

## Evidentialism v. Pragmatism(with corrected page references)

### 1. The "Wager" and the Practical Rationality Principle

*Practical Rationality Principle*: The practically rational thing to do is the thing with the highest expected value (or "utility").

Version A: *Do the thing with higher expected value than all its competitors.*

--In the case of a tie, neither action/belief is permitted.

Version B: *Find the actions with highest expected value and perform whichever of them you like.*

--In the case of a tie, Theism is practically rational. (Just like choosing pie over cake.)

### 2. Evidentialism (Clifford)

"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (p. 101)

First objection: Problem is not with evidence, but with falsity of beliefs.

Clifford's response: There is an all-important difference between the beliefs we are *entitled* to hold and those we aren't. The beliefs we are entitled to hold are the ones supported by the evidence, i.e., the supported beliefs. *Nothing else is relevant.*

Second objection: Clifford's examples all involve beliefs that matter, i.e., ones that have consequences for the welfare of others. This suggests that maybe what's wrong is holding unsupported beliefs that can reasonably be expected to cause harm. What about harmless beliefs?

Note distinction between actions that are *intrinsically wrong*, and ones that are *instrumentally wrong*. Instrumental wrongs are not wrong in themselves, but only insofar as they cause harm. If unsupported belief is intrinsically wrong, then it would be clear that it is always wrong. But if only instrumentally wrong, then it would seem that there are all sorts of cases in which no bad consequences could reasonably be expected. In fact, there seem to be cases in which unsupported beliefs are instrumentally good, i.e., they have good or positive consequences.

You'd expect Clifford, given his uncompromising position, would not be happy simply with the idea that the wrong of unsupported belief is merely instrumental. And he does sometimes suggest otherwise. But he has no argument for the intrinsic wrongness of unsupported belief. Instead he puts together a questionable argument that unsupported belief *always* has bad consequences, and so is *always* instrumentally wrong.

But forasmuch as no belief held by one man, however seemingly trivial the belief, and however obscure the believer, is ever actually insignificant or without its effects on the fate of mankind, we have no choice but to extend our judgement to all cases of belief whatever. (99)

His argument seems to be (roughly):

- 1) All beliefs influence action in some way or another.
- 2) Actions based on unjustified beliefs either cause harm directly, or they promote credulity which results in broad social ills.
- 3) Therefore it is always wrong to hold unjustified beliefs.

Both premise (1) and (2) seem questionable. Here are three questions for you to think about:

- Is it really plausible that all unsupported beliefs, i.e., beliefs based on weak evidence, have, or may be expected to have, bad consequences?
- Is it possible to have a belief that has no effect whatsoever on action?
- Is it ever wrong *in itself* to believe without sufficient evidence? Could it *always* be wrong in itself to believe without sufficient evidence?

### 3. Pragmatism (James)

There are many different kinds of circumstances in which we are faced with the decision about what to believe. James offers a view about when unsupported belief is permitted. Options:

living v. dead: living “make an electric connection with your nature”  
 forced v. avoidable: forced leave no other alternatives  
 momentous v. trivial: momentous have big stakes and the chance is unique  
 genuine: living, forced, momentous

Pragmatism: *Faced with a genuine choice about what to believe, and where evidence does not decide the matter, we are free to decide it however we want.*

As James puts it, “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.” (105)

### 4. James's response to Clifford

How does Clifford know that Evidentialism is true? Argument for it is unconvincing.

James' suggestion: Clifford is not convinced of evidentialism by evidence, but rather a feeling-- Quite simply, Clifford is afraid. Of what? Of making a mistake, of falling into error. His demand that we believe only what is based on the evidence is based on no more than his “preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe” (105).

Won't Clifford have a response: that we should avoid error is not my own private obsession--isn't it a real and objective danger? James replies: Reading Clifford one might think that only evidentialists are concerned with truth. But:

There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion: we must know the truth and we must avoid error. These are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but there are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws. (105)

So, James concludes, we must be guided by two principles: (i) KNOW TRUTH, (ii) AVOID ERROR. We need both, otherwise we should believe everything, or nothing. On James's view, the evidentialist is one who ignores one commandment in obsessive pursuit of the other. So, in the end, James maintains that evidentialism is based simply on a feeling, *not on evidence*.

How might we turn this into an argument against Clifford? Consider the idea of a *self-defeating* claim. It is best captured by examples: Never say "never". No one can construct a grammatical English sentence. I don't exist. [Written:] I am illiterate. One's claim is self-

defeating if something in the act of making the claim contradicts the message being put forward. Try:

- 1) Clifford's belief in evidentialism is based not on evidence but on passion.
- 2) Evidentialism forbids beliefs not based on evidence.
- 3) Therefore, Evidentialism forbids Clifford's belief in evidentialism.

This doesn't show Evidentialism is *wrong*, just that Clifford is inconsistent. (Maybe it is true, but lacking evidence, he shouldn't believe it.)

Can we develop this into an argument that evidentialism is wrong? One could use the self-defeat argument if one could show that *any* commitment (not just Clifford's) to evidentialism must be based in passion, i.e., that any absolute commitment to the commandment *avoid error*, would have to be passionate. But this isn't promising.

### 5. Other arguments for Pragmatism?

Remember, James not saying that we can believe anything we like. There are special contexts where passion is permitted. Examples: friendship, love, faith.

The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence...*And where faith in a fact can help create the fact*, that would be an insane logic which would say that faith running ahead of evidence is [wrong]. (107)

Consider religious faith:

One who would shut himself up in snarling logicality and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance. (108)

St. Augustine:

How can you believe if you don't know? Answer: I believe in order that I may know.

Possible Pragmatist principle: "*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.*" (108)

- So,
- (1) By following evidentialism, we are completely shut off from certain kinds of truth.
  - (2) A rule which completely shuts us off from certain kinds of truth is wrong.
  - (3) So evidentialism is wrong. (1,2)

Is (2), our "possible pragmatist principle", plausible? Problem: We *should* accept rules that shut us off from some kinds of truths--e.g., we should accept rules that shut us off from beliefs about exactly how many dinosaurs there were. We want to limit belief in cases where evidence is not forthcoming or where only guesswork is possible; So (2) seems like it too strong. Yet, we wouldn't want a rule that blocked us from all belief about the past, or about distant places, or about other people, etc. So (2) may be on the right track, but it needs to be refined to get at what James is looking for. (Exercise: can you refine it?)

However, note that where Clifford's view is self-defeating (assuming we don't have conclusive evidence for it), James's is self-endorsing. The decision between evidentialism and pragmatism seems to be genuine, and so we are entitled, by pragmatism to endorse whichever we want; so James's pragmatism *entitles* him to endorse pragmatism, but does not require it.

RECAP:

Johnson: Theism is irrational (because belief in God is inconsistent with the recognition of evil).

Russell: Theism is logically consistent, but not rationally warranted.

Pascal: Theism is (pragmatically) rationally required (because the EV of theism swamps the alternatives).

Clifford: Theism is not warranted by the Wager (because belief must be based on sufficient evidence).

James: Theism is rationally permissible but not required (because it is a genuine option).