

## **Method vs. Mercy: The Purpose of Faith**

### INTRODUCTION

In this paper I contrast William Clifford's and William James' perspectives on faith and reason. I argue that James is right in his sympathetic approach towards the rationality of faith. I defend James' account of the permissibility of faith by highlighting that faithful intents are always good; the thoughtfulness within the value of faith's rationality can justify our actionable beliefs, resulting in us becoming morally purposeful in our decisions.

### DESCRIPTION AND ARGUMENTS

Religious realism explores the idea of God's existence within religious beliefs and practices. Religious antirealism explains how religion should be investigated from its context in social and cultural development. Both religious realism and antirealism form the current religious beliefs of society—atheism, agnosticism, and realism. In *The Ethics of Belief*, Clifford articulates his view on the responsibilities of faith. He argues that faith, or believing in the absence of evidence, is irrational. Epistemic reasoning is the search for evidence to justify our beliefs and deciding based on all evidence presented to us. As Clifford suggests, he highly values evidence-based epistemic reasoning and believes it is a moral requirement for all situations. Faith is unsuitable for justifying a person's duty. In Clifford's story of the ship, the shipowner disregards his ship's maintenance before he lends it over to a crew of men. Clifford condemns the shipowner for being negligent and irresponsible. He defines that any actions of an individual propelled by faith, especially false beliefs behind faith, is morally irresponsible regardless of

whether the crew of men returns safely or not. Clifford argues that the act of believing is crucial because it reflects our morality and affects people around us. When there is morality, there is responsibility. Therefore, we should be certain of our judgments and decisions. Clifford further describes that having faith makes us credulous. In Clifford's story of the isolated island, rumors of religious indoctrination of children were spread. Although concerned citizens had sincere faith that it is true, they had no justified evidence to prove it. Fundamentally, human beings operate through belief, and unfortunately, people are less trained and less informed about proper epistemic reasoning. He concludes that relying on unjustified and shallow faith weakens our self-control, judgment, and makes us consciously dishonest in time.

Clifford's perspective presents the utility and righteousness of logic. The utility of evidence can change and revise our beliefs. Evidence can beneficially challenge our reasoning. He comments that "Their sincere convictions, instead of being honestly earned by patient inquiring, were stolen by listening to the voice of prejudice and passion" (**Clifford 100**). I agree that sometimes we become so greatly passionate about a subject that we overlook and dismiss evidence. When observing religious faith under the narrow lens of evidence-based epistemic reasoning, the beliefs often appear to be unsubstantiated. However, faith cannot be erased in judgment because many decisions are driven by emotions. I disagree that having faith is merely a product of our emotions. Faith can contain justifiable evidence that forms decisions. There are situations where we feel skeptical towards a logical decision and therefore decide with our gut feeling. For example, a potted plant in my backyard requires a specific amount of watering every other day. One afternoon, I decided to water the plant. After the next day, I see the soil is still moist and the weather outside is mild and pleasant. The logical decision will be to water the plant with the same amount because that is the evidence-based instruction. My gut feeling will be

inclined to lessen the watering since adding more water is unnecessary. It would only increase the risk of overwatering. Either way, both decisions are justifiable. I have faith that lessening the plant watering will be suitable because I know the plant is in optimal soil and water conditions. I have faith that my potted plant will not start to wilt. My faith is neither irrational nor an excuse to cause harm, as Clifford would suggest, I have thoughtfully used faith and reason to correctly justify my actionable belief.

In *The Will to Believe*, William James articulates his view on the permissibility of faith. He considers our passionate nature to be essential. He asserts that each person has a right to operate on faith. The willingness to act is to definitively put faith into a decision. Epistemic reasoning is still important, but there are cases in which one cannot always have accessible evidence. James utilizes the importance of reason, and he argues that chance and options will affect the structure of epistemic reasoning. We need to decide eventually, and so we follow premises that will help us to decide which requires faith. James argues that faith can coexist with reason because our premises can become genuine options. A genuine option consists of a living, forced, and momentous decision; James asserts its existence even without sufficient evidence. Living options are present and appeal to our previous beliefs. Forced options separate all options into individual pathways with necessary results. It makes us choose either way. And momentous options are unique and incomparable from other options. This “momentous” aspect gives us a culminating decision once we proceed with our living and forced options. When our faith appeals to a belief, despite how much it can be overridden or undermined, a leap of faith is permissible for a necessary decision. Additionally, James believes we can do our best to stray away from false beliefs given the genuine options we have. The endless search for evidence directs us to perfectionism; the fear of believing a lie, and this extensively withholds our faith.

James concludes that the fear of deception through faith is unreasonable due to our proclivities to deceive ourselves without religion.

No scientific advancement solely relies on evidence. Trial and error, alternative and null hypotheses, are scientists' tools where they use evidence and place their faith. They place their faith into a hypothesis, along with the evidence on why it will work. In failures, they revise, find new evidence, and place their faith again. We can effectively utilize faith and reason together. James' perspective highlights the stability of faith as a permissible reason to justify our beliefs. He remarks that "The question of having moral beliefs at all or not having them is decided by our will. Are our moral preferences true or false, or are they only odd biological phenomena, making things good or bad for us, but in themselves indifferent? How can your pure intellect decide?" **(James 107)**. I agree that our morality is influenced by our will. The intellect works with our rationale, and the will works with our intent and faith. The will itself does not know if the reasoning results in the common good. Consequently, the belief in our will, reflects the intent of virtue in our morality. James asserts that the heart and mind are interconnected; strong morals can directly affect both in the same manner, especially in our decisions and actions. When we decide based on faith and reason, the influence of faith in our decisions morally resonates better than logic. For example, a man donates a portion of his yearly income to the SickKids Hospital. From my perspective, there are two main reasons why he decides to donate. Firstly, he believes that it is right, meaning logically virtuous, to be charitable to people who are in need. Secondly, he has faith that his donations will help save a life and contribute towards pediatric health and research. Overall, the man is logically and faithfully inclined in goodwill, but the second reason morally resonates better. It is shallow to make a donation just for the sake of placing a donation. Most of our decisions and actions have a purpose and we want to be morally purposeful when we

decide and act. We do not place faith for the sake of placing faith; the act of placing faith is purposeful. As a result, deciding with faith and reason, we are hopeful that our morals are purposefully reflected in our actions. The act of placing faith is intentional in that it reflects our good intentions. Since faith is neither irrational nor an excuse for affliction, the beliefs behind faith are good. Despite variations in contents and practices, if faith and reason can justify our beliefs, and if we are being morally purposeful about our decisions, we can state that our faithful intents are always good.

## CONCLUSION

William Clifford's views faith as inadequate; faith is irrational and evidence-based epistemic reasoning is required for all moral situations. Alternatively, William James' believes faith is permissible for an individual's autonomy of faith; genuine options present themselves aside from evidence. I argued that faith can be used together with reason. Utilizing faith as part of our reasoning is not an excuse to cause harm, but helps us justify our actionable beliefs. Additionally, I examined forming decisions and being morally purposeful. One does not place faith for the sake of placing faith—the act of placing faith itself is purposeful. Finally, I argued that faith and reason can justify our beliefs with thoughtfulness, and our decisions are aimed to be morally purposeful by the intent of virtue in our will. I conclude that faith and reason can be fairly utilized and faithful intents are always good.

## Works Cited

Peterson, Michael, et al. "The Ethics of Belief, William Clifford." *Philosophy of Religion: Selected Readings*, 4th ed., Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2010, pp. 100.

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