



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
DI TORINO

Theoretical philosophy: The ethics of belief

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Philosophy International Curriculum



James and the will to believe

- William James, 'The will to believe', in *The will to believe and other essays in popular philosophy*, New York 1896.
- Defends a non-evidentialist position, which is a direct response to Clifford.
- Identifies some conditions under which it is legitimate to ignore the evidentialist principle.



James and the will to believe

- The conditions under which it is legitimate to ignore the evidentialist principle:
- Hypothesis: everything that is considered as a possible belief.
- Option: The decision between two hypotheses
- An option can be:
 1. Dead or alive;
 2. Forced or avoidable;
 3. Momentous or trivial;



James and the will to believe

- An option could be: alive or dead.
- A hypothesis is living if it appears to as a a real possibility.
- A living option is an option between two living hypotheses.
- «If I say to you: "Be a theosophist or be a Mohammedan," it is probably a dead option, because for you neither hypothesis is likely to be alive. But if I say: "Be an agnostic or be a Christian," it is otherwise: trained as you are, each hypothesis makes some appeal, however small, to your belief». (3)



James and the will to believe

- An option could be: forced or avoidable.
- A forced option is one in which we cannot avoid taking one side.
- «But if I say, "Either accept this truth or go without it," I put on you a forced option, for there is no standing place outside of the alternative. Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind». (3)



James and the will to believe

- An option could be: momentous or trivial.
- A momentous option is an option which is unique and with high stakes.
- «Finally, if I were Dr. Nansen and proposed to you to join my North Pole expedition, your option would be momentous; for this would probably be your only similar opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it into your hands. He who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed».

(4)



James and the will to believe

- Thesis: it is legitimate to ignore the evidentialist principle whenever we are faced with a living, forced, and momentous option and, given the evidence in our possession, the hypotheses that form the option are equally possible.
- «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.» (11)



James and the will to believe

- Two conflicting approaches to the fixation of belief:
- «There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion,—ways entirely different, and yet ways about whose difference the theory of knowledge seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. *We must know the truth; and we must avoid error,*—these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers; but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws.» (17)



James and the will to believe

- *We must avoid error.*
 - It is Clifford's principle.
 - It tells us that we must suspend judgment unless we are in possession of evidence that makes us certain of the truth of a hypothesis.
- *We must know the truth.*
- The truth we seek is sometimes so important that it is legitimate to risk believing the falsehood rather than having the certainty of not reaching the truth.



James and the will to believe

- «Wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous, we can throw the chance of gaining truth away, and at any rate save ourselves from any chance of believing falsehood, by not making up our minds at all till objective evidence has come. In scientific questions, this is almost always the case; and even in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all». (19-20)



James and the will to believe

- Are there cases of living, forced and momentous options where it is legitimate to adopt a belief in the absence of evidence?
- «Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of maybes, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you roll in the abyss» (Is life worth living?, 59)
- Religious questions have this nature according to James.



James and the will to believe

- Are there cases in which adopting a belief is a condition to make the belief true?
- «Do you like me or not?—for example. Whether you do or not depends, in countless instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you shall have done something apt...ten to one your liking never comes». (23-4)



James and the will to believe

- Marco and Giulia are friends.
- Their friendship is partly based on (Marco's) belief 'Giulia and I are friends' and (Giulia's) belief 'Marco and I are friends'.
- These beliefs require additional beliefs, e.g. about being able to trust each other, etc.
- Marco's belief "Giulia and I are friends" seems necessary for a friendship relationship to be formed and thus for the believed proposition to become true.
- Requiring Marco to gather evidence of Giulia's friendship before believing in that proposition would be tantamount to making the establishment of a friendship relationship impossible.



James and the will to believe

- The rationality of religious beliefs:
- Religious belief states: "we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true." (26)
- If the religious choice is 'alive' for us, then it will also be forced and momentous.
- «Religion offers itself as a momentous option. We are supposed to gain, even now, by our belief, and to lose by our non-belief, a certain vital good. Secondly, religion is a forced option, so far as that good goes. We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical 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.» (26)



James's examples

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James's examples

- James on Clifford: «It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound. Not so are victories either over enemies or over nature gained.» (19)
- «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. Would he not cut himself off from that particular angel-possibility as decisively as if he went and married someone else?» (26)



James's examples

- «How many women's hearts are vanquished by the mere sanguine insistence of some man that they must love him! He will not consent to the hypothesis that they cannot. The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. Who gains promotions, boons, appointments, but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance? His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification.» (24)