

## IV. Religious Experience and Religious Epistemology

The twentieth century saw significant new developments in and significant new directions for the treatments of religious experience and religious epistemology. The philosophical discussions in these areas have now taken on significant new dimensions. While natural theology, based upon evidentialism, dominated Anglo-American analytic philosophy in the early part of the twentieth century, anti-evidentialism – either in the various forms of religious experience, Reformed epistemology, or fideism – became very dominant in the last few decades of the century.

### THE JUSTIFIED TRUE BELIEF THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE AND EVIDENTIALISM

In contemporary epistemology, an evidentialist view regarding knowledge is reflected in the justified true belief theory of knowledge (JTB), which has dominated Western epistemology. According to the JTB theory of knowledge, a person S knows that p if and only if

- i. p is true,
- ii. S believes that p, and
- iii. S is justified in believing that p.

Conditions (i) through (iii) are regarded as both necessary and sufficient for S's knowing that p. Condition (iii) has been explained in different ways by different people, but, perhaps most commonly, epistemic justification has been explicated in terms of "adequate evidence."<sup>1</sup> That we must provide some explanation of (iii) seems obvious if we are to rule out epistemic luck. If S believes p on certain evidential grounds that turn out to be false, but then p turns out fortuitously and coincidentally to be true for other reasons than the ones for which S believes p to be true, then we are not willing to grant that S knows that p. This is the lesson of Edmund Gettier's famed counterexamples.<sup>2</sup> These counterexamples notwithstanding, probably no other feature has so thoroughly characterized or

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Roderick Chisholm, *Perceiving: A Philosophical Study* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1957).

<sup>2</sup> Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" *Analysis*, Vol. 23, 1963. Reprinted in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Louis P. Pojman (New York: Wadsworth, 1999), pp. 142-43.

dominated Western philosophical epistemology than the fundamental position that underlies the justified true belief theory of knowledge: justified beliefs are epistemically better than nonjustified ones, knowledge must be based upon justified beliefs, and justification requires adequate evidence.

There appear to be two ways in which evidentialist theists might respond to the general challenge of JTB theory in accounting for knowledge of God. First, the theist may respond by confronting evidentialism directly and rejecting the fundamental claim that beliefs must be justified on the basis of evidence. Such a response amounts to either denying condition (iii) in the definition of the JTB theory of knowledge or explicating (iii) in some terms and on some grounds other than "adequate evidence." One obvious way of attempting to maintain the epistemic value of a belief while denying that the belief is justified in terms of adequate evidence is to maintain that the belief in question is a "foundational" or "basic" belief. Foundationalist epistemologists, such as Alvin Plantinga, take this approach (as I examine below). Secondly, a theist may respond by claiming that the beliefs of the theist are justified in the same way and on the same grounds as other beliefs. William Alston develops such a position with his theory of perceiving God (also examined below). This sort of response amounts to retaining (iii) in terms of "adequate evidence" and then attempting to demonstrate how religious beliefs are justified along the same lines as are other kinds of beliefs and using the same kind of evidence as is used to justify other kinds of beliefs.<sup>3</sup>

### THE JAMES AND CLIFFORD DEBATE

The dispute between evidentialists and nonevidentialists is nicely framed by the dispute between William Clifford and William James early in the twentieth century. In his famed "The Ethics of Belief," Clifford argues that there is a normative aspect to knowing and believing that prohibits belief in the face of insufficient evidence. Clifford tells a story of what appears to be a compelling case of a situation in which, he claims, we are inclined to invoke a normative standard to prohibit a person from believing something in the absence of adequate evidence. A shipowner sends a ship full of emigrants out to sea even though he knows that the ship is old, was not well built originally, and is often in need of repairs. He considers overhauling the ship before it sails but then convinces himself that it will make the trip safely, so he sends the ship off, and it sinks with all aboard. The shipbuilder saves the expense of overhauling the ship and collects the insurance money. The shipowner refuses to investigate the doubts he initially entertained, and even if we concede, for the sake of the argument, that the shipowner is honest and that he comes to believe sincerely that the ship is seaworthy, Clifford insists that the shipowner "*had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.*"<sup>4</sup> According to Clifford, proper belief cannot be the result of inadequate evidence or

<sup>3</sup> Most commentators usually include Alston in the camp of the Reformed epistemologists; however, it often appears as if Alston is not rejecting the need for epistemic justification of religious beliefs entirely but is arguing rather that the perception of God provides such epistemic justification. Reformed epistemology, in contrast, takes the belief that God exists as basic and warranted though not inferred from or based upon other beliefs.

<sup>4</sup> William K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," from *Lectures and Essays*, 1879. Reprinted in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Louis P. Pojman, p. 551.

the result of "suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation." The net result, he concludes in his famous dictum, is that "it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."<sup>5</sup>

For Clifford, on occasions when the evidence is not adequate for belief, it is better to suspend judgment than it is to believe on the basis of inadequate evidence and risk error. But what constitutes "adequate evidence" for Clifford? In contemporary terminology, his position is a strong form of *naturalistic evidentialism*. We are not entitled to hold any belief in the absence of such evidence and should suspend judgment concerning such a belief. Clifford generalizes his view about the nature of beliefs on the grounds that the actions that are predicated upon inadequately justified beliefs often affect other people. This is certainly true in the example of the shipowner; however, Clifford easily and glibly concludes that no belief "however seemingly trivial the belief" and no believer "however obscure" is really "insignificant or without its effect on the fate of mankind."<sup>6</sup> But surely some beliefs are more important than others, and some believers are more important than others. Undeniably, Hitler's belief that the Jews are an inferior race had a significant impact upon the fate of mankind. However, an isolated hermit's belief that eating a banana for breakfast each morning will help promote a long, healthy life certainly seems to be insignificant and lacking in any consequences concerning the fate of mankind.

#### WILLIAM JAMES AND "THE WILL TO BELIEVE"

James concedes to Clifford that religious beliefs are not supported by adequate evidence of the kind Clifford demands; however, at the same time, James does not wish to relegate all religious beliefs to faith. He attempts to preserve some sort of notion of epistemic justification for religious beliefs, so he sets for himself the task of redefining condition (iii) of the JTB theory of knowledge. In his lectures on *Pragmatism*, James makes the now well-known distinction between what he calls "the tender-minded" and "the tough-minded" approaches to problems in philosophy.<sup>7</sup> The tender-minded, the rationalists, are regarded as sentimental, soft-headed, and religious while the tough-minded, the empiricists, are regarded as callous, brutal, and nonreligious. The naturalists, of course, are to be counted in the camp of the empiricists. The rationalists offer a philosophical theory within which religious beliefs are welcomed, but it is not empirical. The empiricists offer a philosophical theory that is strictly empirical but within which religious beliefs are not welcomed. James tries to stake out a "middle ground" by "stretching" the narrow confines of the beliefs that are permitted on strictly naturalistic grounds. James is an empiricist in his general philosophical method, but he cannot bring himself to follow his empiricism wherever it may lead, that is, to a strict naturalistic ontology that admits nothing beyond the natural world. In "The Will to Believe," he maintains that a person can be justified by the passions and the will in believing, in certain circumstances, where the evidence available on strictly empirical grounds is inadequate to justify the belief. He says,

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 554.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> William James, *Pragmatism* (New York: New American Library, 1907), pp. 22ff.

Our passional 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; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision – just like deciding yes or no – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.<sup>8</sup>

The "genuine option" that James describes is a choice between two competing hypotheses (in this case, the choice between the religious hypothesis and the nonreligious hypothesis) that James further characterizes as forced, living, and momentous.<sup>9</sup> A forced option is one in which the choice between the two competing hypotheses is exhaustive. A person must choose one of the two, and the possibility of a third hypothesis or of avoiding the choice altogether is not available. A living option is a choice between two competing hypotheses when, given the circumstances and the nature of the person making the choice, both of the hypotheses are genuinely possible choices for the person to make. Finally, a momentous option is a choice between two competing hypotheses where the choice involves a matter of some vital importance with significant consequences.

While embracing a general empiricism, James thus seeks to avoid what he regards as the restrictive implications of relying only upon empirical observations and sense experience as the sources of the evidence for beliefs. Restricting the notion of adequate evidence to empirical sense experience in condition (iii) of the JTB leads to a thoroughgoing naturalism. Whereas Clifford exhorts a person to avoid error above all else, James regards "the chase for truth as paramount."<sup>10</sup> A general will never win any battles, James claims, if he advises his troops to avoid the risk of being wounded above all else. To win battles – either military ones or epistemic ones – requires taking some risks, according to James, and the fact that we might make mistakes in holding certain beliefs is not that serious a problem.<sup>11</sup> According to James, only in situations involving "scientific questions" are we justified in suspending judgment when we have inadequate evidence, since, in such situations, we are simply "recorders" of an objective truth. Such scientific questions are not forced upon us, nor, James claims, do they represent living or momentous options.<sup>12</sup> For James, naturalism must be circumscribed to our knowledge of the natural world.

James thinks that his understanding of how the roles of a person's "passional nature" and the will may justify belief in certain situations represents a significant improvement over the blatantly self-interested pragmatism of Pascal's wager. Pascal argues that since the known evidence equally supports God's existence and God's nonexistence, a reasonable person should choose to believe that God exists since the benefits of the positive belief are much greater. There is much that may be said about Pascal's wager, but here I will simply note that James denies that a

<sup>8</sup> William James, "The Will to Believe," in *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, edited by Louis Pojman, p. 558.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 555.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 558.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 559.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 559.

person can calculate such probabilities and the potential benefits and losses in the artificial manner that Pascal suggests and then convince oneself to sincerely believe, on such bases, that God exists.<sup>13</sup> James's point is similar to, and undoubtedly drawn from, the point made by Charles Peirce in his attack upon the general, methodological skepticism of Descartes. Peirce insisted that doubt must be genuine and that a person just cannot bring himself to doubt the kinds of things that Descartes claimed he can doubt. Similarly, James claims, belief must be genuine. A person just cannot make himself sincerely believe something as the result of the kind of artificial and selfish calculation that Pascal's wager requires.<sup>14</sup> The wager thus is not a genuine option. With genuine options, the will and our passions justify belief in the absence of adequate evidence, and the will to believe thus is James's way of redefining condition (iii) above in the JTB theory of knowledge to extend the notion of "justification" to include nonepistemic considerations.<sup>15</sup>

### CONTEMPORARY RESPONSES TO THE CHALLENGE OF EVIDENTIALISM

In terms of more recent responses to the JTB theory, contemporary evidentialist positions rely upon natural theology and particularly the arguments for the existence of God.<sup>16</sup> Much of this volume, as well as most of the problems and issues discussed herein, are related in one way or another to the challenge of evidentialism to various theistic beliefs – including the problem of trying to get clear about the concept of God, the problem of the meaningfulness of claims made about God, the problem of the epistemic force of arguments for the existence of God, the problem of the counterevidential force of the problem of evil, questions about the comparative reasonableness of religion and science, questions about the comparative reasonableness of atheism and theism, questions about the source of religious ethics, and questions about the comparative reasonableness of different claims made by different religious believers.

The contemporary evidentialist approach that requires basing theistic beliefs on reason and evidence is found amongst both theists and nontheists. For the most part, this challenge can be seen as a continuation of the age-old debate concerning the respective roles of faith and reason in religion and as a continuation of the Clifford-James debate concerning the role of evidence in terms of religious beliefs. The evidential challenge from nonbelievers – atheists and humanists – who reject the various attempts to establish the reasonableness of belief in the existence of

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 556. There are many discussions that compare Pascal and James. For example, see J. L. Mackie, *The Miracle of Theism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 200-203.

<sup>14</sup> Pascal may respond that if a person behaves religiously (for example, by praying or using holy water), then religious belief will gradually and eventually follow, but such a response seems very optimistic and belies what is known of human psychology. James maintains that there are, of course, other difficulties with Pascal's wager. For example, obviously God may punish a person for believing on such grounds. See James, *ibid.*, 556.

<sup>15</sup> It should be noted that James follows Peirce in holding that knowledge is essentially fallible. Thus, any knowledge claims based upon religious beliefs must also be regarded as tentative and fallible.

<sup>16</sup> However, Nicholas Wolterstorff disagrees that evidentialism is tied so closely to natural theology. See his "The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidential Apologetics," in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment*, edited by Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1986), pp. 38ff. Wolterstorff attributes evidentialism to the philosophical influence of the Enlightenment.



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