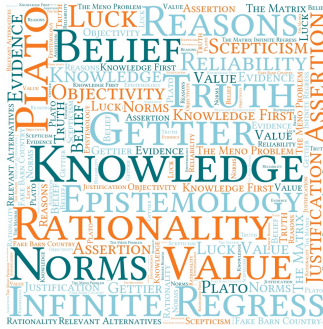




## Knowledge, Individuals & Society

JAKE CHANDLER

*Rational belief  
& practical interests: Clifford vs James*



### Clifford's shipowner

'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.'

### Why believe on sufficient evidence?

- We have seen 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 (ctd)

'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 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

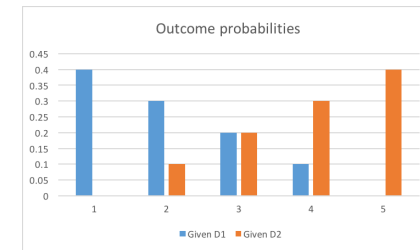
- OK, plausibly, the shipowner is indeed blameworthy here
- What is the heart of issue? Perhaps this:

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.'

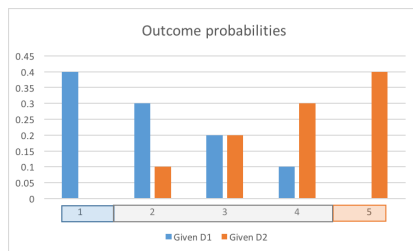
## James' two injunctions

- 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)

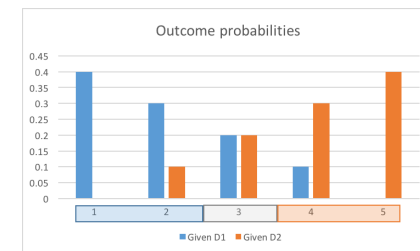
- Given that we observe a certain outcome, which dice, if any, should we believe was tossed?
- Assuming J-INFALLIBILITY, CLIFFORD'S RULE has us believe Dice 1 if we get a 1, Dice 2 if we get a 5, and neither otherwise:



- 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 rule ("Avoid error!"), at the expense of the first ("Believe the truth!"), *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 God 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?