Aikin, Scott, F. *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014, 214 pp. Cloth, $120─Aikin’s book is a detailed, meticulous and thought-provoking comparative study of two seminal papers on the ethics of belief, William Clifford’s ‘The Ethics of Belief’, which enjoins us always to believe in accordance with the evidence, and William James’ ‘The Will to Believe’, which defends our right to believe, in some carefully circumscribed circumstances, even when the evidence is insufficient.

Aikin comes down on Clifford’s side by arguing for several claims. First, Clifford makes a good case for the claim that beliefs adopted on insufficient evidence invariably cause moral harms, either directly (the ship-owner who believed on insufficient evidence that his ship was seaworthy caused the sailors’ deaths) or indirectly (believing on insufficient evidence encourages intellectual sloth and impugns one’s capacity for critical assessment, thereby making for future errors with attendant moral harms). Second, James’ counter-examples to Clifford’s evidentialism do not work. Third, there is a cognitivist (in addition to the ethical) case to be made for evidentialism. Finally, even if a case could be made for believing on insufficient grounds, it wouldn’t work for religious belief, which James aims to vindicate. This is because James’ characterisation of the religious doctrine, which satisfies the conditions for properly believing on insufficient evidence, is too impoverished. What Christian, for instance, would identify his religious doctrine with the claim that “Perfection is eternal” and that we are better off believing this? It seems as if atheists could well subscribe to Jamesian religion!

It makes good sense to discuss the two papers together. After all, James was *responding* to Clifford. And the detailed discussion acquaints the reader with the two thinkers’ stances towards a host of issues that together make for comprehensive views concerning evidentialism. But it is insufficiently clear from Aikin’s discussion that we don’t have to choose between two *package-deals*. For instance, we may accept the evidentialist thesis, while believing, *contra* Clifford, in moral luck (if the ship-owner’s ship had reached its destination safely, he would have been less culpable) or rejecting his reductionist view of testimony, and supposing, instead, that absent any reason for doubting the reliability and sincerity of an informant, we are justified in accepting his testimony. Similarly, we may accept James’ right-to-believe doctrine (because we are persuaded that evidentialism is too stringent) while thinking it doesn’t work for Christianity, Islam or Judaism. The two papers defend *versions*, not necessarily the most satisfactory, of the two doctrines, evidentialism and the-right-to-believe.

The “positive-thinking” examples, central to James’ case against evidentialism and rejected by Aikin, are intriguing. A self-fulfilling belief, Aikin claims, isn’t a counter-example to Clifford’s evidentialism, because if one knows one has the belief that one will succeed in the test, for instance (call this belief p) and that it is self-fulfilling (one will succeed if and only if one believes one will), one has *evidence* for it. But this is a bit too quick. Anyone who knows or justifiably believes that the belief in p is self-fulfilling (call this psychological evidence) and that he believes p has (strong) evidence that he will succeed. Now, there’s no problem about the psychological evidence. There is, in fact, empirical support for the efficacy of “positive thinking”. But how can the 2nd-order belief (that one believes p) be justified? One possibility is that one finds (by introspection, say) that one believes one will succeed. But this means that the scenario involves an episode (albeit short) of unjustified believing. *Before* one reasoned (from the conjunction to one’s success), one’s belief in p was unjustified. The other possibility is that one doesn’t as yet believe p: suppose one is agnostic. But this means that one cannot reason from this doxastic position to believing one will succeed. Of course, one can justifiably believe the conditional ‘If I believe p (at some relevant time), then p’. But *at the moment*, I have no evidence for the antecedent. Indeed, being a self-aware person, I know I *don’t* believe p. So I am *not* justified in detaching the consequent. This means that, *pace* Aikin, James’ examples do involve violations of epistemic justification. But do they undermine evidentialism? A self-fulfilling belief is true, so unlike the ship-owner’s belief, its immediate consequences are *beneficial*. But Clifford thinks believing (ever so briefly) against the evidence subverts one’s critical power, and engenders false beliefs in the future. To assess James’ examples, then, we need to decide whether such (short) bouts of epistemic irrationality subvert one’s powers of critical reasoning or merely exploit an existing shortcoming without worsening it.**─**Ruth Weintraub, *Tel-Aviv University*.