

FAITH IN THE LIGHT OF CLIFFORD, WILLIAM JAMES AND BLAISE PASCAL - IS IT IMMORAL?

Belief is taking something to be likely to be true. You could be wrong but you believe what the evidence tells you. Faith is trust and belief combined. Blind faith is believing something no matter how good the evidence that it is wrong is. You reason away the evidence or ignore it. Simple faith is hearing a story - even a mad one - and believing it just because you hear of it.

Blind faith is trying to force yourself to believe in something. You cannot just decide to make yourself believe in something for it will be doomed to failure (page 14, What Do Existentialists Believe?).

It is not belief to take something as true without evidence or sufficient evidence – that is assuming. Assuming is just a pretend belief.

Freud said that all belief is anti-intellectual. It must have been Catholicism gave him that impression! Even if your belief is based on reasoning and evidence, you could still be anti-thinking. For example, if you decide that the evidence shows there is a God and you refuse to reconsider that evidence you are being anti-intellectual. To use the intellect a bit does not make you pro-intellectual. It is what you want to believe that matters to you not the evidence that got you to believe. Belief even if not always anti-intellectual and anti-truth risks being those things which is why evidence and careful thought is necessary when forming beliefs. Faith is commitment to some set of beliefs so it is more risky than mere belief. Commitment implies that you resolve to make your mind hard to change.

Clifford

William Clifford was the philosopher who was famous for teaching that believing anything without enough validated evidence was immoral.

Against that it has been asked where is the empirical proof or evidence for saying you need to show something empirically before you get entitled to believe.

But if there were a problem with verifying that, we still see there is force in it. We just look and see that. It doesn't mean you give up in being open to evidence for it. You keep trying to get as close to the empirical proof or evidence as you can. If empirical proof is the ideal and you cannot get into it then that is not your fault and you are honoring it by trying and being open and wishing.

The answer to the objection is that if we at times do have to do without evidence that does not mean that we don't need evidence. The absence of evidence is not our fault.

Clifford said that it is always daft to believe anything without enough relevant and good evidence.

When he said this, he gave the example of a ship-owner who has an unseaworthy ship and doesn't bother with evidence but simply trusts that God will provide and take care of the ship and off the ship goes and ends up at the bottom of the ocean. The man is foolish for he is taking a risk with human life. He puts faith and opinion before life.

Clifford is thought to be wrong that evidence is always needed for belief for there are times you have to do without evidence (eg if you are told the hotel you are in is about to blow up) but his example of the devout ship-owner shows that it is always wrong to trust in religion and faith without evidence. It is wrong to believe when the evidence is insufficient. But the ship-owner certainly was going too far with the possibility that a god would protect the rotting ship regardless of the leaks.

Though Clifford argued that it is dangerous to believe in supernatural stuff and magic without evidence, Christians incredibly contradict him. They say we do believe things without evidence and a lot of the time we get on fine. That is true but it does not allow for us adopting supernatural beliefs. It might let us accept natural things without evidence at times but that is the exception not the rule. We are living by the fact that we cannot consider evidence all the time. What if you have to make a big decision in a hurry? Believing then without evidence is the exception not the rule. The rule is that we must be reasonable people and try to make a good case for the verity of our beliefs.

We simply do not need to adopt supernatural beliefs without evidence and if we do, we are saying that if X is told God will

kill her husband unless she gives money to a particular charity then she should believe and comply. Do you see how dangerous that is in principle? - the principle asks for such nonsense. It asks us to lie that evidence is not always important.

To sum up Clifford gave the example of a shipowner who let his ship sail though it was unseaworthy for he trusted in God to keep it afloat. It sank with a number of lives lost. His point was that the shipowner should have looked for evidence - solid evidence that the ship could sail. He killed people over his irrational faith and because he cared about what he wanted to believe not what he should believe. He cared more that he believed he should believe than in believing for sensible reasons.

Most people feel that blind faith is silly and is only immoral in certain cases such as with the shipowner. Many of them are hypocrites for the Bible says Jesus walked to crucifixion in the belief that God would restore him to a better life.

Christianity is immoral even if blind faith is not always or necessarily immoral. It is immoral for it endorses mad risks in the name of faith.

It makes no sense to argue that blind faith is silly and dangerous when disaster happens. That is condemning something for turning out badly. That is not the point. It is only luck if other forms of blind faith do not lead to calamity. If you are anti-danger you will be anti-blind faith full stop. If you are pro-health you don't argue that taking medication unsupervised is only bad when it leads to harm.

Double Standard?

According to Christian Randal Rauser, Clifford defined faith as believing without evidence and that he treated reason as doubt without evidence. Rauser then argues that Clifford held to a double standard. He was pretending to care about evidence. So if you believe in doubt and that you should doubt without evidence then that is a form of faith. Faith is being dismissed by Clifford and brought back under another guise.

That is a pack of lies. Clifford did no such thing. Reason is not about doubt as such but about scanning ideas and claims for credibility and self-consistency.

Anyway is "belief without evidence" as bad as "doubt without evidence"? It depends. Living a good life and doubting God is better than living a good life and committing to a God you are not sure of.

James

William James agreed with Clifford about blind faith being bad and reckless but made a few exceptions. The exceptions are as follows.

The first exception is a forced option.

That is when you cannot stop behaving as if a belief was true when you are trying to doubt or deny it. For example, if you cannot stop believing that your dead father is alive you may as well believe it. The reasoning is that when it affects your life you might as well believe in it. But you can stop behaving that way eventually. Also why not keep trying to doubt or deny it and enjoy the benefits of the rejected belief and the benefits of living as if it were true? To believe in a forced option would be to believe something because habit and the heart tell you to and you know you can't listen to them so how could it be belief? It is pretend belief. It is mad to suggest that a young man who cannot stop believing that his neighbour is his real father should believe it. That would not be belief but a sign of an emotional disorder.

It may be objected that unsupported faith is reasonable when I have to believe that I will be shot tonight when a stranger warns me but gives me no reason to hold that he speaks the truth. The reply is that I don't have to believe but I can still be careful and listen to him. I can do nothing about the fact that I can't believe without evidence and that is that.

The forced option supporters cherry-pick. They would usually tell you to face up to your father's death though it is a forced option. But there are forced options they will tell you to accept. For example, that you will live long which encourages you to slave for the benefit of your family.

The second option is a lively option.

A lively option is when the evidence tells you to believe in X and when there is an equal amount of evidence telling you to

deny X leaving you free to pick whatever one you feel like.

They seem to want you to settle with one but why not flip flop?

It is most reasonable to just admit that you don't know which one is right. That is all you can honestly do. You need to believe what evidence says but you don't need to believe either of these when your mind can't tell you what is right. You can go along with one but that is not the same as believing it.

The third option is a momentous option.

A momentous option is when something bad will happen if you don't believe something you should believe it without evidence. James uses this argument to justify belief in religion for if we wait for evidence or more evidence or to get our intellectual problems with religion sorted out we will miss out on the good things it has to offer. He would say we should believe God will put us in Hell if we don't obey him for we cannot wait to after death when it may be too late and we might end up in Hell.

It is like a man refusing to marry a woman in case she will not be an angel if he does marry her though he has no reason to be suspicious of her. He misses out on the happiness he could have with her for the sake of being sure. James thinks it is and to yield to the fear of making a mistake instead of yielding to the hope that it is not a mistake. If he represses his desire and while wanting to be sure he isn't going to be happy anyway.

James' logic is terrible.

First of all if God is good then we will have the benefits and joys of religion without believing in it as long as we are sincere.

Secondly, an atheistic system of right conduct that makes one feel good about oneself and that takes away fear of death is what the momentous option would justify and not religion. Anything else would be non-essential and therefore not a momentous option. The atheist who feels that there is no God to look after sick babies and who looks after them herself (I will be God to to you when there is no God) at huge personal cost knows what the momentous option is not the believer.

The point is not all momentous options are really momentous options. If I lie to you that God will kill you and punish you forever unless you give me money? That is blackmail not a momentous option. A real momentous option makes sense.

James is wrong to argue that the threat of Hell makes belief in God a momentous option.

Thirdly, nobody knows how much happiness or whatever will come unless it actually happens. The man does not know if the woman is really what she seems to be and will not know until he marries her so James is asking for him and the person who wants to join a religion to take a risk. How James can say that taking a risk means that one believes in what one is doing is a mystery. It would not be a risk if one did. You only have an opinion that taking the risk is worth it. A belief is not the same as an opinion. Any woman out of many can be right for marriage. The chance is worth it. The same cannot however be said of religion. There are thousands of religions. Many of them are abhorrent to the others and poisonous. The type of religion that wants to believe that non-members of the religion to rot in Hell forever is common. There are endless possibilities for inventing new religions.

Fourthly, we do not believe that everybody should give up on hoping that things are true and that they should just wait and look for evidence all the time. We do believe that you can accept something as likely to be true with little evidence. But only as long as you can't get any more evidence. And as long as you have tried to look at the evidence against your position and found it unsatisfactory. And as long as you have to really think the evidence is good. And as long as you are open to new evidences and understandings for close mindedness is really opposition to faith and belief and evidence. The belief will be very weak but you have to be true to what you think. In summary, you can hope your weak belief is true and still look for evidence for it where it is practical. There are lots of important beliefs and we cannot verify them all more than we do. But if God is the most important thing then God is different. The believer has a duty to make sure he exists and to carry out this duty to the utmost.

Pascal

Blaise Pascal supported something like James' momentous option.

He said that it does no harm to believe in God and we will go to Hell and lose his blessing in this life if we don't. So when we have nothing to lose and everything to gain we should believe in God.

But it is Jesus Christ saying we will go to Hell and be cursed if we do not believe. Why should we think he is right? And is it really a blessing to get on the good side of a God who does not have the morals to love you unless you believe? That is not a true blessing. Neither is believing because of the risk of Hell. If you find joy in faith because you think it is for others to worry about Hell for you are fine then your joy is revolting.

We can't believe in God just because Christ wants us to curse us and wants us to go to Hell for unceasing torments for disbelieving for we can't accept every religion or god just because it or its god makes threats. Anybody who reveres the vice of blind faith who tells you that something terrible will happen to you if you don't believe what they believe is just admitting that they would like to see the misfortune visiting you. They wouldn't be making a dogma out of a guess otherwise. And how could it be harmless to believe in and reverence a God who has no understanding for people who don't believe in him? Where is his mercy for them? Anybody could manipulate you if you have to believe in whoever says God will do X, Y, Z if you don't do this or that. You can't believe in every religion that makes threats and it is sectarian and unfair to pick one religion out of many when you believe that you should believe in a threatening religion just in case.

Clifford detested belief in God and in atheism for he felt there was no evidence for either of them. I would say he should not detest them equally for atheism will not depend on God to keep a leaking ship afloat but belief in God can. Belief in God is the most detestable.

James argues that belief in God can be justified without evidence but his argument can justify atheism as well. The atheist can argue that atheism is a momentous option because it frees you from the guilt and fear and extra rules that comes from belief in God. God is claimed to be THE momentous option for he is what everything is supposedly about 100% and is to get total commitment from you. But if God is unworthy of such devotion or does not exist then atheism is the momentous option!

The atheist can argue that atheism is a higher momentous option than theism for a good God will save you if you are a sincere atheist making it immoral and irrational to believe in God.

Belief in atheism is actually simpler than belief in God so Clifford was wrong. God leaves us with too many extra questions to answer.

The power of motive

Blind faith that has evidence but is not really using it is still blind faith. You never know if a person armed with evidence for something is really believing because of the evidence. Blind faith is so rife that even when evidence is presented you still can't take it for granted that the person is exercising reasonable faith. The reasonable assumption is that they in fact are not. Faith is fed and watered from your faith that others have faith. Belief in God for example would not matter as much if you didn't think others had real faith. Trust the truth that they in fact do not.

Last

Blind faith is faith that has evidence and does not really respect it or build on it or which does not have evidence at all. It is really faith that does not own the evidence. So in that sense it does not have it. It is there but it does not give a toss.

We conclude that faith in God without any evidence is totally irrational and inexcusable. Faith without reasonable evidence or enough is not far behind.