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Book Review: Evidentialism And The Will To Believe

Michael Pace

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BOOK REVIEWS

Evidentialism and the Will to Believe, by Scott F. Aikin. Bloomsbury, 2014. Pp. 214. \$120.00 (hardcover).

MICHAEL PACE, Chapman University

In his introduction, Scott Aikin remarks that there has never before been a book-length commentary on W. K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" and William James's "The Will to Believe." "With this book," he announces, "that changes." One might worry—as I did at first—that there may be compelling reasons why there has not been a book such as Aikin gives us, which consists in a section-by-section summary and critical analysis of each essay, in two very long chapters. (A concluding, third chapter functions more as an appendix, taking up some loose ends.) After all, both James's and Clifford's essays were originally written for non-specialists, and they are clear enough to be anthologized in introductory textbooks that many of us require our beginning students to read. Wouldn't a book-length commentary be tedious or otiose?

I am pleased to report that any such worries about Aikin's project are misplaced. The book is engaging as well as careful, and it touches insightfully on a surprisingly wide range of fundamental issues in epistemology and ethics. It is also a highly enjoyable read, chock-full of humor. I could imagine basing a successful upper-level undergraduate course on just Aikin's book and the two primary sources. A "slow reading" course of this sort would model for students how a philosopher carefully reads and criticizes important texts, and it would have a suitable breadth. Moreover, there are payoffs here for experts, since Aikin ably argues for some distinctive interpretative and philosophical claims, some of which I will critically examine in the remainder of this review.

Aikin adjudicates the Clifford-James dispute in favor of Clifford. He argues that Clifford's case for evidentialism is cogent (with some "tweaking"), whereas James's project fails even on the most generous interpretation. Aikin summarizes Clifford's evidentialism in the following "Integrated Evidentialist Rule" (IER):



(IER) If any subject (S) believes any proposition (p) at any time (t), then S has properly done so only if: (i) S has sufficient evidence at t that p is true, and (ii) all doubts S has had (and should have) regarding p's truth or falsity have been investigated so that there are no truths S could have easily discovered that would have affected S's evidence. (49–50)

The first condition of IER is intended to capture Clifford's famous dictum: "It is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence." The second is intended to capture Clifford's lesser-known principle that it is wrong to believe things that one has not investigated with due diligence. On Aikin's interpretation, it is *moral* wrongness that Clifford has in view; IER should thus be understood as an ethical principle giving conditions for morally proper belief, rather than an epistemic principle intended to illuminate some familiar kind of epistemic property (such as justification, knowledge, or rationality).

Aikin defends IER against several prominent objections, including the charge that Clifford's principle is too demanding, leading to a problematic skepticism. In response to the skeptical challenge, Aikin teases out of Clifford's essay a remarkably comprehensive epistemology, including proposals—which deserve more considerations than I can give here—for responding to Pyrrhonian skepticism and Hume's challenge to induction, as well as substantive accounts of moral and testimonial knowledge.

However, a weakness of Aikin's anti-skeptical defense is that he offers very little guidance about what it means for evidence to be *sufficient*. Notice that "sufficient" in IER cannot be short for "sufficient for counting as morally proper," since that would render the first condition trivial. One approach to explicating evidential sufficiency might appeal to a threshold of epistemic probability (the likelihood of a proposition on one's total evidence). One will then owe an account of how high the threshold is. Is it enough that evidence makes a proposition more likely than not, or must it make a proposition 100 percent certain, or somewhere in between? A second approach might treat "sufficient" as short for "sufficient for knowledge-grade *justification*." The strictness of the principle will then depend on the correct account of evidential standards for justification and knowledge, which is a matter of debate in epistemology. Descartes and contemporary infallibilists about knowledge have extremely high standards, requiring epistemic certainty. Fallibilists require something less than certainty, but owe an account of how low the standards can be.

The threat that IER might lead to skepticism, of course, will be much more serious if evidential sufficiency demands meeting very high, or even infallibilist standards. Aikin does not discuss the fallibilism/infallibilism debate, but he does point out that Clifford implicitly rejects Cartesian standards of evidence by allowing some cases of testimony and inductive reasoning to count as sufficient evidence. This makes it all the more important, though, to clarify how strict the evidential standards for inductive evidence are. (The threat of skepticism is also more serious than Aikin seems to realize for the specific account of appropriate testimonial

belief that he attributes to Clifford, which requires that hearers meet the following “testimonial requirement of knowledge”: “Listener A may hold that attester B has satisfied the testimonial requirement of knowledge for testimony that *p* only if A has reason to believe that (i) B’s claim that *p* is the kind of content that has publicly verifiable evidence so that A could access this evidence and (ii) B’s claim that *p* is the result of B’s sufficient inquiry regarding *p* and access to sufficient evidence that *p*” [63].)

Clifford’s central examples (the shipbuilder who negligently sends an unseaworthy ship out to sea and the islanders who convict a group of natives on trumped up charges) suggest that he had in mind very high, though not infallibilist, evidential standards. The shipbuilder’s belief that the ship is seaworthy would still be seriously morally wrong even if he had a slight preponderance of evidence that made the proposition just barely more likely than a coin toss. Something closer to certain evidence seems required for his belief to be appropriate.

Of course, Clifford’s shipbuilder and islanders cases are idiosyncratic insofar as the moral risk of error is extraordinarily high; if a false belief is formed and acted upon, people die. A question that Aikin does not explicitly take up is whether standards for sufficient evidence are invariant or whether they might vary in different circumstances. IER, as stated, is consistent with the idea that the standards for sufficient evidence might vary depending on the circumstances. Perhaps evidential standards for belief are like evidential standards for court judgments, where we apply a strict, beyond-reasonable-doubt standard in criminal cases but a lower, preponderance-of-evidence standard in civil cases. In the contemporary epistemology literature, “pragmatic encroachment” theorists have argued that standards of evidence for justification or knowledge vary depending on practical or moral circumstances, and it is disappointing that Aikin does not directly consider these issues, especially since some pragmatic encroachment theorists claim inspiration from Clifford and James. (For a defense of pragmatic encroachment that takes James as its inspiration, see Michael Pace, “The Epistemic Value of Moral Considerations: Justification, Moral Encroachment, and James’ ‘Will To Believe,’” *Noûs* 45 [2011]: 239–268; for a recent one inspired by Clifford, see Matthew McGrath and Jeremy Fantl, “Practical Matters Affect Whether You Know,” in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. John Turri and Ernest Sosa, 2nd ed. [Wiley-Blackwell, 2014], 84–94.)

Although he does not directly address the question of whether evidential standards might vary, some things Aikin says in the context of defending Clifford suggest the view that the standards of evidence in IER are invariably quite high (though not infallible). In his essay, Clifford anticipates the objection that his high-stakes examples do not support the generalization that it is *always* (everywhere, for anyone, etc.) wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. Perhaps, according to the objector, it is okay to form relatively trivial beliefs on insufficient evidence. Clifford gives two replies intended to demonstrate that “no real belief, however

trifling or fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant." First, he claims that the content of any belief may, for all we know, turn out to have more important consequences than it seems. (Aikin calls this the "Content Slide.") Second, Clifford claims that bad intellectual habits are formed by believing even trivia on insufficient evidence.

Aikin argues that there is more to these responses than is often acknowledged. For example, he illustrates the plausibility of the Content Slide with the following description of Karla, who has a seemingly trivial belief that her favorite sports team (the Cowpokes) will win, even though the evidence suggests otherwise.

How does the content slide happen? Well, perhaps with the fact that teams that are of championship caliber should get media coverage. But the Cowpokes don't get any. Well, there must be some reason for that, thinks Karla, and she then hypothesizes that the media is ignoring the Cowpokes. There's likely a conspiracy against this team—they clearly are contenders, but get not even a sniff. The fix must be in. Nobody wants the Cowpokes to win, so the media will ignore them with hopes they'll go away. Every expert who holds the Cowpokes have no chance, then, is part of conspiracy, and just empty talking heads. And so Karla has gone from one overbelief born of enthusiasm to now a belief that she can't trust most of the experts on a matter of circumstance to her. If the sports case isn't moving, consider this analogous to politics and one's favored candidate. (35)

As I write this, at the start of a Trump presidency, one can hardly fail to appreciate how the throw-away last line might inspire many more examples of the content slide. Insufficiently supported political beliefs can (and do) lead to conspiracy theories, distrust of longstanding institutions, and other bad consequences. Further, Aikin supplements Clifford's argument with a good discussion of relevant work in social psychology on error amplification and polarization in groups. "Given our evidence of human and group psychology," he concludes, "overbelief is a dangerous business. Even if it turns out that some are inert with regard to bad consequences, the fact that so many have the bad consequences makes it objectionable to allow any" (41). When it comes to belief, Aikin seems to suggest, the stakes are always high because of the dangers inherent in believing falsehoods.

Even so, it seems exaggerated to think that we can never accurately anticipate the likely consequences of our beliefs. The shipbuilder, for example, can surely know that the proposition that the ship is seaworthy carries with it a lot more moral risk of error than beliefs he might form by picking up a phonebook and reading from a page at random. Furthermore, as I will discuss below, James makes a compelling case that the risk of error must be balanced with another risk that in some circumstances can be much greater, namely the risk of failing to believe something that turns out to be true.

Let us turn, then, to Aikin's discussion of James, who famously held that in special circumstances it is appropriate to believe propositions, including religious ones, for practical reasons. Aikin, poking fun at James's

over-the-top style, quips that James not only explicitly announces his thesis but also “was good enough to put it all in italics” (111).

The Thesis I defend is, briefly stated, this: Our passionate nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, ‘Do not decide, but leave the question open,’ is itself a passionate decision—just like deciding yes or no—and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth (James, “The Will to Believe,” IV, emphasis in original).

As everyone familiar with James’s essay knows, “genuine option” is a technical term that he cashes out in terms of three further semi-technical terms. A genuine option is “living, momentous, and forced.” Following many commentators, Aikin has some critical things to say about the way James explains these conditions. He also presses a pithy initial worry, which he calls the “less talkin’, more rockin’” objection. The idea is that we have *prima facie* reason to be suspicious of the cogency of any argument that involves a lot of technicalities and qualifications in its setup, as James’s argument does.

In a more serious mode, Aikin accuses James of moving the goalposts (committing “the old switcheroo”). James begins his essay by promising to defend something akin to traditional Christian belief, but by the end of the essay he only defends the religiously obscure proposition “that the best things are the more eternal things” and “that we are better off even now if we believe . . . [this] first affirmation to be true” (“Will to Believe,” X). As Aikin aptly points out, it is not clear what this proposition even means, and it would certainly not be recognized as a central doctrine of any major world religion.

According to Aikin, James commits the old switcheroo in an attempt to paper over a crucial flaw in his central argument. On Aikin’s interpretation, the lynchpin of James’s argument is a set of counterexamples to Clifford’s principle that involve “doxastically efficacious” beliefs. These are cases in which, as James says, “faith in a fact can help create the fact” (Section IX). James’s examples include an Alpine climber whose belief that he can successfully jump across a crevasse is causally necessary for him to be able to do so and a partygoer who believes that a stranger will like him, thereby making it more likely that the stranger will. Propositions that are doxastically efficacious are such that believing them either makes them true or objectively likely to be true, and James argues that it is thus appropriate to believe them for practical reasons, even without sufficient evidence.

It is at this point in the argument that James makes the old switcheroo, according to Aikin. Recognizing that his challenge to IER depends on the special features of doxastically efficacious propositions, James cooks up a proposition about the value of eternal things, which, he claims, captures the essence of religious belief. James picks this unorthodox proposition, according to Aikin, because he thinks that it is doxastically efficacious. (Given

some antirealist presuppositions about value, which Aikin attributes to James based on other sources, believing that eternal things are supremely valuable will *make* them supremely valuable.) But Aikin accuses James of obscuring the fact that his argument only works for doxastically efficacious beliefs, a fact that would require another qualification to his main thesis: Someone may engage the will to believe only when a proposition is *doxastically efficacious* as well as living, momentous, forced, and undecidable on intellectual grounds. (Even more talkin'!) The revised thesis spells disaster for James's project as a defense of ordinary religious belief, since most orthodox religious claims are not doxastically efficacious. A Christian's believing that God exists or that Jesus rose from the dead, for example, has no causal effect on whether these propositions are true or objectively likely. Thus, James's argument involves a bait and switch that fails as a defense of the religious beliefs of ordinary folk.

Further, Aikin objects that doxastically efficacious propositions are not even genuine counterexamples to Clifford's evidentialism. When we recognize that we believe a proposition that is doxastically efficacious, Aikin says, "we have reason to hold that the fact will come to be. That's evidence" (153). Aikin's idea seems to be that the Alpine climber, for example, will have the following argument available as evidence (where *p* is the proposition, "I will successfully jump the crevasse"):

1. If I believe *p*, then *p* is likely to be true.
2. I do believe *p*.
3. So, *p* is likely to be true.

A defender of James has available several compelling replies to Aikin's interpretation and critique. First, Aikin's attempt to defang James's counterexamples is not convincing. To see why, we need first to note a subtle difference between Aikin's IER and Clifford's original principle. Clifford held that it is wrong to "believe *on* insufficient evidence." But IER is weaker, implying only that it is wrong to believe when one lacks sufficient evidence. IER omits a "basing requirement," that is, a requirement that proper beliefs must be *based on* the good evidence one has. When this plausible requirement is added to IER, the counterexamples stand. For, even if the Alpine climber has access to the above argument *after* she believes, she could not properly base her belief on the argument, since it includes as a premise that she already has the belief!

More important, there are more charitable interpretations of James, according to which the doxastically efficacious proposition counterexamples are not central to James's main argument. As I see it, the central and most enduring part of James's essay is his discussion of the two-part truth goal. James points out that our intellectual goal is not just to avoid having false beliefs but also to believe significant truths. Thus, James:

There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of opinion—ways entirely different, and yet about whose difference the theory of knowledge

seems hitherto to have shown very little concern. . . . Believe truth! Shun error!—these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance. Clifford . . . exhorts us to the latter course. Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies. (“Will to Believe, VII)

James’s insights are related to the statistical distinction between “type 1” and “type 2” errors. One commits a type 1 error when one has a belief that turns out to be false, and a type 2 error when one fails to have a belief in a proposition that is true. As James suggests, the two parts of our intellectual goal are in tension. Moreover, as several contemporary epistemologists have pointed out, different evidential standards involve different proposals for how to strike an appropriate balance. Adopting infallible evidential standards would assure one of avoiding type 1 errors, but skepticism would be the result and type 2 errors would abound. Adopting lower standards will lower the risk of type 2 errors, but at a greater risk of type 1 errors. (For discussion, see Wayne Riggs, “Balancing Our Epistemic Ends,” *Nous* 37 [2012], 342–352; Pace, “The Epistemic Value of Moral Considerations”; Mark Schroeder, “Stakes, Withholding, and Pragmatic Encroachment on Knowledge,” *Philosophical Studies* 160 [2012]: 265–285; and Thomas Kelly, “How to Be an Epistemic Permissivist,” in *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology*, ed. John Turri and Ernest Sosa, 2nd ed. [Wiley-Blackwell, 2014], 298–311.)

James’s discussion of the two-part truth goal suggests that it would be a bad thing practically and epistemically if the norms we adopt are too strict. Suppose—as some epistemologists have argued—that infallible evidential standards are built into our ordinary concept of knowledge. On the interpretation of IER that takes “sufficient” evidence to be short for “sufficient for knowledge,” James’s critique seems powerful. Infallibilist standards privilege avoiding error way too much, guaranteeing that we will fail to believe things that are important to believe if they are true. If evidentialism demands that we have sufficient evidence for knowledge and knowledge requires *that*, so much the worse for evidentialism (and, perhaps, so much the worse for the idea that knowledge is a category of great epistemic value). Moreover, this critique is epistemic and not merely pragmatic, since it involves thinking about the best way to balance our two-part cognitive goal.

In his discussion of the passage quoted above, Aikin accuses James of relying on an uncharitable interpretation of Clifford that attributes to Clifford a commitment to implausibly high evidential standards. That may be right, although it is open to James’s defenders to point out, as I did above, that not much guidance is given by Aikin or Clifford regarding how high the standards are. Aikin also interprets James as defending the

right to follow *only* the command to believe truths, giving no heed to the risks of error. He points out that it would be abhorrent for Clifford's shipbuilder to believe that the ship is seaworthy on the grounds that he values taking courageous risks in believing and doesn't care so much about being wrong. However, I think that this is an uncharitable reading of James. The initial conditions that James gives for engaging the will to believe arguably already give some weight to the "avoid errors" part of the truth goal, insofar as they require the belief to be a live hypothesis that cannot be decided on intellectual grounds. (I have elsewhere argued that James should have required that evidence at least make a proposition more likely than not in order for it to be permissible to believe it [Pace, "The Epistemic Value of Moral Considerations"].) Aikin seems in several places to overlook this (but you can't just *ignore* the talkin' when you don't think the argument's rockin'!). Further, although James does, admittedly, sometimes talk as if the best way to balance the competing truth goals is purely a matter of personal preference, it is not too difficult to think of ways to extend James's view so that we can morally criticize people (such as the shipbuilder) who fail to take into account serious moral costs involved in avoiding errors or failing to believe truths. (See Pace, "The Epistemic Value of Moral Considerations.")

On an interpretation of James that puts his discussion of the truth goal at center stage, the doxastically efficacious belief counterexamples are supplemental points that are not central to his main argument. Such an interpretation has the advantage of not forcing us to revise the thesis he claims to defend or attribute to him an obvious fallacy. But what about Aikin's claim that James betrays his dependence on the counterexamples in choosing to defend his unorthodox proposition about the value of eternal things? Also, is Aikin right that James commits the old switcheroo in defending that proposition? I don't think so. James advertises from the start that his argument is going to be highly personal, depending on which propositions are live hypotheses given one's evidential situation. He is also forthright in stating that he does not find traditional Christian teachings to be live hypotheses. (Late in the book, Aikin dismisses traditional religious claims out of hand on the grounds that the evidence weighs too heavily against them, so he is in agreement with James on this point.) This is enough to explain why the religious proposition James explicitly defends is unorthodox, but it also allows (as James seem to have intended) that the argument can be adapted by someone who takes different religious claims to be live options and who can defend them as such. True enough, if it can be shown that the evidence against traditional religious claims is overwhelming, this will sink such a project. But that was part of the dialectic from the start, and determining which religious hypotheses, if any, are live is beyond the scope of what James (or Aikin) sets out to do.