford agrees that even when we have no doubt about the truth or falsehood of certain propositions, as believers, we still have a duty to investigate our beliefs before acting on them.³⁶ Further, he considers this judgment necessary to deal with two situations: first for beliefs that are so firmly set that a person does not even have indirect control over them, and second, for those who are not yet able to control their thoughts and feelings.

In the first case, a person would still have an obligation to investigate the truth of what they firmly believe before acting upon it and could be held responsible for acting on their belief without confirming that it is true through a reliable investigation. This obligation, however, is not the same as Clifford's principle that it is wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. As I interpret it, an evidentialist ethics of acceptance is an obligation to have sufficient evidence for the truth of a proposition before acting as though it were true. This may also be stated in terms of degree: only assign a proposition the weight of probability that is warranted by the evidence when employing that proposition in one's practical reasoning. Clifford's ethics of belief is an obligation to not believe in a proposition beyond what is warranted by one's evidential support. The ethics of belief may also require investigation and judgment (or suspension of judgment), but for the purpose of keeping one's beliefs, rather than one's actions, accountable to the evidence.

³⁶ Ibid. 21

Second, he thinks an ethics of acceptance is necessary for those who have not yet developed the rational capacities necessary for gathering and evaluating evidence. In this case, obligations to investigate and reason do not apply, or at least not in the same way. Rather, they “must have a plain rule dealing with overt acts.”³⁷ I interpret this second case to refer to the sorts of rules we might have for children: we do not expect them to form their own opinions or make judgments about how much evidence is required before acting on a proposition. Thus, we do not hold them as responsible for either the way they form beliefs or evaluate the basis for their actions. Instead, we hold them responsible for learning what we teach them and following explicit rules of action, whether or not they accept the lessons or keep the rules through an independent evaluation of our evidence and moral reasoning.

Why we need an ethics of belief

While he agrees that we certainly have duties of acceptance, such as investigating some propositions before acting on them and acting on certain propositions whether or not one believes them, Clifford argues that such duties do not sufficiently explain the moral judgments we have about cases such as the ship owner or group of false accusers. Thus, he defends his ethics of belief as a distinct and irreducible source of moral obligation:

But this [our duties to inquire and act] being premised as necessary, it becomes clear that it is not sufficient, and that our previous judgment [of belief on insufficient evidence] is required to supplement it. For it is not possible so to sever the belief from the action it suggests as to condemn the one without condemning the other. No man holding a strong belief on one side of a question, or even wishing to hold a belief on one side, can investigate it with such fairness and completeness as if he were really in doubt and

³⁷ Ibid. 21

unbiased; so that the existence of a belief, not founded on fair inquiry, unfits a man for the performance of this necessary duty.

Nor is that truly a belief at all which has not some influence upon the actions of him who holds it. He who truly believes that which prompts him to an action has looked upon the action to lust after it, he has committed it already in his heart.³⁸

The first issue for interpreting this argument is to get clear on what “the one” and “the other” are referring to in the second sentence. He either means A) if we condemn a belief-forming practice we must condemn the action it suggests, or B) if we condemn an action, we must condemn the belief-forming process that suggests the action. I interpret “the action it suggests” to refer to the behavior difference a belief would make if added to one’s current state of beliefs and desires.

If Clifford means A), the conclusion that some ways of forming belief are blameworthy does not follow the premises: 1) some actions are blameworthy, and 2) if some belief is blameworthy, the actions it suggests are blameworthy.

Therefore, Clifford must mean B) that if some action is blameworthy, the belief-forming practice that suggests the action is blameworthy. Thus, his argument is that: 1) some actions are blameworthy; 2) if some actions are blameworthy, the belief-forming practice that suggests them is blameworthy; therefore, 3) belief-forming practice that suggest wrong actions are blameworthy.

However, unless the belief-forming practice in question provides some additional *motivation* to act, this argument seems clearly false: I can blame you for trying to shoot me without blaming you for looking to see that your gun is loaded. Since we often judge an agent’s intention based his or her motivation, but it seems odd to blame a means-end belief, e.g. “if I pull

³⁸ Ibid. 21

this trigger, the gun will shoot,” in the same way as an motivation, e.g. to shoot me for no morally good reason.

Though there are some beliefs that may serve as immoral motivations and we would blame accordingly, such beliefs are explicitly evaluative, e.g. “you are not worthy of life,” or “those people do not have the same rights as us.” While Clifford would certainly blame someone for having such beliefs on epistemic and possibly moral grounds³⁹, this is not the sort of blameworthy belief Clifford is attempting to establish. Rather, Clifford wants to show that it is morally wrong to hold any belief that does not have sufficient evidence *because* it does not have sufficient evidence. He does this by drawing a connection between un-evidenced beliefs and wrong actions, not wrong motivations.

As we see in the second half of the first paragraph and beginning of the second, Clifford thinks that certain beliefs can prevent us from doing our duties of inquiry and action. First, he thinks having or even wishing to have a belief on any basis other than “fair inquiry” makes it impossible to carry out an unbiased and complete investigation of the truth of that belief. Second, he claims that every belief, have some influence on our actions, whether immediately, or in the future, and on our other beliefs, since “it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others.”⁴⁰

While it is apparent how a passionately held belief could prevent us from investigating it fairly, how would such a belief prevent us from fulfilling our duties to act? Clifford points us back to his two examples:

³⁹ For example, John Bishop’s ethics of belief holds morally blameworthy any faith-commitment with evaluative content that is inconsistent with correct moral norms (Bishop 2007, 163-166).

⁴⁰ Clifford 1986, 21

In the two supposed cases which have been considered, it has been judged wrong to believe on insufficient evidence, or to nourish belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation. The reason of this judgment is not far to seek; it is that in both cases the belief held by one man was of great importance to other men.⁴¹

The ship owner failed in his duty to provide his passengers a safe ship for their voyage across the ocean because he formed a belief about the condition of his ship in an unreliable way. The group of agitators falsely accused the religious leaders because they formed false beliefs about the leaders' actions. They formed these false beliefs because they did not inquire into the evidence for them. From these cases, we might infer a moral argument of this sort:

- 1) If doing B is necessary for doing A
- 2) and X has an obligation to A
- 3) then X has an obligation to B.

The ship owner had an obligation to ensure a safe voyage for his ship's passengers. Reliably forming beliefs about the ship's seaworthiness was necessary for ensuring the passenger's safety. Wishful thinking and suppressing doubt was an unreliable way of forming beliefs about the ship's seaworthiness. Therefore, he was blameworthy for forming his belief about his ship in those ways.

In Clifford's second story, the accusers had a duty to make only correct accusations. In order to avoid making false accusation, they needed to carry out an investigation to see what the religious leaders were actually doing. Thus, they had a duty to search for and evaluate evidence relevant to justify the truth of their accusations before presenting them in court and spreading them in public. The fact that they were ignorant of evidence that was readily available to them leads us to believe that they were not even concerned about avoiding the truth of their

⁴¹ Ibid. 21-22

accusations. Thus, we hold them doubly responsible for their false accusations: they were, perhaps, intentionally negligent in supporting their claims.

Thus, Clifford's argument for why some belief forming processes are morally blameworthy is able to account for our moral intuitions about his two stories of belief on insufficient evidence. Of course, we could think of situations in which, all obligations considered, we would blame someone for doing what is required to fulfill one of his duties. For example, if I promise to pick up a friend at the airport I have an obligation to do what is necessary to keep my promise. But if, on my way to the airport, I come across an emergency situation of greater moral significance than fulfilling my promise, I should stop and help, even though continuing to drive in the direction of the airport is necessary for picking up my friend.

While we might think that such exceptional cases and conflicts between obligations might leave open the possibility that, in some cases, we would be justified to belief on insufficient evidence, Clifford is famously absolute in articulating his ethics of belief: "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."⁴² He arrives at his universal condemnation of unevidenced belief in two stages. First, he extends our moral judgment of the character's actions in his two examples to *any* act of belief formation, based on the claim that no belief is "without its effect on the fate of mankind."⁴³ Then, Clifford applies these judgments equally to *everyone*, regardless of role in society, education, resources or cognitive ability, since everyone's belief have some influence on the function and future of society.

Finally, Clifford characterizes the wrong of believing on insufficient evidence in a variety of ways: it is a stolen good, i.e. un earned sense of knowledge and power, it violates our duties to

⁴² Ibid. 24

⁴³ Ibid. 22

mankind, it risks the well being of others, it produces and sustains credulous habits, and it results in a society that neither values believing the truth nor telling the truth.⁴⁴ Clifford claims that these duties are so interrelated that to break one of them is to be guilty of breaking them all. According to Clifford, our belief-forming practices are so interwoven with our obligations to others and society that there is never a situation in which we could be morally justified in forming a belief in a way that would not guarantee its truth.

Is Clifford's ethics of belief practical?

Before considering the objection and response Clifford produces for his view, I want to briefly mention and address the question of doxastic voluntarism, that is, whether or not we have voluntary control of what we believe. One of the main topics of disagreement for contemporary proponents and opponents of evidentialism is the extent to which we can control and be held responsible for what and how we believe. While I do not want to go into the various positions and arguments, it may be helpful to note what capacities of control Clifford needs to assume for his ethics of belief if voluntary control is necessary for moral responsibility.

Clifford's ethics assumes that most people are able to investigate, to avoid suppressing doubt and to avoid being swayed by non-evidential influences. None of these duties require directly forming beliefs, though they do require some other forms of cognitive control. The first, inquiry, Clifford does not apply to those incapable of "controlling their feelings and thought."⁴⁵ Investigation requires a large variety of cognitive capacities, such as focus, memory, reasoning, judgment etc.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 22-23

⁴⁵ Clifford 1986, 21

People have different levels of ability to entertain doubt and to censor their biases, though we assume that responsible adults have this ability, at least at a basic level. Clifford also suggests that we can strengthen or weaken these capacities by exercise or by lack of exercise: “Every time we let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons, we weaken our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judicially and fairly weighing evidence.”⁴⁶ Therefore, Clifford’s ethics also holds people partially responsible for their intellectual capacities and character, in as much they had a choice in shaping them. That being said, I don’t think Clifford’s duties to inquire and to not believe raise any unique, belief-specific issues regarding volition and responsibility. As he himself recognized when discussing ethics of acceptance, we cannot be held responsible for those beliefs we have no ability to change, but we can be responsible for how we reason and act on those beliefs.

In section two, ‘The Weight of Authority’, Clifford outlines what he regards as sufficient evidence for beliefs based on testimony, tradition and inference. But before getting into his main topic, he responds to an objection that his ethics of belief makes impossible confident action, broad education and moral conviction. In response, he claims that those who have most fulfilled these responsibilities have acquired “a practical certainty” through the testing of “certain great principles... for the guidance of life.”⁴⁷ These principles include their moral beliefs about right and wrong social interaction and their perceptual beliefs that allow them to navigate their physical surroundings. Clifford explains that principles “never suffer from investigation; they can take care of themselves, without being propped up by ‘acts of faith’.” For those situations that require action but do not permit belief, Clifford claims, “it is our duty to act upon probabilities.” He explains that, when we only have only probable evidence, acting and

⁴⁶ Ibid. 23

⁴⁷ Ibid. 25

observing results is a process by which we can gain new evidence and possibly justify future beliefs. Of course, we also act on probabilities in order to achieve a desirable end; when this end is morally valuable, we might have an obligation to act though the outcome is uncertain.

Does Clifford apply his prohibition against believing on insufficient evidence only to beliefs that have been brought into question? If so, then Clifford's principle is a prohibition against suppressing doubt: "It is never lawful to stifle a doubt; for either it can be honestly answered by means of the inquiry already made, or else it proves that the inquiry was not complete."⁴⁸ However, because of different circumstance and dispositions, some people tend to question more than others. Would Clifford also consider less inquiring minds culpable for their failure to generate doubts in matters of belief (not including common moral and physical intuition)? Of course, he most blames those who let themselves form the "habit of believing for unworthy reasons" and "lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them."⁴⁹

Clifford, however, holds people responsible for an unjustified lack of doubt only in so far as they voluntarily brought about this state. I base this interpretation on his response to the suggestion that we blame people for their actions rather than beliefs: he agrees that that is how we should blame those who don't inquire because they have a firm belief or are unable to control their thoughts and emotions; they can only be responsible for what they recognize as their duty to act, and this may be a duty to investigate despite the absence of doubt.⁵⁰ Thus, in addition to the negative duty not to suppress doubt, Clifford includes a positive duty to investigate.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 24

⁴⁹ Ibid. 23

⁵⁰ Ibid. 21

If Clifford's argument demands we investigate some beliefs, such as traditional moral concepts and rules, but not others, such as moral intuitions,⁵¹ does it provide a principled explanation for why some belief need to be questioned, and others do not? The closest thing to such an explanation is his claim that moral and physical beliefs "never suffer investigation; they can take care of themselves."⁵² One way to interpret this claim is that our moral and physical intuitions are epistemically basic, though our intellectual interpretations of them are not.⁵³

Clifford's only statement of a positive duty to investigate is his example of the ship owner who says of his ship, "I feel it is my duty to have her examined, before trusting the lives of so many people to her."⁵⁴ Based on this example, Clifford seems to suggest that our duty to investigate derives from our duties to other people, or 'mankind' more generally; because our actions affect others, we must only believe and act on propositions that we believe true on the basis of solid evidence.

"The Will to Believe"

William James' interpretation and reaction to Clifford, "that delicious *enfant terrible*,"⁵⁵ is much less nuanced than the one I have just presented. Even today many people only know Clifford as a caricature of moral evidentialism. Though he does not take it upon himself to explain and criticize the arguments of "The Ethics of Belief," as we turn to James' "The Will to Believe" we see similarities between both essays in their connection between the way we form beliefs and significant actions.

I – Technical Distinctions

⁵¹ Ibid. 31-32

⁵² Ibid. 25

⁵³ Ibid. 32

⁵⁴ Ibid. 20

⁵⁵ James 1896, 8

James begins by postulating some “technical distinctions” for his psychological account of human judgment. The first is a *hypothesis*, which he defines as “anything that may be proposed to our belief.” Considering his example hypothesis, “believe in the Mahdi,” and how he introduces his essay as a “justification of faith,” it is natural to interpret his lecture as a defense of belief in a religious figure or institution. While James is not entirely consistent in his using ‘hypothesis’ and ‘belief’, I will always interpret these terms as referring to propositional belief and acceptance.

James distinguishes between hypotheses that are *live* and *dead*.⁵⁶ He explains that these properties are not intrinsic to the hypotheses themselves, but based on how plausible they seem to the one considering them. He also claims a strong correlation between one’s willingness to act on and one’s tendency to believe in a hypothesis such that the live-ness or deadness of a hypothesis can be measured by one’s willingness to act upon it. James describes live-ness in terms of degrees: the most live hypotheses are measured by “willingness to act irrevocably”, the least – the weakest willingness to act, and dead hypotheses – no willingness to act.

Next, James defines an *option* as a decision between two hypotheses.⁵⁷ Why only *two* hypotheses? Rarely are we presented with a choice between just two things, even when these are matters of religious faith. Because of its audience and context (the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown), James’ lecture is probably pointed at a specific option: students of philosophy in most American universities at that time were probably presented with at least these two possible faith-commitments: agnosticism or Christianity.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 2-3

⁵⁷ Ibid. 3

Lastly, James distinguishes between different types of options. Options can be categorized as: 1. *living* or *dead*; 2. *forced* or *avoidable*; 3. *momentous* or *trivial*. I will explain what he means by each of these classifications.

1. For an option to be *living*, both of its hypotheses must be live ones. A *dead* option proposes two objects of belief, either of which, or both, do not appeal to the decider as real possibilities. Because the live-ness of hypotheses is an agent-relative property, as James suggests, so then is the living-ness of options.

2. James describes a *forced* option as a decision between two hypotheses when there is “no possibility of not choosing.” An *avoidable* option allows one to choose neither hypothesis. James does not mention the possibility of believing in both hypotheses; thus, I will assume that an ‘option’ must be between mutually exclusive hypotheses. The example he gives of a forced option is, “Either accept this truth or go without it,” (3). Thus, forced options only occur when we are faced with a decision of whether or not to take a certain stance toward a hypothesis. Of course, there are many stances we could take toward even a single hypothesis: we might consider it false, possible, probable, or suspend judgment on it entirely. However, when obtaining or not obtaining a significant outcome depends on whether or not one fully believes or accepts a hypothesis then it is *forced* according to James.⁵⁸

3. Finally, James contrasts *momentous* and *trivial* options. The former are unique, irreversible and significant, while the latter are none of these.⁵⁹ His example of a *momentous* option is whether or not to join Dr. Nansen on his North Pole expedition. In this case, the choice to accept his offer is a once in a lifetime opportunity that puts a great deal at stake for the possibility of great fame and at the risk of disaster. His example of a trivial option the kind of

⁵⁸ Bishop 2007, 126-127

⁵⁹ James 1896, 4

choice a chemist makes between whether or not to test a certain hypothesis for a year. If he tests it for a year and makes a discovery, no great gain, and if he does not, no great harm.

I admit that I find the chemist example puzzling since I could imagine that such a decision would have a great deal of significance for the chemist and possibly for others as well. Academics, as much as explorers, have a stake in their work being successful and recognized. The choice between testing two hypotheses can determine the difference between a groundbreaking discovery and an unsurprising result, between tenure and a job hunt. Others in our society also have an interest in the success of scientific research, especially in fields such as epidemiology and medicine. Of course, James is not denying that *momentous* options exist in scientific practice, but only claims that “trivial options abound.” The point is that the *momentousness* of an option is based on the significance of its possible outcomes. This includes the opportunity cost of choosing not to pursue a hypothesis; while going on an expedition, for most people, would be a rare opportunity, the chemist could likely get another grant and test the hypothesis at a later time.

As with the living-ness of an option, the significance of a decision could be interpreted as consisting in the agent-relative evaluation of the hypotheses. James presented the live or dead-ness of a hypothesis as agent-relative based on the individual thinker’s tendency to believe and willingness to act upon it. Likewise, we could measure the significance of an option based either on how the agents estimates its potential outcomes according to their own, subjective values. Decision theorists have proposed both subjective and objective approaches to determining the probability and utility of each option. However, for the purposes of interpreting James’ essay, I will take both values of probability and significance to be internally accessible to the agents deciding, though this does not preclude the fact they can be either right or wrong about either.

An advantage of such an approach is that the person deciding has access to the probability of certain beliefs being true and false, and the value of holding certain beliefs if true and if false. A worry about this sort of subjective decision-making is that the agent can be misinformed about the likelihood and significance of their actions' consequences. However, an internalist approach to epistemic, moral and practical reasoning should not be interpreted as undervaluing our efforts to become informed about the objective truth of our evaluations, rather it is a mere acknowledgement that we cannot take into consideration that which we are not aware of; we are fallible knowers and evaluators and thus fallible decision makers. James' thesis allows for the possibility that one can be morally justified in a decision even though that it is, objectively, not the right thing to do.

II & III – The Psychology of Belief

James' second set of preliminary issues concerns "the actual psychology of human opinion" and how it is influenced by the "passional and volitional nature" and the "intellect."⁶⁰ He thinks of both of these as aspects of our psychology that have a role in forming beliefs, though in different ways and to different degrees.

In this section, he brings up two objections against thinking of believing as a choice between hypotheses. First is the thesis of doxastic involuntarism: it is not possible to change our beliefs at will. The second is that any such choice to believe that depends on our will instead of our intellect is morally blameworthy. James deals with the first, and then the second. This is appropriate, if the claim that you ought to do something implies that you can do that thing. If it were not psychologically possible to let our belief be influenced by our will "when the intellect had once said its say," there would be no sense in a proscription again doing so.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 4

Regarding the first problem, James presents a series of examples: from choosing to believe that Abraham Lincoln is a myth, to Pascal's wager in defense of faith in masses and holy water.⁶¹ In such cases, he suggests, we find that it is not possible to believe; the reason, James claims is because these hypotheses are, employing one of his technical distinctions, 'dead'. According to James, we are sometimes not able to believe by choice, not because our passional nature has no influence on these sorts of belief, but because either it or our intellectual nature has already done so decisively.

Next James considers the condemnation of such willing to believe by those Victorian rationalists. Such epistemic exemplars from the history of science, such as Huxley and Clifford assert that believing without sufficient evidence is a serious immoral wrong.⁶² He describes this "rugged and manly school" as a "system of loyalties" and a "scientific fever," making the point, as he does in the *Sentiment of Rationality* and later in the *Will to Believe*, that such moral values are no less products of our social affiliation and psychological temperament than any other philosophical or religious commitment.

In Section III, James addresses the first objection: that we do not, as a matter of psychology, will to believe. Though it is commonly thought that the intellect is the primary source of our beliefs, James wants to show that our 'willing nature' is behind most of our opinions. By 'willing' or 'passional nature', James does not mean our capacity for choice or volition, but "all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set."⁶³ James goes on to describe the many areas in which these non-rational factors produce our beliefs: popular acceptance of scientific theories,

⁶¹ Ibid. 5-6

⁶² Ibid. 7-8

⁶³ Ibid. 9

political opinions, religious views, belief in truth and the assumption of the uniformity of nature.⁶⁴ He characterizes such belief as “faith in some one else’s faith” and unbelief as not caring to make an assumption for which we have no use.

Thus, James concludes that the sort of decision suggested by Pascal’s wager *is* relevant to the formation of majority of our beliefs and that evidence and intellect “are not the only things that really do produce our creeds.”⁶⁵ Does James think there are any beliefs based solely on intellectual grounds? Perhaps he would say that some questions are answered on the basis of evidence though at the foundation of such intellectual justifications lies a set of passionately held assumptions that make such inquiries and arguments possible. This is the sort of perspective suggested by the way James characterizes two epistemological approaches in sections V and VI.

V & VI – Empiricism and Absolutism

James presents his thesis in section IV but does not defend it until section VII, after “a bit more of preliminary work,” thus I will hold off discussing his thesis until the next section.⁶⁶ Sections V and VI are dedicated to contrasting two ways of believing in truth and our ability to attain it: empiricism and absolutism.⁶⁷ While both are dogmatic in that they believe we can know things about reality, they differ on whether or not we can know that we know certain things. The empiricist perspective, which he considers more prevalent among scientists, sees our beliefs as fallible and open to revision, while the absolutist perspective, more common in philosophy and every day life “whenever we uncritically abandon ourselves,” is characterized by certainty about what we think we know. James suggests that both Catholic Scholasticism and Clifford’s scientific confidence in an “anti-Christian order” as examples of this more dogmatic

⁶⁴ Ibid. 9-10

⁶⁵ Ibid. 11

⁶⁶ Ibid. 11

⁶⁷ Ibid. 12-14

epistemology. He implies that their certitude derives from a firm belief in objective evidence and our ability to recognize it, and results in the ‘deadness’ of competing hypotheses.

In section VI James argues that the empiricist attitude is “the only one we can follow as reflective men.”⁶⁸ While he describes his own radical empiricism as living by a “practical faith” that we must never hold any belief as unable to be overturned by new experiences or interpretations, James thinks that a pessimistic meta-induction supports his approach. First, he cites widespread, honest disagreement over claims about the world and even alternative systems of math and logic. Second, he points to the lack of consensus on criteria for verifying true beliefs, citing examples such as Descartes’ clear and distinct ideas, Reid’s ‘common sense’ and Kant’s *a priori* judgment. Third, confidence in ‘objective evidence’ is a criterion of truth that has produced a host of contradictory beliefs. After presenting a list of such contrary conclusions, he claims, “there is indeed nothing which some one has not thought absolutely true, while his neighbor deemed it absolutely false.”

We might wonder how these observations support James’ own approach to “the quest or hope of truth.” As a supporter of one method among many, should not James list his own ‘radical empiricism’ among the epistemologies of Descartes, Reid and Kant? Does James argue for an account of truth and verification, as his concluding sentence may suggest: “if the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it, that is what he means by its being true”? It is unclear whether or not James is making these mistakes in *The Will to Believe*, which he later recognized and attempted to correct, by only offering his pragmatic conception of truth as “a live mental attitude,” not a theory to be defend as true.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid. 14-17

⁶⁹ Conant 1997, 198-199

We may, however, read this as an argument for fallibilism, that is, giving up “the doctrine of objective certitude,” which he here presents as the primary difference between empiricism and absolutism. James’ third observation is surely meant to show that one’s confidence in objective evidence is “only one more subjective opinion added to the lot,” that has led to belief in a diversity of conflicting opinions. This is to say that confidence in one’s belief forming processes does not supply any reason for thinking they are reliable guides to truth. However, if this is the extent of James’ argument, it is something of a straw man, since no absolutist believes in the reliability of some evidence *because* they feel confident about it, but rather feels confident as a result of some further beliefs about their belief-formation, namely, that it is reliable because it works in such and such way.

Does James’ argument show that no one should believe that he or she is a reliable knower? I think if one has a certain assumption that those who disagree are equals in their capacities to recognize “objective evidence”, then the conflict of opinions arguing on this basis will raise doubts about our reliability in recognizing it. Many absolutists, however, will believe that some people *are* reliable, or at least more reliable, knowers, and that they are one of these people. James might try to press such people into admitting that they do not *know* that they are reliable, and thus do not *know* that they know. He does not, however, pursue such arguments but simply presents both these ways of trusting in the existence of truth and our ability to recognize it. Thus, we must conclude that James does not provide conclusive arguments for his preference for empiricism over absolutism.

Ultimately, James’ portrays the difference between absolutism and empiricism as distinct methods of verifying a belief.⁷⁰ The absolutist tests truth by the sources of the belief, that is, the

⁷⁰ James, 1960, 17

evidence and reasoning processes that he takes to be objective and reliable; the empiricist tests truth based on “not where it comes from but what it leads to,” that is, by continuous testing beliefs by how they fit with new experiences. What difference does this make for James’ justification of faith? In the final section, he refers back to this distinction in order to buttress his claim that we have the right to believe before our intellect has gathered sufficient evidence. Since absolutism puts more trust in an “infallible intellect with its objective certitudes,” it may be more reasonable to wait for evidence rather than believe. However, if empiricism is right, and “no bell in us tolls” when we have the truth, “then it seems a piece of idle fantasticality to preach so solemnly our duty of waiting for the bell.”⁷¹

VII – Two Duties of Believing

James offers one last preliminary point before defending our right to believe. He suggests that there are two separate laws when it comes to forming beliefs: “*We must know the truth; and we must avoid error.*”⁷² James is particularly interested in making the point that these laws can be obeyed separately, such that we may avoid error but not gain the truth – by not believing an option’s false hypothesis, p , we don’t necessarily believe the true one, $\sim p$. Because these laws are distinct, James claims that we can choose between them and, by doing so, determine our approach to forming beliefs: “We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary: or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance.”⁷³

James interprets Clifford as recommending the second option. He claims that this choice is an expression of his “passional life,” which he thinks determines the relative weight of “these

⁷¹ Ibid. 30

⁷² Ibid. 17

⁷³ Ibid. 18

feelings of our duty about either truth or error.” Thus, he characterizes Clifford’s rule as “his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe,” in comparison to his own healthier “lightness of heart.”⁷⁴ From James’ empiricist perspective, we are not likely to gain truth without taking such risks and, since we are bound to form some false beliefs anyway, being duped is not something to be so afraid of.

IV & VIII – The Right to Believe

While James first lays out his thesis in section IV, he explains and defends it more fully in section VIII before applying it to specific cases in sections IX and X. He presents a summation of his thesis in section IV:

*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.*⁷⁵

James reintroduces his thesis in VIII by reminding us that he has shown that our passionate nature does influence our opinions and that we have agreed that it rightfully may do so, at least in so far as we accept on faith that there is such a thing as truth and error and that we have a duty to pursue the former and avoid the latter.⁷⁶ While James does not elaborate on his claim that beliefs about the existence and value of truth are products of one’s passionate nature, he compares the assumptions and aims of scientific practice with our moral commitments: we feel that things have *value* by consulting our “heart,” not the empirical evidence, which can only tell us *facts*.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ibid. 19

⁷⁵ Ibid. 11

⁷⁶ Ibid. 19

⁷⁷ Ibid. 22

This does not commit James to an expressivist theory of value, as some have interpreted,⁷⁸ rather he thinks of such value statements as one of the types of propositions that his main thesis defends. He does not deny that they have a truth-value, but rather denies that there are arguments that defeat or prove skepticism about values any more than there are for skepticism about facts. Therefore, “when we stick to it that there *is* truth (be it of either kind), we do so with our whole nature, and resolve to stand or fall by the results. The sceptic with his whole nature adopts the doubting attitude: but which of us is the wiser, Omniscience only knows.”⁷⁹

Thus, James considers the affirmation of the existence of duties to believe truth and not believe falsehood as an initial concession in allowing belief beyond sufficient evidence. This first objection to Clifford is succinctly stated in his thesis: Clifford’s rule “*is itself a passionate decision, - just like deciding yes or no.*” Another way of articulating this criticism is that Clifford’s ethics of belief breaks its own rules: believing his rules for believing goes against his rules for believing.

Of course, it is easy to qualify in various Clifford’s rule in various ways so that it does not apply to itself. Clifford would probably do this by including the ethics of belief in the category of beliefs about right and wrong that are based on foundational moral intuitions but still require conceptual defense.⁸⁰ James, however responds to a different strategy. He wants to refute the claim that the best way to meet our total obligations, including these two epistemic obligations, is not to form any further passionate beliefs. He attempts to do this by presenting a substantive set of counter-examples in which our obligation, all things considered, is to let our

⁷⁸ Kasser and Jeff 2006

⁷⁹ James 1960, 23

⁸⁰ Clifford 1986, 32

passional nature decide. He defines these counter-examples through a set of conditions: the option must be genuine and intellectually undecidable.

Since we have already outlined the conditions of a genuine option: live hypotheses, forced and momentous, we only need to see how James uses them to distinguish cases in which we have freedom to believe from those we do not. When a social or scientific question is not important and urgent, James thinks that the best choice is to avoid believing falsehood by not making a decision. The ideal in this case is the scientific method of weighing the evidence with indifference to which hypothesis is true, but a passion for scientifically verified truth. In the case of most scientific questions, deciding on the true answer is neither significant nor urgent, that it would be better to risk truth than to suspend judgment and continue investigating.

Another very important condition for James' thesis is that the option "*cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual ground.*" If deciding on intellectual grounds means basing one's stance toward the hypotheses on the weight of evidence, then options will always be decidable on intellectual grounds: when the evidence does not conclusively point to the hypothesis being true or false, then the evidence points to some degree of probability, and thus a degree of partial belief. While this reading presents a problem for James' thesis, John Bishop provides another interpretation of this condition that, he argues, resolves this 'degrees of belief' challenge.⁸¹ He proposes that an option is "essentially evidentially undecidable" when it is forced in a way that what is at stake in our decision depends whether or not we fully take the hypothesis in question to be true, and when it is not possible to obtain any evidence that could give sufficient support for taking it to be true. Bishop produces arguments that theistic hypotheses do meet these conditions because they require complete commitment in order to serve their

⁸¹ Bishop 2007, 130-134

important role of “highest-order framing principles” for religious ways of life, and that they are, by nature, unable to be proven true on the basis of the evidence available within our natural historical order.⁸²

At this point, neither James nor Bishop argue for this principle, since such a defense could only be made plausible by focusing on concrete cases in which these conditions hold. While Bishop only argues for the applicability of the Will to Believe thesis to theistic faith-propositions, James seeks to defend it for three sorts of options: moral, social and religious.

IX & X Moral, Social and Religious Options

Finally, James asks whether there are such forced options in our “speculative questions” that cannot wait for scientific proof. The first he considers are questions of moral value.⁸³ As we have already seen, James thinks that the existence of moral values cannot be proven. Instead, the issue of whether or not to believe that there are any moral values “is decided by our will.” Again, this does not mean that there is not fact of the matter, but that cannot know for certain whether or not we are right in our beliefs.

The second set of questions James proposes as instances of our right to believe are questions of social interactions and others’ intentions.⁸⁴ James points out that, in these cases, “the desire for a certain kind of truth here bring about that special truth’s existence.” He cites examples of believing someone loves you, believing you will obtain promotions, and believing others will cooperate with you. In all these instances, the likelihood of these beliefs being true increases by acting on them. James believes that these examples present a serious challenge to Clifford’s rule.

⁸² Ibid. 140-145

⁸³ James, 1960, 22-23

⁸⁴ Ibid. 23-25

Lastly, James turns to religious options in section X. In order to encompass a broad range of religious hypotheses, James defines religion as saying two things: “the best things are the more eternal things,”⁸⁵ and, “we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.”⁸⁶ Based on this definition, James claims that religious options are both momentous and forced. Since religious hypotheses, by James’ definition, are claims about what is most valuable and must be attained by believing, they present a significant decision about what to believe. Further, they are forced because we risk losing the highest good *now* by not believing.

Finally, the right to believe beyond the evidence is only possible for those who consider some religious hypotheses to be a real possibility; thus he urges his listeners to not think of some religious hypotheses that is dead to them but to consider “the religious question as it really puts itself to concrete men,” and “all the possibilities which both practically and theoretically it involves.”⁸⁷ Though for some, there will be no live religious hypotheses, this exercise in sympathetic imagination is an important aspect of James’ thesis: that we ought “delicately and profoundly to respect on another’s mental freedom.”⁸⁸ Thus, he accepts that not everyone will have freedom to have religious beliefs. For those who do not, he wants to convince them that others have the right to believe and they should not “issue vetoes” or “bandy words of abuse” to such believers.

James gives two arguments for the rationality of weighing the value of religious truth over the danger of religious falsehood. Both of these are restatements of earlier arguments but applied specifically to religious decisions. The first of these comes from section VII: James characterizes the skeptical position as an excessive fear of error and lack of hope in the truth of a

⁸⁵ Ibid. 25

⁸⁶ Ibid. 26

⁸⁷ Ibid. 29

⁸⁸ Ibid. 30

potential good.⁸⁹ Though this position may appear to be the wisest choice to the skeptic, James argues that giving up the possibility of truth is as much a risk as chancing error: “what proof is there that dupery through hope is so much worse than dupery through fear? I, for one, can see no proof.” In the absence of such proof, James defends his “right to choose my own form of risk.” Of course, this risk depends on the possibility that his inclination to believe might prove be correct and of great value.

James’ second argument is in support of this possibility and the importance of belief for increasing both its probability and successful outcome. This argument relies on the similarity between the personal and social dimensions of religious cosmologies and the dynamics of interpersonal trust discussed in section IX.⁹⁰ According to James, if there is a personal force in the universe, then “some participation of our sympathetic nature would be logically required” in order to gain evidence and knowledge of its being. James comes to this conclusion based on his understanding of the importance of belief and trust for getting to know other people. And so, if our potential knowledge of god(s) also requires our initial trust, then we might never make their acquaintance if we followed Clifford’s rule. This leads James to claim that “*a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.*” While other have interpreted this as a premise in James argument,⁹¹ it is important to understand it in the context of James’ social argument: Clifford’s rule prevents us from gaining true beliefs about other people when it depends on having some initial un-evidenced beliefs about them.

⁸⁹ Ibid. 18-19, 26-27

⁹⁰ Ibid. 23-25, 27-28

⁹¹ Jordan 2011, 3; Wood 2002, 24

Evaluation

Does James' essay successfully defend an exception to the ethics of belief in the case of an evidentially undecidable, genuine option? To answer this question, I will analyze three contemporary interpretations and defenses of a Clifford-inspired moral evidentialism and John Bishop's recent attempt to defend a Jamesian moral fideism. I will then consider whether or not James' defense of believing on the basis of one's passional nature can be defended.

Clifford has three contemporary defenders that each takes a different approach to articulating his ethics of belief, though they agree with what is perhaps Clifford's fundamental commitment: that credulously believing is bad for society. Van A. Harvey presents a role-based ethics of inquiry; Allan W. Wood argues for a moral evidentialism based on duties to our society and ourselves; and Philip Kitcher produces a defense of Clifford's principle on consequentialist grounds. After examining each, I will consider possible Jamesian responses and evaluate their success.

Van A. Harvey – “The Ethics of Belief Reconsidered”

First, Harvey argues for role-specific obligations to inquire into and critically judge the grounds for certain beliefs.⁹² He takes the example of the ship owner to demonstrate why he was particularly responsible for the deaths of the immigrants because of his failure to carry out his responsibilities as the ship owner. Further, he was obligated to form a judgment of what he *knows* about the safety of his ship, since claiming knowledge, unlike belief, makes him answerable to the grounds of his claim.⁹³ From the post-critical perspectives of Polanyi and

⁹² Harvey 1979, 195-6

⁹³ Ibid. 197

Wittgenstein, the required grounds for such a claim would depend on its context, one's foundational assumptions and the "public canons of assessment."⁹⁴

Harvey contextualizes his language of duty to humanity within the Victorian society and its ideal of a healthy civilization.⁹⁵ Though the intellectual ideal of sound judgment and patient inquiry has been important throughout the history of western culture, Clifford universalizes it beyond the intellectual classes. Harvey explains this extension with reference to the increasing intellectual demands brought about by "the emergence of an industrialized and technological society that depends upon specialized knowledge."⁹⁶ Though what beliefs individuals are responsible for will depend on varying contexts and roles, "that we can and must believe reasonably as [sic] a role-invariant virtue of our culture." Thus, Harvey concludes that Clifford's ethics can be reinterpreted in a way that does not demand questioning everything in every situation, but situates the virtue of not believing on insufficient evidence within the society's "fiduciary framework" and with reference to the individual's specific cognitive roles.

Harvey further considers Clifford's ethics as it relates religious belief in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁹⁷ He observes that religious systems contain beliefs relevant to a variety of intellectual domains: anthropology, history, cosmology, metaphysics etc. Such beliefs are related in complex ways and permit a high degree of flexibility as they adapt to various challenges and cultures. When, later in the modern era, these specialized intellectual domains developed with their own procedures and standards, in addition to demands of responsible inquiry and belief. Taking his own discipline of New Testament history, Harvey considers the conflict of Christian beliefs and the "fiduciary framework of the historian." Though

⁹⁴ Ibid. 198

⁹⁵ Ibid. 199

⁹⁶ Ibid. 200

⁹⁷ Ibid. 200-202

he recognizes the risk of obscuring arguments by including *moral*, as opposed to just epistemic, criticisms into academic debate, he concludes that “it is because the vocation of scholarship ultimately informs the spiritual substance of our culture that moral appraisal in historical reasoning cannot be completely eliminated.” Thus, like Clifford, Harvey concludes by appealing to the health of society as the basis for an ethics of belief.

There are a couple considerations that may be able to insulate James’ defense of faith from Harvey’s role-specific ethics of belief. The first is James’ provision that an option must be undecidable on intellectual grounds. Thus, believing according to James’ recommendations should not result in violating the “ethos of a role-specific mode of inquiry.”⁹⁸ This, however, might be cold comfort for Harvey, whose own discipline has seen “the interjection of faith claims by traditional Christian New Testament scholars.”⁹⁹ If, as Harvey suggests, such a claim “inevitably short circuits the process of inquiry,” then James has a further problem: believing on the basis of one’s passional nature might dampen further investigation and sensitivity to new evidence and arguments, both essential elements for actively contributing to a scholarly discipline. This is an empirical claim and I will defer to Harvey’s understanding of his own discipline. Theoretically, one might be able to make a conclusion on the evidential unanswerability of a historical question, but the history of science should warn us from making such predictions. Though it may depend to some degree on the particular claim, it is unlikely that any historical proposition will remain *by nature* evidentially indeterminate.

Another possible response to Harvey’s role-ethics of belief is to focus on the acceptability of un-evidenced beliefs that are irrelevant to the individual’s role in and commitment to specialized domains of inquiries. As Harvey points out, religions contain a

⁹⁸ Ibid. 203

⁹⁹ Ibid. 202

complex interrelation of beliefs in which some may be abandoned “without altering visibly the framework of belief.”¹⁰⁰ For example, an evolutionary biologist might give up his literal interpretation of Genesis, while believing in the historical validity of the Gospels; a New Testament scholar might maintain his belief in creation, while suspending judgment on certain historical questions in his field; an engineer might accept literal readings of both creation and the New Testament stories without compromising his intellectual responsibilities as an engineer. Can Harvey’s role-ethics of belief sufficiently universalize the obligation of proportioning one’s belief to the evidence in order to find these cases blameworthy? Our next author agrees that there are role-specific elements within Clifford ethics, but does not think these are sufficient to explain universal application of ‘Clifford’s Principle’. As Clifford writes in response to such a non-specialist:

“But, says one, ‘I am a busy man; I have no time for the long course of study which would be necessary to make me in any degree a competent judge of certain questions, or even able to understand the nature of the arguments.’ Then he should have not time to believe.”¹⁰¹

Allen W. Wood – *Unsettling Obligations*

Allen Wood opens his book, *Unsettling Obligations*, with a new essay, ‘W. K. Clifford and the Ethics of Belief’, in which he defends a version of Clifford’s moral evidentialism: “a belief can be morally justified only if it is epistemically justified.”¹⁰² Though Wood does not defend an account of epistemic justification for his thesis, he interprets Clifford as holding some form of internalist justification such that our internal awareness of the evidence could influence

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 201

¹⁰¹ Clifford 1986, 78

¹⁰² Wood 2002, 3

our voluntary control over our beliefs.¹⁰³ In response to the debate over the extent to which beliefs are voluntary, Wood contends that Clifford's Principle only commits him to evaluating those "processes and procedures" that we have control of in forming our beliefs; while the ethics of belief requires that we become more aware of and in control of these processes, it does not hold us blameworthy for what we cannot voluntarily do, just like the ethics of action.¹⁰⁴ The fact that belief is not under our direct control as much as other propositional attitudes, is a reason for its special importance as an object of ethical consideration: it is a stable state, "an end of inquiry," that serves as a basis for our actions, understanding and communication, and therefore, adopting a belief puts much more at stake than adopting a 'provisional hypothesis'.¹⁰⁵

Next, Wood attempts to defend Clifford's Principle against a variety of objections, most of which he comes to through an interpretation of James' 'The Will to Believe'. The first of these is James' criticism of Clifford's excessive fear of believing falsehood and lack of interest in the truth. With the help of Hume, Wood reinterprets Clifford's Principle as requiring beliefs formed in accordance with evidence and thus as interested in gaining true beliefs as in avoiding false ones.¹⁰⁶ While this view is not expressed, it is certainly consistent with Clifford's essay. Against the criticism that evidentialism hinders action, Wood uses Clifford's same appeal to the necessity of acting on probabilities.¹⁰⁷ He also brings up the social demands of trust: might these be inconsistent with Clifford's Principle? In many cases, he thinks it is clearly consistent, such as when trusting involves having justified beliefs, lack of evidence demands mistrust, and a situation demands taking a risk in trusting without sufficient evidence, and thus without belief.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 4-5

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 8-11

¹⁰⁵ Wood 2002, 11-12

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 16

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 20

On the issue of emotional commitment to another person, Wood thinks that it depends on the case: emotion can either distort judgment or serve as a source of knowledge about the person.¹⁰⁸

Lastly, Wood responds to a view often attributed to James' 'The Will to Believe': we ought to believe when believing has advantageous consequences. He responds that Clifford's ethics is not consequentialist in form but deontological, though it is justified on rule consequentialist grounds, as he later argues. Thus, the ethics of belief cannot permit believing in those unique cases where unjustified beliefs prove advantageous. Wood claims that voluntarily forming such beliefs is either a form of wishful thinking or self-deception; thus it cannot be rational even if there is evidence that the belief will benefit us.¹⁰⁹

Thus, Wood produces two objections to James' Will to Believe thesis: the first based on an appeal to the importance of rationally based beliefs; the second is that James' defends religious belief on the unsupported claim that it confers some benefit. I will attempt to give a Jamesian response to each. One initial problem with both critiques is that they misread the Will to Believe thesis, or at least the way James presents it. Wood thinks that James defends adopting unjustified belief on the basis of purely non-epistemic advantages. James, however, describes the right to believe as the right to risk coming to false beliefs for a chance at gaining significant true beliefs. James considers religious beliefs to be significant because they are advantageous if and only if they are true. He never claims we should believe a proposition because it confers any sort of good. The aim of believing is truth; a false belief cannot be good, even if it brings about other things we value. James' thesis only permits believing upon insufficient evidence when an option is undecidable, meaning that it is at least possibly true but does not have enough

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 21-22

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 23

evidential support to epistemically justify the degree of belief or acceptance necessary to benefit *if it is true*.

Wood's first objection is that believing a proposition, while recognizing that it lacks sufficient evidence that it is true, "is possible only by means of some psychological process (such as wishful thinking or self-deception) that subverts our rational processes of deliberation and belief formation."¹¹⁰ While it is true that James defends belief based on one's "passional nature," i.e. our non-rational disposition to believe, this observation in itself is not enough to claim that James argues for forming one's beliefs in a way that *subvert* rational processes. While Wood might argue that *any* cause of belief besides evidential reasons do in some way undermine the belief's responsiveness to such reasons, James might argue that, even if this is true, all things considered, in some situations it will be more rational to allow such factors to influence our belief than not. Next, I will consider how this might be the case.

One possible danger of forming and sustaining beliefs through non-rational causes is that it would prevent us from being sensitive to new evidence against that belief. For example, if in trusting a stranger, I form a confidence belief in his good intention, then, when I encounter evidences that suggests otherwise, I might be less inclined to take them seriously and instead dismiss them as coincidences. Thus, it is important to morally prohibit any kind of *irrational* belief formation, such as brain washing, mind control, wishful thinking etc., that disable the believer from being sensitive to new evidence. Not all passional causes of belief, however, inhibit rationality to the same degree; nor, James might argue, is any belief completely free from such non-rational influences. Thus, there may cases in which it is morally justifiable to permit the influence of passional nature, provided that it does not prevent us from recognizing and

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 23

evaluating evidence to a degree that the belief results in more harm than good. For example, love may be blind but also helpful in initiating successful relationships, provided that it is not *too* blind.

Second, Wood accuses James of recommending such beliefs even when there is *not* evidence that believing will confer some benefit.¹¹¹ He bases this accusation on an interpretation of the religious hypothesis: it permits believing that a belief is advantageous if one thinks it is advantageous to believe that it is. Trying to pose such a regress for the religious hypothesis, however, does not work because James does not appeal to the second affirmation, namely that “we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true,” as a reason for *believing* the religious hypothesis, but for *making a decision* whether or not to believe it; the value of true religious beliefs is supposed to make the religious option momentous and forced.¹¹²

Wood also misinterprets the meaning of James’ claim that “*a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.*”¹¹³ He dismisses this claim with the observation that “any rule whatever that restricts belief in any way might conceivably shut us off from some truths.”¹¹⁴ Unfortunately, Wood fails to notice the context in which James makes this claim: it concludes James’ observations that if we refuse to approach others we will prevent ourselves from getting to know them. Further, he misreads James as making a claim about any rule “that restricts belief” rather than “*a rule of thinking,*” and, as Wood himself observes, “trusting someone can sometimes consist simply in being willing to leave yourself open to the risk of

¹¹¹ Ibid. 24

¹¹² James 1879, 26

¹¹³ Ibid. 28

¹¹⁴ Wood 2002, 24

betrayal by the person trusted. This is something you may choose to do without having to *believe* that you will not be betrayed.”¹¹⁵

Finally, we turn to Wood’s interpretation of the basis for Clifford’s Principle. After explaining the story of the ship owner and the intuitions it suggests, Wood gives an account of Harvey’s role-based theory, which he critiques for not explaining the universal application of epistemic duties. Instead of the view that all epistemic duties are solely based on roles in a profession or relationship, he claims that even for issues that people have no special obligation to form justified beliefs about there are “still epistemic standards to which they are answerable.”¹¹⁶ To make sense of these basic standards, Wood proposes his own explanation of Clifford’s ethics of belief that is based on duties to humanity and the self.

First, he explains that we have a moral duty to humanity to follow “universal standards of truthfulness and epistemic justification.”¹¹⁷ Wood comes to this obligation based on a view of humanity as an inquiring community that aims at achieving true beliefs. As members of this global community, we must make a worthy contribution to this effort. Second, he claims that we have duty to ourselves on the basis of the value of individual autonomy. Wood gets this obligation more from Kant than Clifford, who seems only concerned with the good of society. Wood claims that believing on insufficient evidence violates our duty to ourselves because then “we do not experience the belief as an exercise of our freedom but as a process in which some factor foreign to our faculties is needed to maintain the belief.” In contrast, “good evidence produces belief irresistibly, and yet in a way I experience not as a constraint on me but as the most evident exercise of my own freedom.” I find this emphasis on our experience of freedom

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 22

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 28

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 30

puzzling since Wood regards blameworthy unjustified belief as voluntary and, in some cases, an exercise of “wonderful miraculous freedom.”¹¹⁸

In the end, Wood argues that we should insist on Clifford’s Principle because of the pervasive harmful effects on society that habitually violating such a rule would bring about.¹¹⁹

Almost matching Clifford’s pitch of moral condemnation, Wood protests:

People come to feel that it is simply a legitimate part of free thought and expression to hold whatever views they please, and to employ all sorts of rhetorical manipulation to persuade others of these views, without paying any regard to whether what you say has any evidential support. If we do not see the profound evils all around us for which this habit is to blame, then I think we are suffering from a serious moral blindness.

While I agree that believing without regard for evidence can have serious consequences, I take this as an empirical question, not an object of our moral vision. Indeed, it would be credulous to attribute “the profound evils all around us” to credulity, without considering what sort of evidence would be required to support this causal claim and whether such evidence exists. Since Wood does not provide such evidence, I think he will agree that we should not accept this argument.

Wood recognizes the basis of this view of social progress in the Enlightenment tradition, which many have critiqued for its corruption of nature, harmful social institutions and war. However, he maintains that “it is all the more important not to give up on that spirit, and to admit to ourselves that the Enlightenment, and its radical followers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such as Clifford, were basically and importantly right.”¹²⁰ Part of Wood’s commitment is to the sociological theses that if a society does not give up belief in miracles, mysteries and

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 9. Wood uses Kierkegaard’s “knight of faith” as an example and concedes, “but surely thinkers such as Kierkegaard are not entirely mistaken in maintaining that there exist some beliefs that are reasonable approximations to this ‘ideal’.”

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 36

¹²⁰ Ibid. 37

religious dogmas, it will lose its “integrity and sense of human dignity,” followed by its quest to ground decisions on rational agreement and truth, and then “there is no kind of evil in human affairs that will not follow.” I have a hard time taking Wood seriously at this point, given that he does not even try to provide evidence for these beliefs; would he have us take them on faith? That would be ironic. A moment’s reflection will cast serious doubts about the justifiability of these claims on the available evidence.

On a historical note, it is interesting to consider how the disagreement between James and Clifford may reflect their different social contexts. James’ Progressive America, with its robust individualism and separation of private and public spheres, affirms the values of free speech and religious expression, as long as they do not interfere with others’ private rights or the function of public institutions. On the other hand, Clifford’s Victorian England, with a strong sense of social responsibility and national identity, was more concerned with the improvement of society and the development of enlightened civilization, both at home and through imperialism abroad. I think it is helpful to connect James and Clifford to certain social structures, not because they explain the genesis of their intellectual ideals, but because they help us to understand what social consequences the authors expect their ideas to bring about.

Philip Kitcher – “A Pragmatist’s Progress”

In a collection on James’ *Varieties of Religious Experience*, Philip Kitcher contributes an essay that interprets *Varieties*’ seemingly inconsistent defense of mystical experience through James’ response to Clifford in ‘The Will to Believe’.¹²¹ In the first half of his essay, Kitcher argues that *Varieties* cannot be read as a simple pragmatic argument, since he is concerned with

¹²¹ Kitcher 2004

the veridicality of mystical states, nor can it be an evidential argument for the reliability of such states. Instead, James suggests, “they offer us *hypotheses*, hypotheses which we may voluntarily ignore, but which as thinkers we cannot possibly upset.”¹²² To make sense of this suggestion, Kitcher looks to the debate between Clifford and James, and draws his own conclusion on the permissibility of religious belief.

First, Kitcher observes that both Clifford and James share the view that there can be no religious *knowledge*, given the current scientific, historical and philosophical understanding of religious belief and perception. Their debate concerns the *right*, not *justification*, of holding such beliefs.¹²³ Since James bases his argument on the genuine good that adopting religious beliefs can bring about, Kitcher points out weakness in his argument: he does not show that actual religious beliefs do bring about some good. Instead, James gerrymanders his definition of the “religious hypothesis,” so that the “good consequences will come for free – but the issue ultimately requires a vast amount of empirical detail.”¹²⁴

Thus, Kitcher sees the *Varieties* as filling out James’ Will to Believe argument by demonstrating the positive results of concrete religious experiences, while, at the same time, defending the possibility that they are veridical. As James says, “How, you say, can religion, which believes in two worlds and an invisible order, be estimated by the adaptation of its fruits to this order alone? It is its *truth*, not its utility, you insist, upon which our verdict ought to depend.”¹²⁵ Thus, James’ defense of religion depends both on the probability of good results in this world (the second claim of the “religious hypothesis”) and the possibility of being true. Kitcher concludes that, without his specific accounts found in the *Varieties*, James’ “religious

¹²² James 1985, 338-339. Quoted by Kitcher, *ibid.* 108-109

¹²³ Kitcher 2004, 109

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* 113-114

¹²⁵ James 1985, 300. Quoted by Kitcher 2004, 108

hypothesis” has some major problems: it does not have enough content to support any actual religious belief, and it fails to fit James’ class of exceptions to Clifford’s rule because it does not show that failing to decide results in a sure loss of some good, i.e. that religious options are momentous.¹²⁶

In order to establish whether or not these arguments are successful, Kitcher presents an interpretation of Clifford before evaluating James’ response. According to Kitcher, there are two possible sources of Clifford’s principle: a duty to have justified beliefs, or the duty to promote good consequences.¹²⁷ He interprets Wood as adopting the former, based on duties to humanity “as a community of inquiry”, and to develop one’s own autonomy. Kitcher, however, opts for the latter, based on the possibility that Clifford’s principle could conflict with our duty to advancing human welfare. In such a case, “the conflict would have to be resolved by appealing to the expected consequences.”¹²⁸ Thus, James is correct in his approach to defending an exception to Clifford’s principle. While I have interpreted Wood more in line with Kitcher as ultimately justifying his moral evidentialism on the basis of its social consequences, I do not think that this is even necessary for accepting both Wood’s and Kitcher’s proposition that Clifford’s principle can be subordinated to other obligations. Even if we have a basic duty to hold true, significant beliefs, the duty to promote the welfare of others could be more important in cases of conflict. That being said, I agree with both Wood and Kitcher that our obligation to have true beliefs about significant issues can be derived from their instrumental value in obtaining other human

¹²⁶ Kitcher 2004, 111-113

¹²⁷ Ibid. 116

¹²⁸ *ibid.* 116

goods. As Kitcher observes, what makes truths “significant” is based on more than epistemic value.¹²⁹

Kitcher develops his defense of the possibility of exceptions with two examples. The first is of an important scientist believing against the medical evidence that he will recover. This belief is instrumental to his recovery and continued contribution to the progress of scientific research and discussion.¹³⁰ Surely, this is a case that both Wood and Clifford would be tempted to accept as an exception to their ethics of belief, since it permits the intellectual progress they are so eager to defend. The second class of examples Kitcher draws from the history of science: radically new theories were advanced and eventually verified and accepted by the community because certain maverick scientists not only pursued, but fully committed, to their unsupported ideas.¹³¹ Thus, he concludes, as long as the *community* of inquirers demands sufficient evidence before accepting propositions, in the long run, it benefits from having a diversity of approaches: both cautious and risky.

Next, Kitcher considers Peter van Inwagen’s argument against Clifford’s Principle on the basis of similar observations: professional domains of inquiry often have individuals forming beliefs before gathering evidential support and this does not have negative consequences.¹³² Kitcher critiques Van Inwagen’s argument for not understanding the consequentialist basis of Clifford’s Principle, and thus failing to see how it would apply differently to academic and non-academic communities of inquiry. Because Clifford was concerned with the advancement of knowledge and avoidance of dangerous errors, unless a community possesses the same critical mechanisms for testing such unjustified beliefs, then believing on insufficient evidence *does*

¹²⁹ Ibid. 117

¹³⁰ Ibid. 117-118

¹³¹ Ibid. 118-119

¹³² Ibid. 119-120; Van Inwagen 1996, 137-153

bring about an epistemically worse-off community and *does* violate the spirit of Clifford's principle.

Lastly, Kitcher connects James' disagreement with Clifford over the relative values of true and false belief, to his empirical assertions in *Varieties*.¹³³ He contends that both James' thesis and Clifford's principle must be judged based whether they figure "as part of a system of belief formation and regulation that produces states of the highest expected value, where the value concerned embodies not only our doxastic and epistemic ideals but *all* our ideals." While he thinks Clifford's principle fails to apply in its absolute form to his two examples, the permissibility of accepting a religious belief that has insufficient evidence is still an open question and must be evaluated on the same consequentialist basis.

This cannot be accomplished without studying the "*systematic* effects of religious practice (effects that are likely to remain even when other social practices are modified) that *dominate* among the set of consequences (by having a larger contribution to the overall value)." He continues on with an explanation of James' division between the "healthy-minded" and the "sick soul," the former being inevitably the result of ignoring the existence of suffering, not only on insufficient evidence, but also against the available evidence. Next, James shows how various religious experiences provide a solution to the "sick soul," which is preferable to the alternatives of not accepting the facts of the human condition "by endorsing some form of (healthy-minded) religion or by insisting on the completeness of science."¹³⁴ While I see how James rejects a counter-evidential faith in the lack of evil in the world, I do not see where in *Varieties* he rejects

¹³³ Ibid. 122-125

¹³⁴ Ibid. 125

scientism based on the refusal to acknowledge such evil.¹³⁵ I see no reason to exclude faith in science and the progress of a rationalist society *ex hypothesis*. Rather, it is to be evaluated along the same consequentialist lines as other hypotheses.

Finally, Kitcher considers the conflict between James' positive evaluation of religious personal transformation and Clifford's negative evaluation of unjustified belief that corrupts the intellectual and social pursuits of society.¹³⁶ James' strategies in *Varieties* are to isolate mystical experience from intellectual pursuit and to blame and outright reject the social dimensions of religious belief, "the spirit of corporate dominion."¹³⁷ Because James seeks to isolate the effect of religious belief, Kitcher worries if that James will be unable to defend actual religious hypotheses, as they present themselves to "concrete men."¹³⁸ Perhaps, then his *Varieties* does not provide the sort of account of religious experience to give content to the anemic "religious hypotheses" in 'The Will to Believe'. Kitcher expresses this problem as "Clifford's dilemma:"

Either the adoption of religious belief does make a difference to human judgments and actions, in which case the consequences are likely to be harmful and to outweigh the good effects of the transformation of the life of the individual; or else the adoption is always overridden in practical situations by secular considerations, in which case the belief is empty.¹³⁹

Using two characters, Ernest, who represents the first horn of the dilemma, and Faith, who represents the second, Kitcher concludes that the only way to escape this dilemma is "to find a way of embedding Ernest's beliefs in a system of norms that prevents the harmful effects, without such complete subordination that made Faith seem a believer in name only."¹⁴⁰ The

¹³⁵ Kitcher sites *Varieties* 102-105 for James' rejection of scientism. But the only discussion of scientists, on 102, points out that their belief in the impersonal nature of all reality is as unfalsifiable as the mind-cure devotee's belief in the personal nature of reality.

¹³⁶ Ibid. 126

¹³⁷ James 1985, 271. Quoted by Kitcher 2004, 127

¹³⁸ James 1960, 32

¹³⁹ Kitcher 2004, 128

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 129

problem, according to Kitcher, is that religious beliefs, as we know them, have greater authority for the believer than secular empirical inquiry and morality. Neither is it possible to follow Mill's isolation of religious belief with the division of private and public life; even in private affairs, such beliefs can give rise to harmful consequences.¹⁴¹ Thus, Kitcher concludes that James can only succeed in defending a very narrow role for justified religious belief: to provide a personal hope and comfort that one's life has some greater meaning and security.¹⁴²

While I agree with Kitcher that isolating the influence of religious beliefs to so called 'private' decisions is impossible, I think that he too quickly dismisses the possibility of integrating religious and secular beliefs, moral values and methods of investigation. At this point, we should remember Harvey's observation that systems of religious belief often give up certain beliefs and values, and thus become acceptable to local cultures without becoming unrecognizable.¹⁴³ Of course, James' thesis defends the right to decide on particular religious hypotheses, though it may be central to a system of belief; therefore, this observation does not provide an escape from the worry that his thesis could permit believing a particular proposition that contradicts secular standards of morality and inquiry. Could James' thesis permit these additional conditions and still defend a recognizably religious faith? In *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief*, John Bishop takes a related approach in order to limit the range of permissible belief on insufficient evidence in order to avoid objections that it is too liberal. He does so by adding values for epistemic and moral "integration" that prohibit believing theistic faith-propositions that conflict with the available evidence and correct moral norms. I will next

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 130 Kitcher uses a bio-ethics example to make his point. If a religious couple has the personal freedom to choose not to abort a fetus with a severe genetic condition, their decision will have serious consequences for the child, other family members and society's medical resources.

¹⁴² Ibid. 131

¹⁴³ Harvey 1979, 201

turn to explaining and evaluating Bishop's defense of James' thesis before going on to see whether it can ultimately escape Kitcher's objection.

John Bishop – *Believing by Faith*

Before I go into Bishop's "integrationist" conditions for his Jamesian defense of faith, I should say a little about what he takes to be the basis for moral evidentialism. First, Bishop presents the "standard view" of religious epistemology in three parts: a) the kind of justification required for religious beliefs is the evidential support needed for them to count as knowledge, b) our responsibility to have such epistemically justified beliefs is based on our responsibility to act on true beliefs, and c) meeting these requirements is based on our indirect control over how we form our beliefs in rationally investigating and evaluating relevant evidence.¹⁴⁴ He adds to this view an account of beliefs as dispositions to assent to the truth of propositions and an account of acceptance as taking a proposition to be true in our practical reasoning and actions. Bishop takes the ethics of belief to apply to both actions of forming belief and acceptance; the latter can be done with a greater or lesser degree of confidence and independent of whether or not we believe the proposition to be true.

While the standard view takes our primary responsibility to be about belief, Bishop suggests that the way we take propositions as true or false when deciding on morally significant actions is also subject to direct moral evaluation.¹⁴⁵ In support of this view, he presents the case of an Inquisitor, whose intentions in having heretics burned at the stake (in order to save them from eternal torment) is morally right, but his act of accepting the proposition that heretics will suffer eternal torment unless they are burned at the stake is morally wrong, assuming that he

¹⁴⁴ Bishop 2009, 41-42

¹⁴⁵ Ibid. 43-44

could have done otherwise, say by reflecting on the evidential justifiability of this claim.¹⁴⁶

According to Bishop, taking religious beliefs to be true has morally significant consequences for the ways we act and live.¹⁴⁷ Thus, the central question of justification in the philosophy of religion is the moral evaluation of acting and reasoning on the basis of certain faith-beliefs. Bishop seeks to articulate an “*ethics of faith-commitment*” that gives criteria for determining exactly what sorts of religious commitments are morally justified and under what conditions.

Bishop recognizes that some philosophers, such as Clifford on Wood’s interpretation, hold that committing to the truth of a proposition is morally justified only if it is epistemically justified.¹⁴⁸ Bishop gives a slightly more elaborate account of moral evidentialism that consists of two theses: *the moral-epistemic link principle* and *epistemic evidentialism*. The first thesis specifies that one’s commitment must have *epistemic entitlement*, that is, “*made through the right exercise of their epistemic capacities*” in order to be morally permissible. The second thesis, “epistemic evidentialism” defines this proper exercise as proportioning one’s commitment to the relevant evidence.¹⁴⁹ While people often act on propositions that were not formed in this proper way, Bishop does not consider these acts culpable unless committed knowingly.¹⁵⁰ Thus Bishop defines the thesis of moral evidentialism as:

the principle that people are morally justified in taking beliefs to be true in their practical reasoning only if those beliefs are evidentially justified (i.e. only if the beliefs fit the believers’ evidence, and are held by them on the basis of that evidence).

Next, I will look at how, in Chapter 7, Bishop defends James’ thesis that religious faith can be an exception to this formulation of moral evidentialism, against worries, such as

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 44-45

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 47-48

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 52

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 57-58

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 59

Kitcher's. that such an exception permits religious commitments that *conflict* with the what we know is evident and morally required.

Bishop first deals with an epistemic worry: he considers the objection that there are no non-arbitrary reasons for excluding counter-evidentialist faith while permitting supra-evidentialist ones.¹⁵¹ He responds by appealing to the epistemic norm of coherence among beliefs and the value for integrating one's various commitments and projects.¹⁵² Bishop, however, recognizes the basis for these values is a commitment to a monistic realist conception of the world: "*there is but one reality.*"¹⁵³ Thus, it might not be possible to establish integrationist values in a non-question begging way. Nevertheless, given a commitment to realism, Bishop wants to show that it is consistent to reject faith-ventures that go against evidence while accepting those that go beyond it. He argues that the best way to do so is to reject the thesis of *epistemic evidentialism* but maintain the *moral-epistemic linking principle*.¹⁵⁴ Instead of endorsing an ethical suspension of the epistemic norms, he changes the epistemic norm to line up with his ethical commitments. Bishop rejects moral evidentialism by denying the claim that sufficient evidence is required for *epistemic entitlement*. In place of this claim, Bishop claims that we can be, not only morally, but also *epistemically entitled* to holding beliefs not supported by the evidence on the basis of our "passional nature." We are never, however, *epistemically entitled* to holding beliefs that are contradicted by the evidence. Thus, Bishop attempts to avoid the objection that defending religious beliefs as a class of exception to moral evidentialism permits belief against what we know. He does this by prohibiting the ethical suspension of the epistemic but widening epistemic norms to allow for supra- but not counter-evidential beliefs.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 151

¹⁵² Ibid. 156, 157

¹⁵³ Ibid. 159

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. 161

Next, Bishop attempts to respond to worries that James' thesis is too *morally* liberal. He introduces this worry by considering a faith in 'Nazi gods' that fits all of James' criteria for permissible supra-evidential belief on passional grounds. Bishop provides two integrationist principles that he hopes will exclude such possibilities. The first is that any faith-proposition can only be held through morally acceptable passional means; this excludes the use of fear, wishful thinking, peer pressure, forms of mind control and so on.¹⁵⁵ Second, the content of propositions must conform to correct moral standards; they must not contain evaluative claims that conflict with other, acceptable evaluative claims.¹⁵⁶

Do these limitations on un-evidenced faith-commitments adequately respond to Kitcher's objections? They do not. While Kitcher is primarily concerned with the consequences of making faith-commitments without sufficient evidence, Bishop additional "integrationist values" are not concerned with whether or not the *results* of supra-evidentialist belief-forming practices are epistemically and morally acceptable. Rather, Bishop is adding conditions on the moral *content* and epistemic *standards* for making a faith-commitment. It is important to see this difference: for Kitcher, non-evidentialist belief-forming practices are unacceptable if they result in morally or epistemically harmful actions, such as persecuting heterodox believers or censoring scientific education. For Bishop, forming a faith-commitment on non-evidential grounds is unacceptable when the content of the commitment conflicts with true moral beliefs or the available evidence; these sort of unacceptable commitments would include claims such as, "genocide is not wrong," or "the earth is about 6000 years old." While Kitcher's and Bishop's moral and epistemic concerns reject many of the same belief-forming practices, there will be significant cases in

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. 163

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 164-165

which they do not. Next, I will consider two such cases that Kitcher would consider wrong, but Bishop, presumably, would not.

First, consider the case of the Inquisitor, which Bishop takes as a paradigm example of morally significant belief.¹⁵⁷ The Inquisitor acts on the proposition that heretics will be sent to hell unless burned at the stake; this proposition, however, does not go against any empirical evidence, nor does it contain a moral or evaluative claim, thus it appears permissible on Bishop's account. His belief-formation leads to actions that are morally wrong, but Bishop observes that his moral beliefs that lead him to these actions could be blameless. Since Bishop does not base his "ethics of faith-commitment" on consequentialist grounds, his supra-evidentialist fideism cannot judge the Inquisitor as morally wrong for believing as he does. Thus, it falls short of responding to the concerns set forth by Clifford, Wood and Kitcher.

Second, consider one of Kitcher's examples: the more robust version of Ernest who adopts beliefs on insufficient evidence because he "takes the dicta of the church fathers as authoritative in matters of forming beliefs and coming to action."¹⁵⁸ Accepting certain belief-forming practices and norms may not contradict any available evidence, however, it still may lead to negative consequences. Kitcher is worried that accepting an authoritative belief-forming practice would lead one to "contradict the results of inquiry," or "forestall certain lines of inquiry."¹⁵⁹ Since it is not necessary that committing to such a belief-forming practice will explicitly involve any beliefs that conflict with the currently available evidence, we might worry that Bishop's criterion of epistemic coherence is not sufficient to deal with such cases.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 47

¹⁵⁸ Kitcher 2004, 129

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. 127

In chapter 8, Bishop evaluates different strategies for arguing that his version of supra-evidentialist fideism (with integrationist values) is preferable to the moral evidentialism he initially outlines. He considers various arguments, including attempts to assimilate it cases of interpersonal trust, a consequentialist argument, and the *tu quoque* (“and you too”), or parity objection, before concluding that they all end in an impasse: neither the fideist nor evidentialist can produce non-circular arguments to defend their own ethics of belief.¹⁶⁰ In the last chapter, Bishop produces three arguments for the claim that his modest form of fideism is preferable on moral grounds, though he admits that even these are indecisive. At most, they provide the reflective theist assurance that there are positive moral reasons for endorsing moral principles that their faith-commitments are morally justified.¹⁶¹ I agree with Bishop’s assessment of his concluding moral arguments, though I would add that this “positive endorsement” fail to provide compelling reasons for moral evidentialists to give up their position in favor of Bishop’s modest fideism.

Since Bishop’s addition of “integrationist values” and moral arguments for fideism fail to answer the consequentialist objections of Clifford, Wood and Kitcher, I cannot consider Bishop’s account a success. Bishop does, however, entertain a ‘consequentialist strategy’ for defending fideism that may provide a solution to these problems. I will first consider whether or not it is a sensible strategy by considering Bishop’s arguments against it and then ask whether it might provide a better response to Kitcher’s moral concerns and a more persuasive defense of fideist belief-forming practices.

Bishop – ‘A Consequentialist Strategy’

¹⁶⁰ Bishop 2007, 206-207

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 228-229

One of the strategies Bishop rejects in chapter 8 is a utilitarian approach to morally justify the taking of faith-propositions as true in one's practical reasoning.¹⁶² From this utilitarian perspective, moral evidentialism is a rule of thumb that guides our actions toward the bringing about the best state of affairs. In the same way, the utilitarian might argue for a modest fideism that overrides the rules of evidentialism under certain conditions. This argument would depend on calculating the value and probability of potential outcomes in order to determine when reasoning and acting on a proposition beyond its evidential support is morally preferred to only giving a proposition as much or as little practical weight as is evidentially warranted. Bishop advances three objections to this strategy; I will present and evaluate each of these in turn.

Bishop's first issue with a consequentialist justification of fideism is that it allows for ethical norms to override epistemic norms.¹⁶³ As we saw in Chapter 7, he rejects this strategy as a solution to ruling our counter-evidentialist faith-propositions and maintaining supra-evidentialist. Instead, he appeals to epistemic coherence and abandons epistemic evidentialism entirely in order to maintain that his modest fideism is both epistemically and morally acceptable. However, this move proves to end in an impasse since it is impossible to develop a non-circular argument that passional inclinations are, in the relevant cases, reliable guides to truth and thus epistemically normative.¹⁶⁴ Further, Bishop himself concedes that there *are* such cases in which we would have a moral obligation to act on a proposition that has evidence against it because of

¹⁶² Ibid. 185

¹⁶³ Ibid. 186-187

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 195

actions consequences.¹⁶⁵ Thus, his worry that counter-evidential commitment is unfounded since he agrees that, in certain cases, it is necessary.

Might a better strategy allow for the moral suspension of evidentialism? On a consequentialist view, evidentialism itself is based on its general success in producing true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs. However, as James observes, the value of gaining truth and of avoiding falsehood are independent values. In some cases, the possible harm of acting on a false belief should have more weight in one's practical reasoning than the possibility of attaining some good. In other cases, the possible good attained by acting on a true belief may outweigh the possible harm of acting on a false belief. Thus, a consequentialist interpretation more fully captures the essence of James' Will to Believe thesis and, as I will argue, more directly deals with the evidentialist worries of Clifford, Harvey, Wood and Kitcher. However, I must first deal with Bishop's second objection to the consequentialist strategy.

Bishop introduces his second concern as a standard objection to any moral consequentialist theory: it "fails to be action-guiding."¹⁶⁶ In the case of religious beliefs, he argues that it will be impossible to determine, without begging the question, whether or not acting on them produces better consequences than not. In the case of Christianity, only those who already see the world from a Christian perspective will think that a better outcome results from acting on its teachings. This is not only an issue with assigning probabilities, but also with assigning values to the possible outcomes of acting on a proposition. Bishop explores this consequence by reflecting on the similarity between a consequentialist fideism and Pascal's

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 153-155. Bishop produces a sci-fi example in which you are captured by Martians and convinced that they will destroy our planet unless you act on the truth of, or even believe with the help of hypnosis or drugs, a proposition you know to be false.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 186

wager.¹⁶⁷ While the Christian believes that the highest human fulfillment is found in relationship with a supreme god, the naturalist believes that the greatest fulfillment can be achieved within the natural world.

I have two responses to these objections. First, people from different religious traditions do have *some* common evidential and evaluative grounds for coming to *some* agreement on the probability and value of the results of acting on faith-commitments. Bishop himself appeals to “rational empiricist evidential practice” as a basis for defending the thesis that the evidence for existence of the classical theistic God is ambiguous.¹⁶⁸ He takes this to be a valid method for demonstrating the possibility of God’s existence to both theists and non-theists. With regard to agreeing on what is valuable, there may be more of a basis for consensus than Bishop presents. While there are such differences between different cultures and ways of life, humans do share many common values, such as material wealth, relationships, freedom from pain etc.

Second, a consequentialist fideism is helpful because it makes explicit these sources of disagreement. As James observes, “as a rule we disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use... Evidently, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions.”¹⁶⁹ By justifying our actions, such as taking certain propositions as true in practical reasoning, with a consequentialist argument, we must defend our evaluations of the probabilities and values of possible outcomes; this allows for argument over and investigation into the moral grounds of our actions. Compared to the apparently irresolvable impasse of Bishop’s defense of fideism, a consequentialist defense of specific faith-commitments looks like a more promising approach.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 187-188

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 68-76

¹⁶⁹ James 1960, 10-11

Bishop's third objection is that it will be difficult to defend supra-evidentialist fideism on this approach.¹⁷⁰ This difficulty lies in defeating the probable claim that following this policy is the source of many problems caused by religion. Any attempt to vindicate religious fideism would have to deal with the long historical track record of such faith-ventures. Thus, developing a consequentialist justification of faith appears to be not only evidentially unlikely but also an impossibly enormous empirical task. I will respond to each of his worries in this order.

Bishop's first objection betrays the fact that he is more concerned with morally justifying theistic faith-propositions than with understanding the proper grounds for an ethics of faith-commitment. The fact that a moral principle criticizes one's conduct is not a conclusive reason, in itself, for rejecting that principle. If one's conduct is *prima facie* morally justified, then this fact provides intuitive reason against the principle. However, for Bishop's "reflective theists," it is presumably an open question whether or not their faith-commitments are justified, otherwise they would not be reading his book. Thus, we should not give this objection any weight.

Bishop's second objection raises a real concern about the feasibility of a consequentialist ethics of belief. Like Wood, Bishop has in mind a rule consequentialist defense of certain belief policies. This would require that we could determine that taking a certain type of un-evidenced proposition to be true in our practical reasoning under a certain set of defined conditions, generally produces better consequences than not. This is not, however, the only strategy for justifying exceptions to the rule of moral evidentialism. First, we can narrow our evaluation of faith-commitments and the conditions in which they are carried out to a manageable set. For example, if one was considering making a faith-commitment to a specific set of doctrines within a specific religious community, they might study the results that such commitments have for

¹⁷⁰ Bishop 2009, 187

the members of that community and the impact these results have on their lives and society in general. Second, we can consider the possible outcomes of a specific action on the basis of its similarity to other situations and actions. While not infallible, we may become more reliable at judging the outcomes and values of certain unevidenced beliefs by gathering more evidence from the results of our own and others' faith-commitments.

Of course, some outcomes will be beyond our ability to predict or evaluate, especially for religious faith-commitments that include claims about an unseen order and life after death. Yet, even for such claims, there is no reason to think that they must necessarily remain beyond our grasp. I think that even the most hard-line evidentialist will agree that, in principle, a person could obtain such clear, distinct and infeasible evidence, such as an undeniably veridical religious experience, that he or she would have better grounds for acting on a religious commitment. But, even if we are not able to predict all the outcomes of an action with certainty (and we rarely are), we can still justify an action based on what evidence we do have about its probable outcomes.

Answering Clifford's dilemma

This consequentialist strategy brings us back to Kitcher's essay and James' *Varieties*. If Kitcher's interpretation is correct, then James attempted to provide exactly this sort of empirical defense of adopting certain religious hypotheses. Of course, James' *Varieties* is an inconclusive empirically study of the results of religious experience. Besides its historical significance, the primary value of *Varieties* today is as model for an empirical, consequentialist ethics of faith-commitment. However, before accepting this approach we must consider Kitcher's objection: Clifford's dilemma. Is this objection a conceptual argument or an empirical hypothesis that must

be defended or refuted on the basis of research on the faith commitments of actual people in real social contexts? This is how Kitcher characterizes the problem for James:

The heart of the difficulty lies in the fact that, from the perspective of *Varieties*, and indeed from our common understanding of religious commitment, the doctrines of religion take priority. They are supposed to have greater authority than findings of empirical inquiry or the deliverances of secular morality. Clifford's attempt to defend a general principle succeed in showing that we can't accept that assignment of authority in situations where there are serious consequences. James's task is to define a sphere within which the traditional authority of religion can be defended, and in which granting that authority will not generate any serious harms.¹⁷¹

Kitcher goes on to conclude that *Varieties* only establishes a very limited sphere for religious belief: "its sole effect on his life is to give him a firmly grounded hope that his existence is not pointless and that all will be well."¹⁷²Of course, Kitcher recognizes that this is no defense of the "traditional authority of religion" at all. Thus he concludes that James' project in both *Varieties* and 'The Will to Believe' is a failure. I disagree. Whether Kitcher is trying to make a conceptual or an empirical argument, his objection fails. I will first address the conceptual argument.

One way of interpreting Kitcher's claim is that a religious framework of belief, *by definition*, overrides other empirical and moral considerations when taken as true in one's practical reasoning and action. Such a definition of religion is clearly more limited than our actual use of the term. It excludes recognizably "Christian" systems of belief that acknowledge both the authority of God and the validity of natural scientific inquiry and secular moral arguments. I think that most people would still call such a system of belief "religious."

Another way to understand Kitcher is as presenting a hypothesis that if we examine anyone who has beliefs that we might intuitive classify as "religious," then we will find that the

¹⁷¹ Kitcher 2004, 129

¹⁷² Ibid. 131

person does not give proper weight to scientific inquiry or secular moral principles, with the result that the person's actions have significant, negative consequences on themselves and others. Again, Kitcher goes beyond his evidence when he claims that James' empirical defense has failed. While I do not know whether *Varieties* provides any refutation of this hypothesis, Kitcher is certainly too quick to claim that James' only escape is to define a limited sphere in which it is morally permitted to act on the basis of religious beliefs.

A 'Consequentialist' Ethics of Belief

Where does all of this discussion leave us? I will conclude by articulating the basis for an ethics of belief that incorporates the concerns of Clifford and James and my responses to their contemporary defenders. My account does not provide an answer to whether or not certain beliefs are morally wrong, permissible or obligatory; rather, I defend an approach for judging the moral justifiability of both accepting particular hypotheses and forming beliefs through particular methods. Indeed, I argue that we cannot make such ethical judgments without some understanding the probabilities and nature of their effects on fulfilling our moral obligations. I hope it is clear from the previous two sections that a "consequentialist strategy" has not been ruled out, either as a basis for the ethics of belief or as a potential defense of faith. However, I have not yet considered what exactly this strategy would entail nor how it might help us evaluate the moral permissibility or impermissibility of certain belief-forming practices.

While Bishop uses Utilitarianism to explain the 'consequentialist strategy' for defending the permissibility of theistic faith-commitments, any set of ethical values could be used to evaluate the acts of accepting and forming beliefs with a consequentialist argument. The logical structure of this approach is similar to the one I presented in my interpretation of Clifford:

- 1) If B contributes to A

2) and A has some moral value,

3) then B also has some moral value.

Of course, this does not show that A is morally valuable, all things considered. Rather, it argues that A has some additional moral value, either for it or against it. In Bishop's presentation, maximizing utility takes the place of A in premises one and two. Accordingly, B stands for following Bishop's principle, supra-evidentialist fideism. Premise one can be partially defended through empirical evidence on the causal relation between B and A. Of course, this relation may be partially or entirely beyond our ability to empirically investigate, such as when A stands for the result a belief-forming practice with regard to an unseen order or life after death. In any case, we are dealing with probabilities that, combined with the moral values of its possible outcomes, can produce an evaluation of B. However, instead of A standing for utility or some other valuable consequence, it could represent a right action or a good habit. Clifford's essay has examples of all three ethical values: letting oneself believe without sufficient evidence results in failing to perform one's duties (e.g. to ensure the seaworthiness of your ship before letting it sail), making oneself credulous and bringing about all kinds of bad consequences for society and the fate of mankind. While Clifford's argument primarily focuses on negative moral consequences that one ought to avoid by not believing on insufficient evidence, the logic of his argument is the same and may be used to defend a belief-forming practice as permissible or even obligatory based on the fact that it leads to positive moral consequences. Clifford's duty of inquiry is an example of such a corresponding positive moral obligation.

Another issue to consider is how this ethics of belief might apply differently to the act of forming a belief that p and the act of taking p to be true in one's practical reasoning. Bishop introduces this latter action but does not distinguish between the two in his subsequent

arguments. It is, however, important to note that they will often bring about very different results. Choosing a belief-forming practice that leads one to believe that p will have a wider impact on one's actions than merely choosing to accept p in a particular decision. Engaging in a belief-forming practice, which includes involvement in a community since such practices are often social, will likely affect a variety of other beliefs and decisions. Acceptance, on the other hand, can be more limited in its effect on particular decisions and contexts; this would depend on the scope of one's commitment to think and act as though p were true. Thus, while both belief-formation and acceptance can be evaluated on the basis of their influence on ethically significant actions, outcomes and dispositions, since this influence will likely be different, they will require separate ethical evaluations.

One last question is the relation between epistemic and moral values. As we saw, Bishop resists recommending that moral values override epistemic values, though, he thinks, in some morally exceptional circumstances, such as a commitment to always speak and act as if you were not hiding Jews whenever in the presence of Nazi sympathizers, other moral values do become more important than acting on what we know to be true. In order to allow for belief beyond the evidence, Bishop argues against the epistemic norm of evidentialism in favor of giving epistemic significance to our non-evidential inclinations. This move, however, is ultimately unsupportable, since he cannot show that our "passional nature" is a guide to gaining true beliefs and avoiding false beliefs.

I will propose another way of thinking about James' argument that the value of true beliefs may sometimes outweigh the negative value of false beliefs such that we can believe or act a proposition with a greater degree of confidence than we are epistemically entitled to. James' insight is that the significance of having true beliefs and not having false beliefs is not

epistemic, but pragmatic – whether moral or prudential. While the epistemic practice of proportioning one's belief to the evidence might produce the highest ratio of true beliefs to false beliefs, it may not always be a reliable policy for producing the best proportion of *significant* true beliefs and *significant* false beliefs. When forming the belief p has more (positive) moral significance if true than the (negative) moral significance of holding the belief p if false, then the morally appropriate practice might be to have more confidence that p than is warranted by the evidence.

To use one of James' social examples, believing that a person will be a good friend may result in becoming their friend, if true, or being rejected, if false. Lets say that the probability of the person being a good friend is .5 if you try to initiate the friendship. Trying to initiate, however, requires accepting the truth of the proposition and acting on it. This presents a forced option that is evidentially undecidable since the necessary degree of confidence for veridical acceptance to be *significant* is greater than the degree of confidence supported by the evidence. Accepting the claim would be the best decision if the expected utility of accepting p were greater than that of accepting $\sim p$ or suspending judgment. The expected utility of accepting p would be positive in value if the positive utility accepting p if it is true is greater than the negative utility of accepting p if it is false, since both would be multiplied by .5 and added together. This calculation requires comparing the utility of gaining a friend and being rejected; unless the person has a severe reaction to rejection, gaining a friend has more positive utility than being rejected has negative. With an equal chance that either outcome will obtain, accepting the proposition has a positive expected utility. Of course, the choice between accepting p , $\sim p$ or not accepting p or $\sim p$ would be based on a comparison of the expected utilities of each of these options.

This approach allows the moral consequences to have some say in deciding how we should accept propositions and form our beliefs. To show that it can also prohibit forming beliefs on insufficient evidence, I will consider how it explains Clifford's ship owner example. Since our previous example deals with acceptance, I will consider this one as a question of belief. We must assume that when doubt arises the ship owner has a choice between different methods of forming his belief about his ship's safety. He can either hire an inspector or suppress his doubts through wishful thinking. If he hires an inspector, it will cost him time and money, but he will also be performing his duty to guarantee that his passengers will have a safe voyage; if he suppresses his doubts, he will not have to pay for an inspection but he is not meeting his obligation to his passengers. If he remains in doubt and does not form a belief, he has an obligation to not let his ship take passengers out to sea. Since the moral value of doing his duty as the ship owner is more significant than his personal costs, we judge him blameworthy for choosing to form his belief on the basis of wishful thinking rather than investigating or canceling the voyage.

Lastly, we should consider Kitcher's suggestion that empirical investigations into religious phenomena, such as *Varieties*, can help James argue that religious belief is morally justified. First, we must recognize that some religious claims and predictions are open to empirical verification. James' thesis, however, is concerned with faith-commitments that are intellectually undecidable, thus it does not include those whose truth can be either disproven or proven through the scientific study of religion. James wants to defend those claims that are possibly true but do not have enough evidence to support the degree of commitment necessary for gaining prudentially and morally valuable goods *in this present life*. A religious hypothesis, according to James, includes the claim to make one's life "better off even now if we believe her

first affirmation to be true,” and if it is true, we might add.¹⁷³ Of course, one could believe this “second affirmation” of religion without believing the first, and thus not reap the benefits promised by the second – a sort of faith in faith in God that ultimately fails without actual faith in God. Or one could believe the first affirmation, and though it is not true, gain some benefit from this belief; however, as we saw in *Varieties*,¹⁷⁴ James does not think that belief can be good without being true and thus would not endorse forming a belief or accepting a proposition that could not be true because it proved practically useful.

James’ argument, however, is not a moral argument to convince a person to have faith based on its moral value, but rather a defense of forming beliefs on the basis of faith the claim that it is *always* morally wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. If, as I have interpreted, moral evidentialism is based on an empirical claim that believing beyond the evidence produces all kinds of harmful consequences for society, then an empirical counter argument for the claim that adopting a faith commitment leads to more, or at least equally, morally valuable outcomes is just the sort of defense that James’ thesis needs.

¹⁷³ James 1960, 26

¹⁷⁴ James 1985, 300

Bibliography

- Bishop, John. 2007. *Believing by faith: An essay in the epistemology and ethics of religious belief*. Oxford: New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Alan Willard. 1947. *The metaphysical society; Victorian minds in crisis, 1869-1880*. New York: Columbia university press.
- Chignell, Andrew. 2010. "The Ethics of Belief", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/ethics-belief/>](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/ethics-belief/).
- Clifford, William Kingdon. 1986. "The Ethics of Belief." In *The ethics of belief debate*. ed. McCarthy, Gerald D. Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press.
- Clifford, William Kingdon, and Tim Madigan. 1999. *The ethics of belief and other essays / W.K. Clifford ; introduction by Timothy J. Madigan*. Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books.
- Cohen, L. Jonathan. 1989. Belief and acceptance. *Mind* 98 (391) (Jul.): pp. 367-389.
- Conant, James. 1997. "The James/Royce dispute and the development of James's 'solution'." In *The cambridge companion to william james*. ed. Ruth Anna Putnam. Cambridge England; New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Goodman, Russell, "William James", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2012 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/james/>](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2012/entries/james/).
- Harvey, Van A. 1979. "The Ethics of Belief Reconsidered." In *The ethics of belief debate*. 1986. ed. McCarthy, Gerald D. Atlanta, Ga: Scholars Press.
- James, William. 1985. *The varieties of religious experience / william james ; [introduction by john E. smith]*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- . 1960. *The will to believe, and other essays in popular philosophy, and human immortality*. New York: Dover Publications.
- Jordan, Jeff. 2011. "Pragmatic Arguments and Belief in God", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2011 Edition)*, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = [<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/pragmatic-belief-god/>](http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2011/entries/pragmatic-belief-god/)
- Kasser, Jeff, and Nishi Shah. 2006. "The metaethics of belief: An expressivist reading of 'The will to believe'." *Social Epistemology* 20 (1) (01/01; 2012/04): 1-17.
- Kitcher, Philip. 2004 "A Pragmatist's Progress: The Varieties of James's Strategies for Defending Religion." In *William james and a science of religions: Reexperiencing the varieties of religious experience*. 2004. ed. Wayne Proudfoot. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Richardson, Robert D. 2006. *William james: In the maelstrom of american modernism : A biography*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Simon, Linda. 1998. *Genuine reality: A life of william james*. 1st ed. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Van Inwagen, Peter. 1996. "It is Wrong, Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence." In *Faith, freedom, and rationality: Philosophy of religion today*. ed. Howard Snyder, Daniel, and Jeff Jordan. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Wood, Allen W. 2002. *Unsettling obligations: Essays on reason, reality, and the ethics of belief*. Stanford, Calif: CSLI Publications.