

The Ethics of Belief

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God, Faith and Infinity » Lecture 9

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Clifford and the Ethics of Belief

Evaluating Belief

- › Suppose we grant Pascal some response to the objections we raised last time. Even so, there is another objection in the wings.
- › Prudentially rational actions might be the right thing to do in some sense of ‘right’, but wrong in another.
 - › It could be that bumping off my business rival, when I’m confident I won’t be detected, maximises my subjective expected utility.
 - › But it remains **morally** wrong. And that is a reason to **refrain** from acting in that way – not a prudential reason, but a moral one.
- › Now that Pascal has given us an argument that there can be prudential reasons to come to believe that are distinct from any epistemic reasons, we open up space for a parallel situation: perhaps my acting so as to foster a belief in God is prudent, but **wrong**.
 - › Its **cognitive irrationality** may be a reason to refrain from acting in that way – an epistemic reason that is **akin to a moral reason** in its motivating force.
 - › It may even be a moral reason: so say proponents of the **ethics of belief**.

Clifford's Ethics of Belief

To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call into question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it - the life of that man is one long sin against mankind. (Clifford 1876: 295)

- › Pascal isn't mentioned, but is clearly the target: why else would Clifford single out those voluntary activities that might foster belief in God?

Action and Belief

- › Is Clifford's Principle far too **stringent**? 'Are we then to become universal sceptics, doubting everything, afraid always to put one foot before the other until we have personally tested the firmness of the road?' (Clifford 1876: 295)
- › Clifford thinks not:
 - there are many cases in which it is our duty to act upon probabilities, although the evidence is not such as to justify present belief; because it is precisely by such action, and by observation: of its fruits, that evidence is got which may justify future belief. So that we have no reason to fear lest a habit of conscientious inquiry should paralyze the actions of our daily life. (Clifford 1876: 296)
- › One worry arises. Clifford views action as justified by probabilities; indeed, the **expected utility framework for deliberation** relies only on probabilities. What is **the role of belief**, if not in deliberation (see, e.g., Jeffrey 1970)?

Clifford's Argument

- (C₁) In any case in which 'is is not possible ... to sever the belief from the action it suggests', the belief is 'not a private matter' (Clifford 1876: 291–92).
 - (C₂) It is 'wrong to believe on insufficient evidence' when the belief in question is 'not a private matter' but instead concerns 'that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes' (Clifford 1876: 292).
 - (C₃) But 'no belief ... is ever actually insignificant or without its effect on the fate of mankind' (Clifford 1876: 292).
 - (CP) So it is in every case 'wrong to believe upon insufficient evidence, or to nourish belief by suppressing doubt and avoiding investigation' (Clifford 1876: 292)
- › In what sense of *wrong*? Clifford's case of the ship owner suggests **moral** wrongness.

Considering (C1): the Ship-Owner

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. ... Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections ... he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales. (Clifford 1876: 289)

- › Here the belief is of **life or death importance**, since had the owner not been convinced, he would have had the ship 'overhauled and refitted' (Clifford 1876: 289).

(C2) and the Ship-Owner

What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him. He had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts. And although in the end he may have felt so sure about it that he could not think otherwise, yet inasmuch as he had knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind, he must be held responsible for it. (Clifford 1876: 289-90)

Responsibility and Voluntary Belief

- › Clifford here makes a point with obvious connection to Pascal's views: if 'working yourself into' believing something is **in your power**, either directly as a voluntary act itself, or as the natural consequences of voluntary acts, then you must **exercise** that power **well**.
- › You must exercise it **correctly**, believing only what you have a 'right to believe' in light of the evidence.
 - › If you exercise it **dishonestly**, 'stifling' your doubts rather than following the evidence where it leads, then you are responsible for any consequences of that belief that you **should have foreseen**, given **the evidence you ought to have considered**.
- › Why we aren't responsible for the unforeseen bad consequences of properly formed beliefs? (Suppose all the evidence at the ship-owners disposal misleadingly suggests it is sea-worthy.)
 - › Presumably in that case the fact we've followed the evidence **excuses** us – a bad consequence is really **unforeseeable**, not merely negligently **unforeseen**.

An Objection

- › Some might object: *it is not the belief which is wrong, but the negligent **action** of failing to have the ship checked before setting off.*
- › Clifford replies: as a matter of psychological fact, no one holding a strong belief on one side of a question ... can investigate it with such fairness and completeness as if he were really in doubt and unbiased; so that the existence of a belief not founded on fair inquiry unfits a man for the performance of this necessary duty. (Clifford 1876: 291)
- › So even if the action is wrong, so too is the belief that licensed it – holding the belief ‘unfits’ a person from acting rightly, so is itself wrong.
 - › More generally, low standards for inquiry increase the risk that society ‘should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things’; that will lead to **chronic suffering** ‘from the maintenance and support of false beliefs and the fatally wrong actions which they lead to’ (Clifford 1876: 294). It is a **moral duty** to contribute to preventing such suffering.

Worries about (C3) and/or Validity

- › So if Clifford's Principle (CP) concerns 'moral' wrongs, it must be because in (C3) every improperly formed belief, unjustified by evidence, has morally bad consequences – that **all cases** are relevantly like the shipowner case.
 - › But this universal claim is implausible: Not every 'humanly significant' proposition is morally significant – so if principle (C2) is really a **moral** principle, it has **restricted application**.
 - › It is not plausible that every belief formed on insufficient evidence is morally wrong for **this** kind of reason. (Some private beliefs don't set a bad precedent, even for the believer.)
- › On the other hand, if (CP) is a claim about **epistemic rationality**, then while it may be true, it may not follow from cases like the ship-owner (as it is not obvious that those cases prompt a judgment about morally neutral cases).
 - › Then the argument would involve an invalid over-generalisation.

Neglect versus Prematurity

- › Clifford's argument is problematic in another way – it seems he may have **misidentified** the lesson of his own case.
- › The ship-owner, by Clifford's own description, **neglects** some of the evidence he formerly had – he had 'no right to believe' (Clifford 1876: 290) given the **total evidence**, even if the limited portion he considers supports the belief.
- › But later on Clifford is arguing that it is wrong to 'believe anything on insufficient evidence' (Clifford 1876: 295). That seems like forming a belief when the evidence isn't yet **sufficiently clear or extensive** to forcibly resolve a prior suspension of judgment.
- › While it might be wrong to neglect evidence one has, is it wrong (or is it wrong in the same way) to take a **leap of faith** based on inconclusive evidence?
 - ›› Wishful thinking isn't the same as acting on a hunch.

What is 'insufficient' evidence?

- › A way of reinforcing the previous point is to consider the question, *under what circumstances is evidence insufficient?*
- › Clifford thinks that if a belief is subject to any **residual doubt**, then the inquiry which lead to it 'was not complete' (1876: 295).
- › That is, the evidence collected in a complete inquiry is **conclusive**, leaving no doubt.
- › Accordingly, Clifford seems to think something like this:
C-Insufficiency Evidence for p is C(lifford)-insufficient if either (i) it leaves some doubt about whether p ; or (ii) it hasn't been collected in an **unbiased** way.
- › Clifford sees a tension here, because lots of our belief is subject to the possibility of doubt (Descartes 1641); the second and third parts of his paper attempt to show that **inductive** and **testimonial** evidence are nevertheless sufficient, because they have a 'practical certainty' (Clifford 1876: 296)

Epistemic Duty

Alternative Justifications for Clifford's Principle (CP)

- › Clifford's main argument, from the case of the shipowner, seems to link the morality of belief to the morality of the consequences of incorrect belief – which faces problems when the consequences are morally neutral. Is there another argument?
 - › Hume famously said that a rational person 'proportions [their] belief to the evidence' (Hume 1777: §10.4).
 - › If this is thought to be **essential** to **epistemic rationality**, it would be epistemically obligatory to fit your belief to your evidence.
 - » In particular, it would be epistemically obligatory to form a belief only when there is sufficient evidence for it, and epistemically obligatory to make use of all the evidence at our disposal.
- (P1) It is epistemically forbidden to hold a belief upon insufficient evidence.

Ethical Dimensions of Epistemology

- › Given (P₁), we can defend Clifford's conclusion (CP) using this principle:
 - (P₂) We have a moral obligation to uphold our epistemic obligations. (Chignell 2018: §2.4)
 - › It would follow from (P₁) and (P₂) that it is morally forbidden to hold a belief upon insufficient evidence.
- › How might we defend (P₂)? One broadly Cliffordian suggestion appeals to our need to rely on the testimony of others in order to avoid significant harm and advance scientific progress. No belief is without effect ... believing on insufficient evidence (even with respect to an apparently very insignificant issue) is liable to lead to the lowering of epistemic standards in other more important contexts too. (Chignell 2018: §2.4).

Testimonial Duties

- › Every belief might lead to **testimony** – when I am called upon by others to guide them in forming their own beliefs.
- › One has an **duty**, when testifying, to do one's best to inform one's hearers of the most reasonable opinion concerning p with respect to the evidence one believes there is.
 - › **Lying** (deliberately asserting something you do not believe with an intention to cause a false belief to be formed) in testimony is wrong.
 - › If you believe a claim you regard as false in light of the evidence, then strictly speaking you are not lying in asserting it, but you would still wrongly manage to cause a false belief in one's hearers.
 - › You might believe your testimony that p , even when it is grounded in insufficient evidence. Yet it is doubtful: it might, **for all you know**, be false.
 - › Likewise, testimony relying on merely part of your evidence might, for all you know, be unjustified in light of the total evidence.
- › In all these cases, your testimony will be **misleading** about whether your current evidence supports p . In misleading your audience, you do both epistemic and moral harm.

Biased Evidence

- › Another case: suppose someone intends to form the belief that p , and decides to collect only evidence in favour of p – ‘purposely avoiding’ anything which calls it ‘into question’ (Clifford 1876: 295).
 - › In such a case, the believer may have **adequate** evidence to **resolve suspension**;
 - › And they may not have any counter-evidence; *a fortiori* they aren’t **neglecting** such evidence.
- › Nevertheless, such a person seems to be **incapable** of fulfilling their testimonial duty with respect to p here. For all they know, there is evidence out there against p , evidence which they had a deliberate **policy** of remaining in ignorance about.
- › That policy is enough, it seems, to make their assertions a poor guide for others about whether p .

Clifford Summarised in this light: Epistemic Duty

- › If this is right, one's **testimonial duty** is to inform one's peers of **how the totality of available evidence bears on p** .
 - › One must not thus suggest that **inadequate evidence** – evidence to which the proper reaction is suspension of judgment – is in fact adequate.
 - › Nor must one suggest that the evidence tends to support p when one is **systematically neglecting** some part of it that may, for all you know, lead to a proper reaction of rejecting p .
 - › And one cannot be **negligent in collecting evidence** that a reasonable person would regard as probative.
- › This testimonial duty leads to an **epistemic duty**.
 - › Having such a belief licenses certain behaviours. In particular, believing that p gives you the right to **assert** it in the course of testimony.
 - › If a belief licenses testimony that violates this testimonial duty, then the belief itself **violates one's epistemic duty**.
- › One can avoid this, Clifford thinks, by believing only when the **total available evidence** gives you the **right** to do so.

Theological Application

- › But Pascal seems to recommend an immoral epistemic policy here – recommending that those who want to believe ought to **deliberately bias** their evidence to promote belief, and also adopt policies of neglecting counter-evidence and prematurely forming belief.
 - › For God's nature may be unknowable to our reason, Pascal admits, and yet we should try to believe.
 - › Pursuing the path of belief will 'deaden [our] acuteness' (Pascal 1670: 76) and thus make us neglect contrary evidence.
- › Notice that the unknowability of God is **tantamount** to the **insufficiency of any possible evidence**.
- › It follows from Clifford's Principle that **any religious belief is morally wrong** given the paucity of current evidence – and indeed that this is necessarily so for the infinitely unknowable Christian God.

The Right to Believe

- › When does evidence grant the **right to believe**, independent of whether someone does in fact believe? Something like this makes sense of Clifford's text:

Right to Believe Evidence e grants the right to believe that p if any rational person would believe that p if they were aware of and understood e . That is, if e is **generally compelling** evidence.

- › Not all proposed rights work like this, not even all proposed epistemic rights:
Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance. (*Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 18*)
- › Here the right is **not** an obligation.
 - ›› The right to freedom of religion presupposes that there are many legitimate but incompatible religious beliefs.

Uniqueness and the Right to Believe

- › Clifford seems to suggest that having the right to believe p on your evidence is in fact a **duty to believe p** .
- › Rights and duties coincide when there is only one permissible option.
 - › Not many examples: maybe the right to elementary education (Article 26) also involves a duty to be educated to a basic level?
- › His proposal thus directs our attention to an apparent **presupposition** of the epistemic duty framework:
 - Uniqueness** ‘There is a unique rational response to any particular body of evidence’ (Kopec and Titelbaum 2016: 189).
- › If Uniqueness is correct, then our testimonial duty is the duty to inform our hearers of ***the rationally permitted attitude*** to p .
 - › We do a poor job of providing such information if we neglect evidence, but also if we misjudge what the attitude is – perhaps ‘leaps of faith’ arise when one makes a mistake about what one is permitted to believe given the evidence at your disposal.
- › If Uniqueness is false, what we have a right to believe may outstrip what we are obliged to believe.

Uniqueness and Clifford's Principle

- › If Uniqueness is **false** – if there can be more than one rationally permitted response to a given body of evidence – then there must be cases where it is rationally permitted for *A* to believe *p* on the basis of *e*, and also rationally permitted for *B*, given the same total evidence, to fail to believe it (either to suspend judgment, or to disbelieve it).
- › Since it is rationally permitted to fail to believe *p*, *p* cannot have been **proved** – *e* does not provide **generally compelling grounds**. So *A* has rationally given belief to ‘unproved ... statements for the solace and private pleasure of the believer’ (Clifford 1876: 292).
- › If we identify ‘sufficient evidence’ with **conclusive** evidence, as Clifford does, then Uniqueness and Clifford's Principle stand and fall **together**.
 - ›› If *A* has **rational permission** to accept *p* without the evidence being compelling, *A* is doing nothing wrong while believing on insufficient evidence.

Belief and the Passions

James' Project

- › James wants to resist Clifford's epistemology by undermining his Principle (CP).
- › James appears to think that the correct way to undermine Clifford is to **reject Uniqueness**. He argues that we are rationally permitted to believe even when our beliefs outstrip their 'intellectual grounds' (James 1897: §4).
 - › He thus seems inclined to accept Clifford's assumption that 'sufficient' evidence eliminates doubt, so a rejection of Uniqueness would show that someone believes something on insufficient evidence.
- › But this would also show that **Pascal was partly wrong too** – we may be able to have reasons to believe in God, not merely prudential grounds for coming to acquire the belief that God exists.
 - › Note James isn't necessarily arguing **for theism** – only that we may have reasonable theological beliefs one way or the other, without suspending judgment or going beyond epistemic factors.
 - › The sceptical atheist could embrace something like James' framework.

Genuine Options

Let us give the name of *hypothesis* to anything that may be proposed to our belief.... A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature - it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however ..., the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an *option*. ... They may be—1, *living* or *dead*; 2, *forced* or *avoidable*; 3, *momentous* or *trivial*; and for our purpose we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind. (James 1897: §1)

Clarifying these kinds

Living/Dead An option is living when each constituent hypothesis ‘makes some appeal, however small, to your belief’ (James 1897: §1); otherwise dead.

Forced/Avoidable An option is forced when it is ‘based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing’ (James 1897: §1); otherwise avoidable.

- › James gives the example, ‘Love me or hate me’ – here we may avoid the choice by ignoring or remaining indifferent. But not with ‘Love me or don’t love me’.

Momentous/Trivial A trivial option is one where ‘the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible’ (James 1897: §1); otherwise momentous.

- › Note that Pascal’s wager turns out to be strictly speaking trivial – it only has an infinite stake, but is neither unique nor unrevisable.

The Mixed State of our Epistemic Lives

- › James notes a puzzling tension in our epistemic practice.
 1. On the one hand, the **scientific method** seems to be as Clifford suggests: a ‘magnificent edifice ... reared’ on a foundation of ‘patience and postponement, ... choking down of preference, ... [and] submission to the icy laws of outer fact’ (James 1897: §2). There is no role for any individual factors that might lead to belief in one person but not another – so (i) science seems to presuppose Uniqueness, and (ii) in many cases, that the uniquely rational response is to suspend judgment.
 2. On the other hand, in our own life ‘we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why’ (James 1897: §3), and more importantly, when we confront someone with a sceptical attitude to some belief of ours, ‘we are willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he, for his part, does not care to make. ... Evidentially, then, our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions’ (James 1897: §3).

Science and Trivial Options

- › Most scientific choices are not between genuine options, James thinks, and yet many of our personal beliefs are formed after confronting genuine options.
- › In science, options aren't genuine because in that environment options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons *pro et contra* with an indifferent hand. (James 1897: §8)
- › It becomes clear that James thinks that the relevant forced options are those where we must choose **what to believe** – where the question of **whether to believe** has already been answered affirmatively.
 - › In many cases there is always the option of abstention: we may save ourselves from any chance of *believing falsehood*, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. ... in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all (James 1897: §8).
- › But if belief is preferable to no belief, sometimes we may not have the luxury of awaiting the verdict of future science.

James' Justification of 'this mixed-up state of affairs'

- › James doesn't claim passion is **always** involved in epistemic decisions.
 - › Clifford could be right about there being no role for private conviction in natural science – maybe the scientific method identifies scientific truth with what has been established on public grounds, and hence excludes individual variation.
- › But our passions do play an essential role **when the choice is forced and evidence is lacking**.

Our passional 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 passional decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (James 1897: §4)

- › How does our 'passional nature' influence our belief?

Two Epistemic Rules

There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion.... We must know the truth; and we must avoid error - these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers....

Believe truth! Shun error! - these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. 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. Clifford, in the instructive passage which I have quoted, exhorts us to the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. You, on the other hand, may think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge, and be ready to be duped many times in your investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. I myself find it impossible to go with Clifford. (James 1897: §7)

Revision and Belief

- › Clearly, any epistemic rule that differs from the Cliffordian ‘Shun Error’ is such that following it runs a risk of forming an erroneous belief.
- › Belief isn’t **irrevocable**, and error can always be addressed by a simple change of mind.
- › Indeed, the truth-seeker will typically be required to change their mind in a case where error is apparent.
 - ›› Suppose we implement ‘Seek Truth’ by believing when the evidence favours a belief, even if there is some room for doubt.
 - ›› As more evidence accumulates, what the evidence favours can shift, and we would then be **obliged** to **revise** our belief in order to continue to match what the evidence favours.
- › While those who adopt ‘Seek Truth!’ may find themselves in (what they retrospectively see as) error for long stretches of time, their approach is ‘self-correcting’. If so, is being in error a big deal?
 - ›› Weirdly, Clifford acknowledges that the ‘sin’ of error can be corrected, at a social rather than individual level: our duty to successive generations involves ‘enlarg[ing] and purif[ying]’ (1876: 292) the body of common knowledge, but what was not in error never needs to be purified.

Passions and the Rules

- › One way in which our passions enter in to our epistemic life is in determining which of these rules we are **inclined** to follow - one feature of our ‘non-intellectual nature’ is which of these rules appeals to us.
 - ›› Whether you are a ‘truth seeker’ or an ‘error shunner’ isn’t a matter of rational belief, but is more like a **disposition** or habit of mind.
 - ›› Akin to the personality trait known as ‘openness to experience’ in Big Five models of personality (John, Naumann, and Soto 2008).
- › But there is another way in which your passions enter: in cases where evidence is equally balanced between p and not, so that ‘intellectual grounds’ are lacking – but where your choice is **forced**.
 - ›› If you are disposed to shun error, then perhaps your passions won’t enter in this way. But if you are disposed to seek truth, ‘passion’, or **desire**, might be one of the grounds you appeal to in making a choice when intellectual grounds are lacking.

Doxastic Voluntarism and Belief

- › In none of these cases does James suppose that we have direct **rational control** over what we believe.
 - » We don't indulge in **wishful thinking**, that is, in caricature form: 'I want it to be the case that p , so p '.
- › Rather, our emotional and non-rational mental states – our evaluative habits – constrain whether we are optimists or pessimists, idealists or cynics, truth-seekers or error-shunners – and how we antecedently-to-experience regard the space of options.
- › So James isn't an orthodox **doxastic voluntarist** (someone who thinks we can believe at will), despite his talk of the 'will' and the 'passions' – it may well be that none of these evaluative habits are a matter of conscious choice.
- › Nevertheless, he thinks, like the voluntarists, that evaluative judgments are connected to decision in a way purely 'cognitive' judgments are not.
- › James may thus be an early proponent of **anti-intellectualism**: the view that people can differ in whether their belief is justified merely by differing in the practical facts of their situation (Stanley 2007: 168–69).

Passional Grounds

- › It is by no means clear precisely what James thinks is involved when desire influences belief. But something like this captures some of his intent:
 - PB When you must believe some hypothesis in a genuine option, and your evidence is balanced, then you may believe that p if you judge that it would be desirable that you believe p .
- › Here one is enjoined to seek the truth; and if evidence is not merely inconclusive but equipollent between p and $\neg p$, then let your views about what belief states would be preferable guide your opinion.
 - › Not necessarily personally desirable (though Pascal obviously appeals to self-interest): one might be able to disinterestedly judge that some state of affairs is preferable to another – i.e., that it be **better** that p be believed, not just better **for me**, and not just better in its practical consequences, but better **for the belief** that p itself. (Hence, unlike Pascal.)

Does 'Passion' Influence Belief?

The Status of PB

- › If PB is true, then Clifford's principle is false, as is Uniqueness.
 - › Two people might be in a situation of evidential symmetry, and yet one might believe that p and the other refrain from belief, because one prefers believing that p and the other does not.
- › But are there any cases of forced genuine options where it seems we should seek truth in accordance with PB rather than shun error?
- › Such cases would arise if we have to choose which **world view** to adopt, where the world view we choose will be reflected in our actions and where we can argue that the desirable consequences of acting in a way licensed by that world-view justify adopting it. James offers three examples:
 1. Adopting a moral framework;
 2. Trusting others in joint action;
 3. Adopting a religious belief.

Moral Choice

Moral questions immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof. A moral question is a question not of what sensibly exists, but of what is good, or would be good if it did exist. Science can tell us what exists, but to compare the *worths* ... we must consult not science but what Pascal calls our heart. (James 1897: §9)

- › If we are to make a decision – and sometimes we **must** – then we need to **evaluate** the possible outcomes. We cannot suspend judgment about what is most choiceworthy.
- › In this case of course there may be little problem with **using evaluative commitments to decide what is desirable**.
- › But James thinks this line of thought can be extended to all **moral judgments** – the belief that murder is wrong, for example, reflects for him a certain ‘resolution’ (James 1897: §9) to commit to having a moral perspective on the world.

Joint Action

A social organism of any sort whatever, large or small, is what it is because each member proceeds to his own duty with a trust that the other members will simultaneously do theirs. Wherever a desired result is achieved by the co-operation of many independent persons, its existence as a fact is a pure consequence of the precursive faith in one another of those immediately concerned. A government, an army, a commercial system, a ship, a college, an athletic team, all exist on this condition, without which not only is nothing achieved, but nothing is even attempted. A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before any one else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train robbing would never even be attempted. There are, then, cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming. (James 1897: §9)

Trust and the Avoidance of Error

- › In cooperative action we put up some stake for uncertain reward – and we lose our stake if others do not do their part.
- › Maybe often we have good reason to think others will do their part. But, James suggests, sometimes we need to **trust** others, to optimistically believe they will do their part, and to believe the best of them.
- › This resonates with what others have said about trust. Karen Jones:
trust is an attitude of optimism that the goodwill and competence of another will extend to cover the domain of our interaction with her, together with the expectation that the one trusted will be directly and favorably moved by the thought that we are counting on her. The attitude of optimism is to be cashed out not primarily in terms of beliefs about the other's trustworthiness, but rather ... in terms of a distinctive, and affectively loaded, way of seeing the one trusted. This way of seeing the other ... explains the willingness of trusters to let those trusted get dangerously near the things they care about. (Jones 1996: 4)

Faith

- › One thing of interest about James' case of trust is that adopting a trusting attitude, even though it goes beyond the evidence, **makes one's belief more likely to be true.**
 - › Your trust is a necessary condition for the joint action to occur, so your belief that it will must precede the action. There is thus a strange sort of epistemic reason for belief here: believe p because it will foster the truth of your belief.
- › The third case James considers, and the most relevant for this course, is the case of adopting a religious belief and approaching the world in light of that belief.
- › This third case is also supposed to give us epistemic reasons to believe – not that bold acts of belief help make their content true (as in the action case), but that such acts are a **precondition of justified belief.**
- › Such beliefs outstrip our evidence at the time. They appear to be examples of **religious (leaps of) faith**, intuitively – our topic **next time.**

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