The Clifford/James Debate

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> Theoretic philosophy knows no passion save the passion for truth, has no fear save the fear of error, cherishes no hope save the hope of theoretic success.
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> –Josiah Royce

Evidentialism, a doctrine of epistemic justification stipulating that a belief is warranted if and only if it is supported by evidence, is a central tenet of Anglo-American empiricism particularly in its form as logical empiricism or positivism. Advocated by Locke and Hume, it is found early on in this tradition. Perhaps the most impassioned advocate of evidentialism is the English mathematician and philosopher, William K. Clifford, who in his "The Ethics of Belief" gave this doctrine a moral twist by declaring uncompromisingly that to believe anything on insufficient evidence is not merely imprudent or foolish, but morally wrong no less.

Clifford is perhaps remembered today outside of mathematical circles for William James' riposte to him in the "Will to Believe." James contended that we are not in the wrong to believe things without sufficient evidence; indeed, we have the right, no less, in certain cases so to believe. James' contention is based on his exposure of an unacknowledged bias behind Clifford's stricture against believing on insufficient evidence, namely, the fear of error. However, James appeals to another bias, no less legitimate than the fear of error, which justifies believing on insufficient evidence, namely, the hope of truth.

In what follows I hope to show that, though it may not be initially apparent, James is actually closer to Clifford's views than one might suppose. Both are pragmatists (Clifford in spirit if not in name), and James no less than Clifford is committed to the empiricist principle of verification. James, moreover, concedes that Clifford's epistemological strictures should be observed in assessing scientific beliefs, but makes a qualified exception for moral and religious beliefs. James, I think, does not so much refute Clifford's evidentialism—much of which he accepts—as significantly qualify and even expand upon it. I shall begin by explaining why Clifford holds such a strong evidentialist view, and then go on to consider James' response. This is followed by a consideration of their agreements and differences, and finally by an assessment of the merits of James's response.

Clifford begins with a parable of a ship-owner who is about to send a ship to sea. He cannot be absolutely sure of the ship's seaworthiness. It is an old ship, not originally well built, and having undergone many repairs. He could wait to have the ship thoroughly overhauled and refitted, but at great expense. He nevertheless suppresses his doubts; after all, the ship had weathered many voyages, and in rough seas, safely arriving back in port. He sends the ship on her way. The ship sinks and all on board drown. The ship-owner is blamable, avers Clifford, "because *he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before* him." His belief in the vessel's seaworthiness was ill gotten since "he had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts." Even had the voyage been successful, the ship-owner would still not escape censure because he acted on a belief with insufficient evidence. It is not the belief itself, or the baneful consequences of the action ensuing from it, which confers moral blame on its holder, but the *inadequacy* of the evidence for the belief. Hence, Clifford's uncompromising dictum: "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." Further, "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," then, admonishes Clifford, "the life of that man is one long sin against mankind."[1] Holding a belief is not just a cognitive matter, but is essentially a deeply moral one.

Today, unfortunately, we can update Clifford's fictional parable with actual historical events from our recent past such as the first space-shuttle disaster, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, and the mining accidents in West Virginia. In all these cases where avoidable negligence was found there were men whose thought processes may have resembled the ship-owner's.

But what exactly is morally wrong about believing on insufficient evidence? Clifford explains that beliefs are not wholly private, innocuous, inconsequential, and ephemeral mental states. They are incipient actions, as acorns are incipient oaks. Any belief, however seemingly trivial, has the potential of issuing in behavior—if not immediately, then in the future. Beliefs can be sundered from their corollary actions only in theory. "He who truly believes that which prompts him to an action," says Clifford with a biblical flourish, "has looked upon the action to lust after it, he has committed it already in his heart." Like landmines, beliefs may remain dormant for years only later to explode into action with the right stimulus. "If a belief is not realised immediately in open deeds, it is stored up for the guidance of the future."[2]

Clifford, moreover, notes that a belief is efficacious in ways other than being productive of behavior. It is psychologically efficacious at the personal level insofar as it ineluctably enters into relations with other beliefs we hold, reinforcing or weakening them, thereby helping form a composite of belief. A belief, according to Clifford, goes to make a part of that aggregate of beliefs which is the link between sensation and action at every moment of all our lives, and which is so organized and compacted together that no part of it can be isolated from the rest, but every new addition modifies the structure of the whole. No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may some day explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character forever.

Yet a belief is sociologically efficacious at the social level. A belief, though it may be possessed by us as individuals, is not our private possession but something held in the public trust. Our beliefs emerge from a matrix of belief built up from the larger culture of which we are parts, and they in turn react upon it. Clifford evinces here a fine sense of the sociology of belief:

> And no one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone. Our lives are guided by that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes. Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handed on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork. Into this, for good or ill, is woven every belief of every man who has speechof his fellows. An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live.[3]

No man is an island; as long as we hold beliefs at all, they must, however indirectly and minutely, affect the larger culture for good or bad, and in the mass they will prove enormously consequential. Consequently, because beliefs ineluctably issue in action, and have such a powerful influence on both ourselves and on others, it behooves us to choose them very carefully, to suppress no doubts about them, to scrupulously and rigorously examine and test them to determine whether or not they hold water—what "an awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live." Thus Clifford's extreme and uncompromising evidentialism.

For Clifford, then, skepticism respecting beliefs together with their acceptance only upon sufficient evidence

is a moral imperative since belief, "that sacred faculty which prompts the decisions of our will, and knits into harmonious working all the compacted energies of our being, is ours not for ourselves, but for humanity." And because of the social efficaciousness of beliefs, none of us, no matter how lowly, is exempt from the duty of scrupulosity with respect to our own—"No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe." Incredulousness for Clifford is the highest virtue so, "Whoso would deserve well of his fellows in this matter will guard the purity of his belief with a very fanaticism of jealous care, lest at any time it should rest on an unworthy object, and catch a stain which can never be wiped away." A paradigm of one who guarded the purity of his belief with his incessant and conscientious quest for more and more evidence to support it is Charles Darwin. Darwin delayed for years the publication of *On the Origin of Species* lest he had insufficient evidence for his theory of natural selection. It was only when he feared that Alfred Russel Wallace might jump the gun on him and publish his own similar findings that Darwin published his. Belief, stipulates Clifford, "is rightly used on truths which have been established by long experience and waiting toil, and which have stood in the fierce light of free and fearless questioning," otherwise "it is desecrated when given to unproved and unquestioned statements."[4] If so, then belief is indeed rightly used on Darwin's theory.

Clifford, though, does make some significant qualifications to his otherwise stringent evidentialism. First, we may accept certain beliefs as true without ourselves having acquired the requisite evidence for or personally tested them if that evidence has been acquired by others, or they have been tested time and time again by those qualified to do so and shown not wanting. Thus, says Clifford, "certain great principles, and these most fitted for the guidance of life, have stood out more and more clearly in proportion to the care and honesty with which they were tested, and have acquired in this way a practical certainty."[5] Such presumably are moral precepts like the golden rule and scientific laws like Newton's laws of motion and Boyle's law of gases.

Second, we may properly believe what is only probably true (what lacks evidence sufficient for certainty) because the results of such belief may vindicate our belief in future probabilities: "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."[6] For example, meteorologists in forecasting the weather deal exclusively with probabilities; however, their forecasts are necessary to navigation on the seas and in the air and so must be made. And if their predictions turn out true more times than not, then our future belief in these probabilities together with the actions taken because of them is vindicated.

Third, scientists sometimes need to believe things which go beyond their experience and so have no empirical evidence. Induction is one of those great principles most fitted for the guidance of life that Clifford speaks of, but, as Hume noted, it cannot be empirically validated since it involves predictions about future events of which no one has had experience. A child burnt yesterday dreads the fire because she believes inductively that the fire today or tomorrow will burn her as well. However, though she has as yet no experience or real evidence of today's or tomorrow's fire for her belief, she is nonetheless justified in so believing because of the uniformity in nature. Clifford allows, "We may go beyond experience by assuming that what we do not know is like what we do know; or, in other words, we may add to our experience on the assumption of a uniformity in nature. . . . we may fill in our picture of what is and has been, as experience gives it us, in such a way as to make the whole consistent with this uniformity." However, "No evidence," cautions Clifford, "can justify us in believing the truth of a statement which is contrary to, or outside of, the uniformity of nature." Here Clifford presumably has in mind belief in miracles. Moreover, we have no warrant "to believe that nature is absolutely and universally uniform." The principle of the uniformity in nature "only tells us that in forming beliefs which go beyond our experience, we may make the assumption that nature is practically uniform so far as we are concerned. Within the range of human action and verification, we may form, by help of this assumption, actual beliefs; beyond it, only those hypotheses which serve for the more accurate asking of questions."[7]

Though Clifford is skeptical of the veracity of revealed religion in references to the pronouncements of Buddha and Mohammed, nowhere does he mention Christian faith in particular, the implied gravamen of his attack

on belief ill supported by evidence. However, that implication was not lost on his contemporaries. Tom Flynn writes, "To Victorian intellectuals caught in the fury of that era's Crisis of Faith, Clifford's essay served up a corrosive tonic whose ingestion must surely have seared away the last vestiges of faith. So it seemed to rationalists who embraced its forbidding evidentialism—and to champions of the church who struggled to reply to it."[8] Clifford, along with such as Thomas Huxley and Henry Thomas Buckle, belonged to a generation of religious skeptics and agnostics. James was of the same generation but, owing no doubt to his upbringing and temperament, did not join the chorus of these cultured despisers of religion. He was as well aware as they of science's challenges to faith and of the obsolescence of some traditional religious beliefs. However, as a psychologist, he believed that religion is an ineradicable part of human nature—a virtual instinct—and that at its best it has therapeutic value for the individual and an ameliorative effect on society; and, as a philosopher, he believed that religious experience in its mystical form might be an avenue to knowledge inaccessible to reason and the scientific method. For James, religion is an indispensable and inestimable form of life still possible within and compatible with a scientific worldview. James demonstrated that one could be both scientifically enlightened and authentically religious without suffering cognitive dissonance as a result. James' defense of religion is an example of the mediatory role he assumed of reconciling ideological extremes and an expression of his metaphysical pluralism.

Broadly considered, his "Will to Believe" (more accurately, "the right to believe"), together with his *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, is James' apologia for religious faith. More particularly, it is a polemical rejoinder to Clifford. James takes Clifford to task on three points. First, he challenges the plausibility of Clifford's epistemological criterion of evidential sufficiency. Second, he detects an unexamined emotive bias behind Clifford's insistence on sufficiency of evidence as the sole warrant for belief. And third, he shows that Clifford's stringent requirement for warranted belief may, paradoxically, block the road to truth.

With respect to evidential sufficiency, nowhere does Clifford specify its criterion, an infallible mark by which one could know that it has been reached; he only assumes that there is one. For James, anyway, the quest for that criterion is a fool's errand. "Objective evidence and certitude are doubtless very fine ideals to play with, but where on this moonlit and dream visited planet are they found?" he asks rhetorically. He notes further, "No concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon." For example, the rationalist's test of "the inconceivability of the opposite," the empiricist's test of "the capacity to be verified by sense," or the idealist's test of "the possession of complete organic unity or self-relation, realized when a thing is its own other," have all been found wanting. And what has been claimed as objectively certain and self-evident by some has been denied by others. "Apart from abstract propositions of comparison," says James, "we find no proposition ever regarded by any one as evidently certain that has not either been called a falsehood, or at least had its truth sincerely questioned by some one else." Indeed, certainty has even been claimed for mutually contradictory beliefs such as those constituting Kant's antimonies. James' diagnosis for this state of affairs is "that the intellect, even with truth directly in its grasp, may have no infallible signal for knowing whether it be true or no."[9]

In his reply to Clifford, though, James considers not just the epistemology of belief but the psychology of belief as well. Ever the psychologist, James discerns lurking behind Clifford's stricture against believing on insufficient evidence a certain attitude or dispositional imperative, namely, "*we must avoid error*." This is the counsel of fear, the fear of being duped. Better by far to be secure in unbelief, than to believe and risk being wrong and so made a fool of. Yet there is an alternative attitude or motive, which James identifies, no less legitimate and compelling in determining what to believe, and that is, "*we must know the truth*."[10] This is the counsel of hope. From fear of error we may miss out on truth. Both attitudes entail risk. Avoiding error at all costs risks losing truth; seeking truth, come what may, risks being duped. Note that neither of these epistemological motives—the fear of error or the hope of truth—is amenable to evidential validation. But each is appropriate depending on the kind of beliefs being weighed.

Whether one should be motivated by fear of error or desire for truth in choosing among beliefs depends on the kind of choice before us. James stipulates, "Let us give the name of *hypothesis* to anything that may be

proposed to our belief." A choice between beliefs he calls an option. James classifies options according to whether they are dead or live, unforced or forced upon us, and trivial or momentous in their consequences. A dead choice or option is one where the choice of believing or not believing does not even arise because we have no interest in it. Whether to believe that Neptune may be the cause of storms at sea or not is such a dead option. A live option is one where the choice of believing or disbelieving is of vital interest to us such that we are willing to act on it. Whether to believe that democracy is the best form of government or not is an example of a live option. Beyond this, an option may be unforced or forced upon us. Either believing that acupuncture works or does not work is a choice that I have to make one way or the other. Finally, an option may be trivial or momentous. A trivial option concerns a choice between beliefs where the consequences of choosing are unimportant. Believing that sitting on the left side or the right side of the bus is the better choice is such a trivial case. By contrast, a momentous option is one that is live for us and unavoidable, and occurs but once in a life time; moreover, the choice once made can never be undone and is enormously consequential for us. Thus, the choice between sinking all my life's savings in an investment scheme or not would be a momentous one. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Once the choice is made, there is no turning back. The consequences involved are tremendous. I stand to loose everything in this risky venture or might become a millionaire. It is exactly this kind of option that Robert Frost poignantly illustrates in his poem, *The Road not Taken*. Deciding which road to take in Frost's yellow wood would be momentous in the extreme since once made there is no returning, and the road actually taken, the poet says retrospectively, "made all the difference." An option that is live, forced upon us, and momentous is what James calls a "genuine" option.[11]

Now in cases where our options or choices are not genuine, that is, neither forced upon us nor momentous, then we should adopt the cautious attitude of avoiding error. "Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous," advises James, "we can throw the chance of *gaining truth* away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of *believing falsehood*, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come." This is the case in choosing among scientific hypotheses.

"What difference, indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Röntgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a conviction about the causality of conscious states?" James asks rhetorically. "It makes no difference. Such 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." To update James' own examples, the option of believing either that *homo sapiens* originated in Africa or in Asia, for example, is not momentous. It does not demand an immediate decision, and the consequences of believing either way are not overwhelmingly important. Here our belief ought to be strictly determined by the evidence, and only when the amount of evidence is, in some sense, sufficient need we make up our minds. The same is true in cases of testing drugs for human consumption. Here we must avoid error at all costs, since human life and health depend upon it. We can afford to wait until all the results of rigorous testing are in, since the results of failing to do so might be catastrophic. Laboratory personnel who test drugs are in the same position, with the same responsibility, as Clifford's ship owner. With respect to accepting or rejecting scientific hypotheses, then, James completely agrees with Clifford's stricture against accepting nothing without sufficient evidence. James affirms that the fear of error should motivate the scientist, and that shunning error is properly endemic to the scientific method:

> The most useful investigator, because the most sensitive observer, is always he whose eager interest in one side of the question is balanced by an equally keen nervousness lest he become deceived. Science has organized this nervousness into a regular *technique*, her so-called method of verification; and she has fallen so deeply in love with the method that one may even say she has ceased to care for truth by itself at all. It is only truth as technically verified that interests her. The truth of truths might come in merely affirmative form, and she would decline to touch it.[12]

Having conceded this much to Clifford, however, James goes on to argue that sometimes we have no choice but to believe things for which at the time we have insufficient evidence, for refusing to do so might lead to the loss of truth and a diminished life. And among those beliefs are just those religious beliefs Clifford repudiated,

moral beliefs, and metaphysical doctrines. Options concerning which moral beliefs to hold, if any, are genuine since they are unavoidable and momentous. Yet they cannot be decided empirically, and so the issue of evidential sufficiency hardly occurs. That decision now devolves upon the will. "The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will," maintains James. "Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for *us*, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide?" Moreover, says James, "If your heart does not *want* a world of moral reality, your head will assuredly never make you believe in one,"[13] whatever the evidence in its favor. And, I might add, it is not just moral beliefs that elude definitive empirical justification, but also beliefs about values generally such as aesthetic beliefs concerning the nature and value of beauty and of art.

But above all it is religious beliefs that James is particularly anxious to vindicate, a vindication that would be continued later in his *Varieties*. James reduces all religions down two fundamental affirmations, namely, that good will out—"the best things are the more eternal things"—and we are immediately better off if we believe this. Our option is either to believe these propositions to be true or not. Obviously, this option, like the moral, is live, momentous and inescapable—in a word, genuine. Yet again there is no evidence sufficient to determine that one choice is true and the other false. And to remain agnostic by refusing to decide one way or another is itself a choice motivated as well by the fear of error. Since the intellect cannot decide the issue it is left up to the will or what James calls our "passional nature": "*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.*"[14]

Now in the cases of genuine options concerning our moral and religious beliefs which, unlike the case of scientific beliefs, elude *immediate* empirical justification, observing the dictum of "seek truth" is entirely appropriate. Here the conflict is not between the intellect and the will, but between two attitudes—the fear of error and the hope of truth. And the impulse to seek truth is no less legitimate than the caution to avoid error—indeed, given what is at stake, it is the more reasonable. Furthermore, in the case of such beliefs, our willingness to seek truth even in the teeth of insufficient evidence and the threat of being duped may actually bring about the truth sought. James assures us, "*Faith in a fact can help create the fact* " for there are "cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming."[15] Thus, if we truly desire a world of moral reality, believe in and act on it, then we may discover and come to know the truth of that reality. We may find a world responsive to and chiming in with our moral impulses, judgments, and actions. However, if we do not want such a world, and do not believe in and act on it, then we shall make no such discovery. The same is especially true of religious beliefs. Religion is "a postulator of new *facts*," says James, such that "the world interpreted religiously is not the materialistic world over again, with an altered expression; it must have, over and above the altered expression, *a natural constitution* different at some point from that which a materialistic world would have. It must be such that different events can be expected in it, different conduct must be required."[16] So, if those expectations are met, and that different conduct is forthcoming, then our religious beliefs are vindicated. We may come to discern the hand of Providence in the course of human events after all, particularly if we act to turn that hand. However, if we lack the requisite faith, then we will be blind and indifferent to this world differently constituted according to faith. Emerson finely expresses the way the world might appear to one having moral or religious faith: "As the world was plastic and fluid in the hands of God, so it is ever to so much of his attributes as we bring to it. To ignorance and sin, it is flint. They adapt themselves to it as they may; but in proportion as a man has any thing in him divine, the firmament flows before him and takes his signet and form."[17]

Although he does not mention them in "Will to Believe," choices between opposed metaphysical beliefs are also among those where the truth-seeking disposition is appropriate. This is particularly so in the case of stale-mated oppositions where good reasons can be given for either choice but there is insufficient evidence to decide decisively in favor of one over the other. An example of such is the opposition between determinism and indeterminism (free will). Because this is an issue that concerned him personally, James confronted and resolved it head on. In his essay, "The Dilemma of Determinism," James claims that it is impossible for this issue to be decisively resolved empirically: "facts practically have hardly anything to do with making us either determinists or indeterminists." Consequently, as is the case with moral and religious believes, it is left for the will to decide.

(What makes us determinists or indeterminists is what James calls "different faiths"[18] or sentiments.) And that is exactly what happened in James' own case. James had long been beset with deep depressions, fear of insanity, hypochondria, listlessness, and indirection. But then he had an epiphany of sorts upon reading the French psychologist, Charles Renouvier. In a diary entry for April 30, 1870, he writes,

> I think that yesterday was a crisis in my life. I finished the first part of Renouvier's second *Essais* and see no reason why his definition of free will — "the sustaining of a thought ***because I choose to*** when I might have other thoughts"— need be the definition of an illusion. At any rate, I will assume for the present — until next year — that it is no illusion. My first act of free will shall be to believe in free will.[19]

Though he had no evidential warrant for this belief, the beneficial results of his acting upon it were remarkable. His life now had direction; he overcame his various psychological ailments, and went on to become a great psychologist and philosopher.

Neither of these emotional stances, fear of error and hope of truth, is more or less acceptable than the other. Each is appropriate within its own sphere. Thus, the motive of avoiding error is appropriate within the sphere of scientific investigation, whereas the motive of seeking truth is appropriate within the spheres of religious faith, moral commitment, and metaphysical outlook.

However—and this is significant—even in the case of moral and religious beliefs James himself does not abandon a form of evidentialism; even they are open to and demand some form of empirical verification—but at a later time. This possibility is allowed in his conception of "belief" in "Will to Believe": "Let us give the name of *hypothesis* to anything that may be proposed to our belief." Now a hypothesis is a belief that is held tentatively until empirically verified by tests. Moral and religious beliefs, then, are just such hypotheses. Like scientific hypotheses, they stand to be tested. Scientific hypotheses are tested through experimentation. Moral and religious hypotheses can be tested only by applying them in practice, by acting on them, looking for their consequences to see whether our expectations regarding them are met. In *Varieties*, James states that the truth of religious beliefs is to be validated by their practical fruits. He gives the example of belief in God. Those who hold this belief typically expect that God will guarantee that "the best things are the more eternal things." Since this expectation must be either met or not met, then belief in God is a bona fide hypothesis; it, like a scientific hypothesis, is in principle verifiable and falsifiable (though it would be difficult to determine when this verification or falsification occurs). Here is James account of the hypothetical nature of theism as found in *Varieties*:

> God's existence is the guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. This world may indeed, as science assures us, some day burn up or freeze; but if it is part of his order, the old ideals are sure to be brought elsewhere to fruition, so that where God is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution are not the absolutely final things. Only when this farther step of faith concerning God is taken, and remote objective consequences are predicted, does religion, as it seems to me, get wholly free from the first immediate subjective experience, and bring a *real hypothesis* into play. [561-62]

As mentioned above, James regards religion as "a postulator of new *facts*," though he is agnostic about their nature: "What the more characteristically divine facts are, apart from the actual inflow of energy in the faith-state and the prayer-state, I know not."[20] If, indeed, the remote objective consequences in fact come to pass, then this serves as some validation for the beliefs in question. However, for us to know this, we need to take the first step by actively seeking truth, even at the risk of being duped. In other words, the evidence for our moral, religious and metaphysical beliefs needs to be forced by our first assenting to them. This was certainly the case with James' belief in free will, the life-changing effects of which were its vindication and a retroactive sign of its truth.

During the discussion of this paper after its oral presentation the following question was raised: How long should one wait for the future confirmation and vindication of moral and religious hypotheses that James al-

lows? James sets no time limit, nor is it necessary. It may come sooner or later in the course of life; if not sooner, then the faith that it will come later is part of the experiment—to give up on the hypothesis too soon would forever preclude its verification. My sense is that their confirmation typically comes not as a Damascus Road revelation (though it may do so) but slowly and incrementally, and even ambiguously. This question, though, stands to be settled empirically. Surveys may be done to determine how many people lose their faith and the reasons for it, and how many persist in their faith and for what reasons. And those reasons may be that they see practical benefits accruing to them over time as a result of their faith. Some studies, albeit highly controversial, have already shown that people of faith are happier and live longer than those without faith.

James and Clifford, then, are not as far apart as one might think. Both are pragmatists of sorts insofar as they alike hold to a behavioral conception of beliefs as preparations and guides to action which are validated by the occurrence of their expected results. James, in his "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," affirms, "Beliefs, in short, are really rules for action,"[21] which parallels Clifford's affirmation that "no belief is real unless it guide our actions, and those very actions supply a test of its truth." Both are empiricists in their equal insistence that beliefs must be verified empirically. No belief is to be accepted on faith (for James not, ultimately, even religious beliefs) but rigorously and continuously investigated: According to Clifford:

> In regard, then, to the sacred tradition of humanity, we learn that it consists, not in propositions or statements which are to be accepted and believed on the authority of the tradition, but in questions rightly asked, in conceptions which enable us to ask further questions, and in methods of answering questions. The value of all these things depends on their being tested day by day. The very sacredness of the precious deposit imposes upon us the duty and the responsibility of testing it, of purifying and enlarging it to the utmost of our power.[22]

Clifford here conceives of science less as a body of received knowledge than as a method of inquiry, where truth can by approached only asymptotically since truth itself is ever evolving. This is a pragmatic conception of science and truth that James would definitely accede to. In *Pragmatism*, James states, "The truth of an idea is not a stagnant property inherent in it. Truth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its veri-*fication*. Its validity is the process of its valid-*ation*."[23]

Furthermore, Clifford and James alike concede that certain beliefs may be rightly held without sufficient evidence. Clifford specifically includes among them assumptions like the principle of uniformity in nature, the viability of induction, and the trustworthiness of statistical probabilities; James specifically includes moral, religious, and metaphysical beliefs. Further, both think that such beliefs are vindicated by their usefulness. Thus for Clifford the belief that nature is uniform is vindicated by the useful results that come from applying it: "And practically demonstrative inference—that which gives us a right to believe in the result of it—is a clear showing that in no other way than by the truth of this result can the uniformity of nature be saved."[24] And for James religious belief, as a postulator of new facts, is vindicated if those facts are forthcoming.

James' departures from Clifford stem from his being a more consistent and thorough-going pragmatist (and empiricist) than Clifford. He thus enfranchises religious beliefs as inductive hypotheses, putting them on the same epistemological footing as scientific hypotheses—their validation too must await experimental results in the form of expectations fulfilled. Religious beliefs, no less than scientific ones, may be treated hypothetically, and in this way deserve a chance for their future verification. James, no less than Clifford, demands evidence for even religious beliefs. He is no fideist. But, unlike Clifford, he is willing to wait for that evidence to emerge later in their case, whereas Clifford wants evidence *now* before risking belief. This marks the chief difference between James' empiricism and that of traditional empiricists like Clifford. According to Ralph Barton Perry, "whereas according to the traditional view experience *has* spoken, according to James experience has yet to speak, and its response will be proportional to the boldness and happy inspiration with which it is interrogated." James believes that the prospect of finding truth justifies waiting for the results of that interrogation. "The truly empiri-

cal mind," says Perry, "imagines curious possibilities and gives nature every chance to reveal itself in unfamiliar ways."[25] On this account, James was possessed of a truly empirical mind. We shall never know whether certain beliefs are true—miss out on their truth—or false unless we take the risk of believing and acting on them. "But the skeptic who does not formulate any hypotheses," according to Edward C. Moore, "can never correct them by the discovery of errors or reinforce them by the act of having them lead him successfully."[26] And as James says, "*a rule of thinking* [Clifford's] *which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.*"[27]

The issue joined by James and Clifford over what conditions should be met for our acceptance of a belief is a long-standing one dating back at least to Hume. It is, as James would say, a live and momentous one, especially so today. It is the very issue between the so-called New Atheists and the religionists who oppose them. Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennet, Paul Kurtz, and company, are uncompromisingly committed to Clifford's position, whereas their opponents, at least tacitly, side with James. Clifford's stricture that only beliefs based on sufficient evidence are warranted is a stock-in-trade argument against theism. One might say that evidentialism has become a perennial problem of philosophy, and an importunate one at that. Consequently, it deserves to be addressed across the university curriculum and not just in philosophy courses where, of course, it should be given careful consideration.

How, then, might evidentialism be addressed in the classroom? The opportunities for doing so abound particularly in those fields like the natural and social sciences where theories proliferate. A theory, or hypothesis, is, using James' terminology, "anything that may be proposed to our belief," where we have the option either to accept or reject. Students might be required to classify options according to whether they are alive, forced upon them, and momentous. In the case of scientific theories, where the options are not genuine insofar as they are neither momentous nor forced upon us, the cautious avoidance of error ought to be the rule and evidence must be demanded for their acceptance (something on which both James and Clifford agree). However, the students' option or choice among theories becomes particularly acute in those cases where theories conflict, and where the evidence on either side does not decisively outweigh that on the other, which is especially true of those theories in the social sciences that are not falsifiable—think, for example, of the various conflicting theories of personality in psychology. The students might be asked to choose among such conflicting theories, and give reasons for their choices, and to consider what criteria might be brought to bear in making a choice. Furthermore, they might be instructed to identify those deep assumptions covertly made in science where sufficient evidence is lacking (something Clifford concedes) such as the principles of induction and of the uniformity in nature, and why those assumptions are warranted. Addressing the issue of evidentialism would enable students to realize that science is not a static body of holy writ but a pragmatic method of inquiry into truth that is never complete and final (on which James and Clifford again agree), to avoid the pitfall of "scientism," and to better appreciate the rightful place science occupies in the economy of human life—to wit, to bring home to them the point of Hamlet's remark, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, Than are dreamt of in your philosophy."

The most opportune place to address the issue of evidentialism is, of course, in courses in philosophy—especially epistemology, philosophy of science, and philosophy of religion—which cry out for a discussion of this issue. The following questions might be profitably raised there: What counts as evidence for a belief? What makes the evidence in support of a belief sufficient for its acceptance; in other words, what are the criteria of sufficiency? Do the criteria or standards of evidential sufficiency necessarily shift from field to field so that what is appropriate in one field of inquiry may not be so in another; that is, do these standards depend on the object of inquiry? Thus, beliefs that might pass muster in a court of law may not do so in a laboratory. Aristotle's remark that standards of precision necessarily differ from field to field, e.g. those in mathematics are more stringent than those in the social sciences, might apply as well to the standards of evidential sufficiency required by those fields. Finally, what are we do with those moral, religious, and metaphysical beliefs that seem incapable of achieving evidential sufficiency? Should we dismiss them as nonsensical, as do the logical positivists, or as immoral, as does Clifford, or hold them tentatively as recommended by James?

Let me conclude with what I think are the indisputable merits of James' position. James teaches us the wisdom of following the middle way. He shows us how to shake off the shackles of a constrictive scientism and stultifying skepticism without falling into the abyss of irrational subjectivism and anti-intellectualism. He exposes the inexpugnable psychological factor, the emotional bias, the voluntaristic element, lying behind all forms of epistemological justification. He thereby redeems ethics, religion, and metaphysics from the exile to which positivism sends them. He demonstrates that the faith of the moralist and the religionist is not unfounded, without betraying the spirit of scientific empiricism. As Moore puts is, "This act of faith—the belief that there are answers and we can find them—is intrinsic to all of James's philosophy. He insists upon an element of belief—over and above what we can prove rationally or experimentally—in all of the knowledge process."[28] I close with a quotation James takes from Fitz James Stephen. It neatly and poignantly expresses James' counsel to seek and hope for truth even when sufficient evidence is wanting:

> We stand on a mountain pass in the midst of whirling snow and blinding mist, through which we get glimpses now and then of paths which may be deceptive. If we stand still we shall be frozen to death. If we take the wrong road we shall be dashed to pieces. We do not certainly know whether there is any right one. What must we do? "Be strong and of a good courage." Act for the best, hope for the best, and take what comes. . . . If death ends all, we cannot meet death better.[29]

Endnotes

1 William K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879), pp. 164, 175.
2 *Ibid.*, p. 168.
3 *Ibid.*, pp. 168-69.
4 *Ibid.*, pp.170, 171, 170-71, 170.
5 *Ibid.*, p. 177.
6 *Ibid.*, pp. 177-78.
7 *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200, 203, 204
8 Tom Flynn, "Clifford in Whole," *Free Inquiry*, XXX, No. 1 (December, 2009/January, 2010), 63.
9 William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), pp. 14, 15, 16.
10 *Ibid.*, p. 17.
11 *Ibid.*, pp. 2, 3.
12 *Ibid.*, pp. 19-20, 21.
13 *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.
14 *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 11.
15 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
16 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience, A Study in Human Nature* (New York: The Modern Library, 2002), pp. 562-63.
17 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The American Scholar," in *Ralph Waldo Emerson: Selected Essays, Lectures, and Poems*, ed. by Robert D. Richardson, Jr. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p. 94.
18 William James, "The Dilemma of Determinism," in *The Will to Believe, and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1956), pp. 152, 153.
19 Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James, I* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1936), 323.
20 James, *Varieties*, pp. 561-62, 563.
21 William James, "Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results," in *William James, Writings 1878-1899* (New York: The Library of America, 1992), p. 1079.
22 Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," pp. 183, 197-98. The definition of "belief" as a rule or guide for action originated with Alexander Bain, a Scots psychologist, who defined belief as preparedness for action. Clifford makes no mention of his having derived this definition from Bain. However, Nicholas St. John Green,

who along with Peirce and James was a member of Boston's Metaphysical Club that met in the early 1870s, took up the idea from Bain and suggested it to others in the club. In response, Peirce wrote "The Fixation of Belief" and "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" that were published in *Popular Science Monthly*. Thus, Bain's idea contains the seeds of Pragmatism. See Thomas S. Knight, *Charles Peirce*, The Great American Thinker Series (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1965), pp. 45-46.

23 William James, *Pragmatism*, in *William James, Writings 1902-1910* (New York: The Library of America, 1987), p. 574.

24 Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," p. 203.

25 Perry, *William James, I, 558.*

26 Edward C. Moore, *William James*, The Great American Thinker Series (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1965), p. 98.

27 James, "The Will to Believe," p. 28.

28 Moore, *William James*, p. 98.

29 James, "The Will to Believe," p. 31.

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