INTRODUCTION

A Brief Commentary on James's *The Will to Believe*

Many people believe in God believe while acknowledging that their belief lacks strong grounds. They believe anyway, despite the insufficient evidence. They have faith.

Not everyone is impressed by this sort of faith. The 19th Century mathematician and philosopher W.K. Clifford argues that it is actually morally wrong to believe on the basis of insufficient evidence. Clifford says, 'it is wrong, always, everywhere and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'. As Clifford supposes that those who believe in God believe on the basis of insufficient evidence, he considers their belief immoral.

William James attacks Clifford's view, insisting that we are sometimes right to believe, even when the evidence is inconclusive. In *The Will to Believe*, he argues that this is precisely the situation regarding belief in God.

Though James is a scientist, he thinks that science has its limitations. There are circumstances, he thinks, when a scientific approach to deciding what to believe can be harmful. Below is one of James favourite illustrations of this point.

The mountaineer example

Suppose that you are a mountaineer. To return safely home you must leap a chasm. The chasm is wide, and the evidence you will make it not particularly strong. In order to succeed, you need to feel confident. Hesitate and all will be lost.

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So, despite the fact you are not entirely justified in believing you will make it safely across the chasm, it is nevertheless a sensible thing for you to believe, particularly as the belief will make it more likely that you will succeed.

James concludes that Clifford is mistaken. It is sometimes sensible to allow what James calls our 'passional nature' – our interests, hopes, desires and fears – to influence what we believe, even though there is insufficient evidence to warrant belief.

Live, forced and momentous

When is it legitimate to allow our passional natures to rule our beliefs in this way? James says the following three conditions must be satisfied:

First, we must be faced with a choice between options that are live. A live option is one that is genuinely a possibility for us – it is one we can at least take seriously. Believing in Zeus or Santa Claus are not live options for most contemporary adults. On the other hand, believing in the Judeo-Christian God, or in the existence of life on other planets, are genuine possibilities.

Second, the choice must be forced. A forced choice is one where you have to choose one way or the other. For example, I cannot help but choose between having an ice cream today or not having an ice cream today (though of course I might put the choice off for a while). I have no option but to do one or the other of these things. The choice between travelling to Africa or India, on the other hand, is not one I am forced to make.

Third, the choice must be momentous. A momentous choice is one that will have a major impact on your life. The choice to have children is a momentous one, obviously. As is the choice of an ex-alcoholic to have a drink.

All three of these conditions are satisfied in the mountaineer example. The choice is between live options. It is also forced: either you believe or you fail to believe. And

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the consequences are momentous. To leap without belief may be fatal. Under these circumstances, thinks James, there is nothing wrong with allowing your passional nature to lead you to belief.

According to James, we face a similar choice when it comes to religious belief. The choice between believing and not believing is forced. It is also momentous: depending on which choice you make, your life will no doubt go very differently. And, in the case of Christianity, both choices are live for many of us.

So, under these circumstances, says James, it is legitimate to allow our passional natures to lead us to belief.

An objection to James' defence of religious belief

I think we should concede that there are circumstances in which allowing our 'passional natures' to determine what we believe is indeed the right thing to do. However, it is debatable whether this is the case when it comes to many religious beliefs.

Consider a rather different religious belief – the belief that the entire universe is about six thousand years old. Approximately one hundred million Americans currently hold this belief. The fact is (though few of them would accept this) that there is little evidence to support their belief and overwhelming evidence against it. Is it, nevertheless, entirely legitimate for them to hold it?

It seems the three conditions James says are necessary if we are to allow our 'passional natures' to determine belief are satisfied. The choice between believing and not believing in a six-thousand-year-old universe is forced. It is also, for many, momentous. Given the option is also live, is it, then, acceptable for people to allow their hopes and desires to lead them to believe that the universe is six thousand years old?

Surely not. Given the weight of evidence, these people really shouldn't believe what they do. Indeed, isn't there

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something rather irresponsible about anyone who would allow their beliefs to be shaped in this way, given the evidence available to them? James would probably agree. He says

> . . .the freedom to believe can only cover living options *which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve.* [my italics]

That the universe is more than a few thousand years old is, presumably, something most of us are now able to figure out intellectually. At least beyond reasonable doubt.

The moral carries over to belief in God. If the evidence for and against the existence of God is more or less evenly balanced, then perhaps it is acceptable for us to allow our 'passional natures' to lead us to religious belief.

But, if, as most atheists maintain, the evidence is actually stacked heavily against belief in God, then *James' 'will to believe' does not extend to belief in God.*

(Adapted from Stephen Law, The Great Philosophers)

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