Notes on W.K. Clifford and William James

W.K. Clifford's essay is called *The Ethics of Belief*, and for good reason. He wants to convince us that forming our beliefs in the right way is a matter of real ethical importance. Thus, he begins with an example where the co nnection between belief and ethical considerations seems very strong: the ship-owner knows that his ship might need to be overhauled. Before the ship leaves port, however, he talks himself out of his doubts. He reminds himself that the ship has sailed saf ely many times before. He reminds himself that he believes in Providence. And he persuades himself not to distrust the shipbuilders and contractors who have worked on the boat in the past.

The ship sinks in mid-ocean and all aboard it die.

Clifford insists: the ship-owner is morally responsible for the deaths of these people. And his failing is clear: he let his beliefs be guided by things other than the evidence. Further, Clifford insists, he would be just as guilty if the ship had never sunk. What makes actions wrong are not the results. What makes actions wrong is not a matter of results. He had no right to believe that the ship was safe; it was *wrong* of him to hold that belief, even if he is lucky enough to have nothing go wrong as a result.

It might occur to the reader: what was wrong was not *holding* the belief; what was wrong was *acting* on the belief.

Clifford agrees that even if my belief is fixed, I can control my action, and I have duties to *act* in certain ways (e.g., to have my ship checked before sending it on a long voyage) if even if I don't believe there is anything wrong. But he thinks the original judgment still stands: if the belief was gotten illegitimately -- if it came about without relying on good evidence -- then the person who holds the belief is open to moral criticism -- has failed in his or her duty. This is because belief is not simply disconnected from action. To hold a belief involves having some tendency to act in certain ways. And if I hold a strong belief without evidence, it will cloud my judgment when I try to carry out the duty of investigating facts carefully.

Clifford also recognizes that belief isn't just a private matter.

> 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... are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a sacred deposit and a sacred trust to be handed on to the next generation, not unchanged but enlarged and purified...

As Clifford sees it, *any* case of believing for faulty reasons has the potential to infect and corr upt the system of belief that we all depend on. And any such act weakens our self-control and our critical faculties. And carelessness about the evidence leads eventually to carelessness about the truth itself. Clifford sums up:

> ...it is wro ng always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

The consequences for religion should be clear: if Clifford is right, then believing in God without sufficient evidence -- holding the belief as a matter of faith, as some people put it -- is wrong.

What are we to make of this?

There is a curious feature of the argument. Clifford is well aware that we get many of our beliefs form society at large. This collection of socially-held beliefs he calls an heirloom; a sacred trust. Now clearly no one is in a position to check every belief in this treasure trove. Clearly *all* of us have to rely on some beliefs that we will never be able to gather the evidence for ourselves. In fact, most of our general beliefs are of this sort. History is an obvious example. The best I could do by way of producing evidence that the Battle of Hastings was fought in 1066 is to point to some book that records the fact. But that author, in turn, got her information elsewhere. Our justification for these sorts of beliefs is in one sense very weak: it depends entirely on other people.

This helps reinforce Clifford's point that the social fabric of belief *is* a social trust. We are constantly in the position of having to believe things on no more evidence than the fact that they are widely believed. And we know: things that are widely believed -- even things that are widely believed by experts -- may be false.

This might make it sond as though our historical beliefs, for examplem, aren't based on sufficient evidence. If that's so, Clifford's positon self-destructs. However, we probably don't need to say that. We might say that "sufficient" here menas something like "sufficiently reasonable." If I have reason to trust you, I'm justified in believing you even if you happen to be careless or even lying. More generally, things that are found in a wide variety of sources, for example, may have more hope of being true. Things that are believed by people who have spent years becoming experts on the topic at issue are more likely to get things right than the casual commentator. But this still leaves us in the position of having to believe much more than we could ever have evidence for ourselves.

Of course, if we really take seriously the idea that knowledge is a social product, then the rules for coming to hold beliefs might b e like rather elaborate social rules. In fact, that is probably true. We treat certain experts *as* experts because their credentials are socially recognized. And it may be that if our society is healthy with regard to the process of inquiry, this will generally produce reasonable beliefs. Some people may see this as a far cry from Clifford's bracing slogan.

Still, Clifford could pull the following arrow from his quiver: it is one thing to believe things that are socially sanctioned. If I am not an expe rt myself, that may be the best I can do. It is another thing, however, to hold a belief when I *know* that the evidence is less than convincing. In particular, if I say that I believe something on faith, I seem to be saying that I believe it *in spite* of the fact that I know the evidence for it is at best not strong. So even if Clifford overplays his hand in general, it might be argued that applying the point to religious faith is perfectly in order. And in any case, a weaker version of his dictum has a very reasonable sound to it: it is wrong to believe things when you *know* that the evidence for them is inadequate. It is wrong because doing *this* really does threaten the socially-constructed fabric of shared knowledge and belief on which we all must rely.

There's another point we might make about Clifford's case, however. He says it is wrong, always, everywhere and for anyone to believe something without sufficient evidence. Therefore, we can ask: does Clifford have sufficient evidence for **this**? It's hard to see that he does.

William James makes a very different sort of case in *The Will to Believe*. James's explicit aim is to provide a philosophical justification for faith. He sets forth the conditions in which he thinks that something lik e faith is appropriate and the reasons *why* it is appropriate. We begin with some definitions. Note: James is not defining the terms as used in ordinary language. He is telling us what *he* will mean by them in his essay.

1. A **hy pothesis** is anything that might be offered for us to believe -- that it will rain tomorrow; that quarks are the ultimate particles; that Madonna is the reincarnation of Jane Austen.
2. A **live** hypothesis is one that we take seriously to s ome degree -- that we have at least some slight tendency to believe. The hypothesis that the next president will be an independent may be unlikely, for example, but it probably has **some** plausibility for you. On the other hand, the hypothesis that M adonna is the reincarnation of Jane Austen is one that most likely experts no pull on you whatsoever. The first hypothesis is live, though perhaps barely. The second is dead.
3. An **option** is a choice between two hypotheses.
4. A **living** option is one in which both hypothesis are live.
5. A **forced** option is one in which we have no other live options -- where the choice between these two options is unavoidable if we are to choose at all. For example, James says, "E ither accept this truth or go without it" is a forced option. I either believe the claim or I don't. And saying that I don't *disbelieve* -- that I suspend judgment -- is still to choose the second option. On the other hand, "Believe that Smith is perfectly honest or that he is an incurable liar" is not a forced choice. I could suspect that the truth lies in between.
6. An option is **momentous** if the opportunity is unique, or the stakes are significant or the decision irreversible. The choice between marrying one of two people might be such an option, for example. The choice between chocolate or vanilla ice cream wouldn't.

James's thesis is that it is appropriate for our will - more generally, our passions -- to influence people in certain situations. But he notes: this may seem to be plain confusion. Typically, our will *can't* influence our beliefs. No matter how much I might *like* to believe it, I can't make myself believe that there is a million dollars in my ba nk account.

We have already encountered a related argument: *Pascal's Wager*. James is not impressed by Pascal's argument as such, and argues that is is both not an account of how we *do* come to believe, nor is it a recipe for coming to g enuine religious conviction. But James goes on to point out: in fact, our passions frequently *do* influence our beliefs. The hypothesis that I

have a million dollars in the bank is not a live hypothesis for me; there is nothing for my passions to w ork on. But not all beliefs are of this sort. With live hypotheses, the will and the passions may play a role.

In any case, a great many of our beliefs are based on "faith in someone else's faith," and so the idea that we *are* simply rational a bout our beliefs is well off the mark.

But of course, the question isn't how we *do* form our beliefs; the question is how we *should*. So James asks: is it ever acceptable to *let* passion influence belief? His answer is yes. It is in order when we are faced with a genuine option that can't be decided on intellectual grounds alone.

The detailed working out of this idea takes up most of the rest of the essay. James begins his argument by pointing out that we have two goals as peop le who form beliefs. One is to avoid error, but the other is to believe the truth. These are *different* goals. You can avoid error on a given topic by sitting eternally on the fence. But if you do, you will never believe the truth, because you will believe nothing. Sometimes that may be what is called for. In particular, it may be what science calls for, though James points out that scientists in the process of *discovering* the truth are often quite passionate about their favorite hypotheses. And in any case, there are worse things than being duped.

Whatever may hold for science, in other areas of life, other rules are called for. James discusses a few such cases.

Moral questions, he points out, can't simply be settled by the facts. From this it is not exactly clear just how our passions *should* enter the equation, but perhaps we can say a bit. Emotions such as pity, sympathy, anger, disgust and so on are often morally *relevant*. Bringing our emotions into moral thinking in a careful way is part of what a good moral thinker does naturally. Also, James points out, in human relations, I may have to *believe* that others will meet me half-way in order to make it at all likely that they *will*. If I don't believe y ou will like me, my belief may become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

What of religion? James sees the underlying idea of religion as having two parts: that the best things are the eternal things, and that you will be better off *in the here and now* if you believe this.

Suppose this is true. If your rule of life forbids believing on less than sufficient evidence, you will never be able to reap the benefits of this truth. And if we add the idea that Ultimate Reality is personal, then it may well be necessary for us to reach out in trust to *have* a real relationship with the Divine. But if we adopt Clifford's rule, we would be left unable to have any such relationship, because the matter can't be decided on intellectual grounds. James s ays:

> a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there would be an irrational rule.

Thus James's argument that we may decide religious q uestions on passional grounds. What should we say?

James has a strong case that not all matters of belief can or even should be decided purely intellectually. But religions are much more specific and particular than the very vague and general stateme nt that James offers. What if following David Koresh seemed to someone to be a genuine option? Should we simply say: let your passions decide? This seems wrong. We are probably inclined to think -- I am, anyway -- that David Koresh's followers were, among other things, not thinking nearly hard enough. In fact, the history of religion is filled with horrors committed in the name of faith (though horror stories are not the only stories, to be sure.) Even if James is onto *something*, it is much less cl ear what the appropriate limits are. And so we are left with a very vague idea at best of how this all should apply -- if at all -- to the real religious choices that people have to make.