

Clifford's Principle and James's Options

1. One prominent aspect of the discussion of the ethics of belief grows out of the dispute between William J. Clifford and William James over whether it is always wrong to believe something without having sufficient supporting evidence. James disputed Clifford's (1879) famous dictum:

It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence. (p. 183)

Two things about Clifford's claim require explanation. One concerns exactly what Clifford meant by "wrong." This is a matter best left to Clifford scholars.¹ In the first part of this essay I will take the claim to be that it is "epistemically" wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. Toward the end, I will consider some other interpretations.

A second question about Clifford's claim concerns what counts as "insufficient evidence." There is a reading of his words that makes his claim wholly trivial. If "sufficient evidence" just is enough evidence to make belief on that evidence not wrong, then Clifford's claim is completely empty. I will not enter into any discussion of what Clifford actually had in mind. Instead, I will make use of the idea that one's evidence concerning a proposition can either support the proposition, support the negation of that proposition, or equally support the proposition and its negation. When the evidence is equally divided in this way, I will say, following Chisholm (1989, p. 9), that the evidence is *counterbalanced*. I take Clifford's claim to be that when one's evidence supports the negation of a proposition or is counterbalanced, then one has insufficient evidence to believe that proposition.² Thus, I take Clifford's principle to be:

- C. It is epistemically wrong to believe a proposition when one's evidence fails to support that proposition.³

For present purposes, the key implication of (C) is that it is epistemically wrong to believe a proposition when one's evidence concerning it is counterbalanced.

2. The interpretation of Clifford's view just described is adequate to make his view conflict with a plausible interpretation of William James's famous contention in his essay, "The Will to Believe." James (1956) writes:

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; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passionate decision,—just like deciding yes or no,—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth. (p. 11)

Several things about James's claim require explanation. These include what a "genuine option" is, what it is to "decide an option," what it is to be unable to decide on option on "intellectual grounds," what a "passionate decision" is, and what it means to say that one "lawfully may" decide an option in a particular way. I will explain these ideas in the next three sections.

3. The term “genuine option” is a clearly explained technical term in James’s work. He says that an option is “a genuine option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind.”(p. 3) An *option* is a decision between believing one or another of two hypotheses. *Hypotheses*, he says, are propositions that are candidates for being believed. An option is a *living* option for a person when both hypotheses have at least “some appeal” to the person. An option is *forced* when one cannot avoid selecting one of the alternatives.⁴ An option is *momentous* when a great deal turns on one’s decision. And, as noted, an option is *genuine* when it is living, forced, and momentous.

One point of clarification is needed. James says that an option is a choice between two hypotheses. But he illustrates the idea of an unforced (*avoidable*) option with “Either love me or hate me,”(p. 3) which is not a matter of hypotheses (propositions to be believed) at all. It is a choice between two attitudes. And he says that a forced option is illustrated by “Either accept this truth or go without it.” (p. 3) But here there are not two hypotheses put forward for belief but rather a pair of potential attitudes toward one proposition. (I take “going without” a proposition to be either disbelieving it or suspending judgment about it. And I take suspending judgment about a proposition to be a cognitive attitude toward that proposition.) It will be easiest to accommodate these examples by broadening what counts as an option. We can say that one is confronted with an option when one has a choice between two alternatives. These alternatives can be cognitive attitudes toward hypotheses or emotional states or behaviors, although only the former will be under discussion here. And they can be different attitudes toward the same proposition, as in James’s example of a forced option, or the same attitude (e.g., belief) toward different propositions.

I take *deciding* an option to be simply adopting one of the alternatives that constitutes the option. In the cases that are of central concern here, it will be adopting an attitude toward a proposition.

4. In the passage quoted above James suggests that some options cannot be decided on *intellectual grounds*. The idea is that there is no intellectual basis—no evidence or arguments—that provides a good basis for selecting among the alternatives that constitute the option. The evidence then provides no intellectual basis for a choice. Such cases may include those in which one is deciding about believing a proposition and one’s evidence concerning that proposition is counterbalanced.

James says that in some cases, when we cannot decide an option on intellectual grounds, we lawfully may make a *passional decision*. I take a *passional decision* to be a decision made on the basis of one’s passions, i.e., one’s desires and preferences. I will sometimes describe *passional decisions* as “non-intellectual decisions.”

5. James says that we *lawfully may* make a *passional decision* under the specified circumstances. I take this to mean that such a decision is not wrong. Initially, I will take this to mean that these decisions are not epistemically wrong. This interpretation will help to make James’s claim conflict most clearly with (C). Toward the end, I will consider alternative interpretations.

It should be noted that James also says that we *must* make decisions under the specified circumstances. Possibly this claim concerns not what is right or wrong but rather what is dictated by our psychologies. In a nearby passage he says that “our non-intellectual nature does influence

our convictions”(p. 11) and the suggestion seems to be that this is supposed to be a deep fact us. I will not address this empirical claim here. That claim would not conflict with Clifford’s view about what is wrong, and James does clearly seem to be addressing Clifford’s thesis.⁵

6. Thus, I take James’s key claim to be that it is not epistemically wrong to adopt, on a passional basis, one of the alternatives constituting a genuine option when it is not an intellectually decidable option. The intended implication of all of this is that it is not always epistemically wrong to believe a proposition constituting such an option when one’s evidence is counterbalanced.

7. James contends that the conditions listed in his principle apply in the case of “the religious hypothesis.” I take it that the specific hypothesis is the proposition that God exists. Let us call the option we face when deciding about religious belief “the religious option.” I will follow him by making the religious option the focus of my discussion, but my point is primarily about Clifford’s principle and James’s objection, and not about religious belief itself.

James’s argument relies on the idea that the religious option is not intellectually decidable. I will assume that some version of this claim is true. However, as I will argue shortly, there is some delicacy involved in figuring out exactly what this assumption amounts to.

To make the best case for James’s view, let us assume for the sake of discussion that the evidence for and against the existence of God is perfectly counterbalanced. Whether that is actually true is, of course, a matter of considerable controversy. Whether James accepted it is a matter of historical scholarship into which I will not enter. It is, however, an assumption that makes James’s view interesting and relevant to (C). Without it, it appears that his stated principle does not apply to the case.⁶

It may be that for some of us, the religious option is not momentous. For some, the hypothesis or its denial may have no appeal and thus the option may not be living. Set such people aside. Let us assume that, for at least some people, the religious option is momentous and living. For the remainder of this paper, I will be speaking only of people for whom these conditions are true.

8. Using the concepts previously described, it is relatively easy to formulate the argument James proposed. I set it out here in excruciating detail.

James’s Argument

1. The evidence for and against the existence of God is counterbalanced.
2. The religious option is live and momentous.
3. The religious option is forced.
4. Therefore, the religious option is not decidable on intellectual grounds. (1), Def. of “the religious option,” Def. of “not decidable on intellectual grounds”
5. Therefore, the religious option is a genuine option. (2), (3), Def. of “genuine option”
6. If an option is genuine and not decidable on intellectual grounds, then it is not epistemically wrong to decide it on non-intellectual grounds. (James’s

Principle)

7. Therefore, it is not epistemically wrong to decide the religious option on non-intellectual grounds. (4), (5), (6)
8. Therefore, it is not epistemically wrong to believe that God exists. (7), Def. of “the religious option”, Def. of “decide an option”.
9. Therefore, the evidence for the proposition that God exists is not sufficient. (1), Def of “not sufficient”
10. Therefore, it is not epistemically wrong to believe that God exists and the evidence for the proposition that God exists is not sufficient. (8), (9)

The conclusion provides a falsifying instance of Clifford’s principle. I am accepting (1) for the sake of argument. The argument is intended to be about people for whom (2) is true. Thus, I will not question these premises. I will discuss (3) and (4) below. Given the definitions, (5) does follow from the prior steps. (6) is just a restatement of James’s key principle, (7) applies that principle to the present case, and (8) draws out the consequence of that application. (9) is a simple consequence of the assumption stated in (1). (10) is the conjunction of (8) and (9).

9. Evaluation of James’s Argument depends in large part on exactly what the religious option is. I have said that this is the option we face when deciding about religious belief. However, there is more than one way to specify this option.

If the religious option is the decision between believing that God exists and believing that God does not exist, then, given our assumptions, (4) does follow from (1) and the option is not intellectually decidable. However, a problem for James’s Argument emerges immediately, and James himself seems to acknowledge the point. The religious option, as just described, is not a forced option since we can suspend judgment about the matter. In that case, (3) is false.

James himself makes a similar point with respect to other examples early in his essay. He says that the option between going with your umbrella or going without it is not forced, since you can choose not to go at all. (p. 3) Analogously, he might agree, the religious option as just described is not forced. He suggests, however, that we conceive of the religious option as the decision between believing that God exists and not believing that God exists. (p. 26) In this case the option is forced and (3) is true. It may seem that this solves the problem. I will argue that it merely introduces a new problem.

10. If the religious option is the choice between believing that God exists and not believing that God exists, and evidence concerning the existence of God is counterbalanced, then the option is intellectually decidable. (4) does not follow from (1). The key point to notice is that the non-belief option can be carried out in two ways: by disbelieving and by suspending judgment. Since, on our assumption, the evidence is counterbalanced, the intellect can decide the case. It decides in favor of not believing (by suspending judgment).

It will be useful to describe the situation in a slightly different way. Instead of limiting options to just two alternatives, we can imagine options with more alternatives. The notion of a genuine option can still be understood in essentially the same way. We can therefore think of ourselves as having a three-way option with respect to the hypothesis that God exists: we can

believe it, we can suspend judgment about it, and we can disbelieve it. This is a forced option. It is also an intellectually decidable option, given our assumption about the evidence. Suspending judgment is the preferred choice. Reconceiving of the option as having only two alternatives—believe or do not believe—does not change things in any significant way.

11. One might object at this point, arguing that since the “do not believe” alternative does not specify how it will be implemented, it is wrong to think that there are intellectual grounds for favoring this option. However, this objection is mistaken. Compare the following case, which involves actions rather than beliefs. Suppose that you have a serious allergic reaction to chocolate. You are given a choice for dessert: chocolate cake, chocolate ice cream, or nothing. We can think of this as a three-way option and agree that it is a forced option. Given standard background assumptions, such as a desire to avoid foods to which you have a serious allergic reaction, the option can clearly be decided in favor of no dessert. Suppose we reconceive the case as a two-way option, the alternatives being having chocolate cake and not having chocolate cake. The option can be intellectually decided in favor of the latter alternative. Nothing changes by subsuming two of the three alternatives under a broader category and reducing the number of alternatives to two.

12. In effect, then, my contention is that James’s Argument rests on an equivocation. On one way of conceiving the religious option, it is not forced and therefore not genuine. On another, it is intellectually decidable (given the assumption about the evidence). Thus, either (3), as well as (5), is false or (4) does not follow from (1) (and is false). On no interpretation is the argument sound.

13. It is worth noting that I have objected to James’s Argument without calling into question James’s principle, (6). In fact, my contention is that the conditions in the antecedent of his principle do not apply to the case under discussion. And the point generalizes. Any decision about believing a proposition can be considered as a two-way option where the alternatives are believing the proposition and disbelieving the proposition. Such cases can be intellectually undecidable. However, suspending judgment is always an alternative. Hence, such options are never forced. The case can be redescribed as a three-way option, where suspending judgment is one of the alternatives. This forced option is intellectually decidable in favor of this third alternative. The case can also be thought of as a two-way option in which the alternatives are believing the proposition and not believing it. However, this option is also intellectually decidable in favor of the non-belief option whenever the evidence is counterbalanced, and in favor of believing when the evidence supports the proposition and in favor of non-belief when the evidence supports its negation.

14. Readers familiar with James’s essay may object that he has anticipated all of this when he defends his claim that the religious option is forced. He writes:

We cannot escape the issue by remaining skeptical and waiting for more light, because, although we do avoid error in that way *if religion be untrue*, we lose the

good, *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve. It is as if a man should hesitate indefinitely to ask a certain woman to marry him because he was not perfectly sure that she would prove an angel after he brought her home.
(p. 26)

I take “remaining skeptical and waiting for more light” to be equivalent to suspending judgment. So the idea here seems to be that disbelieving and suspending judgment are not relevantly different. Similarly, hesitating indefinitely about marriage and choosing not to marry do not differ in any way that matters. This requires taking “hesitating indefinitely” to be hesitating so long that the chance to marry is gone. If it just meant waiting an unspecified amount of time for more evidence, then hesitating would not be equivalent to choosing not to marry.

One aspect of James’s marriage analogy may distract us from the central point. Surely the man he describes would be foolish to hesitate if all that is holding him back is his not being “perfectly sure” that the marriage will prove to be successful. But being “perfectly sure” of the outcome is a far higher standard and not the one at issue in the case of belief on the basis of counterbalanced evidence.

To develop a closer analogy to the religious option, imagine a case in which the man’s evidence is counterbalanced between the proposition that marriage will make his life better and the proposition that it will make his life worse. As he is deciding what to do, for all relevant purposes, there will be no difference between hesitating indefinitely and deciding not marry.⁷ In each case, he ends up not married to the woman. No other consequences are relevant to our consideration of the case.⁸ He has only two real choices.

It is worth noting that attitudes toward risk do not affect this case. Riskiness does not favor one alternative over the other here: each alternative is risky. Nor will it help to say that it is better to seek the good than to avoid harm. Each alternative has its potential good features and its potential harms.

Waiting for more evidence may seem like a good idea in such a case. However, to wait forever is, in effect, to decide against marriage. Perhaps, then, one should simply make a choice, and neither choosing to marry nor choosing not to marry would be unreasonable.

This line of reasoning might be thought to defend James’s Argument from my objection. The two-way option involving believing and disbelieving is not intellectually decidable and, contrary to my claim, it is a forced option since suspending judgment is not a genuine third alternative. This is because it really does not differ from disbelieving. If this is correct, then the argument through line (5) can be sustained after all. The rest of the argument goes through as before.

15. The claim that there is no real difference between disbelieving and suspending judgment is incorrect.⁹ This can be seen by noting a key difference between beliefs and actions. When one is deciding about performing an action, one can either do it or not do it. Hesitating forever is the same as not doing it. When one is contemplating believing a proposition, one can believe it, disbelieve it (i.e., believe its negation), or suspend judgment. It is true that both disbelieving and suspending judgment entail not believing.¹⁰ But there still is a real difference between disbelieving and suspending judgment: when one disbelieves, one does believe the negation

whereas when one suspends judgment, one does not believe the negation. Thus, suspending judgment does not play the same role in the religious example that hesitating plays in the marriage example. In the religious belief case, there really are three different end states, whereas in the marriage example there really are only two different end states. Hesitating indefinitely does coincide with not marrying, whereas suspending judgment does not similarly coincide with disbelieving.

Another way to argue for this point begins by noting that the three-way religious option includes two different actions, believing that God exists and believing that God does not exist. James thinks that suspending judgment is, for all relevant purposes, the same as believing that God does not exist since by suspending judgment “we lose the good (of believing that God exists), *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to” believe that God does not exist. However, one could just as well say that for all relevant purposes, suspending judgment and believing that God exists are the same since by suspending judgment “we lose the good (of believing that God does not exist), *if it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to” believe that God exists. Suspending judgment no more amounts to the same thing as believing that God exists than it amounts to believing that God does not exist.

When it comes to an action, one can do it or not. There isn’t a third alternative. When it comes to belief, there always is a third alternative.

16. Although the marriage example does not indicate any good way to defend the version of James’s Argument formulated above, it may suggest a way to revise the argument in the light of my objection. The lesson to be drawn from the marriage example is that hesitating indefinitely is not required. In a case in which one’s evidence about which outcome is best is evenly split, it is not wrong to make a choice. Similarly, one might think, suspending judgment is never required of us. Thus, one may modify James’s principle to say that in cases in which the evidence concerning a proposition is counterbalanced, it is not epistemically wrong to believe the proposition. Of course, if that’s the case, it is also not wrong to disbelieve the proposition. His view, then, may be that when the evidence is counterbalanced, believing is not epistemically wrong and disbelieving is not epistemically wrong.¹¹ Thus, on this interpretation, his contention is that in such cases it is epistemically permissible to decide on “non-intellectual”, or “passional”, grounds.

James says things that seem to support such a view. As is well-known, he says that our goals in believing are to “Believe truth! Shun error!” (p. 18) But he places a greater emphasis on believing truths. He rejects in a number of places such things as “*Better risk loss of truth than chance of error*” and he writes:

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.(p. 28)

In the cases with counterbalanced evidence, we will be prevented from acknowledging (believing) certain truths if we adhere to Clifford’s principle.

The idea, then, is that a principle holding that suspension of judgment is required in cases

of counterbalanced evidence would prevent one from believing a truth in such cases. Such principles, according to this line of thought, are unreasonable. Since it is better to take a stab at the truth rather than to suspend judgment and give up all chance of having a true belief, it is not wrong to believe in such cases. And, lacking any intellectual basis, it is not wrong to decide on a passionate basis.

These thoughts suggest revising James's Argument by replacing (6) with something like this:

- 6a. If an option to believe P or disbelieve P is not decidable on intellectual grounds, then it is not epistemically wrong to decide it on non-intellectual grounds.

Notice that it is consistent with (6a) that neither way of deciding these is wrong but also consistent with it that some non-intellectual factors determine a unique epistemically right choice.

We can revise James's Argument to make use of (6a). The new argument drops the element of a forced option, and thus a genuine option, from the picture. The steps having to do with genuine options ((2), (3), (5)) and would therefore be dropped, (6a) would replace (6), and the remaining steps would be the same. On this interpretation, the religious option is taken to be the two-way, believe/disbelieve option. It should be granted that this option is not decidable on intellectual grounds. Thus, if (6a) is correct, the revised argument for James's conclusion is sound.

17. The reasoning in support of (6a) is not sound. Unless we are playing tricks with "kinds of truth" here, rules that prevent the acknowledgment of some kinds of truths surely are rational. Consider the clearly reasonable rule that says that you should not believe something when your evidence very strongly supports its negation. Given the fallibility of any evidence we can actually get, following such a rule will prevent you from acknowledging the kinds of truths that your evidence misleads you about. So if the alleged irrationality of such rules is supposed to be a premise in an argument for James's defense of (6a), then the argument has a false premise.

Not only is the argument for (6a) unsound, but (6a) is itself quite dubious. Surely there are circumstances in which suspending judgment is the only reasonable attitude to take. If our evidence is forever silent and counterbalanced about a certain trivial matter about the distant past or future, there is something unreasonable about forming a belief about it. There is nothing to be said in behalf of the idea that it is reasonable to believe (or disbelieve) in such cases in order to have at least a chance of truth. The only reasonable thing is to acknowledge that one simply has no information that decides the case, and, accordingly, to suspend judgment.

The revised argument, making use of (6a), is unsound.

18. One might think that it was a mistake to omit the idea of momentousness from the formulation of (6a). A better idea, perhaps, is that when one's evidence is counterbalanced and the option is momentous, it is not wrong to believe (or to disbelieve). That is,

- 6b. If an option to believe P or disbelieve P is momentous and is not decidable on intellectual grounds, then it is not epistemically wrong to decide it on non-intellectual grounds.

A revised argument, making use of (6b), could easily be constructed. We can grant that the option involving believing that God exists and believing that God does not exist is momentous and is not decidable on intellectual grounds. Thus, if (6b) is correct, James's conclusion is correct.

The thought that momentousness changes things may get some apparent support by considering cases in which the evidence about a choice of actions is counterbalanced.¹² Suppose that I come to a fork in the road and have no information about which path leads to my destination. It is very important that I get there. Given suitable details about the situation, it may be that waiting is the worst option. It's better to just pick one path. At least then I have some chance of arriving at my destination. But either path is just as good a choice as the other. Choosing either path is reasonable. I think that this view about actions is correct. Similarly, then, one might think that momentous choices involving beliefs can properly be decided without there being evidential support for one's choice.

It is worth noting that the fork in the road example again makes vivid a key difference between action and belief. It is clear, I think, that I should not believe, as I proceed along my chosen path, that I have chosen the correct path. I should suspend judgment about which path is best, even as I take one. Once again, suspending judgment remains a good alternative in this case, whereas inaction is not. But this serves to highlight the striking thing about the momentousness of the religious option. In that case it is, allegedly, belief itself that is crucial, and not associated actions. In the fork in the road example, it was crucial that I go along one of the paths. It did not much matter what I believed. In the religious option, believing itself makes all the difference. This may seem to suggest that believing here should be considered an action and that it can be reasonable, in spite of the counterbalanced evidence. Picking an attitude is like a picking a path in my example.

19. If (6a) is false and (6b) is true, then momentousness makes a significant *epistemic* difference. However, what makes the religious option momentous is the practical significance of religious belief. This makes (6b) highly implausible. From a purely epistemic perspective, where this has to do with trying to believe truths and trying to avoid believing falsehoods, and perhaps also with trying to have knowledge and reasonable belief, there is nothing better about believing important propositions whose evidence is counterbalanced than believing insignificant propositions whose evidence is counterbalanced. In each case, an honest appraisal of the situation requires acknowledging that one has no reason to believe or to disbelieve, and suspending judgment is the proper response. Believing *is* epistemically wrong.

20. One might reply that the argument so far overlooks the pragmatist element of James's thought. The religious option illustrates the idea that having a belief can have practical benefits. It can affect the quality of one's life. Considered as a practical option, it may be that it is better in this case to commit oneself than it is to suspend judgment. As far as I can tell, no good argument

has been given for this claim about the practical inferiority of suspending judgment, but it is worth exploring the implications of the proposition that it is inferior. Let us grant, then, that there are practical benefits that may come from belief. It can affect the quality of one's life.

To determine the implications of this concession for James's Argument and Clifford's principle, it will be helpful to examine some alternative views about uses of the word "wrong." One view holds that there are many different kinds of wrongness or, alternatively, that there are many senses of the word "wrong." Thus, things can be morally wrong, or prudentially wrong, or epistemically wrong. Perhaps there is also such a thing as "all-things-considered" (or "plain") wrong. Things can be evaluated differently along these different dimensions. Thus, something might be morally wrong but not prudentially wrong. Another view rejects this multiplicity of kinds of wrongness. It denies that epistemic and non-epistemic considerations can be as neatly segregated as my discussion suggests. This idea suggests that James's central claim be revised to be that given all the relevant factors, it is not (plain) wrong to believe in the cases under consideration. Thus, his principle may be:

- 6c. If an option to believe P or disbelieve P is momentous and is not decidable on intellectual grounds, then it is not wrong to decide it on non-intellectual grounds.

In (6c), the evaluation is about plain wrongness, and not epistemic wrongness.

To use (6c) in James's argument, the rest of the argument must be revised to be about plain wrongness, and not epistemic wrongness. To make the resulting conclusion conflict with Clifford's thesis, that thesis must also be revised along similar lines. And it may be that claims about plain wrongness, rather than epistemic wrongness, are enough to argue against Clifford's intended principle. He may have thought that it is always (plain) wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. His defense of his claim suggest as much, since he emphasizes alleged social harms that come from believing on the basis of insufficient evidence.

Variations of (6c), and the argument using it, could be constructed in which claims about what is (plain) wrong are replaced by claims about what is morally wrong or prudentially wrong.

21. The variations on James's Argument described in the previous section can all be considered together. If James's central point has to do with the quality of life considerations associated with belief, and his claim is that evidential factors can be outweighed by non-intellectual factors in overall (or moral or practical) evaluations, then his argument is curiously complex and indirect. There are plenty of cases in which people will cause themselves or the world to be better if they believe things without sufficient supporting evidence. One simple example will establish the point. A person in a treacherous situation who optimistically believes, against the evidence, that he will survive surely may benefit from that belief. Though Clifford may stridently disagree, it is hard to see any sensible basis for the claim that a potentially life-saving belief in such a situation must be imprudent or immoral or plain wrong. If these non-epistemic evaluations of belief make sense, then beliefs are wrong or not wrong depending upon how these collective factors add up. So if the point is that beliefs that are not supported by one's evidence need not be wrong in these other ways, then the point is well-taken. However, *all* the machinery James introduces is completely irrelevant to his argument. Nothing about intellectually undecidable options or forced

options or momentous options is needed to make that point. Nothing about the relative importance of the twin goals of believing truths and avoiding falsehoods plays a role in the argument. Nothing concerning the alleged irrationality of rules that could prevent believing a true proposition enters into the argument. The point is just that these other factors can outweigh evidential considerations in these non-epistemic evaluations.

22. One rather peculiar option remains. One might retain the idea that there are distinctive kinds of wrongness, and that things can be wrong along one dimension while being not wrong along another. However, one might insist that epistemic wrongness depends in part upon the non-evidential (quality of life) factors that allegedly count in favor of deciding the religious option in favor of belief. This thought might be used to support the version of James's Argument appealing to

- 6b. If an option to believe P or disbelieve P is momentous and is not decidable on intellectual grounds, then it is not epistemically wrong to decide it on non-intellectual grounds.

It is difficult to make clear sense of this last view. If the considerations relevant to the evaluation include quality of life factors and are not restricted to considerations having to do with getting true beliefs, justified beliefs, knowledge, or any other characteristically epistemological element, it is hard to see why the resulting evaluation counts as an epistemic evaluation. The view seems to insist without basis that the factors discussed in sections 20 and 21 as being germane to non-epistemic evaluations are in fact relevant to epistemic evaluations. The peculiarity of the view is made especially salient by noting that it must hold the factors under consideration are "non-intellectual" yet are "epistemic."

It must be admitted, however, that what exactly counts as an epistemic evaluation is to some extent a matter of stipulation. It is difficult to know how to argue with someone who, in spite of the points just mentioned, insists that these quality of life considerations are relevant to purely epistemic evaluations. Suppose, then, that this insistence is brought to a defense of (6b).

The response to this point is the same as the response to the version of the argument invoking (6c): if all these non-intellectual considerations are (somehow) relevant to determining what is epistemically wrong, then James developed his argument in an extraordinarily cumbersome and complex way. There is no reason to think the evidential factors are only outweighed by these other factors in cases of genuine options that are intellectually undecidable. Lots of simpler cases are available to make the point. None of the points about the goals of believing truths and avoiding falsehoods play a role in the argument. James could just as well have asserted that it is not epistemically wrong to believe something, without supporting evidence, when that belief will improve your life without hurting anyone else. The assertion would depend upon an extremely peculiar notion of epistemic wrongness, but it would be otherwise as effective as the far more intricate considerations he does advance.

23. My conclusion is thus as follows. There are a variety of ways in which we can understand the idea of "wrongness" that the debate is about. One possibility is that it is about epistemic

wrongness, where this depends upon failures to pursue truth or knowledge in epistemically proper ways. On this construal, James's point is that it is not epistemically wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. I think that if this is his view, then his view has not been defended well. There are no genuine options that are intellectually not decidable, and thus no cases to which James's Principle, (6), applies. Therefore, the argument I have extracted from his essay is not sound. I have not argued that (6) is false. Revised arguments make use of principles such as (6a) and (6b), and these principles, I claim, are false.

A second possibility is that James's point is that it is not prudentially, morally, or all-things-considered wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. If that is his point, then I think that he is right. But his argument is needlessly complex, invoking concepts such as genuine options and intellectual undecidability, that play no crucial role. He need only have pointed out that sometimes a person, or society, is better off when someone believes something on insufficient evidence. That there are cases of that sort is beyond serious debate, even if Clifford thought otherwise. Whether such considerations resolve the religious option in a way that would meet with James's approval is a question I will not attempt to address here. The general theoretical considerations he develops in his essay do not establish that they do.

Finally, James may think that somehow quality of life considerations enter into assessments of what is epistemically wrong. I do not understand the notion of epistemic wrongness that this view invokes. But the considerations mentioned with regard to the second possibility apply here as well.

24. There is one loose end remaining. It may be that there are cases in which one's evidence marginally supports some hypothesis. Perhaps one will think that stronger evidence is needed to make it clearly the case that believing the hypothesis is the epistemically correct alternative. Thus, believing and suspending judgment may be tied for reasonableness, and either of these alternatives is permitted. If so, then (C) is false: there are cases in which it is not epistemically wrong to believe something even though it is not true that one's evidence supports that proposition.

Such cases introduce difficulties that I do not know how to resolve in a completely satisfactory way. My own inclination is to think that if the evidence does on balance marginally support a proposition, then believing it is the preferred alternative. In effect, the issue turns on whether there are borderline cases of sufficient evidence. The objection to (C) rests on the assumption that there are. If there are, then I think that there are also borderline cases of whether it is wrong to believe something or not.¹³ I do not see an objection to Clifford's principle in the vicinity. It's just that this principle, like almost everything else, must accommodate the vagueness throughout our language.¹⁴

REFERENCES

Chisholm, Roderick, *Theory of Knowledge* 3rd Edition (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989)

Clifford, W.K., "The Ethics of Belief," originally printed in *Contemporary Review* (1877) and

reprinted in Clifford's *Lectures and Essays* (London: MacMillan, 1879)

James, William, "The Will to Believe," in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956) (Originally published by David McKay, 1911)

Haack, Susan, "'The Ethics of Belief' Reconsidered" in *The Philosophy of Roderick M. Chisholm* edited by Lewis Hahn (LaSalle, Ill.: Open Court, 1997), pp. 129-44.

Mavrodes, George I., "James and Clifford on 'The Will to Believe'," *The Personalist* 44 (1963).

ENDNOTES

1. See Haack 1997.

2. This leaves open the possibility that weak supporting evidence is also not sufficient. I will ignore this possibility here, except for a brief comment in section 24. I believe that every argument in the paper could rather easily be modified to take this into account.

3. There is one detail here that I am passing over. Clifford's principle says that it is wrong to believe *upon* insufficient evidence. (C) merely says that it is not wrong to believe in a case in which one's evidence is insufficient. I assume that nothing turns on this difference.

4. I do not assume that one voluntarily selects one of the alternatives. In particular, I do not assume that forming a belief is something that we can do voluntarily.

5. It is also possible that one might infer from the fact that we must form beliefs in this way that it is not wrong to do so. I will not discuss this argument either. James seems not to argue in this way. In fact, asks whether this tendency we have is "reprehensible and pathological." (p. 11)

6. I assume in this discussion that options are intellectually undecidable only when the evidence is counterbalanced. One might think that evidence only slightly favoring one hypothesis or the other is also not enough to decide the option. With little or no modification, everything in this paper can accommodate this more inclusive view about which options cannot be intellectually decided. It will be simpler to proceed by ignoring this complication.

7. I assume that we are not to complicate the story by worrying about the possibility that if chooses not marry this woman, he will then possibly meet someone else, whereas if he hesitates indefinitely he will spend the rest of his life considering only this one potential spouse.

8. In limiting consideration to "practical purposes", I set aside considerations having to do with the ongoing unpleasantness the man may experience by failing to make a decision. I consider only the factors having to do with being married or not being married. Also, throughout

discussion of this example, I ignore considerations having to do with the possibility that his marriage proposal will be rejected.

9. Mavrodes (1963) takes up this same aspect of James's argument. Several of my points overlap significantly with points developed in that extremely useful paper.

10. This assumes that one cannot simultaneously have conflicting attitudes. Perhaps that assumption is controversial. It seems to be a suitable assumption in the present context.

11. Of course, simultaneously believing and disbelieving would be wrong.

12. The marriage example could be used here as well. But I think that a fresh example will be helpful.

13. I believe that Hud Hudson brought this point to my attention.

14. I am grateful to Jonathan Adler, John Bennett, Earl Conee, Andrew Cullison, Hud Hudson, and Edward Wierenga for very helpful comments on drafts of this paper.