

William James and What Cannot Be Believed¹

By Jonathan E. Adler

IN *VARIETIES OF RELIGION TODAY: WILLIAM JAMES REVISITED*, CHARLES Taylor praises, though not uncritically, James's philosophy of religion.² I focus on the admiring pages (pp. 43-60) he devotes to James's famous article "The Will to Believe." James directs his argument against 'agnostic vetoes' as championed by William Clifford in "The Ethics of Belief."³ Clifford loudly concluded:

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

The doctrine we can take Clifford as defending is "evidentialism," which traditionally holds that belief ought to be proportioned to the evidence. With James, Taylor complains that Clifford attempts to promote this doctrine, which he finds in science, into "a moral precept for life in general."⁴ In opposition to this, James declares:

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 ground; 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.*⁵

Taylor comments:

Clifford assumes that there is only one road to truth. . . . To put it dramatically, we can win the right to believe a hypothesis only by first treating it with maximum suspicion and hostility.

James holds, on the contrary, that there are some domains in which truths will be hidden from us unless we go at least halfway toward them. Do you like me or not? If I am determined to test this by adopting a stance of maximum distance and suspicion, the chances are that I will forfeit the chance of a positive

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answer. An analogous phenomenon on the scale of the whole society is social trust; doubt it root and branch, and you will destroy it.⁶

After drawing an analogy to ‘Pascal’s Wager’, Taylor states that the ‘crucial issue’ is

the place of ‘our volitional nature’ in the theoretical realm. The very idea that things will go better in the search for truth if you keep passion, desire, and willing out seems utterly implausible to James—not just for the reason he thinks he has demonstrated, that certain truths are only open to us as a result of our commitment, but also because it seems so clear to him that we never operate this way.⁷

Drawing on Taylor’s fair and sympathetic defense, let me sketch out James’s argument:

(1) Assume that a hypothesis (for example, the religious hypothesis that there is a good God) is an “option” with which you can live in accord and if so, it would make a momentous, rather than a trivial, difference to your life. Finally, the option is forced—you must either believe it or disbelieve it. (The logically further option of agnosticism is practically ruled out because it justifies only the same (non-religious) practices as atheism. See premise (6) below.)

(2) The evidence or intellectual grounds cannot favor either of these options.⁸

So,

(3) It is not irrational for you to take either option (and, by (1), one of these must hold).

(4) We have two goals as inquirers or believers: to obtain truth and to avoid error. Aiming to avoid error is a cautious policy offering small rewards; aiming to obtain truth is a risky policy offering large rewards. Both of these are legitimate (cognitive) goals, and there is no a priori reason to prefer one to the other.

(5) Only by believing the religious hypothesis—neither atheism nor agnosticism—do you have the opportunity for the great benefits of discovering its truth, if the religious hypothesis is true (that is, only the option of believing [(1),(4)] can satisfy the goal of seeking truth, as contrasted to merely avoiding error).

(6) When the potential (cognitive) reward (truth) of holding a belief is a live, momentous, and forced option (for you) [(1)], and neither option can be ruled out as irrational [(2),(3)] and the only way to achieve the reward is by believing [(4),(5)], then it would not be irrational for you

to 'will to believe', and, in fact, under these conditions, it would be irrational for you not to believe (merely for the sake of avoiding error).

(7) So, you are entitled to believe the religious hypothesis, even in the absence of favorable grounds.

(8) So you ought to will to believe it.

My critical comments focus mainly on premises (2), (3), and (5). However, in treating these I will address other of James's assumptions—particularly, the presupposition of his argument that it is (conceptually) possible to will to believe.⁹ Later I will try to accommodate existential aspects of James's argument that retain value, even if my objections to his argument stand.

Like James and other commentators, Taylor does not preface his judgments on the *ethics of belief* with any analysis or account of the concept of belief itself. The omission is characteristic of an orientation that is on the wrong track, even though it is the track taken for granted by evidentialists and anti-evidentialists alike. It is the orientation implicitly recommended by what is traditionally the fundamental question in the field: What ought I to believe? Whereas James thinks that you sometimes ought to believe without evidence; and Clifford thinks that you ought not, both hold that you *can* so believe. The conclusion is an evident implication of the intuitive principle that "'ought' implies 'can'." The conclusion that you can in many cases believe voluntarily and regardless of evidence, which I argue is misleading, seems, however, easily reached without attention to the "'ought' implies 'can'" principle or sophisticated theorizing at all. Everyday observations of persons who do hold beliefs, despite a (recognized) lack of evidence is sufficient, for example, alien invaders are performing experiments on humans.

As a reminder of the continuing influence of this orientation—that it is not merely a position, but a way of speaking and thinking—consider the following *New York Times* Op-Ed piece:

If certain physical constants had slightly different values, stars would not have formed to cook up the atoms that made the biological molecules. Since early in the century, some truth seekers have taken this sort of argument as a reason to believe that the universe was created with people in mind.

But one is also free to choose the opposite belief: that the coincidences simply show that life is indeed an incredible fluke.¹⁰

The orientation is favored in the very choice of topics and examples. The *New York Times's* column on religion is called 'Beliefs', and Taylor marches in line with the tradition of referring to those who believe in God as "believers" and secularists as "unbelievers." But belief is the attitude we have as much to the propositions that $2+3=5$, the road is plowed, or Bill is in the backyard as we do to the propositions that there is a God or love is the greatest happiness. In fact, the former are far more representative examples of belief. The latter, vivid examples, however, favor this orientation with its bias toward treating the study of the ethics of belief as the study of difficult, controversial, valuative, or non-

empirical subjects about which we are called on to take a stance. It is one of many paths leading away from focus on the concept of belief and toward, instead, a prominent role for personal judgment or choice in the ethics of belief.

Dissent from the popular orientation and focus is not verbal, as it would be if the believing that applies to the salient and exciting cases is just not the same concept that is involved in the dull and boring ones like that Bill is in the backyard. But this maneuver is self-defeating because the concept of belief that applies to the dull and boring cases is precisely the concept that is fundamental to guiding our deliberations, judgments, and actions.

Belief is the attitude that is correct just in case what is believed is true, and the truth-connection explains its centrality to us intrinsically and extrinsically. The intrinsic value of belief is the value of truth—of getting things right. The extrinsic value of belief is more obvious. Only if my beliefs satisfy their claim (to truth) are the actions guided by those beliefs expected to succeed.

The main objections that I pose to James's argument and to the orientation underlying it are developments of *James's own admissions*, which commentators, like Taylor, no more pause over than James himself does. In Section II of his essay, James writes,

Does it not seem preposterous on the very face of it to talk of our opinions being modifiable at will? . . . Can we, by just willing it, believe that Abraham Lincoln's existence is a myth, and that the portraits of him in McClure's Magazine are all of some one else? . . . We can say any of these things, but we are absolutely impotent to believe them; and of just such things is the whole fabric of the truths that we do believe in made up. . . .¹¹

The implication is that in these cases Clifford's evidentialism is incontestable. However, the evidentialism suggested by James's admission is actually stronger than Clifford's. For Clifford only holds that one ought not believe that Lincoln's existence is a myth, not that one *cannot*. Other examples of what cannot be believed are easy to cite. A notable one occurs in a text from which James tries to distance his own position. Pascal ponders a plea by a would-be believer convinced of Pascal's wager-argument that it is prudent to believe in God, regardless of whether God exists:

'I confess, I admit it, but is there really no way of seeing what the cards are?' — 'Yes. Scripture and the rest, etc.' — 'Yes, but my hands are tied and my lips are sealed; I am being forced to wager and I am not free; I am being held fast and I am so made that *I cannot believe*. What do you want me to do then?'¹² [my emphasis]

Commentators like Taylor appear indifferent to these cases where one cannot believe because, I expect, they construe it either as just an inability or, as James presumably does, as holding in only restricted domains, principally science and empirical matters. Contrary to Pascal's would-be believer, they do not take it to apply to the domains to which James's argument is directed—ethics and religious belief. The former alternative of an inability James himself rules out when he observes that in these cases we are "absolutely impotent to believe." (Alternatively, the "cannot" claim might be construed as hyperbole. But any such denial of the data rings hollow, as you can test yourself: try as you might

you simply cannot believe that Lincoln's existence is a myth, short of massive self-delusion.)¹³

Well, why "cannot" we just will to believe that Lincoln's existence is a myth or that there are an even number of stars? As just observed, it seems evident that it is not a mere inability or inadvisability, as both James's closing statement ("absolutely impotent") and our own failures corroborate. Rather, it is a conceptual 'cannot', and so the implication is that it is *impossible* to believe that Lincoln's existence is a myth.

You might agree that the impossibility is conceptual, and yet insist, as just suggested, that it is a claim restricted either to certain contents of belief (factual or empirical) or to certain epistemic positions (markedly impoverished; way-out). But such a restriction would be *ad hoc*, since the obstacle—the impossibility—is to be explained by the concept of belief itself, regardless of its content.

The explanation, filled out, is in two steps: First, an argument is (briefly) presented from the concept of belief to a strong version of evidentialism. It is correct to hold a belief only if what is believed is true. One is in a position to satisfy the (implied) claim that one's believing is correct only if one has (epistemic) reasons,¹⁴ evidence, or grounds adequate to establish that the belief is true—effectively, to know it. Here then is the strong, conceptual version of evidentialism that I will refer to from now on by "evidentialism":

One properly believes that p if and only if one has truth-indicating grounds (reasons, evidence) sufficient to imply (or establish) that p .

By contrast, the traditional version holds that:

One ought to believe that p (to a certain degree) if and only if one's strength of belief is proportional to the evidence.

Contrary to the traditional version, what is improper to believe is improper to the concept of belief, directly implying no 'oughts' or actions, since such directives address the agent, not believing itself.

The previous argument, as one that tacitly governs our belief-practices, helps to explain what (conceptually) cannot be believed as an obvious violation of evidentialism. The second step of the explanation is that in the case at hand, we recognize that the truth-indicating grounds (evidence) we have prove that Lincoln's existence is not a myth. However, what we are asked to do is to believe otherwise. So we recognize that the former excludes satisfaction of belief's claim to truth. So it is impossible for us to so believe, on the assumption that it is impossible to believe an overt contradiction (I believe that Lincoln's existence is a myth and that I fail to satisfy the conditions for believing that Lincoln's existence is a myth).

Although the ethics of belief captured by this evidentialism is rooted in the concept of belief, and so it is a view to which we are all committed, these commitments are difficult to acknowledge, or even recognize. In fact, they are commonly denied. The denials are partly due to reflective over-sophistication,

induced by the orientation that dominates the field and which is challenged above. But there are three difficulties that can be raised without losing foothold in our belief practices. First, there are just many cases where we do believe while (knowingly) lacking adequate reasons, as Taylor, following James, will insist. Second, the requirement for reasons adequate to establish the belief as true or as knowledge is just too demanding. That is, if we adhered to the demand, we would believe too little. It is one thing to demand that whenever reasons for belief are appropriate, they must be epistemic. It is another, and much stronger, to insist that (epistemic) reasons are always demanded. But such widespread skepticism about our entitlement to many ordinary beliefs would not be plausible. This worry motivates a lot of James and Taylor's animus toward what they regard as 'agnostic' or skeptical ethics of belief. The third worry is a different facet of the second, though here narrowly focused on a step in the argument for evidentialism: Even granted that belief is correct only if it is true, how does the demand for reasons or evidence enter? Is it not enough that one holds the belief by virtue of being in a position from which either one's belief is *reliably* formed or something *ensures* that the belief is true?¹⁵ I will reply to this last worry first (and via the second alternative of ensuring, rather than reliability, for which my response would be similar).¹⁶

If what does the ensuring is not your evidence or your believing itself, the proposal denies the need for the agent's reasons or evidence to secure his justification (that the belief is true). So understood, it is incompatible with the assumption that belief implies a claim to the truth of what is believed (that the believer must satisfy). This assumption is one aspect of a parallel between belief and *assertion*, exploited further below: just as for a speaker to assert that *p* is for the speaker to claim the truth of what is asserted, so too to believe that *p* is tacitly to assert to oneself, and so thereby to claim the truth of what is believed. Although more attention to this assumption is deserved, particularly to disassociate it from the legalistic sound of a claim, its rejection is of small consequence in the salient cases like James's religious hypothesis. Sooner or later the salient cases are ones where a claim is entered, if only by the very everyday act of asserting one's belief, and so the demand for adequate reasons is, at most, delayed.¹⁷

To explain the cases of when one cannot believe I implicitly applied an incoherence test:

It is incoherent for you in full awareness (overtness) to believe both that *p* and that your belief that *p* is not based on reasons that establish that *p* is true.

('Overtness' signals that nothing of the agent's epistemic position—in particular, his evidence, his relevant beliefs, that the propositional-attitude involved is belief, and his essential commitments in regard to belief—is hidden. 'Full awareness' may misleadingly suggest a certain psychological state, rather than a methodological idealization.)¹⁸ The 'ensures' view provides for a version of the incoherence test that yields similar results, at least for the egregious examples:

It is incoherent for you in full awareness (overtness) to believe both that Lincoln's existence is a myth and that you do not have that belief because of something that ensures it.

The incoherence test applies though well beyond the egregious cases to ones just shy of full support or conclusiveness. You are asked, "Where is Jim today?" You know only that since Jim is infirm he is mostly at home in New Brunswick, except that once a month he goes to Princeton for a check-up. According to the incoherence test you cannot believe that Jim is in New Brunswick today because your explicit thought would be incoherent:

I believe both that Jim is in New Brunswick, and that my grounds do not establish the (unqualified) truth that he is.

Let's try applying the 'ensures' test to this example, since it seems that there could be cases where one recognizes oneself as lacking evidence, and yet one does believe that one's belief is due to something that ensures it. Although one can then pass the incoherence test on the latter basis, one could not pass it on the fuller and appropriate basis of both (evidence and ensuring):

It is incoherent for you in full awareness (overtness) to believe that Jim is in New Brunswick and that you believe it because of something that ensures that he is in New Brunswick, but that you lack adequate reasons that he is there.

The case of believing that Jim is in New Brunswick today also serves to press the two previous worries, which I now want to address. Given that on your evidence it is overwhelmingly probable that Jim is in New Brunswick, even if the small chance that he is not remains, it is reasonable to wonder whether the implied standard for (full or all-out) belief is set too high. It is also reasonable to wonder, as the first worry does, whether that Jim is in New Brunswick really cannot be believed, on the model of the impossibility of believing the strikingly incredible proposition that Lincoln's existence is a myth.

The incoherence test suggests a response to the latter worry. The incoherent thought proposed as explaining what cannot be believed is complex. It requires that one be fully explicit about one's epistemic position, which is difficult and unnatural. Even as stated above, in fact, the overt contradiction is only indicated not completely set out. So set out, it corresponds to no natural way of thinking:

I believe that Jim is in New Brunswick. All that can secure for me that my belief is true, as it claims, is adequate evidence (reason) of its (unqualified) truth. I obviously lack adequate evidence. So I am not in a position to judge that Jim is in New Brunswick, as contrasted to judging it only very probable. So I do not judge it true. So I do not believe that Jim is in New Brunswick.

This complex set of inferences is proposed as articulating the evident commitments and implications of belief and as explanatory of our basic data. It explains why the cases where one cannot believe are cases where it is impossible to believe, and impossible because it would issue in an overt contradiction.

In the egregious cases, like James's Lincoln's existence is a myth, you are starkly aware of overwhelming evidence against it. But if the impossibility of belief resides in conflict with that concept, the example justifies broader generalization than merely that to believe something you cannot believe that the balance of evidence is strongly against it. That is why we find a similar incoherence in the attempt to believe that the number of stars is even, where the balance of the evidence does not favor at all that proposition. Consider next a case in which you submit a much-revised paper to a journal that rejects 98% of its submissions. You surely do not—you cannot—all-out believe (in advance) that your paper will be rejected. Otherwise why even bother submitting it? So then, although these cases are progressively less egregious, they all seem to succumb to the same impossibility of belief, and that corroborates the claim that the fundamental generalization from the egregious cases goes well beyond them: you cannot believe that p if it is manifest to you that your grounds, evidence or reasons do not establish that p is true.

The difference between the actual impossibility of belief in the egregious cases and the actual possibility of belief in the non-egregious cases is that in the former cases the incoherence test is unavoidable. In the non-egregious cases, however, the actuality of believing the unbelievable is explained-away as due to the analytically intrusive operation of ordinary psychological mechanisms—prominently, distraction, narrow focus, keeping obvious implications tacit.

This attempt to allay the second worry applies primarily to the cases where one avowedly believes on less than adequate reasons. Only these are strictly difficulties for the defense of evidentialism via its power to explain the cases where one cannot believe. The much more familiar cases are those where a person holds a belief and lacks adequate reasons for it, though he thinks otherwise. I believe that my hero Jones admires me, but it is really just wishful thinking. Notice that I describe this as a case of believing without adequate reasons, while thinking otherwise (that I do have adequate reasons). This may seem to miss a class of cases: I lack adequate reasons for a belief, but I have no concern about that lack. This possibility I deny. When the crucial condition (of full awareness or overtness) for testing the conceptual coherence of a belief is met, no one seems able to maintain a belief without taking him or herself to have adequate reasons. Thus, even those who hold egregious beliefs, are compelled to go out on the further limb of defending their beliefs as established by the evidence.

Typical cases where we lack adequate reasons, though we do not think so, are unproblematic for evidentialism, since it does not enter any claim as to our conformity to it. These cases simply reflect our limits and fallibility or, less excusably, our credulity, gullibility, and haste.

But there is a proper subset of this class which does conflict with the spirit, if not the letter, of evidentialism. These are cases of unbelievable (or egregious) beliefs, where one takes oneself to have adequate reasons, though it

is evident (to others) that one lacks them, for example that the sun revolves around the earth. These are cases just like those where we obviously cannot believe, except that here we do take ourselves to have adequate reasons. And how hard is that, given our capacity for distorted thought, self-deception, or, more simply, distraction?

Yet even these cases would succumb to the incoherence test, under an extended application. The contrived and complex nature of the incoherence test explains how easy it is for someone's relevant set of beliefs to be potentially recognizable by the believer as inconsistent through self-examination or Socratic questioning. To believe that the sun revolves around the earth is to defy extremely well documented findings and predictions. The defiance, though conceivable, is not seriously possible. It is incompatible with the commitments we each generate in our belief-practices. So, for example, when we use a wide range of electronic products, or follow professional medical advice, or accept explanations for natural phenomena ("Why does ice float on water?"; "Why [how] do large groups of ants organize their societies so well?"), we defer to the judgments of the scientific community and so tacitly endorse their methods and findings. To claim that this deference is to be suspended in the case at hand is blatantly not credible. The lack of credibility, as well as suspicions about one's own special pleading, are also implied by one's meta-beliefs (not to trust my judgment to make an exception in my own favor, where most others, otherwise diverse and respected, do not). Ultimately then, were this unbelievable believer to be explicit about the relevant set of beliefs, the inconsistency would become manifest, and so too the incoherence.

The interferences posited to explain-away these recalcitrant cases need not involve the psychologically complex processes of self-deception, but, as earlier noted, the normal stuff of everyday believing—a lack of full awareness, narrow focus, ease of distraction. The child's joke "How many animals did Moses bring on the Ark?" requires that the hearer comprehends the question as stated, and yet the hearer takes it as about Noah. A person can anxiously sweat out of fear of riding on an escalator, while judging that there is nothing to fear. When you read a novel or watch a film, you purposely, though inattentively, 'bracket' your knowledge that it is only a fiction to experience fully (emotionally) the events. If need be, you can instantly drop the pretense, restoring awareness that what is depicted is not real. In these last two cases, there is, nevertheless, a telling instability (in thought). To fear riding an escalator implies a judgment or belief that it is dangerous to ride it, a judgment or belief destabilized when confronted with the person's knowledge (awareness) of its falsity.

The parallel between belief and assertion corroborates and extends these claims about belief. The fundamental parallel is, recall, that to assert a proposition is to claim its truth, just as to believe it is to imply—and, more disputably, claim—its truth. Assertion *expresses* the speaker's belief.

Given the assertion-belief parallel, assertion is crucial methodologically, since it allows us to study the commitments of belief, abstracted from our musings on the concept (or words purporting to stand for the concept). Claims about what it is permissible or possible to believe can be tested against our everyday judgments of what is assertible. Each of the following seems to represent explicit

realizations of James's claim as to what one ought to do, and yet each displays a similar incoherence:

Julia is actually in Dartmouth because I decide to believe it.
 There is a good God because I decide to believe it.
 Torturing innocent babies is wrong because I decide to believe it.

The fundamental parallel between what is first-personally unbelievable and what is unassertible is realized in Moore's Paradox. The Paradox is that assertions of the following form are heard as contradictory, although the contained sentences are consistent:

(A) p , but I do not believe that p .¹⁹

For example, it is raining, but I do not believe that it is raining. The explanation of the Paradox is that the thought corresponding to the assertion would imply that one believes p and that one does not believe p , which is an explicit contradiction. The parallel helps to defend evidentialism only if instances of the following are likewise heard as contradictory:

(B) p , but I do not know that p .

(C) p , but my grounds fail to establish that p .

(B) has been explicitly defended as Moore's Paradoxical by Unger and Williamson.²⁰ The data of how we hear instances of (A) or (B) extends to:

(C) John is in Alaska, but my grounds fail to establish it.

If this instance of (C) is a version of Moore's Paradox, it is plausible to take grounds insufficient to establish that p as grounds insufficient to know that p .

These incoherences reflect incoherences in thought, not dependent on expectations specific to conversation. It is incoherent to think that John is in Alaska, but that my grounds fail to establish it (as true).

Still, there remain troublesome cases for evidentialism, and troublesome, in part, because they are so ordinary. Think of Bill who is convinced that Sally continues to love him, despite the evidence apparent to him, as well as to others, that her affections for him have abated. I assume that there is a way of telling this story so that Bill will continue to believe that Sally loves him while cognizant that the preponderance of evidence goes against it.²¹ Bill acknowledges that his belief in Sally's love is partly a matter of faith.

Even though the case seems familiar and ordinary, it does not stand up well to scrutiny. Can Bill coherently think:

Only the evidence, not faith or hope, indicates the truth of the proposition that Sally loves me. The preponderance of the evidence is that Sally does not love me. Sally loves me.

This full thought (assertion) seems to me of dubious coherence.

By contrast to the special setting requisite to render the case even minimally credible, there are a vast number of simple cases that all of us could produce where one cannot believe. Some have been offered above. Think too of the common cases in which you confront clear counter-evidence to what you believe. You believe that Lonny is tall. You then see him approaching you and he appears to be around 5'6". You immediately cease to believe that he is tall. You cannot believe that Lonny is tall and that he is around 5'6", given what you know about (local) male heights. So evidentialism is able to explain a huge number of simple cases of why one cannot believe. Given this massive explanatory success, evidentialism can set aside cases like Bill's alleged belief (on faith) that Sally loves him as only anomalies, most probably to be accounted for by appeal to the subtle operation of various (natural) psychological mechanisms like distraction, as noted above.

The example is also not convincing that Bill will sustain his all-out belief that Sally loves him, rather than withdraw to only a high degree of belief that she does, though still reaching beyond his evidence. As just indicated, the key assumption for extending the "cannot" cases from the egregious to the ones just shy of adequate reasons is that one has the alternative of fully believing that p or believing p to only a (high) degree. If your grounds that John is in Alaska is that he told you a month ago that he was going, but you just learned that due to poor weather conditions a number of flights have been cancelled, you regard it as (only) very likely that John is in Alaska. Consequently, you cannot all-out believe that John is in Alaska, but only that you are very sure. You should assert not that "John is in Alaska," but only "I'm very sure that John is in Alaska." This assumption of a sharp distinction between full belief and degrees of belief is implicitly rejected in the traditional formulation of evidentialism that one's strength of believing ought to be proportioned to the evidence, which treats full belief as merely an extreme point on the same continuum. And it is explicitly rejected by respected contributors:

Suppose I do believe that p is probable. . . . Clearly, if either I am to believe that p or I am to believe that not- p , I must believe the former. . . . If I believe that p is very, very probable, surely I believe that p [T]here is a strong case, if we are to have a clear concept of 'believe,' for tightening up usage so that to believe that p is probable entails to believe that p .²²

The assumption rests on the earlier observation that only full belief, not any degrees of belief, can play the central role in guiding our activities. The natural way for a belief to be activated for us (as a guide to action) is to look through our attitude toward it—to 'disquote' from the attitude—toward the proposition itself: believing that p is *transparent* to the proposition believed. When I (all-out) believe that Tim is in his office, and I need to meet him, I go directly there. When I only partially believe it, to however high a degree, I will inquire further, unless I am under severe time pressures. Only full belief, we also observed, provides the backing appropriate to assertion, whereas degrees of belief only allow qualified assertions, which are less satisfactory. If you want

to know where Tim is, I do not end your search by telling you, "I'm pretty sure that Tim is in his office," but only if I say, "Tim is in his office."

Yet, as earlier observed, our understanding of full belief suffers the Jamesian worry that it is too demanding. If, "assertion were non-deceptive only if the person making the assertion had evidence guaranteeing the truth of the assertion, then very few of the assertions we make would count as non-deception."²³ But, to respond to the objection, it is precisely by invoking the assertion connection that the association between knowledge or grounds adequate to establish p and the ordinary and common attitude of belief is shown to be non-tendentious. If assertibility requires knowledge, and it can only serve its information transmitting purpose when backed by knowledge, then knowledge, and so belief, is a very ordinary and common achievement.

The differences emphasized between full and partial (degrees of) belief go some way toward respecting James's important distinction between the goals of seeking truth and avoiding error. The move from assigning various degrees of belief to a proposition as more (positive) evidence or grounds accumulate to all-out accepting it as true, and so believing it, is risky. For at the last stage one detaches the proposition from the evidence to claim its truth, not merely that it is well supported so far. So an evidentialist is not bound, as James and Taylor contend, to cautious policies that aim merely to avoid error.

But the evidentialist's willingness to take risks can still be too cautious in James's (and Taylor's) view, if the evidentialist rarely engages in that detachment. His position allows for seeking truth, and not merely avoiding error. Yet the evidentialist will seek truth, so the objection continues, only in the unusual settings where he is virtually guaranteed to be correct. James and Taylor's opposition to the 'agnostic' rules of believing is captured in premise (5):

Only by believing the religious hypothesis do you have the opportunity to discover its truth, if it is true.

Evidentialists ought to stress that premise (5) cannot be openly (overtly) satisfied, although this would not be a crushing objection if James had made out his case that a significant range of potential truths were available (discoverable) only with the prior belief that they were true. But in the main cases that he addresses (of ethical and religious beliefs) James never substantiates his brazenly skeptical assumption that intellectual grounds must be indecisive.

But can we do more than just repel James's objections? Can we handle his (and Taylor's) underlying concerns? Given the central roles in our judgments played by belief, are there not going to be many cases where our need for belief is great, but our evidential or epistemic position is inadequate to secure it according to evidentialism? The previous observations about the ease of assertion as evidence for the ease of knowledge (and of assertion as expressing belief) justify our answering in the negative.

Testimony provides a good test, since it is so prevalent a source of information (beliefs). It is governed by a default rule: accept what the speaker asserts unless you have specific reason to object. This rule alone goes some way

toward meeting a Jamesian concern of entitlement to belief without extended inquiry: The burden is on the hearer to back his challenge to the speaker's assertion (and so belief). So if the speaker asserts *p*, the hearer ought to accept it, unless he has a specific objection.

But what of the possibility that the speaker may be lying or unreliable? We know this sometimes happens and without warning, particularly if the speaker is a stranger or not a close associate, as we will assume. The answer is that we have enormous *background* knowledge of both the typical sincerity and reliability of speakers, as well as the constraints on speakers to provide good information. The possibility of lying or error, without any warning, requires no further exclusion in advance.

The appeal to background knowledge helps to answer another facet of the too-demanding worry. For beliefs that derive from generally trustworthy sources like perception, memory, simple reasoning, and testimony, we typically cannot offer the specific grounds for which we came to hold those beliefs. The phone number of an acquaintance is 435-667-1234. How do you know? You cannot answer—you forgot. This better not imply that on evidentialist grounds you are not entitled to your belief, since that would amount to an implausibly wide skepticism. It is problematic for the evidentialist to respond by focusing on the defense one could offer subsequent to questioning or inquiries, if that does not address the entitlement to belief right now, prior to the questioning.

The demand for adequate reasons is not though a demand for the articulation of reasons, or even to access to them. Your memory for such matters as phone numbers is generally reliable, and the belief that it is reliable operates as a reason for your confidence that the phone number is correct as recalled. You need not hold on to the specifics of how you learned this phone number. That is sufficient to pass the incoherence test without specific grounds to trust him, just as you can coherently believe what a speaker asserts to you under normal conditions.^{24, 25}

Inattention to our vast background knowledge lends unearned credibility to the picture James and Taylor generate of our need for belief greatly exceeding the resources of our ordinary epistemic positions. Without this background knowledge, the incoherence test would be too readily failed. Still, I admitted that in many cases where I claim that the incoherence test would be failed, our observations reveal persons believing what they cannot believe, according to that test. I have tried to undermine the import of this observed discrepancy above. Opposition to these judgments of incoherence and what cannot be believed is on shaky grounds anyhow if it relies on the observational discrepancies alone. For my attempt to explain-away these discrepancies does not rest simply on empirical claims (of interference). Rather, it is more deeply founded in the direct defense of evidentialism (briefly, that since evidence or epistemic reasons are the only indicators of truth, only they can satisfy belief's claim of truth), as well as the success of the incoherence test in explaining a vast range of unproblematic cases where one cannot believe. The success assumes little more than the impossibility of believing an overt contradiction. ϕ

Notes

¹ This essay draws on my *Belief's Own Ethics* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), and it attempts to respond to issues raised subsequent to the completion of that work.

² Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

³ W. K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1999), pp. 70-96.

⁴ Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, p. 44.

⁵ William James, "The Will to Believe," in *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. Albuery Castell (New York: Hafner, 1948), p. 95 (James's italics).

⁶ Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, p. 46.

⁷ Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today*, pp. 50-51.

⁸ Usefully for my purposes, this 'cannot' is readily construed as an in-principle barrier to determination either by evidence or proof, rooted in content or subject-matter. However, it could also be an in-practice barrier, as when further delay in decision will eliminate the availability of a (significant) option—for example, of living a religious life.

⁹ For an excellent analysis, see Pamela Hieronymi's "Controlling Attitudes" in *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* (forthcoming).

¹⁰ George Johnson, "Science and Religion: Bridging the Great Divide," *New York Times*, June 30, 1998, p. F4 (my emphasis).

¹¹ "The Will to Believe," p. 90 (my emphasis).

¹² Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., 1958), sec. 233, p. 68.

¹³ The further alternative for the 'cannot' of premise (2), as noted in note 8, is not available here. It is not simply an in-practice or de facto impossibility that James is alluding to with the example of Lincoln's existence is a myth.

¹⁴ For a subtle and very restricted denial of this claim, see Robert Nozick, *The Nature of Rationality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 86-88.

¹⁵ This is a version of the view Gilbert Harman put forth in his contribution ("Evidentialism") to a symposium on *Belief's Own Ethics* (Pacific Division, American Philosophical Association meetings, 2003).

¹⁶ A question that I do not pursue is whether the 'ensures' proposal is already implicit in belief: In believing that *p* we tacitly do believe (as part of the content of the belief) that we hold the belief due to something (such as a reliable belief forming process) that ensures that *p*.

¹⁷ Assertion is governed by a default rule which restricts challenges to a speaker's assertion. But, again, in the crucial cases, like the religious or ethical ones that concern James, Clifford, and Taylor, the default will not be in force or overruled. It is mutually known that the matter is controversial or not within the speaker's default-conceded scope of competence, and so to suspend the default is not to cast doubt on the speaker's entitlement or authority to assert generally. Similar points apply to belief, treated under the idealization of assertion to oneself.

¹⁸ 'Overtness', as I use it here, is borrowed from its role in pragmatics to describe a speaker's ("Gricean") communicative intentions. See, for example, John McDowell, "Meaning, Communication, and Knowledge," in *Philosophical Subjects: Essays Presented to P. F. Strawson*, ed. Zak van Straaten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 117-139.

¹⁹ Of many discussions of Moore's Paradox, two that are especially congenial to my arguments are Sydney Shoemaker, "Moore's Paradox and self-knowledge," in *The First-Person Perspective and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 74-93, and Richard Moran, *Authority and Estrangement: An Essay on Self-Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

²⁰ Peter Unger, *Ignorance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975); Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

²¹ For such a telling see Paul Noordhof, "Self-Deception, interpretation, and consciousness," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 67 (2003): pp. 75-100.

²² Richard Swinburne, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 35-36.

²³ Igor Douven, "Review of *Belief's Own Ethics*," *Ars Disputandi* 3 (2003), <http://www.ArsDisputandi.org>.

²⁴ The incoherence test will then be passed by some beliefs originally acquired unjustifiably. I leave open here whether this is a problem for evidentialism.

²⁵ Recent epistemology has a different way to spin the Jamesian concern with demandingness. If evidence alone is sufficient for knowledge or to establish the proposition as true, why is it that when the stakes are higher, assertions (and so presumably beliefs) will be withdrawn? Normally, you just dial the acquaintance's phone number, corresponding to your belief (or assertion). Imagine though that you need to pass the number along to someone in a distant country for whom it is a life and death matter to reach the acquaintance. Then you might be hesitant to assert to him that the number is 435-667-1234, as you might cease to fully believe it. Such observations have been taken as challenges to evidentialism, since the implied difference in entitlement to belief is not correlated with differences in the evidence. (See Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, "Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification," *The Philosophical Review* 111 [2002]: pp. 67-94.)

Aside from space limitations, I do not address these examples because I am not sure that the contrasts are genuine:

1. Why does not the difference in costs of error bear only on my willingness to act, not on the entitlement to belief or assertion? I know if I do tell the number to the person who needs it desperately, I can be held responsible by the questioner if I am wrong, and I may reasonably not want to incur the risk. The problem is not in the evidence, but in the tight connection expected between belief (assertion) and action.

2. Both belief and assertion can be, in fact, psychologically undermined by (rational) anxieties over risks, without loss of entitlement. A student who is convinced that a complex proof he does for math homework is correct becomes anxious about it, when the teacher asks him to put it on the board. But he has been given no reason that undermines the belief. This new context in which he is less willing to assert his belief, or less confident in it, is not one in which the entitlement is itself surrendered.

3. The alleged force of the differences in our response to these cases as the context alters seems to depend on our typical lack of knowledge as to when we have reached the proper threshold to affirm the elimination of contrary possibilities. I think this dependence lends illicit persuasive power to the examples. Contrast the above case, with one where we have such knowledge. In the case of Jim, it is highly probable that he is at home, but there is a clear possibility (probability) that he is in Princeton. Regardless of contextual demands (costs of error), you can only know that Jim is in New Brunswick if you eliminate that possibility.