

Introduction: The Clifford-James Debate

I. Clifford and the Ethics of Belief

Clifford's main thesis (p. 295):

“It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

A second, closely related thesis that he also endorses:

It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to form beliefs without seeking any readily available evidence that is relevant to them.

Two examples that Clifford uses to motivate his position:

- i. The owner of a worn-down emigrant ship who makes himself believe it is seaworthy (pp. 289-290).
- ii. The inhabitants of a certain island who rashly believe certain other islanders used unfair means to promote their religion (pp. 290-291).

Clifford's main argument for his two theses appeals to instrumental considerations. He claims that *beliefs held on insufficient evidence* and *beliefs held without earning them through patient investigation* are harmful in a variety of ways:

- When acted upon, they *directly* lead to harm. [Even when true?]
- They *indirectly* lead to harm by promoting other inadequately supported beliefs (either in oneself or in others) that are themselves acted upon.
- They *indirectly* lead to harm by promoting credulity (either in oneself or in others), which in turn leads to the formation of more inadequately supported beliefs in the future, which in turn leads to harm.

According to Clifford, these considerations extend to even the most seemingly trivial of beliefs, thus entitling him to his “always, everywhere, and for anyone” proviso.

II. James and the Will to Believe

Some Jamesian terminology:

An *hypothesis* is a proposition that may be believed.

An hypothesis is *live* for a person iff it “appeals as a real possibility” to that person. (Otherwise it is *dead* for that person.)

An *option* is a choice between two [or more?] hypotheses.

An option is *living* iff both hypotheses are live. (Otherwise it is *dead*.)

An option is *forced* iff there is no possibility of not choosing between the alternatives. (Otherwise it is *avoidable*.)

An option is *momentous* iff the opportunity is unique, and the stake is significant, and the decision is irreversible. (Otherwise it is *trivial*.)

An option is *genuine* iff it is living, forced, and momentous.

James' criticism of Clifford (“that delicious *enfant terrible*”):

Our two fundamental commandments as would-be knowers: “Believe the truth!” and “Shun error!”

According to James, Clifford over-emphasizes the second of these and neglects the first, thereby “merely show[ing] his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe” (p. 25).

James' own proposal:

Whenever one faces a genuine option that is not settled by the evidence, one may (both in the sense that it is possible for one to, and in the sense that it is permitted for one to) decide based on one's "passional nature" which hypothesis to believe.

According to James, the following are genuine options not settled by the evidence:

- *Moral questions* (viz., the decision whether or not to have moral beliefs).
- *Questions concerning personal relations* (viz., the decision whether to believe that someone, whom you wish to be friends with, likes you).
- *Questions of religious faith* (viz., the decision whether or not to believe in the Christian God).

Insofar as James has an argument for his positive proposal, it is summarized by the following thought:

"...a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truths were really there, would be an irrational rule" (p. 32, emphasis omitted).

III. Evaluating Clifford's and James' Arguments

Neither Clifford's nor James' arguments are particularly convincing.

Some problems with Clifford's argument:

- Clifford's appeal to practical considerations of a distinctively consequentialist sort in order to settle the normative status of beliefs is controversial, to say the least. (Also, his appeal to such considerations is in tension with his apparent disavowal of the idea that the moral status of an action depends on its consequences.)
- Even if appealing to consequentialist considerations of the sort Clifford considers is acceptable, Clifford's argument can't establish a *duty* to *never* believe anything for which we have insufficient evidence unless Clifford considers, in addition to the costs of believing upon insufficient evidence, the benefits of so believing, as well as the costs and benefits of the alternatives. It is extremely doubtful that this cost-benefit analysis will *always* work out in favor of avoiding belief on insufficient evidence.

James' criticism of Clifford is unfair:

- Clifford is demanding that we believe things on *sufficient* evidence, not demanding that we believe things on *conclusive* evidence. So it is far from clear that Clifford is saying, "Better risk loss of truth than chance of error."

Some problems with James' argument (and accompanying terminology):

- It is very obscure what liveness comes to, and why it is epistemically relevant.
- If an option is always a choice between *believing* two propositions, then no option is ever forced; but if options include suspensions of judgment as an alternative, then the Cliffordian will reply that there is *no* option that is unsettled by the evidence (in the relevant sense).
- Irreversibility is in tension with being forced. (One way of bringing this out: if continuing to deliberate counts as an alternative, then the decision is not irreversible; but if continuing to deliberate does not count as an alternative, then the decision is not forced.)
- James' argument for his proposal proves too much. If it worked, it would also cut against a point on which James and Clifford agree: that in cases in which a choice between two hypotheses is settled by the evidence, one should believe in accordance with the evidence. (After all, to accept this point is to accept a rule of thinking that absolutely prevents us from acknowledging a certain kind of truth, namely those unsupported by the available evidence.)

IV. Foreshadowing the Semester's Themes

Rather amazingly, nearly every topic that we'll be discussing this semester is foreshadowed in one way or another by either Clifford's or James' article (or both).

a. *Doxastic voluntarism and the appropriateness of normative terminology in epistemology*

Clifford is unabashed in his use of normative language when discussing beliefs:

He talks of us having *no right* to form certain beliefs, of certain beliefs being *wrong*, of us being *responsible* for our beliefs, of us having a *duty* to form beliefs in a certain way, and of certain propositions being *unworthy* of belief.

More pompously, he talks of certain belief-forming practices being *dishonest* and *dishonorable*, of the *sacred* faculty of belief being *desecrated* by certain habits, of it being *unlawful* to stifle one's doubts, and of it being a *sin* to form beliefs upon insufficient evidence.

One thing that's going on here is that Clifford is self-consciously appropriating the language of religion for use in his crusade against religious belief.

But another thing that's going on is that Clifford thinks that many of the normative categories (duty, wrongness, responsibility, etc.) typically reserved for actions are also appropriately applied to beliefs.

an important challenge to this last thought: It is only appropriate to apply these categories to things over which we have voluntary control; we don't have voluntary control over our beliefs; so it is not appropriate to apply these normative categories to our beliefs.

In meetings 2 and 3 of the semester we'll spend some time looking at this challenge.

"Doxastic voluntarism" is epistemologists' ungainly name for the thesis that we can voluntarily form beliefs.

James nicely emphasizes the way in which our attitudes toward that thesis are divided: "When we look at certain facts, it seems as if our ... volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions. When we look at others, it seems as if they could do nothing when the intellect had once said its say" (p. 15).

b. *Pragmatic reasons for belief and Pascal's wager*

Clifford and James also touch on the issue of whether pragmatic considerations are relevant to the normative status of a belief: Clifford is vigorously against them (subject to a certain proviso), whereas James offers a qualified defense of their relevance.

James also discusses the most famous appeal by a philosopher to pragmatic considerations in the realm of belief, namely Pascal's wager.

In meeting 4 we'll discuss some arguments for and against the existence of pragmatic reasons for belief, and in meeting 5 we'll focus on Pascal's wager (rather heroically, I'll defend a version of it).

c. *The value of true belief, and the value of knowledge*

The proviso mentioned above is this: although Clifford directs a good deal of disparaging rhetoric against those who believe things because doing so is comforting or pleasant (thus choosing to live in a "cloud-castle of sweet illusions and darling lies"), his official defense of *the value of well supported belief* appeals to practical considerations. (This, no doubts, represents a tension in his thinking.)

One can imagine a similar defense being mounted of *the value of true beliefs*, in which their value is derived from their practical benefits.

But this raises the question: are true beliefs valuable merely as means to other ends, or is there a sense in which true beliefs are valuable as ends in themselves?

In meeting 7, we'll spend some time thinking about *the value of true belief*.

But before that, in meeting 6, we'll discuss a closely related topic, about which much ink has been spilled of late, namely *the value of knowledge*.

d. *The autonomy of epistemic normativity*

When Clifford talks of us having "a duty" not to believe anything on insufficient evidence, it is very natural to interpret him as saying that the duty in question is a *moral* duty.

But insofar as Clifford's main thesis continues to be influential to this day, the duty in question is usually taken to be a *distinctively epistemic* duty.

A similar issue arises during debates about the value of knowledge and true belief: many participants in these debates think that there is such a thing as *distinctively epistemic value*, and that knowledge and true belief have it.

But if there are such things as epistemic duties and epistemic value, what do these things come to?

e. *Our epistemic goals, and the constitutive aims of (and standards of correctness for) belief*

One widely held view is that epistemic duties, values, and the like are all grounded in a certain set of fundamental epistemic goals that we, as cognitive being, must form our beliefs in accordance with.

James' espousal of the twin imperatives "Believe the truth!" and "Shun error!" is usually taken to be the canonical formulation of this idea that all epistemic normativity is ultimately derived from two fundamental epistemic goals (despite the fact that James calls them "commandments" and not "goals").

Note, too, that James sometimes formulates his first imperative as "We must know the truth," which raises the issue of whether *knowledge* or *true belief* is our fundamental epistemic goal.

In meeting 10 we'll spend some time thinking about epistemic goals, and what they might be.

In meetings 8 and 9, we'll discuss two closely related ideas that, strictly speaking, are logically distinct from the idea that we have epistemic goals: the idea that belief has certain constitutive aims, and the idea that belief is governed by certain constitutive standards of correctness.

f. *Epistemic consequentialism*

For some of you, all this talk of epistemic normativity being derived from a set of epistemic goals might seem alarming: isn't this just the analogue, in normative epistemology, of *teleological* or *consequentialist* approaches to normative ethics?

In meeting 12, I'll try to convince you that this is indeed the case, and moreover that this teleological approach to epistemic norms is positively misguided. We'll also consider, in meeting 11, two recent papers that argue for a similar conclusion, though in a more limited way.

g. *Analogies between moral and epistemic norms*

James writes, "Science herself consults her heart when she lays it down that the infinite ascertainment of fact and correction of false belief are the supreme goods for man" (p. 27).

Contained in this sentence is a thought that has become very influential of late: the idea that those who try to use science as a cudgel against the existence and legitimacy of moral norms risk being hoisted by their own petard, since their arguments also threaten to undermine the existence and legitimacy of epistemic norms (which, presumably, the scientific method is committed to).

We'll end the course by considering companions-in-guilt responses of this sort to Mackie's argument from queerness (meeting 13) and to Street's Darwinian dilemma for realism about value (meeting 14).