

# W. K. CLIFFORD AND WILLIAM JAMES ON DOXASTIC NORMS

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## Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to explain and analyze the debate between W. K. Clifford ("The Ethics of Belief", 1877) and William James ("The Will to Believe", 1896). Given that the main assumption shared by Clifford and James in this debate is doxastic voluntarism –i.e., the claim that we can, at least in some occasions, willingly decide what to believe–, I will explain the arguments offered by Bernard Williams in his "Deciding to Believe" (1973) against doxastic voluntarism. Finally, I will explain what happens with the debate between Clifford and James once we accept Bernard Williams's arguments and refuse to accept doxastic voluntarism.

**Keywords:** Doxastic voluntarism, The Ethics of Belief, The Will to Believe, William James, W. K. Clifford.

## 1. Introduction

The main aim of this paper is to explain and analyze the debate between W. K. Clifford ("The Ethics of Belief", 1877) and William James ("The Will to Believe", 1896).

In "The Ethics of Belief", Clifford argues that there is a norm that we must follow in our process of belief-formation –i.e., that «[...] it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence» (Clifford, 1877, p. 186); while in "The Will to Believe" James argues that there are some occasions in which we must not follow Clifford's norm.

As we will see in what follows, the main assumption shared by both sides of this debate is doxastic voluntarism –that is: the claim that we can, at least in some occasions, willingly decide what to believe. It is for this reason that in this paper we will also see the arguments offered by Bernard Williams in his "Deciding to Believe" (1973) against doxastic voluntarism.

Two main conclusions will be reached at the end of this paper. First, that once we reject the possibility of doxastic voluntarism there is no epistemic or moral normativity in belief-formation, because the possibility of any doxastic norm is grounded on the assumption that we can, at least in some occasions, willingly decide to believe. Second, that

the argument for justifying religious belief presented by James fails because it assumes the possibility of doxastic voluntarism. Besides, I will argue that James's argument is unacceptable even if we claim that religious belief is reducible to its non-cognitive content since James's argument is grounded on the claim that the practical adequacy of religious belief is due to the truth of God's Salvation, which is a factual claim.

## 2. The debate between W. K. Clifford and William James

### 2.1. W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" (1877)

"The Ethics of Belief" was originally published by W. K. Clifford (1845-1879) in 1877 in the journal *Contemporary Review*, and two years later was published in *Lectures and Essays*, a compilation of some of Clifford's writings.

The main claim of "The Ethics of Beliefs" is that «[...] it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence» (Clifford, 1877, p. 186). Thus, Clifford is arguing that there is a doxastic norm that makes it wrong to hold a belief on insufficient evidence. Although Clifford does not explicitly say it, it is important to notice that Clifford's norm seems to admit two different readings: an epistemic one –i.e., «it is (*epistemically*) wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence»— and a moral one –i.e., «it is (*morally*) wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence».

It is also important to say that Clifford's norm is about justification, not about truth (Clifford, 1877, p. 178). This is why, according to Clifford's norm, a non-justified true belief is bad in the same sense that a non-justified false belief is bad. That Clifford is speaking only about justification seems clear from what he says about his example of the ship owner; to wit: that if the ship owner's belief that the ship is seaworthy is non-justified, the ship owner will be acting wrong even if the ship is in fact seaworthy (Clifford, 1877, p. 178).<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Clifford's example is as follows. Imagine a ship owner who was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He had serious doubts regarding the soundness of his ship. Nonetheless, he decided to ignore all the evidence he had so as to get the «[...] sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy [...]» (CLIFFORD, 1877, p. 177). Suppose that he decided to send to sea his ship but, unfortunately, the ship wrecked before reaching his destination; in such a case we would say that the ship owner was guilty of the shipwreck because it has been a consequence of his unfounded belief that the ship was seaworthy, belief which he had formed «[...] not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts» (CLIFFORD, 1877, p. 178). But, Clifford says, even if the ship owner's belief that the ship is seaworthy was true and, hence, the ship was sound enough so as to reach to his destination, the ship owner would still be guilty since: «When an action is once done, it is right or wrong for ever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that. The man would not have been innocent, he would only have been not found out. The question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of his belief, not the matter of it; not what it was, but how he got it; not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him» (CLIFFORD, 1877, p. 178).

The argument offered by Clifford is grounded in the negative consequences that appear when we hold a belief on insufficient evidence. The first consequence of violating Clifford's norm is that it promotes us to hold other beliefs which are not truly justified because their justification derives from a non-justified belief. The second consequence is that the violation of Clifford's norm promotes credulity, in the sense that it feeds the habit of «believing for unworthy reasons» (Clifford, 1877, p. 185). The argument is presented by Clifford as follows:

«Every time we let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons, we weaken our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judicially and fairly weighing evidence. We all suffer severely enough from the maintenance and support of false beliefs and the fatally wrong actions which they lead to, and the evil born when one such belief is entertained is great and wide. But a greater and wider evil arises when the credulous character is maintained and supported, when a habit of believing for unworthy reasons is fostered and made permanent. If I steal money from any person, there may be no harm done by the mere transfer of possession; he may not feel the loss, or it may prevent him from using the money badly. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself dishonest. What hurts society is not that it should lose its property, but that it should become a den of thieves; for then it must cease to be society. This is why we ought not to do evil that good may come; for at any rate this great evil has come, that we have done evil and are made wicked thereby. In like manner, if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery» (Clifford, 1877, pp. 185-186).

Then, Clifford goes to argue that beliefs are not a private matter -that is: they are not something that concerns only the believer. The argument for that is as follows: beliefs are not a private matter because beliefs lead us to act, and our acting is not a private matter –i.e., it affects other individuals apart from ourselves (Clifford, 1877, p. 182). This social scope of believing seems to be what gives some moral strength to Clifford's norm –to wit: in holding a belief for unworthy reasons I will be doing something *morally* wrong because I will be harming others around me.

Clifford makes two remarks to his argument. First, that the norm goes for all beliefs. This is so because all beliefs lead us to act or, at least, they give justification to other beliefs that lead us to act (Clifford, 1877, p. 182). Second, that the norm goes for all believers. The reason for that is that all believers are related to other individuals and, therefore, their acting affect others than themselves (Clifford, 1877, p. 183).

However, it is interesting to point out that Clifford's reasoning seems to involve some kind of circularity. What Clifford says is that to entertain non-justified beliefs is

something bad because it promotes credulity –i.e., it promotes the habit of «believing for unworthy reasons» (Clifford, 1877, p. 185). But the habit of «believing for unworthy reasons» is nothing over and above than the habit of having non-justified beliefs. So, Clifford is claiming that to entertain non-justified beliefs is something bad because it leads us to entertain more non-justified beliefs. But this alone does not explain what Clifford needs; that is: why justified beliefs are (morally and epistemically) preferable to non-justified beliefs. Without this, it seems that there is no reason to conclude that in believing non-justified beliefs we are doing something (morally and epistemically) wrong. Clifford seems to be simply assuming that justified beliefs are (morally and epistemically) preferable to non-justified beliefs.

Forgetting about Clifford's arguments, we can offer some arguments for the claim that justified beliefs are (morally and epistemically) preferable to non-justified beliefs, which, I think, are compatible with Clifford's position. In both cases, we have to assume that justification is an indicator of truth –an assumption that seems reasonable to make, given that nobody will consider that a certain piece of evidence justifies his belief if he also believes that it diminishes the probability that the original belief is true. Regarding the epistemic reading of the norm, and assuming that justification is an indicator of truth, we can argue that justified beliefs are epistemically preferable to non-justified beliefs because the first satisfies in a more proper way one of our main epistemic goals, to possess the truth. Regarding the moral reading, and assuming that justification is an indicator of truth, we can argue that justified beliefs are morally preferable to non-justified beliefs because truths lead us to act in a more adequate way than falsehoods. With the expression «to act in a more adequate way», I mean simply that way of acting which is more fitted for the fulfilling of our purposes and intentions. Thus, for example, my true belief that the cinema is closed will lead me to act in a more adequate way (e.g., not going to the closed cinema, even if I have the intention to see a film) than my false belief that the cinema is open (e.g., going to the closed cinema with the intention to see a film).<sup>2</sup>

It is also interesting to point out that Clifford seems to be arguing for another doxastic norm. Although this second norm is not explicitly stated in "The Ethics of Belief", we can rephrase it following Clifford's style as follows: «it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything until the evidence had been examined with the utmost patience and care». That Clifford agrees with this norm seems clear from

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<sup>2</sup>An anonymous referee of *Comprendre* has suggested me that these arguments cannot be extended to the practical adequacy of the non-cognitive content of beliefs. I agree with that: it is obvious that their non-cognitive value, their practical adequacy, cannot be grounded on their being truth. As we will see in the next section, the examples offered by William James against the claim that there is a strict connection between the possession of truth and the adequacy of acting are grounded on the claim that there are cases in which to embrace the attitudinal content of a belief (i.e., to act as if that belief were true) would lead us to act in the most adequate way. As I will argue later, James might be correct here, but this cannot justify us in accepting the cognitive content of that belief.

what he says in (Clifford, 1877, p. 179)<sup>3</sup> –in fact, there are some passages in which Clifford seems to be more concerned with this second norm than with the first one (Clifford, 1877, pp. 186-187).<sup>4</sup> They are two different norms in the sense that we can satisfy the first norm without having satisfied this second norm –i.e., we can, for example, believe P upon sufficient evidence, although we have not examined all the evidence for P with the utmost patience and care. Also, it would seem that we could have examined all the evidence for P with the utmost patience and care and, nonetheless, believe P upon insufficient evidence. We will return later to this second norm; for the moment the important point is to notice that this second norm, in contrast with the first one, is about the process of getting evidence and not about the kind of evidence to which we have got epistemic access when forming our beliefs.

Perhaps one may worry whether Clifford's norm is too strong, that it makes the scope of the things that we are allowed to believe too narrow. Clifford is aware of this worry and in sections two and three of "The Ethics of Belief" tries to give an answer to it. Thus, in section two he claims that «[w]e may believe the statement of another person, when there is a reasonable ground for supposing that he knows the matter of which he speaks, and that he is speaking the truth so far as he knows it» (Clifford, 1877, pp. 210-211), which allows us to believe those things for which we do not have direct knowledge of the evidence but only by testimony –e.g., that America was discovered in 1492. On the other hand, in section three Clifford claims that «[w]e may believe what goes beyond our experience, only when it is inferred from that experience by the assumption that what we do not know is like what we know» (Clifford, 1877, p. 210), which makes induction a proper way to justify our beliefs. If Clifford is correct, then it seems that the amount of beliefs that can be justified is highly increased.

## 2.2. William James, "The Will to Believe" (1896)

"The Will to Believe" was a lecture given by William James in 1896 to the Philosophical Clubs of Yale and Brown Universities. In 1897, it was published as a chapter of *Essays in Popular Philosophy*. The author defines "The Will to Believe" as «[...] an essay in justification of faith, a defence of our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced» (James, 1896, pp. 1-2).

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<sup>3</sup>CLIFFORD, 1877, p. 179: «For although they had sincerely and conscientiously believed in the charges they had made, yet they had no right to believe on such evidence as was before them. Their sincere convictions, instead of being honestly earned by patient inquiring, were stolen by listening to the voice of prejudice and passion».

<sup>4</sup>CLIFFORD, 1877, pp. 186-187: «If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind».

James recognizes that in most occasions we cannot willingly decide what to believe. We cannot, for example, «[...] feel certain that the sum of the two one-dollar bills in our pocket must be a hundred dollars [...]» (James, 1896, p. 5). Nonetheless, there are some beliefs which we hold for «[...] no reasons worthy of the name [...]» (James, 1896, p. 9); it is in those cases, James says, in which the belief is grounded in our passional nature. An example of this last kind of belief is, according to James, our belief that there is a truth. The reason offered by James is as follows:

«[...] if a pyrrhonistic sceptic asks us how we know all this, can our logic find a reply? No! certainly it cannot. It is just one volition against another, we willing to go in for life upon a trust or assumption which he, for his part, does not care to make» (James, 1896, p. 10).

But, what are those cases in which our will can decide what to believe? Before giving an answer to this question, we must begin settling up some definitions that are of great importance for James's reasoning and that will help us for the correct understanding of what follows. Once we have these definitions in mind, we will be able to explain when, according to James, we can willingly decide what to believe.

First, a *hypothesis* is «anything that may be proposed to our belief» (James, 1896, p. 2) –in other words: a hypothesis is the content of our belief. A hypothesis can be *living* or *dead*: a *live hypothesis* is «one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed» (James, 1896, p. 2), while a *dead hypothesis* is just the opposite. Second, an *option* is «the decision between two hypotheses» (James, 1896, p. 3). An option can be *living* or *dead, forced* or *avoidable* and *momentous* or *trivial*. The option will be a *genuine option* when it is living, forced and momentous (James, 1896, p. 3). A *living option* is one in which both hypothesis are alive, while a *dead option* is one in which some of the hypothesis is dead. A *forced option* is one in which «there is no standing place outside of the alternative» (James, 1896, p. 3), while an *avoidable option* is just the opposite. It is interesting to remark that James's distinction between avoidable and forced is not tantamount to claiming that there are options in which we cannot suspend our judgment; what James is saying is that an option between believing P or believing not-P is forced when our suspension of judgment will be equal, in practical matters, to believe not-P (or P). Finally, a *momentous option* occurs when one «who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed» (James, 1896, p. 4), while a *trivial option* is just the opposite –i.e., «when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant or when the decision is reversible if latter proves unwise» (James, 1896, p. 4).

Now that we have all these definitions in mind, we can explain James's answer to the question that we have stated before. James's answer is that our will can decide what to believe in those cases in which the hypothesis is a living one (James, 1896, p. 8).

After having introduced these definitions, and before explaining his main argument, James offers three different arguments which, I think, aim to criticize Clifford's norm.

First, in sections V and VI of “The Will to Believe”, William James argues that although we can possess the truth, we cannot know when we do it. With this, James seems to be arguing against the possibility of a doxastic norm based on the notion of truth. Second, in sections VII and VIII of “The Will to Believe”, James argues that our epistemic goal of possessing the truth can be performed in two different ways: (1) by believing truths; (2) by not believing falsehoods. James considers that Clifford’s norm is a form of (2), and he argues that (1) is preferable to (2) in those cases in which the option is genuine. Third, in section IX of “The Will to Believe”, James tries to show that there are some cases in which false beliefs lead us to act in a more adequate way than true beliefs.

In sections V and VI of “The Will to Believe”, James argues that we cannot know when our beliefs are true. As I have said, with this James seems to offer a reason against a doxastic norm based on the notion of truth such as «it is wrong to believe those things that are not true». James’s reasoning is easy to follow: if we cannot never know when our beliefs are true, then we cannot follow a norm which is supposed to make us to believe only those things that we know are true. In what follows we will see the arguments offered by James for that claim. However, it is important to remember that Clifford’s norm does not talk about truth, but about justification; so, even if James’s arguments are successful and they show that there cannot be any doxastic norm based on the notion of truth, this will not constitute an objection to Clifford’s norm.

James claims that the *assumption* that «there is a truth and that it is the destiny of our minds to attain it» (James, 1896, p. 12) can be read in two different ways: the absolutist and the empiricist reading. The absolutist reading says that «[...] we not only can attain to knowing truth, but we can *know when* we have attained to knowing it» (James, 1896, p. 12; emphasis of the author), while the empiricist reading says that «[...] although we may attain it [the truth], we cannot infallibly know when. To *know* is one thing, and to know for certain *that* we know is another» (James, 1896, p. 12; emphasis of the author). Although most of us are absolutists by instinct, James says (James, 1896, pp. 12-13), we have to silence our instincts and embrace the empiricist reading. The reason offered for that is simply that «[n]o concrete test of what is really true has ever been agreed upon» (James, 1896, p. 15). But this, I think, seems to be a weak reason: from the existence of disagreement it does not follow that there is not anything to which we can agree. At any rate, it is important to remark, as James does (James, 1896, p. 17), that to embrace the empiricist reading is not tantamount to embrace skepticism about the existence of truth. What James is saying is that there is a truth, and that we can reach it, but that we do not know when this will happen.

At any rate, and forgetting about James’s arguments, it seems that we can sketch another reason against the possibility of a doxastic norm based on the notion of truth. That «it is wrong to believe those things that are not true» can be a normative claim, in the sense that there is something obviously wrong in believing falsehoods. However, this does not mean that such a claim can be taken as a rule or a doxastic *norm* for the processes of beliefs-formation –that is: something to which the believer can stick (or

not) to it in the process of beliefs-formation. This is so because to believe that P involves to believe that P is true –i.e., one could not believe that P and, at the same time, believe that P is not true. What this seems to show is that there cannot be any doxastic *norm* based on the notion of truth for the process of belief-formation, because it is impossible that the believer forms beliefs without sticking to them –i.e., one cannot form the belief that P and, at the same time, believe that P is false.

Then, in sections VII and VIII, James says that the claim that «there is a truth and that it is the destiny of our minds to attain it» (James, 1896, p. 12) can be performed in two different ways: (1) «we must know the truth» (James, 1896, p. 17) and (2) we must avoid error» (James, 1896, p. 17). According to James, (1) and (2) are two completely different things because

«Although it may indeed happen that when we believe the truth *A*, we escape as an incidental consequence from believing the falsehood *B*, it hardly ever happens that by merely disbelieving *B* we necessarily believe *A*. We may in escaping *B* fall into believing other falsehoods, *C* or *D*, just as bad as *B*; or we may escape *B* by not believing anything at all, not even *A*» (James, 1896, pp. 17-18).

It seems that, for the correct interpretation of the argument, (1) and (2) must be understood as applying only to a belief about a particular fact, but not as applying to the entire set of truths. Otherwise, if we do not restrict (1) and (2) to particular beliefs, James's argument does not work. If (1) applies to the entire set of beliefs –i.e., if we read (1) as ‘we must know *all* the truths’–, James's argument does not work because it cannot be the case that we satisfy (1) and, at the same time, that «[w]e may in escaping *B* fall into believing other falsehoods, *C* or *D*, just as bad as *B* [...]» (James, 1896, pp. 17-18), since this will mean that there is some truth which we do not know –and, therefore, that (1) is not satisfied.

So, to make sense of the argument, let's consider that the norm applies to particular truths. Then, we can see why (1) and (2) are two different norms. Let's take the particular true belief that P. We have three possibilities. First, if we believe that P, we will satisfy (1) –given that we will believe that truth– and also (2) –given that we will not believe a falsehood with regard to the belief that P. Second, if we do not believe that P, we will not satisfy (1) –given that we will not believe that truth–, neither (2) –given that we will fail into the error with regard to the belief that P. Third, if we suspend our judgment, then we will satisfy (2) –given that we will not believe a falsehood with regard to the belief that P–, but we will not satisfy (1) –given that we will not believe that truth. So, with regard to a belief about a particular fact, to satisfy (1) implies to satisfy (2), but to satisfy (2) does not necessarily imply to satisfy (1).

After arguing that (1) and (2) are two completely different things, James goes to argue that Clifford's norm is grounded in (2) (James, 1896, p. 18). Then, James claims that (1) is preferable to (2). We can reconstruct the argument (see: James, 1896, pp. 18-19) as follows:

- (I) By following (1) we improve our chances of possessing the truth
  - (II) By following (2) we reduce our chances of possessing the truth
  - (III) An improvement of our chances of possessing the truth is preferable to a reduction of our chances of possessing the truth
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- (C) (1) is preferable to (2)

Although James does not explicitly say it, it seems that the justification for (I) and (II) is grounded in the two different epistemic attitudes that come when we try to satisfy (1) or (2). In trying to satisfy (1) we will assume an epistemic attitude that involves some risk, while in trying to satisfy (2) we will adopt a more conservative epistemic attitude. More concretely: in trying to satisfy (1) we will probably take some risk and give up –or, at least, reduce– the possibility to suspend our judgment, because this will improve our chances of possessing the truth –that is: our chances of satisfying (1) –; while in trying to satisfy (2) we will probably be more conservative and enforce the possibility of suspending our judgment, given that this will reduce our chances of failing to believe falsehoods –that is: our chances of satisfying (2). However, James's argument *per se* does not prove anything, given that it can be reconstructed the other way round; that is:

- (I\*) By following (1) we improve our chances of failing to believe falsehoods
  - (II\*) By following (2) we reduce our chances of failing to believe falsehoods
  - (III\*) A reduction of our chances of failing to believe falsehoods is preferable to an improvement of our chances of failing to believe falsehoods
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- (C\*) (2) is preferable than (1)

James seems to be correct in assuming that by taking a risky epistemic attitude we improve our chances of possessing the truth in a higher way than by taking a conservative epistemic attitude; this is so because, as we have said, a risky epistemic attitude implies to leave aside –or to reduce– the possibility to suspend our judgment, which in turn increases our possibilities to reach –or, in more exact words, to *guess*– the truth. But it seems also correct to say that by taking a risky epistemic attitude we improve our chances of failing to believe falsehoods in a higher way than by taking a more conservative epistemic attitude. The reason is easy to see: the risk that we take when we leave aside or reduce the possibility of suspending our judgment is, precisely, the risk of failing to believe falsehoods. What James seems to need is, then, something like this:

- (4) An improvement of our chances of possessing the truth is preferable to a reduction of our chances of failing to believe falsehoods.

In section VIII, James seems to argue for (4) when he claims that (1) is preferable to (2) in those cases in which the option is genuine, while (2) is preferable to (1) in those cases in which the option is not a genuine one (James, 1896, p. 20). James's argument for that is based in the distinction between momentous and trivial options. What James says is that when the option is genuine it is preferable to follow (1) than (2), because if we follow (2), then we will lose our chances to reach the momentous consequences of holding that belief. And the mere possibility to attain these momentous consequences is preferable to the bad consequences that may result from holding a false belief. In James's words:

«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. [...] The questions here are always trivial options, the hypotheses are hardly living (at any rate not living for us spectators), the choice between believing truth or falsehood is seldom forced. The attitude of sceptical balance is therefore the absolutely wise one if we would escape mistakes. What difference indeed, does it make to most of us whether we have or have not a theory of the Röntgen rays, whether we believe or not in mind-stuff, or have a conviction about the causality of conscious states? It makes no difference. Such options are not forced on us. On every account it is better not to make them, but still keep weighing reasons pro et contra with an indifferent hand» (James, 1896, p. 20; emphasis of the author)

Finally, in section IX, James offers some counterexamples for the claim that there is a strict connection between the possession of truth and the adequacy of acting. More concretely, James wants to show that there are cases in which false beliefs lead us to act in a more adequate way than true beliefs. James refers to these cases as cases in which «the faith in a fact can help create the fact» (James, 1896, p. 25; emphasis omitted). These counterexamples take the form of:

To entertain the false belief that *P* will lead us to act as *A* (where, let's assume with James, *A* is the most adequate way of acting), and *A* will make the previous false belief that *P* to become true.

One of the examples suggested by James is the following:

«A whole train of passengers (individually brave enough) will be looted by a few highwaymen, simply because the latter can count on one another, while each passenger fears that if he makes a movement of resistance, he will be shot before anyone else backs him up. If we believed that the whole car-full would rise at once with us, we should each severally rise, and train-robbing would never even be attempted» (James, 1896, pp. 24-25).

We can go with James and accept that there are some occasions in which a false belief lead us to act in a more adequate way than a true belief. However, the important point is that this does not affect our processes of belief-formation. Otherwise, we would have to accept that we can form a belief uniquely in light of his adequacy, without mattering whether the belief is true or false. But we cannot form a belief uniquely in light of his adequacy: if this were the case, then it would be possible for us to form the belief that P without forming the belief that our belief that P is true. Nonetheless, to do such a thing is not possible.

Maybe James's reasoning can still have some use if it is understood in other way –i.e., that there are some occasions in which the most adequate is 'to act as if' a particular belief is true. We can accept that such a claim is correct but, again, this has nothing to do with believing –neither with James's aim in writing "The Will to Believe".

Finally, in section X of "The Will to Believe", James goes to offer his main argument for «[...] our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely logical intellect may not have been coerced» (James, 1896, pp. 1-2). The argument has two legs.

The first leg of the argument can be read as a *reductio* argumentation against Clifford. It is based, on the one hand, on the claim that the *option* between to believe or not to believe the religious hypothesis is a forced option and, on the other hand, on the assumption that it is a living option (James, 1896, p. 26). It is a forced option, James says, because to suspend the judgment about the religious hypothesis will be equal, *in practical matters*, to believe that the religious hypothesis is false (James, 1896, p. 26)<sup>5</sup> –thus, James is referring here to the moral, practical reading of Clifford's norm. Then, the argument goes, given that the religious hypothesis is a matter that goes beyond our experience, we cannot have strong evidence for neither believing that it is true nor for believing that it is false; so, we are not justified, on evidential basis, in believing that it is true nor false. And, given that to suspend our judgment is equal, on its practical consequences, to believe that the religious hypothesis is false, we are not justified in suspending our judgment. Thus, Clifford's norm is violated no matter what we do, given that we are not justified for believing that the religious hypothesis is true, that it is false or to suspend our judgment.

The second leg of the argument is quite similar to Pascal's wager (Pascal, 1972, pp. 111-117). It is based on the claim that the *option* between to believe or not believe the religious hypothesis is a *momentous option* (James, 1896, p. 26).<sup>6</sup> According to James,

<sup>5</sup> JAMES, 1896, p. 26 (emphasis of the author): «[...] religion is a *forced* option [...]. 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 [that we are supposed to gain if the religious hypothesis is true], *If it be true*, just as certainly as if we positively chose to disbelieve».

<sup>6</sup> James, 1896, p. 26 (emphasis of the author): «[...] that 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».

as we have seen, the believing attitude towards the religious hypothesis cannot be based on evidential grounds. Those who believe and those who do not, James says, do it on passional grounds; more concretely: to not believe that the religious hypothesis is true (or to suspend the judgment) is to «yield to our fear of its being error» (James, 1896, p. 27), while to believe that the religious hypothesis is true is to «yield to our hope that it may be true» (James, 1896, p. 27).. Then, the argument goes, it is preferable to stick to our hope that the religious hypothesis may be true than to stick to our fear that it may be false. This is so because by yielding to our fear of failing into error, either by not believing in the religious hypothesis or by suspending our judgment, we will cut ourselves of attaining those momentous consequences that only come when the religious hypothesis is true and we believe it, while by sticking to our hope that the religious hypothesis may be true, by believing it, we will leave us the door open to the only way of attaining the momentous consequences that only come when the religious hypothesis is true and we believe it. Thus, given that to stick to our hope that it may be true will give us the possibility to attain the momentous consequences that occur when the religious hypothesis is true, while to stick to our fear that it may be false will directly block any possibility to attain these momentous consequences, it is preferable, James concludes, to believe that the religious hypothesis is true.

It is important to notice that the argument is grounded on the assumption that we can willingly decide what to believe. This seems to be unacceptable, and we will discuss it later on. By now it is important to see that this very same assumption seems to be present in Clifford's norm.

Putting aside by now the issue of doxastic voluntarism -that is: the claim that we can, at least in some occasion, willingly decide what to believe-, there are other objections that can be made to the argument, especially to its second leg. One could argue, for example, that a belief on God's existence grounded on such basis will probably cut ourselves from God's Salvation, or one could doubt whether what we bet (i.e., our lives) is really so small when compared with the possible benefit that we could gain (i.e., the eternal life). A possible answer to these kinds of objections is to claim that to believe that the religious hypothesis is true is something *per se* desirable, even when it turns to be false. James seems to have something like this in mind when he says that to believe that the religious hypothesis is true implies to believe that «we are better off even now» (James, 1896, p. 26). This claim is highly disputable and seems to require strong arguments for it; however, James does not offer any argument for that in "The Will to Believe".

### 3. The assumption in the debate: doxastic voluntarism

As I have already suggested, both sides in the debate assume doxastic voluntarism. As we have seen, this assumption is made explicit by William James with re-

gard to what he calls «living hypothesis». On the other hand, regarding Clifford, he assumes doxastic voluntarism for the simple reason that if we cannot choose what to believe, how can we be blamed for not following Clifford's norm?

In what follows we will see the arguments offered by Bernard Williams in his “Deciding to Believe” (1973) against doxastic voluntarism. Then, we will see what happens with the debate between Clifford and James once we accept Bernard Williams's arguments and refuse to accept doxastic voluntarism.

### 3.1. *Bernard Williams*, “Deciding to Believe” (1973)

In “Deciding to Believe”, Bernard Williams states five features of believing and, from here, he argues that believing is not, and cannot be, related to will in the sense that we cannot willingly decide what to believe (Williams, 1973, p. 136).

The first feature of believing is that «beliefs aims at truth» (Williams, 1973, p. 136). This means three things. First, that beliefs, in contrast with other psychological states such as desires or hopes, can be assessed in terms of truth and falsehood (Williams, 1973, p. 137). Second, that to believe that P is to believe that P is true. This explains, Williams says, why «[i]f a man recognizes that what he has been believing is false, he thereby abandons the belief he had» (Williams, 1973, p. 137). Third, that to assert ‘I believe that P’ implies the claim ‘P is true’ (Williams, 1973, p. 137). This explains why Moorean paradoxes are paradoxes –that is: why to assert ‘P but I do not believe that P’ involves something paradoxical (Williams, 1973, p. 137).

The second feature of believing is that «[...] the most straightforward, basic, simple, elementary expression of a belief is an assertion» (Williams, 1973, p. 137). Thus, for example, the simplest way to express my belief that tomorrow the sun will rise is not to assert ‘I believe that tomorrow the sun will rise’ but to assert ‘Tomorrow the sun will rise’.

The third feature of believing is related to the second, and it says that to assert that P is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for believing that P (Williams, 1973, p. 140). It is not a necessary condition, Williams says, because I can have beliefs which I never express (Williams, 1973, p. 140). And it is not a sufficient condition because an assertion can be insincere –that is: I can assert that I believe that P without believing that P at all, and the other way round.

William's fourth feature of believing is, I think, the most important one for his reasoning that believing is not, and cannot be, related to will. This fourth feature says that beliefs are based on evidence (Williams, 1973, p. 141). This happens in two different ways. On the one hand, beliefs are based on evidence in the sense that the *content* of the belief can be supported or falsified by the evidence (Williams, 1973, p. 141). On the other hand, beliefs are based on evidence in the sense that when a subject rationally believes something, his *believing* is grounded in some evidence. This

does not only mean, Williams says, that «[...] he has just the belief and can defend it with the evidence [...]» (Williams, 1973, p. 141), but it also means that «[...] he has the belief because he has the evidence» (p. 141). Thus, for example, my believing that there is beer in the fridge is grounded in some evidence I have (e.g., that I have seen a bottle of beer in the fridge), but if I stop having the evidence (e.g., I realize that it was not a bottle of beer but a bottle of water), and if I am acting as a rational being, then I stop believing that there is beer in the fridge. What this shows is, in short, that when the believer is acting rationally, there is some kind of causal connection between the evidence and her believing (Williams, 1973, pp. 141-142).

The last feature of believing stated by Williams is that beliefs are explanatory notions, in the sense that «[...] we can explain what a man does by saying what he believes» (Williams, 1973, p. 144). The example given by Williams is the following one: «I see a man walking with a determined and heavy step onto a certain bridge. We say that it shows he believes that the bridge is safe, but this, of course, is only relative to a project which it is very reasonable to assume that he has, namely to avoid getting drowned. If this were a man who surprisingly had the project of falling in the river, then his walking with firm step onto this bridge would not necessarily manifest the belief that the bridge was safe» (Williams, 1973, p. 144).

From these five features of believing, Williams says, the only connection between will and believing that we can infer is that we can decide whether to say what we believe or not, or whether to say what we truly believe or not (Williams, 1973, p. 147). But this is far away from showing that we can willingly decide what we believe, it only shows that we can willingly decide *to say* what we believe (Williams, 1973, p. 147). Williams argues that deciding and believing are no more connected than this. What is more, Williams argues that it is not a contingent fact that believing is completely independent from deciding, but something essential to believing, in so far that it derives from the five features of believing that we have just stated (Williams, 1973, p. 148).

Williams offers two main reasons for the claim that we cannot willingly decide what to believe. The first reason is that if I consciously decide what to believe, then my beliefs give up their aim to truth (Williams, 1973, p. 148) –that is: in believing that P I will not be necessarily believing that P is true; in so far that my believing that P will not be grounded in P, but in my conscious decision of believing that P. The second reason (Williams, 1973, pp. 148-149), quite related to the previous one, is that beliefs purport to represent the world –that is: to believe is to represent the world as being in such or such a way–, but if what I do believe is grounded in a conscious decision, then my beliefs will not represent the world at all, because they will be grounded in my will, not in the world.

If Williams's arguments are correct, then it seems that we cannot consciously decide what to believe. But maybe, Williams says (Williams, 1973, pp. 149-151), one could argue that we can still decide what to believe in an indirect way, by inducing ourselves

to a causal mechanism that will lead us to believe those things that we want –for example, by taking some drug. Williams's answer is based on the distinction between two different readings of «wanting to believe» (Williams, 1973, p. 149). On the one hand, our wanting to believe can be motivated by a «truth-centered motive» (Williams, 1973, p. 149) –that is: I want to believe that P because I want that P. In these cases, to try to consciously decide to believe that P is, Williams argues, «impossible and incoherent» (Williams, 1973, p. 150). This is so because to believe that P will not make P to be the case. On the other hand, our wanting to believe can be motivated by a «non-truth-centered motive» (Williams, 1973, p. 149) –for example: I want to believe that P because to hold the belief that P will make my life more comfortable. This is not something incoherent as in the previous case, but it is still something «very deeply irrational» (Williams, 1973, p. 150). It is irrational because it will lead us to paranoia, it will make us to live in a world which is not the actual world (Williams, 1973, p. 151).

#### 4. Conclusion

As we have seen, Clifford seems to assume that his norm has not only an epistemic reading but also a moral reading. And all James's reasoning in “The Will to Believe” seems to go against the moral normativity of Clifford's norm –James is probably guided by the idea that if his objections to the moral reading are successful, then Clifford's norm in its epistemic reading is also rejected.

James could be correct in thinking that there are some cases in which to entertain a non-justified belief is morally adequate, in the sense that there are some occasions in which a non-justified belief would lead us to act in the most adequate way. But, as we have seen, this adequacy depends on the fact that that non-justified beliefs are not formed at will: the practical advantage of an unjustified belief cannot depend on the possibility of the agent's forming this belief because of its putative practical adequacy. Thus, this reasoning does not give grounds to any norm related to belief-formation.

So, if we accept Bernard Williams's arguments –and, therefore, we reject doxastic voluntarism–, there is not any epistemic or moral normativity in belief-formation, because the possibility of any epistemic or moral norm is grounded on the assumption that we can, at least in some occasions, willingly decide what to believe.

More concretely, if we go with Bernard Williams and refuse to embrace doxastic voluntarism, then we must conclude that Clifford's norm –i.e., «it is (epistemically and morally) wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence»– is not a *norm* that could guide us in the process of belief-formation. However, it can be argued that Clifford's norm reflects something which we can consider as a normative feature of believing; that is: it can be argued that there is something wrong in forming beliefs in an irresponsible way, or on the basis of insufficient evidence. We can say, if we please, that this is a normative feature of belief-formation,

but it is not a *norm* that can guide us in this process –and this is what Clifford is arguing for.

It is also interesting to point out that, even if we follow Bernard Williams's arguments and refuse to embrace doxastic voluntarism, Clifford's second implicit norm – which we have rephrased as «it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything until the evidence had been examined with the utmost patience and care»— can still be correct *as a norm*. The reason for this is that although we can accept that we cannot willingly decide what to believe, this does not imply that we cannot willingly decide how to weight our evidence or that we cannot willingly decide to go for (or to stop searching for) new evidence. This seems to be, I think, the correct conclusion: if there is room for deciding in believing, it must be in the process of assessing the evidence, not in a putative ulterior decision about what we should believe. Consider the following example: A friend told me that America was discovered in 1492, and my friend's testimony is the only evidence I have for my belief that America was discovered in 1492. In such case, it seems that there is some room for deciding: I can simply stick to my friend's testimony assuming that it is good enough to ground my belief that America was discovered in 1492;<sup>7</sup> or I can examine whether my friend's testimony is good enough to ground my belief that America was discovered in 1492; or I can decide to look for new evidence –e.g., I can decide to ask to other friend, or go to the library and take a book about the history of America.

On the other hand, once we give up the possibility of doxastic voluntarism, William James's main argument becomes, at most, a defense of the claim that the most rational thing to do is *to act* as if the religious hypothesis were true –and the argument would only work if *to act* as if the religious hypothesis were true would give us some possibility to attain those momentous consequences that only come when the religious hypothesis is in fact true, which is disputable. At any rate, the important point is that this is far away from showing that the most adequate thing to do is to *believe* that the religious hypothesis is true.

Finally, an important remark is need. Throughout this paper I had been assuming that religious belief is not reducible to its evaluative, non-cognitive content.<sup>8</sup> If religious belief is reducible to its non-cognitive content, then there is no problem in deciding to «believe» –since then believing would not be understood in its ordinary sense, as a matter of accepting the truth of some proposition, but in the sense of committing oneself to have some sort of attitude. There are authors who had argued that these

<sup>7</sup>But I cannot consciously decide to stick to the evidence given by my friend's testimony simply because I want to believe that America was discovered in 1492; because this will be a case of deciding what to believe in an indirect way, by inducing myself into a causal mechanism that will lead me to believe those things that I want.

<sup>8</sup>For a classical defense of the claim that religious belief can be reduced to its non-cognitive content, cf. BRAITHWAITE (1955).

non-cognitivist approaches do not fit well with what orthodox theism takes religious belief to be. Thus, for example, in the case of Christianity, Crombie asserts that religious belief cannot be reduced to some sort of non-cognitive meaning since

«Christian worship is neither a kind of poetry nor a kind of asceticism, neither a giving vent to feelings of awe and reverence, nor a cultivation of the soul. Fundamentally it is thought of by the Christian as an entry into relationship with a transcendent being, whom non-Christians do not believe to be there to enter into relationship with» (Crombie, 1958, p. 24).

At any rate, the important point I want to stress now is that the strength of James's argument is grounded on the claim that religious belief involves God's Salvation, which is a factual claim. So, if religious belief has no factual content, James's argument does not succeed in showing the practical adequacy of religious belief. Moreover, this shows that the practical adequacy of religious belief is intimately related to the truth of religious belief, which seems to point out that we cannot understand the religious attitude without understanding the factual claims made by religion –i.e., that the evaluative, non-cognitive content, and the factual, cognitive content, of religious belief are not separable.

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Article rebut: 25 de gener de 2017. Article acceptat: 5 de febrer de 2018