

# Knowledge, Reason & Belief

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7. *Clifford vs James*  
+ *Scepticism*



## INTRODUCTION

### Last week

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- Pascal's second argument, from 'expectation'
- A remark about the weirdness of Pascalian decision problems: Bartha's Grouchy God case highlights the fact that Pascalian reasoning seems to license self-undermining decisions
- Mid-subject discussion

### This week

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- Finishing off practical reasons for belief: bare bones of the Clifford vs James exchange
- Introducing a new topic in which we address the question of the *extent* of our knowledge: scepticism

## Why believe on sufficient evidence?

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### CLIFFORD VS JAMES

- We have seen (Week 4) two reasons why believing on the basis of sufficient evidence has instrumental value for the believer:
  - (1) Believing on sufficient evidence make the belief in question likely to be true
  - (2) Believing on sufficient evidence on one occasion makes one more likely to do so on other occasions
- (2), recall, was drawn from Clifford's 'The Ethics of Belief'
- In that paper, he also argues for a *further* reason to base one's beliefs on sufficient evidence:
  - Failing to believe on sufficient evidence is **morally wrong**
- He introduces this consideration by means of a story...

### Clifford's shipowner

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'A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the 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 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 mid ocean and told no tales.'

### Clifford's shipowner (ctd)

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'What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise to help him, because he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him. He had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts.'

Let us alter the case a little, and suppose that the ship was not unsound after all; that she made her voyage safely, and many others after it. Will that diminish the guilt of her owner? Not one jot. When an action is once done, it is right or wrong forever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that.'

## Clifford's Rule

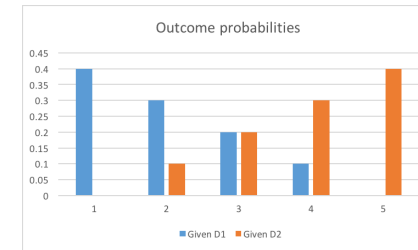
- OK, plausibly, the shipowner is indeed blameworthy here
- What is the heart of issue? Perhaps this:

When holding a belief on the basis of purely pragmatic considerations, the comparative benefits might not be shared by those who subsequently align their beliefs with yours (In our case: the shipmaster may overall benefit from believing that the ship is seaworthy but the passengers do not)
- Anyway, on the basis of the above, Clifford offers:

**CLIFFORD'S RULE:** '[I]t is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'

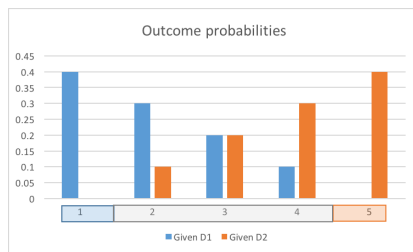
## James' two injunctions

- James notes that inquiry is guided by two 'separable' rules that appear to pull in different directions:
  - **Believe the truth!** (Don't fail to believe things that are true)
  - **Avoid error!** (Don't believe things that are false)
- Example: consider two 4-sided dice, Dice 1 and Dice 2, with



## James' two injunctions (ctd)

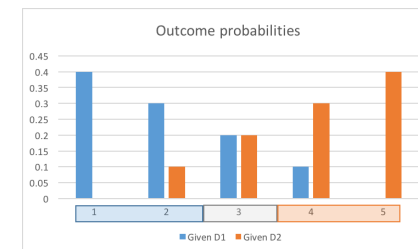
- Given that we observe a certain outcome, which dice, if any, should we believe was tossed?
- Assuming J-INFALLIBILITY, CLIFFORD'S RULE has us believe Dice 1 if we get a 1, Dice 2 if we get a 5, and neither otherwise:



- This minimises the chance of error but also the chance of believing truths

## James' two injunctions (ctd)

- We can increase our chance of believing truths by shifting the thresholds 'inwards'
- For example, Dice 1 if we get a 1 or 2, Dice 2 if we get a 4 or 5, and suspension of judgement otherwise



- But this also increases our chances of making errors!

## James' criticism of Clifford

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- James' complaint:
  - Clifford places emphasis on the second, at the expense of the first, *on the mere basis* of his personal preferences ('merely show[ing] his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe')
- Note: He *can't* be chastising Clifford for believing something on the basis of of passional motivations (James thinks that's OK)
- Rather, he is chastising him for believing, on the basis of passional motivations, *that one ought not believe on the basis of passional motivations* (Clifford's position is **self-defeating**)

## The moral issue

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- Surprisingly, James doesn't appear to address the moral motivation for Clifford's rule
- He writes:
  - 'Each must act as he thinks best; and if he is wrong, so much the worse for *him*.'
- But, if one is wrong, isn't it potentially so much the worse for *others* too? Wasn't that Clifford's point?

## James' Meta-Rule

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- James also seems to offer an argument against Clifford that proceeds from the following strong principle:
  - JAMES' META-RULE:** '[A] rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truths were really there, would be an irrational rule'
- Clifford's recommendation is at odds with this
- But, in our example, so too is *any rule* that prescribes any kind of specific attitude if the dice lands 2, 3 or 4
- The same goes for Pascal's decision theoretic rule: it prescribes wagering for even when God could fail to exist!
- But James endorses Pascal's argument: '[It]...is the last stroke needed to make our faith in masses and holy water complete.'

## The moral issue (ctd)

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- James does seem to adduce some kind of moral 'argument' for his position:
  - 'No one of us ought to issue vetoes to the other, nor should we bandy words of abuse. We ought, on the contrary, delicately and profoundly to *respect one another's mental freedom*: then only shall we bring about the intellectual republic; then only shall we have that spirit of inner tolerance without which all our outer tolerance is soulless'
- Question: Do you agree that CLIFFORD'S RULE violates principles of freedom of thought?

### INTRODUCING SKEPTICISM

- A **dogmatist** wrt a particular domain  $D$  (e.g. morality, religion) is someone who believes we have knowledge wrt that domain
- A **skeptic** wrt  $D$  is someone who isn't a dogmatist wrt  $D$
- This leaves scope for two possible attitudes
  - (1) holding the view that we don't have knowledge (aka 'academic', 'dogmatic' or 'Cartesian' skepticism)
  - (2) suspending judgment as to whether or not we have knowledge (aka 'Pyrrhonian' scepticism)
- The distinction could seem subtle
- In fact, it is tempting to claim that Pyrrhonism quickly collapses into academic skepticism

### Is Pyrrhonism tenable?

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- Let  $K(P)$  = 'S knows that  $P$ ' and  $B(P)$  = 'S believes that  $P$ '
- I'll try to show: if  $S$  is rational and  $\neg B(K(P))$ , then  $B(\neg K(P))$ , i.e.
  - If you don't believe you know, then you ought to believe you don't
- Some logical principles you might find compelling:
  - KNOWLEDGE NORM:**  $B(P) \Rightarrow B(K(P))$   
(If you believe  $P$ , then you believe you know  $P$ )
  - NEGATIVE INTROSPECTION:**  $\neg B(P) \Rightarrow B(\neg B(P))$   
(If you don't believe  $P$ , then you believe you don't believe  $P$ )
  - MODUS PONENS:**  $B(P)$  and  $B(P \rightarrow Q) \Rightarrow B(Q)$
  - TAUTOLOGY:**  $B$  is a logical principle  $\Rightarrow B(P)$
- The first one is controversial and very interesting in itself...

### The 'knowledge norm' for belief

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- One supporting consideration, are **Moore-paradoxical** beliefs:
  - The following do not seem rational to believe, *even* if they happen to be true
    - (1) 'It's raining, but I don't believe that it is.'
    - (2) 'It's raining, but I don't know that it is.'
- We can explain the unbelievability of (2):
  - $B(P \& \neg K(P))$  would plausibly entail  $B(P)$  and  $B(\neg K(P))$
  - By KNOWLEDGE NORM,  $B(P)$  would entail  $B(K(P))$
  - So  $B(\neg K(P))$  and  $B(K(P))$ :  $S$  would have inconsistent beliefs
- Since  $K(P)$  entails  $B(P)$ , we can also similarly handle (1) (we wind up with  $B(\neg B(P))$  and  $B(K(P))$ , hence  $B(\neg B(P))$  and  $B(B(P))$ )

## Is Pyrrhonism tenable?

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- Here, then, is the proof I mentioned:
  - (1)  $\neg B(K(P))$  (assumption)
  - (2)  $\neg B(P)$  (from (1) and KNOWLEDGE NORM)
  - (3)  $\neg K(P)$  (from (2) and the belief requirement on knowledge)
  - (4) It is a logical truth that  $\neg B(K(P)) \rightarrow \neg K(P)$  (by conditional proof from (1) to (3))
  - (5)  $B(\neg B(K(P)) \rightarrow \neg K(P))$  (from (4) and TAUTOLOGY)
  - (6)  $B(\neg B(K(P)))$  (from (1) and NEGATIVE INTROSPECTION)

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- (7)  $B(\neg K(P))$  (from (5) and (6))

## INTRODUCING THE ARGUMENT FROM IGNORANCE

## Preliminaries

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- In view of the preceding concerns, here, then, is the most well-known kind of argument for academic scepticism
- Let:
  - $O$  = Some 'ordinary' claim that you take yourself to know is true (Example: 'The animal in the enclosure is a zebra')
  - $H$  = Some 'sceptical' hypothesis inconsistent with  $O$ , whose truth would just as well predict your perceptual experience (Example: 'The animal in the enclosure is a cleverly painted mule')
- Typically, our grounds for belief fall short of entailing the truth of that belief: for most  $O$ , we have an  $H$

## The argument

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- The classic argument for academic scepticism:
  - (1) You're not in a position to know that  $\neg H$
  - (2) If you're not in a position to know that  $\neg H$ , then you're not in a position to know that  $O$

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- (3) You're not in a position to know that  $O$
- The premises seem OK:
  - (1): If  $H$  were true, things would seem exactly as they do now
  - (2): It seems wrong here to claim that one is in a position to know that  $O$ , but is not in a position to know that  $\neg H$  (e.g. that one is in a position to know that the animal is a zebra but not that it isn't a cleverly painted mule)
- But the conclusion seems disconcerting!!

## The argument from ignorance

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- Some options
  - **Scepticism**: Accept (1), accept (2) and hence accept (3)
  - **Mooreanism**: Accept (2), deny (3) and hence deny (1)
  - **Closure denialism**: Accept (1), deny (3) and hence deny (2)  
(Source of terminology: the principle of **closure of potential knowledge** says that if one is in a position to know both that  $P$  and that if  $P$  then  $Q$ , then one is in a position to know that  $Q$ )
- As DeRose (1995) notes, taking *any* of these options incurs an explanatory debt:
  - Scepticism: explain why (3) seems false when it isn't
  - Mooreanism: explain why (1) seems true when it isn't
  - Closure Denialism: explain why (2) seems true when it isn't

## References

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- DeRose, K. 1995: Solving the Skeptical Problem. *The Philosophical Review* 104(1), pp. 1–52.

## Next week

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- Topic: The argument from ignorance (ctd)
- Required reading:
  - Pritchard, D. *WTK*, Ch. 13, final section titled 'Contextualism'.
- Recommended reading:
  - Cohen, S. & E. Conee 2013: Is Knowledge Contextual? In M. Steup, J. Turri and E. Sosa (eds) *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology, 2nd Edition*. Wiley-Blackwell, pp. 60–83. (Available in course reader)
  - DeRose, K. 1995: Solving the Skeptical Problem. *The Philosophical Review* 104(1), pp. 1–52. (Available in course reader)
  - Rysiew, P. 2016: Epistemic Contextualism. In Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Spring 2016 Edition)*. Sections 1–4. (Available here)