

Clifford and james on religious belief



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Rationally justifying belief in a religious entity is a popular topic of contention in religious philosophy. Philosophers have spent ages discussing the reasons to believe or to not believe in a religion. The essays of William Clifford and William James are the foundations for the discussion behind the ethics of forming a religious belief. Clifford stands by intellectual honesty being responsible for beliefs and discredits those who are solely driven by emotion. On the other hand, James adopts a reconstructed approach and advocates for the “will to believe” by our passional nature in cases of insufficient evidence. In their respective articles, Clifford and James implore the right to belief with Clifford taking a staunch objectivist stance while James defends the sentiments of hope and eternity.

In “The Ethics of Belief”, Clifford contends for our moral duty to find sufficient evidence to support our beliefs, and he begins with a story about a shipowner who lets a ship set sail, despite knowing of its unsteadiness and instability. Consequently, many people die, and the shipowner must live with this guilt. Clifford asserts that the shipowner acted unjustly by relying on something other than sufficient evidence. Although the shipowner had sincerely believed that the ship would see another successful trip, he had no right to believe so based on his negligence in checking for solid evidence. Furthermore, even if the ship had safely reached its destination, the shipowner still failed morally because he had no right to suppress his doubts and rely upon a belief with no evidence.

The lesson that Clifford poses is that we must have sound evidence for believing in something, lest we may endanger the lives of others. The question of a certain action’s morality does not concern the result or

intention, but the origin of one's belief. It is easy to convince ourselves that we are free from blame or guilt because of false feelings, prejudice, or assurances. However, this can lead to clouded judgment and irrational decision-making. The importance of evidence is attributed to the underlying implications of holding a certain belief- acting and behaving a certain way. If the foundations of our beliefs are not supported by evidence, then we are susceptible to acting unjustly and ultimately harming others.

A flaw of William Clifford's contention is its seemingly direct contradiction of its own epistemological structure. Clifford explicitly states that it is always morally impermissible "to believe anything upon insufficient evidence". This statement in itself is subjective, and Clifford fails to provide evidence to support the validity of his argument. Another problem regarding Clifford's argument concerns the definition of "sufficient evidence". Clifford is quite vague in defining clear criterion for what counts as acting rationally based on the knowledge of valid evidence.

How can Clifford's logic be applied to a religious context? Clifford states that if we have a fixed belief, we possess the ability as well as the duty to act in a certain way. If that belief came about in an irrational way and is based on anything other than evidence, then we have acted immorally and failed at our moral duty. Our beliefs are what guide our everyday actions, decisions, and thoughts. If our belief system is corrupt, then this can ____. Consequently, anyone who believes in God without sound evidence is wrong in doing so.

The most famous objection to Clifford's ethics is seen in William James' rebuttal, "The Will to Believe". James takes an entirely different perspective

on religious belief by emphasizing our right to free will and intellectual respect. He states that in the absence of hard evidence, one still has the right to believe. As is for the cases for many religions, there are times when there is insufficient evidence for believing in tenets, doctrines, or entities. William James says that it is still permissible to believe based on the will and right to believe. According to James, it is acceptable to allow emotion to affect our beliefs, especially in a situation “ that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds”. However, James specifies that this doctrine is only permissible if one adopts the “ religious hypothesis”, which focuses on the placement of hope in our lives based on the concept of eternity. His argument mentions the risks that one must consider when it comes to believing in something. It follows that we turn to our beliefs in the absence of evidence.

The source of Clifford and James’ argument can be traced to the origins of religious belief in the case of a belief without any foundation of evidence, as is the case with many religions. While Clifford states that it is morally favorable to withhold our beliefs in the absence of evidence, the question arises of whether it might always be better to avoid falsehood rather than believing a possible truth. James points out that when a choice presents itself genuinely, it is morally permissible to accept it as a truth. He encourages this mindset for the sake of respecting “ one another’s mental freedom”(94).

I most strongly align my beliefs with James’ stance. While it may be simpler to take the evidentialist route in this debate, there are many things that people believe to be real even while lacking firsthand knowledge or experience. In fact, James himself fully acknowledges the societal nature of

many beliefs- we tend to believe based on others' recounts and knowledge. It is inevitable that we make many, if not most of our decisions without any hard evidence. Some of these situations are as immense as that of the shipowner, but many are spur-of-the-moment choices fueled by passion.

I also find it difficult to adhere to Clifford's claims due to its subjective nature. While he wholeheartedly advocates objectivism, his entire argument is grounded in a single subjective assertion that shows no proof of evidence. By failing to address this flaw, Clifford allows his argument to be rather unsound. By Clifford's standards, we would be in danger of acting immorally by believing his claims without any evidence of its verity.

By critically evaluating both Clifford's and James' arguments, one can reach a conclusion about their personal opinions on the rationale and right to forming a belief, with or without solid evidence. Faith and reason are the main components of religious belief. Both Clifford and James agree that the traditional arguments for the existence of God are insufficient. They also concede that there is very little real evidence of God to support His existence. However, their disagreements arise concerning the topic of intellectual responsibility and its role in religious belief given a lack of evidence.

References

1. Clifford, W. K. (1877). "The Ethics of Belief". In *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*. Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books. pp. 70-97.

2. James, W. (2014). *The Will to Believe: And Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (Cambridge Library Collection - Philosophy). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. doi: 10.1017/CBO9781107360525