Rationality and the Ethics of Belief
Faith

- The title of this section of the course is “should be believe there is a God”.
- Usually, after looking at arguments, a lot of people invoke something called “faith” and that is supposed to matter somehow after the arguments are inconclusive.
- The word faith is used very differently by different people, so I have trouble assigning a particular meaning to it, but it does raise an interesting question of how our attitudes or other pragmatic factors should affect our belief, and what is the relation of those attitudes to evidence.
- Where this comes out in religious belief is that some people see religious belief as inherently good, and therefore worth believing, while others see it as inherently bad, and therefore worth being skeptical about
The Ethics of Belief

- Most of philosophy consists in giving arguments for and against various positions.
- If you haven’t noticed, philosophy doesn’t exactly come to a conclusive end very often.
- Philosophy is not unique in this aspect; while other disciplines aren’t quite as skeptical as philosophy, every discipline still has open questions and inconclusive evidence for most things said.
- Despite this inconclusiveness, we still have to live; we still have to function in the world.
- It often seems necessary to believe some things in order to function in the world.
- Thus, an important philosophical question is, when is it acceptable (morally, rationally, etc.) to believe something?
Pascal’s Wager

- French mathematician Blaise Pascal is famous for arguing that one should decide whether or not to believe in God, not based on evidence, but based on the potential outcomes of those beliefs.
- We can best analyze belief in God as a bet which we cannot avoid making which could have drastic consequences.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Believe</th>
<th>God exists</th>
<th>God does not exist</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Infinite gain</td>
<td>Small loss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disbelieve</td>
<td>Infinite loss</td>
<td>Small gain</td>
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- It is obvious which bet is better, but is this a rational way to form beliefs?
- There are a number of objections including that we cannot choose our beliefs in this way and that it oversimplifies by only having two options when there are in fact many (and most seem to only promise infinite gain for correct specific belief).
- Also, if we cannot know God exists, how could we possibly know how God would respond to correct or incorrect belief?
Responses to Pascal’s wager

"Suppose we’ve chosen the wrong god. Every time we go to church we’re just making him madder and madder!"

- Homer Simpson
Pascal’s argument depends on thinking that it is good and right to believe that which stands to benefit you the most.

W. K. Clifford denied this, arguing that it is wrong to let pragmatic reasoning affect our beliefs.

**Clifford’s Principle:** It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

Clifford’s best argument for this principle comes from a story about a shipowner...
The Parable of the Shipowner

“A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she has gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance money when she went down in midocean and told no tales.”
The Point of the Parable

Clifford’s Principle:

It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

- We read the parable and think that the shipowner was wrong to act as he did, but what exactly did he do wrong?
- The wrongness cannot depend on the fact that the boat sank; if somehow the ship had survived simply because there was no rough water along the way we would still consider the shipowner wrong.
- He was wrong not because the ship went down, but because he was negligent in checking the ship.
- We are told in the story that he sincerely believed that it would be safe, but his sincerity is not enough. What is wrong is that he came by his sincere belief in its safety in the wrong way by suppressing his doubts and talking himself into believing it was safe regardless of evidence.
The Point of the Parable

Clifford’s Principle:
It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

- What we hold him responsible for is not paying attention to the available evidence.
- According to Clifford, we have a duty to the human race to believe responsibly because our beliefs affect everyone else.
- To quote Clifford, “The danger 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.”
Problems for Clifford’s Principle

Clifford’s Principle:
It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

- The main problems with Clifford’s principle are with the terms “sufficient” and “evidence”
- What counts as evidence? Must it be publicly accessible?
- Consider a trial in which you were framed perfectly; must you then believe you are guilty?
- Evidence only seems to be relevant to inferences. If we have Descartes’ picture where all but 3-4 things are known inferentially, then every belief depends on evidence.
- On the other hand, it has been suggested that far more of our beliefs are properly basic—meaning they are defeasible, but that we are justified in believing them until we have a defeater for that belief
- Examples of that kind include belief in an external world, belief in other minds, belief in the reliability of our sense, and belief in God
Problems for Clifford’s Principle

Clifford’s Principle:
It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

- What counts as sufficient? Sufficient for what?
- If it is merely sufficient to convince the person who forms the belief, then the shipowner didn’t violate the principle.
- If it is “sufficient to convince all rational people” then almost nothing meets this principle—rational people, even rational people exposed to the same evidence, disagree about almost everything.
- Rational people disagree about every interpretation of physics, about evolution, about whether Socrates existed, about whether we landed on the moon, about whether our government committed the 9/11 terrorist attacks, about whether we should allow gay marriage or abortion, about whether there is an external world, etc.
Problems for Clifford’s Principle

Clifford’s Principle:
It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

- Unless you severely limit who counts as “rational” to those who think just like you, Clifford’s principle seems to imply that you should be agnostic about just about everything.
- Everyone agrees that there are some duties we have to be rational and pay attention to evidence, it’s just very difficult to spell out a good criterion, and Clifford’s principle does not appear to be it.
William James

- William James maintained that if something is a “genuine option”, then it rationally permissible to believe it for non-evidential reasons.
- A **genuine option** is one that is living, forced, and momentous.
- A **live option** is one that for all you know could be true. You haven’t ruled out and can’t rule out intellectually.
- A **forced option** is one which you cannot avoid.
- A **momentous option** is one which is unique, significant, and difficult to change.
William James

- Given that there are forced options for which evidence is insufficient, it is unavoidable that we choose our beliefs.
- When choosing what to believe, James thinks we have two laws (or desires) to follow—believe truths; avoid falsehoods.
- These laws often come into conflict, and it is not always clear how to decide between them.
- Clifford has told us to always withhold belief in uncertain circumstances in order to avoid falsehoods, but why should we always value avoiding falsehood over believing truth? Why can’t we let our desire for truth balance or trump our desire to not believe lies?
- If a choice is not forced or not momentous we should focus on avoiding error, but when it is a genuine option, it is acceptable to will to believe the truth.
- Where do we face genuine options? James points to three instances—morality, love, and religion.