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Evidentialism and the Will to Believe

Scott Aikin

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W. K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" and William James "The Will to Believe" are perhaps the two most influential essays in epistemology written during the 19th century. Both essays are essential readings in any course that addresses issues concerning epistemic normativity. Scott Aikin's *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* is an extensive critical commentary on these two essays. Thus, before addressing the content of Aikin's book, a quick synopsis of the exchange between Clifford and James is warranted.

W. D. Clifford defends a strong, uncompromising brand of evidentialism. Specifically, he claims that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (Clifford 1877, p. 295). Clifford's central arguments for this claim involve the presentation of cases where believing on insufficient evidence puts others at risk of suffering great harm. His most famous example is the case of a ship owner who, despite having substantial evidence that his ship is not seaworthy, allows it to set sail anyway. The ship sinks midway through its journey across the sea, causing the deaths of all those on board. Clifford (1877) reasons that the ship owner is blameworthy for holding this belief because "*he had no right to*

believe on such evidence as was before him” (p. 290; original emphasis). Recognizing that a generalization from a few cases is not sufficient to establish his rigid evidentialism, Clifford then argues that believing on insufficient evidence has two unacceptable consequences: it undermines the general process of critical thinking, and it can lead us to become credulous and share that tendency with others, ultimately leading us all to become negligent. Thus, there are no innocuous cases of believing on insufficient evidence. Once these arguments are presented, Clifford spends nearly all the remainder of the essay attempting to rebut objections – particularly the concern that his evidentialism is so strict that it leads to an unacceptable skepticism.

William James’ “The Will to Believe” is a response to Clifford. James argues that Clifford’s evidentialism is too strong and that religious beliefs should be evaluated according to a more lenient epistemic standard. James’ (1896) central thesis is the following claim: “*Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds*” (p. 334; original emphasis). James holds that matters of religious faith can be cases where intellectual grounds alone do not provide conclusive reasons to believe that the propositions in question are true or false and that in such cases, it is permissible to overbelieve—that is, to believe something that is not sufficiently backed by evidence. Along the path to this conclusion, James presents some specific cases designed to show that Clifford’s evidentialism is too robust. To give an illustration of his strategy, consider the case of friendship. James considers whether or not I should believe that you like me. He observes that whether you like me or not often depends “on whether I meet you halfway, am willing to assume that you *must* like me, and show you trust and expectation” (James 1896, p. 342). In this manner, my overbelieving is permissible

because it brings about a beneficial consequence: my believing (without evidence) that you already like me makes it more likely that you and I will become friends.

Having presented a basic overview of Clifford and James' exchange, we can now turn to *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe*. Aikin's commentary on Clifford and James is divided into four parts. The first is a concise introduction that explains the motivation for the commentary and its central aims. Following the introduction, Aikin provides an in-depth summary and analysis of Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" in chapter 1. Then, in chapter 2, Aikin similarly summarizes and assesses William James' "The Will to Believe." These chapters are long—70 and 100 pages respectively. Fortunately, Aikin has broken them up into a large number of sections and subsections that are more digestible: each subsection typically lasts for 2-3 pages. The book concludes in chapter 3 by addressing four unresolved issues that have emerged from the commentary.

Readers familiar with the Clifford and James dialectic will quickly notice that Aikin argues for some surprising conclusions. Historically, when these two articles have been discussed, James is usually perceived as the victor of this exchange. Aikin argues otherwise. While he claims that Clifford's general argumentative strategies require some tweaking to be successful, he argues that James has not only failed to refute Clifford's position but that "James' reconstructed account of religious belief fails to salvage recognizably religious belief" (p. 7). If Aikin's assessment is right, then James' essay fails both as a critique of Clifford and as an epistemic defense of religious belief.

Aikin's analysis is commendably thorough, as one would expect when the central commentary (170 pages) is four times the combined length of the two articles being examined (42 pages). A few sections of the text are particularly noteworthy for their clarity and the novelty

of their arguments. The first is Aikin's treatment of Clifford's "slope arguments" (pp. 33-41). These are Clifford's arguments for the conclusion that there are no cases of permissible overbelief. Generally, these are regarded as fairly weak arguments, but Aikin suggests they are actually stronger than most have realized. While Clifford does overstate what these arguments demonstrate, Aikin argues (rather persuasively) that a slight modification to Clifford's conclusion enables him to retain his evidentialist thesis without much difficulty.

Another noteworthy section is Aikin's assessment of James' counterexamples to evidentialism (pp. 140-154). Aikin contends that these counterexamples to evidentialism fail. His assessment of the James' friendship case (and similar examples) is particularly novel: in these cases, Aikin reasons that holding the relevant belief (e.g., that someone else likes you) makes it more likely that the belief is true than false. Thus, the fact that you hold the belief counts as evidence for you. The problem for James is that he set out to show that these cases were examples of justified overbelief. Since the individuals in these cases have evidence supporting their beliefs, they aren't actually overbelieving at all.

Chapter 3 (pp. 181-194) is also a noteworthy part of the book. Aikin considers four lingering questions from his analysis of Clifford and James' positions:

1. Must evidentialism be an ethical doctrine?
2. Can practical reasons trump theoretical reasons?
3. Can religion be pragmatically reconstructed?
4. What about the power of positive thinking?

This section not only provides some closure to a few of the larger philosophical points that have arisen through the commentary but also orients the discussion nicely with regard to more contemporary debates on these issues. My only regret about this chapter is its length: these

questions can only be answered superficially in 14 pages. This brevity is particularly jarring given the exceptional rigor and attention to detail found in chapters 1 and 2. The book's closing would have been more satisfactory if this final chapter had been more expansive. I admit, however, that this is a fairly minor shortcoming from a pedagogical standpoint, since instructors can assign other material on evidentialism and the ethics of belief more generally.

Beyond these notable sections, I should also mention that the text is relatively free of historical digressions. While some initial background material on each article is provided, these details comprise a slim portion of the book (pp. 9-13, 79-81). Philosophers with historical interests may find this a bit disappointing, but this approach fits well with Aikin's objective to read the articles "on their own terms, as essays that were presented to educated, but not philosophically advanced, audiences" (p. 3). Since few undergraduates would have the background in history of philosophy to comprehend and appreciate substantial historical digressions, this approach does not, in my view, diminish the text's pedagogical value.

In terms of style, the book is less formal and more lighthearted than your standard journal article of analytic philosophy. Generally, this feature makes the book more enjoyable to read, and since dense, technical prose can be intimidating to undergraduate students, Aikin's informality will probably make the book more appealing to students. Nevertheless, despite its informal tone and clear prose, *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* is likely still too philosophically advanced for students who have not had some significant prior exposure to philosophy. I do not consider this feature of the text much of a drawback, though, because the text is best used as a supplement to Clifford and James' articles—articles that are themselves too complex and technical for undergraduates who are inexperienced in philosophy.

Given my remarks above, I believe *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* is well-suited to two types of courses. The first is a graduate level course on the ethics of belief: the book could provide material for an extensive 3-4 week discussion of the debate between Clifford and James and provide a tidy transition into a discussion of evidentialism more generally. The second is a survey course in epistemology for either graduate students or upper-level undergraduates. Most survey courses in epistemology will feature some discussion of epistemic normativity, and this book could serve as a nice compliment to the classic Clifford and James' articles.

The book's only significant shortcoming is its price. In my view, \$120 is too much to ask students to pay for a book of about 200 pages. The current price might compel instructors to look toward A. J. Burger's *The Ethics of Belief*: a new paperback copy of that text often sells for about \$10. Burger's short book includes both articles by Clifford and James along with additional explanatory footnotes and a critical essay (authored by Burger) on James' "The Will to Believe." As one might expect from this description, Burger's critical analysis is nowhere near as comprehensive as Aikin's, so instructors would have to decide whether an expensive, admirably rigorous text is a better choice for their course than a cheaper but far less rigorous one. Fortunately, this dilemma may not confront instructors for long: the paperback edition of *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* will be released during the fall of 2015.

Overall, notwithstanding its current price, *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* comes highly recommended to instructors of epistemology, particularly those who regularly assign Clifford and James' classic articles.

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