

# Reviews

SCOTT F. AIKIN

## **Evidentialism and the Will to Believe**

London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 214 pp., incl. index

Scott Aikin's *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* is the first book-length discussion of W.K. Clifford's 1877 "The Ethics of Belief" and William James's 1896 "The Will to Believe." Except for twenty pages, the book splits evenly between a detailed discussion of the two essays. A good book demands some good criticism, and I am hoping that the comments I make are read in that light. *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* appears in the Bloomsbury Research in Analytic Philosophy series. Presumably because the book was written for this series, the discussion of historical context is kept to a minimum, and references to other writings of Clifford and James, and to the secondary literature, are scant. They pretty much only emerge where it directly serves the analysis and is all but unavoidable. Aikin's own justification for ignoring the secondary literature is that both essays were written for the general public, so that one does not need the assistance of scholarly exegeses to make sense of them. As Aikin puts it, "I wish to read these essays on their own terms, as essays that were presented to educated, but not philosophically advanced audiences" (3). In a way this is commendable, but it also undermines the very rationale of Aikin's own book, as on these grounds the educated reader would not need to read Aikin's commentary either. As it turns out, however, Aikin's true audience is the professional philosopher. Who else would want to distinguish between "evidentially productive doxastic efficacy" and "alethically productive doxastic efficacy"? Now it seems to me that for most professional philosophers it makes even less sense to wipe the scholarly slate clean. There still may be pockets of analytic philosophers who believe that philosophy only truly begins with them, but they are unlikely to be interested in what two people thought well over a century ago.

Before making some detailed comments on Aikin's discussion of Clifford and James, a few general observations are in order. As said, the book is written to fit into the broader analytic tradition, and comes with some of its trappings. These include a penchant for abbreviations (Clifford's ship owner becomes SO), a tendency to carve out philosophic

positions through hypostatic abstraction, and a focus on increasingly refined directives, such as “Clifford’s Evidentialist Norm” and the “Integrated Evidentialist Rule” (helpfully abbreviated as CEN and IER). Aikin lightens up a bit when he comes to James, and that part of the book is also stronger. Aikin moves through both essays section by section, aiming to stay close to the arguments as they actually unfold. The essays themselves, which are relatively short, can stand on their own, and are in public domain, are not included, which is regrettable. Alternating sections with commentary would have caused the reader to read the relevant section before reading what Aikin has to say about it, which would have enhanced the reader’s understanding, given a stronger voice to Clifford and James, forced Aikin to tighten his discussion, and made it more amiable to the general reader. This is particularly important for James who was not always careful when expressing himself.

Let’s next look at the debate itself. Especially within the American philosophical tradition, there is a tendency to side with James. Clifford’s famous maxim, that it is always, everywhere, and for anyone wrong to accept anything upon insufficient evidence, is considered too strong, which makes for a receptive ear when James argues that there are some exceptions to this. Aikin comes to the opposite conclusion, which he calls “a very unpopular view” (7). James, he argues, like so many others, misread Clifford. When Clifford is read correctly, Aikin continues, his view ends up being stronger than James’s.

One way of measuring the quality of a work that takes a contrarian position is to see whether it makes a convincing case to those who hold, or lean to, the rejected view. Having belonged to the latter myself, and despite some qualms about Aikin’s arguments, I think that he makes a convincing case that Clifford in fact has the upper hand, which makes *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* a must-read book for many that are interested in this debate, as well as for those who teach the essays either at the graduate or undergraduate level. Aikin’s approach even enables one to develop an entire upper-level or graduate course around the debate, whether in philosophy or in religious studies.

Furthermore, Aikin does an excellent job showing that Clifford winning out on James does not in any way entail giving up on pragmatism. Contrary to what is often thought, the Clifford–James debate does not pit the non-pragmatist against the pragmatist. Far from it, the two authors, Aikin correctly observes, “share a core commitment to a broad form of pragmatism” (4). As Aikin puts it, Clifford represents an evidentialist strain within pragmatism that is akin to Peirce (184). Unfortunately, Aikin mentions Peirce only four times, and mostly in passing. It is surely to be lamented that Aikin pays no attention to Peirce’s 1877 “The Fixation of Belief,” and there is certainly still a good book to be written that draws all three essays together. Aikin does wonder whether Peirce and Clifford might have met, and whether they may have influenced one another (29). The two did indeed meet in England

in the spring of 1875,<sup>1</sup> and most likely they also met five years before when Peirce travelled to Europe to make arrangements for the 1870 American solar eclipse expedition. The 1875 date, however, is particularly significant, as Peirce had by then presented his 1872 *Metaphysical Club* paper, which contains the relevant passages of "The Fixation of Belief," which he had been seeking to incorporate into a logic book (a project that remained unfinished). Moreover, on the boat to Europe he had just promised Appleton to write the series of essays for the *Popular Science Monthly* of which "The Fixation of Belief" became the opening essay.<sup>2</sup> Whether Peirce and Clifford actually discussed their views on belief is unclear, but Peirce did go to the trouble of sending Clifford an abbreviated version of "The Fixation of Belief," drawn from the galleys and specifically covering the difference between doubt and belief and the four ways in which the latter can be fixed.<sup>3</sup> It looks as if Peirce was hoping that Clifford would find it interesting enough to help Peirce get the *Illustrations* published in Britain. No correspondence between Peirce and Clifford has been recovered, and perhaps because Clifford died of tuberculosis not long after, nothing came of it. It would be interesting, though, to ponder what a discussion between Clifford and Peirce involving Peirce's first three methods of belief would have been like. There is another reason why bringing in Peirce may be helpful in detangling the connections between Clifford, James, belief, and pragmatism. It can be used as a way of drawing together the discussions that were taking place concurrently in Britain and the United States. Bain's famous definition of belief, as that upon which a man is prepared to act, is no less famously referred to by Peirce, when he remarked that once this is granted, pragmatism follows as a matter of course.<sup>4</sup> It would be interesting to see whether Bain similarly influenced Clifford.

Finally, Aikin correctly takes Clifford and James to focus primarily on the justification of religious beliefs, with Clifford claiming that such beliefs also require evidence, and James arguing that there may be situations where they don't. At the same time, Aikin's focus on religion produced a lost opportunity. More could have been said about the role of belief and the requirements of evidence within scientific inquiry, especially how it plays out differently within the context of discovery—where high demands on evidence may cause one to lose out on truth (James's concern)—and the context of justification—where loose demands on evidence may cause one to embrace preventable falsity (Clifford's concern).

To make his case that Clifford has the upper hand, Aikin presents five evaluative theses—two for Clifford and three for James. Aikin's first thesis reads as follows: "Clifford's case for evidentialism must be supplemented with an explanation of why false belief is bad and credulity is unacceptable" (6). Following Clifford, Aikin does an excellent job showing that false beliefs have consequences and that these are never restricted just to the believer. Moreover, religious beliefs, which are of

central concern to both Clifford and James, are especially prone to affect others, from school prayer to genocide and torture, making the need for evidence in this arena particularly pertinent (especially if we bring in Bain's definition of belief). Furthermore, even if we grant that there might be situations where the consequences for others are negligible, the willingness to accept things as true on insufficient evidence has an overall erosive effect on belief formation, and in Clifford's view is thus to be avoided. Aikin goes beyond Clifford in pointing out, justifiably I think, that when people deliberate within a group, overbeliefs (beliefs based on insufficient evidence) tend to be amplified (for one thing, as evidence is often complicated and multifaceted, exaggerated one-sided beliefs are typically easier to grasp). This, in turn, leads to group polarization (39). Clifford's argument for why overbelief is *always* wrong is surely a slippery slope argument, but Aikin does well in showing that this particular slope is indeed quite slippery. At the same time, I'm not wholly convinced that the slope is slippery enough, and that exceptions to Clifford's rule to never accept anything on insufficient evidence are never allowed.

Aikin's second thesis is that "Clifford's defense of the Assumption of the Uniformity of Nature suffers from the fallacy of confusing contraries with contradictories" (7). For Clifford, all evidence for what we do not know (or believe) requires that we infer it from what we do know (i.e., the evidence). The problem Clifford here faces is broadly Hume's problem of induction (71): how do we know that what we do not know is relevantly similar to what we do know? I think Aikin is right to point out that Clifford's defense of this assumption is unsatisfactory, and, drawing Clifford closer into the pragmatist fold, Aikin plausibly argues that one could instead maintain that the assumption of the uniformity of nature is a non-optional practical postulate of reasoning (77).

The remaining three theses all pertain to James. First, Aikin argues that James's counterexamples are not truly counterexamples but can reasonably be seen as *confirming* Clifford's rule. Part of what is going on is that the apparent starkness of Clifford's rule—that it is always, everywhere, and for anyone wrong to accept anything upon insufficient evidence—is mitigated by plausible claims by Clifford and Aikin on what constitutes evidence and when it is sufficient. Aikin focuses on James's example of the Alpine climber who worked himself into a position where he can only escape by a terrible leap (149). Here, James argues, the climber has the right to make himself believe that he can make the leap, even when there is no sufficient evidence to support the belief, and he does so on the ground that the alternatives—*not* believing it, and withholding belief—both cause certain death. But as Aikin correctly points out, this only makes sense when it is reasonable to believe that one has at least a fighting chance of making it over the crevice. If the climber's legs are broken, or if the required leap is clearly beyond his capabilities, it makes little sense to say that he has the right

to make himself believe that he can do it, as he simply would not be able to make himself believe that he can do it. But if that is true, then the fact that the climber can make himself believe that he can jump would count as evidence that he can do it. Of course, he may be mistaken about what he can or cannot do, but that's true for all evidence. Our concept of evidence does not require it to be foolproof, nor need it be confined to clearly articulated propositions that subsequently can be rejected or assented to.

Aikin's next thesis is that James shifts unawares from "the plausible view that *All belief is a guide to action*" to the "implausible converse, *All action is guided by belief*"—a shift Aikin dubs the conversion fallacy (7). The claim here is that there are actions that are not guided by belief, and that some of these have a bearing upon the debate. Much in this depends, though, on how to understand action, what is meant by "guided by belief," and the role of habits and how they are acquired. Here Aikin could have done more. A nervous tic like biting one's nails is unlikely to be guided by belief, but we probably would not call it action either; this in contrast to clipping or filing one's nails, which is often guided by beliefs or values about one's appearance or hygiene. What I'm driving at is that I'm not convinced that what James had in mind was the kind of argument that Aikin dubs as a fallacy, but that for something to truly qualify as action it must be guided by belief. Put differently, the claim that all action is guided by belief is a matter of definition—a decision on how to use the term "action," not the product of an inference. And James's examples are all cases of deliberative conduct, where he thinks reason fails to carry us all the way while carrying us sufficiently far to allow for the reasoned decision that one is free to make a passionate choice. Again, going back to Bain may be helpful here, as it would give contemporary depth to the two positions. I'm not sure where Clifford would fall in this, but a fairly direct causal scheme that hinges on a belief-action dichotomy is unlikely to be representative of James. Such a causal dichotomy-based interpretation would indeed, as Aikin correctly observes, fall victim to what he calls "the *No True Scotsman* concern" (172), but I don't think that it fits James.

Aikin's final thesis is that even if James's argument is in the end successful, the religious beliefs he would salvage are very thin and far removed from what typical religious believers are seeking (7). This is less of a criticism of James than a warning to James's readers who are most likely expecting too much. James is surely no Descartes who in his *Meditations* ended up reaffirming all he had set out to doubt, and where the only difference being claimed for is that it is now all on much surer footing.

To conclude, Aikin makes a number of controversial points, and we can say that for most of them the dust has not yet settled. This makes *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* a fascinating book to read and respond to. Its main drawback is that it straddles somewhat uncomfortably between a commentary aimed at helping the lay reader better

understand the positions of Clifford and James, and a scholarly exegesis that meets the demands of the professional philosopher, especially one with an analytic bent. For the lay reader Aikin goes too much into technical distinctions; for the professional philosopher too little attention is given to the already existing literature. All in all, however, Aikin's *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe* provides an excellent discussion of both essays. He makes a strong case for why Clifford has the better argument, and makes many insightful new observations that not only enhance our understanding of the two essays but also show why studying them today is still important.

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#### NOTES

1. See e.g. Joseph Brent, *Charles S. Peirce: A Life*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), p. 96.
2. See Charles S. Peirce, *Illustrations of the Logic of Science*, edited by Cornelis de Waal (Chicago: The Open Court, 2014), pp. 7–10.
3. With many thanks to Jaime Nubiola who alerted me to this about a year ago.
4. Charles S. Peirce, *Collected Papers*, edited by Charles Hartshorne, Paul Weiss, and Arthur Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931–58) vol. 5, sect. 12.



WILLIAM J. GAVIN

#### **William James in Focus: Willing to Believe**

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013. 111 pp., incl. index

PAUL STOB

#### **William James and the Art of Popular Statement**

East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2013. 339 pp., incl. index

William Gavin's *William James in Focus: Willing to Believe* is a brief and creative introduction to James's philosophy aimed at students and non-specialists. As the subtitle of the book suggests, Gavin uses James's will to believe doctrine as the organizing theme for his interpretation of James's philosophy. One might initially think that this implies reading the latter in the light of James's views on religion, but Gavin downplays the religious aspects of James's will to believe doctrine and focuses instead on its relevance for understanding what he terms the "latent image" of James's personal life, which according to Gavin is primarily concerned with human mortality and the need to affirm philosophical positions (such as a belief in libertarian free will) which cannot be definitely solved (4). Interpreting James's philosophy as largely an

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