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THE OBLIGATION TO BELIEVE

I

Do we ever have an obligation to choose to hold beliefs, religious or otherwise? The relations between belief, volition and moral responsibility are the subject of William James' widely discussed essay 'The Will to Believe'.¹ James first takes up the relationship between volition and belief: Does it make sense to speak of choosing to believe a proposition? His answer is that it does, in the sense that we can choose to act in ways which encourage the production of a believing attitude in ourself. For example, we can be selective in attending to evidence, and we can incline ourselves toward belief by acting as though we already believe. By avoiding certain influences and subjecting ourself to others, we can encourage the development of belief. In so doing, we in effect treat ourself as a third person, and our behaviour is analogous to what we might engage in when encouraging others toward favourable evidence. The question of moral responsibility then becomes appropriate in our own case in a way analogous to that in which it does with respect to our belief-producing actions toward others. Just as the deception of others raises moral questions, so does the deception of ourselves.²

James' main purpose is to argue for the permissibility of holding certain beliefs despite inadequate evidence. His essay is a response to an attitude which he takes to be widely held among philosophers, that our belief ought always to be proportioned to the evidence. His remarks are specifically

¹ William James, 'The Will to Believe', *Essays in Pragmatism*, ed. Alburey Castell (New York: Hafner Press, 1948). The doctrine appears frequently in James' other works. See, for example, 'The Sentiment of Rationality', 'The Dilemma of Determinism', 'The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life', and the 'Conclusions' and 'Postscript' from *Varieties of Religious Experience*, all anthologized in *Essays in Pragmatism*; also see *A Pluralistic Universe* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967), pp. 328-31; *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. (New York: Dover, 1950), vol. 1, pp. 311-22; *Some Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Longman's Green, 1948), Appendix. For recent helpful discussions of James' doctrine, see Patrick K. Dooley, 'The Nature of Belief: the Proper Context for James' "The Will to Believe"', *Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1972), 141-51; Arnold E. Johanson, "'The Will to Believe" and the Ethics of Belief', *Transactions of the C. S. Peirce Society* 11, no. 2 (Spring 1975), 110-27; Peter Kauber and Peter H. Hare, 'The Right and Duty to Will to Believe', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 2 (December 1974), 327-43; and William Macleod, 'James' "Will to Believe" Revisited', *Personalist* 48, no. 2 (April 1967), 149-66. Kauber and Hare consider the question of obligation and offer a general line of argument which involves considerations of the same sort as appealed to in arguments (3) and (4) in part III of this paper.

² The notion of self-deception raises certain conceptual problems which are relevant to this discussion but will not be taken up in this essay. There is a significant body of literature dealing with these difficulties; see, for example, Charles B. Daniels, 'Self-Deception and Interpersonal Deception', *Personalist* 55, no. 3 (Summer 1974), 244-52; Herbert Fingarette, *Self-Deception* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); Bela Szabados, 'Self-Deception', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (September 1974), 44-9.

addressed to a doctrine formulated by W. K. Clifford in these terms: ‘...it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence’.¹ James argues (in what he refers to as a ‘justification of faith’) that there are some cases in which *over-belief*, belief beyond the evidence, is justified. ‘The essential thing to notice’, says James in a related essay, ‘is that our active preference is a legitimate part of the game’.² The central case, in the discussion in ‘The Will to Believe’, is the religious one. The question of the existence of God, he claims, is one on which the evidence does not clearly favour either the affirmative or the negative. However, we are justified in *gambling* on the religious hypothesis in response to our emotional needs and desires. James’ support for this position involves at least the following distinguishable lines of argument: (1) ‘passional’ (volitional and emotional) factors unavoidably influence our believing already, and what is unavoidable cannot reasonably be forbidden; (2) the very nature of some sorts of beliefs (for example, those which affirm value judgments) is such that they are undecidable on purely evidentiary grounds, and it is unreasonable to prohibit such beliefs altogether; (3) in some cases belief makes itself true (for instance, an athlete’s belief that he will win may be a condition for his doing so); (4) in some cases belief may be a prerequisite for getting access to further evidence (the believer may be the only person in a position to receive the decisive evidence); (5) the prohibition expressed by Clifford is itself an example of *over-belief*; and finally (6) since our eternal well-being may hinge upon our believing beyond the evidence, we can hardly be condemned for venturing forth. James calls this venturing beyond the evidence ‘*faith*’.

Although James aims to defend the religious position, an important strain of Christian religious thought actually subscribes to a position not altogether unlike Clifford’s. It is the doctrine that *we are blameworthy if we fail to hold certain beliefs*. This claim, that we have a moral obligation to hold certain beliefs, is what I wish to examine in the remainder of this essay, not in order to support or refute it, but in order to see how it should be understood and how it is related to James’ position.

It may be illuminating first to look at a discussion of these same issues in St Augustine’s *Enchiridion*:

Nor do I now undertake to solve a very knotty question, which perplexed those very acute thinkers, the Academic philosophers: whether a wise man ought to give his assent to anything, seeing that he may fall into error by assenting to falsehood: for all things, as they assert, are unknown or uncertain... Now, in their eyes every error is regarded as a sin, and they think that error can be avoided by entirely suspending belief... But with us, ‘the just shall live by faith’. Now, if assent be taken away, faith

¹ W. K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays* (London: Macmillan, 1879), vol. 2, p. 186.

² ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’, p. 35.

goes too; for without assent there can be no belief. And there are truths, whether we know them or not, which must be believed if we would attain to a happy life, that is, eternal life.¹

In the first place, the last sentence of this passage suggests that Augustine perhaps subscribes to the doctrine that there is an obligation to believe. This is even more strongly suggested by a statement which he makes later, in chapter 88:

Now the man who, not believing that sins are remitted in the Church, despises this great gift of God's mercy, and persists to the last day of his life in his obstinacy of heart, is guilty of the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit, in whom Christ forgives sins.

A second point to notice is that Augustine means 'faith' in the propositional sense: '...if assent be taken away, faith goes too'. James' use of the word 'faith' has troubled some religious believers. John Hick quotes Santayana as complaining that James' conception lacks the 'sense of security' and 'joy' which are characteristic of religious faith.² However, it is clear that James means 'faith' in pretty much the same sense that Augustine does, and that this sense is religiously important as well as being the one recognized by Augustine as most relevant to the question at hand. Finally, Augustine, like James, is concerned with the relationship between belief, volition and responsibility and wants to argue against the view that we ought not to exercise *over-belief*. Only he seems to go further by suggesting that we not only may but *should* exercise faith.

Now, there are two alternative forms which the doctrine of an *obligation to believe* might take. One of these looks closer to Clifford's position, the other to James'. On the one hand, unbelief might be regarded as involving a *failure to believe despite adequate evidence*. On the other hand, it might be viewed as involving a *failure to venture beyond the evidence*, a failure to exercise the will to believe when one ought to do so. In the following sections these two alternatives will be examined separately.

II

Unbelief as a failure to believe despite adequate evidence. A rather bald statement about the relationship between belief and obligation is made by St. Paul in his *Epistle to the Romans*:

For we see divine retribution revealed from heaven and falling upon all the godless wickedness of man. In their wickedness they are stifling the truth. For all that may be known of God by men lies plain before their eyes; indeed God himself has disclosed

¹ Augustine, *Enchiridion on Faith, Hope and Love*, trans. J. F. Shaw, ed. Henry Paolucci (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1961), chap. 20; see also chaps. 9-19 and 21-3.

² John Hick, *Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed., rev. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973), pp. 55-6.

it to them. His invisible attributes, that is to say his everlasting power and deity, have been visible, ever since the world began, to the eye of reason, in the things he has made.¹

Paul's view is echoed by John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.² Calvin says that knowledge of God is implanted by nature in the human mind, 'to prevent anyone from taking refuge in the pretence of ignorance' (p. 43). Furthermore, the existence and nature of God are clearly revealed in the creation: 'But upon his individual works he has engraved unmistakable marks of his glory, so clear and so prominent that even unlettered and stupid folk cannot plead the excuse of ignorance' (p. 52). Unbelief, according to Calvin, is a result of a deliberate and perverse refusal to accept overwhelming evidence: 'This knowledge is either smothered or corrupted, partly by ignorance, partly by malice' (p. 47). 'David's statement that ungodly men and fools feel in their hearts that there is no God must first... be limited to those who, by extinguishing the light of nature, deliberately befuddle themselves' (p. 48).

Calvin's view is more radical and harsher, no doubt, than many traditional Christian thinkers would accept. But a commonly held view in the Christian tradition has been that the evidence for belief at least outweighs the evidence against it, that this balance justifies belief, and that we have a moral obligation to accept this evidence and believe. A refusal to believe, at least by those acquainted with the relevant evidence, is a refusal to take the position favoured by the evidence. If blameworthiness for unbelief comes into the picture, for this view, it is blameworthiness for this refusal.

Two questions arise in connection with this version of the doctrine of an obligation to believe and its application to religious belief: (1) Is the evidence for religious belief favourable? (2) If it is favourable, does that give rise to an obligation to believe on the part of those to whom the evidence is available? The concern in this paper is not with the first of these questions; the point is just that for *some* religious thinkers, the view that there is an obligation to hold religious beliefs is grounded in the view that the evidence is favourable.

We might ask parenthetically whether the word 'faith' is appropriate in this context. Is the obligation here (if there is one) an obligation to exercise *faith*? (The question is, of course, about *propositional* faith.) This question draws attention to the fact that for this version of the obligation to believe 'faith' does not mean 'venturing beyond the evidence'. Propositional faith, on this view, turns out to be more or less equivalent to *rationaly justified belief* (perhaps restricted to a certain class of religious beliefs). The propositions of faith either have their acceptance directly justified by favourable evidence

¹ Rom. 1: 18–20, *New English Bible*.

² John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), vol. 1, bk. 1, chaps. 3–5.

or are justified rationally by a legitimate appeal to authority. Aquinas, for example, holds that there are rational grounds for acceptance of the Biblical writings as a divine revelation. Calvin holds the same view.¹ Faith in the particular propositions of the *Bible*, then, is belief justified by its status as a revelation.

How does this version of the doctrine of an obligation to believe relate to the disagreement between James and Clifford? Well, in the first place the doctrine seems to fall clearly under the principle that *we ought to proportion our belief to the evidence*. Clifford's formulation is weaker than this, however. Also, James is in partial agreement with Clifford. Consider the following possible imperatives concerning belief:

- (1) *Proportion* belief to the evidence.
- (2) Do not *believe* in the face of a preponderance of unfavourable evidence.
- (3) Do not *disbelieve* in the face of a preponderance of favourable evidence.
- (4) Do not *suspend* belief in the face of a preponderance of favourable evidence.
- (5) Do not believe *beyond* the evidence.

Notice first certain relationships between these principles. First, (1) is the strongest and seems clearly to entail all the others. Second, since disbelief is a kind of belief, (3) is just a special case of (2), so that any commitment to (2) will entail a commitment to (3). Third, the difference between (3) and (4) is the difference between *disbelief* and *nonbelief*, a difference which underlines an ambiguity in the religious notion of *unbelief*.

The clear disagreement between James and Clifford is on (5), which Clifford asserts and James denies. As a result of his denial of (5), James must also deny (1). On the other hand, James accepts (2) and therefore must also accept (3). Clifford must accept (2) and (3) as well, since (2) follows from (5) which he accepts. As a result, Clifford and James must agree *that we ought not to disbelieve in the religious hypothesis if it is favoured by the evidence*.

At this point the distinction between disbelief and nonbelief becomes crucial, and the ambiguity in 'unbelief' comes to the fore. If we accept the view that we ought always to proportion our belief to evidence (1), then we must view suspension of belief (in the face of a preponderance of favourable evidence) as wrong, though perhaps as a lesser offence than *disbelief*. So, given a balance of favourable evidence, *unbelief* in either sense will be wrong.

If (1) were an accurate formulation of his view, Clifford would be committed to the Calvinist version of the obligation to believe (although he would disagree with Calvin's view about the state of the evidence on religious matters). The relevant application of (1) could be formulated in terms of a principle analogous to (5): Do not believe *short* of the evidence. There is, however, no good evidence that Clifford subscribes to (1) and no good reason

¹ *Institutes*, chap. 8; Aquinas, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, trans. Anton C. Pegis (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, Image Books, 1955), chap. 6.

to think that he would accept this version of the obligation to believe. He expresses only his acceptance of an obligation to *suspend* belief or to refrain from *over-belief*.

On the other hand, although James rejects (1), there is some reason to suspect that on his view the distinction between disbelief and nonbelief breaks down. If so, then the difference between (3), which he must accept, and (4) will break down as well, with the result that he must *accept* the view that we have an obligation to believe when the evidence is favourable.

There are two reasons to suspect that the distinction between disbelief and nonbelief breaks down on James' view, at least in certain cases. The first is that he tends generally to identify belief and action. The second is that he explicitly says in 'The Will to Believe' that there are cases in which from a practical (and presumably also a moral) point of view believing a proposition false and suspending belief come down to the same thing. In those cases the relevant dichotomy is between acceptance and rejection. In those cases it matters not whether the rejection is viewed as a matter of disbelief or as a matter of nonbelief.¹

It would be incorrect to say that the distinction between disbelief and nonbelief is generally undermined on James' view. The test of a distinction for James is whether it makes any practical difference: 'There can *be* no difference anywhere that doesn't *make* a difference elsewhere – no difference in abstract truth that doesn't express itself in a difference in concrete fact and in conduct subsequent upon that fact, imposed on somebody, somehow, somewhere, and somewhen'.² In so far as the choice between disbelief and nonbelief makes a difference, it is a real choice. James' claim is that there are *some* cases, however, in which it does not make a significant difference so far as the important practical implications of the choice. In just those cases, the distinction between disbelief and nonbelief is irrelevant. Those are the cases in which there is what James calls 'a *genuine option*' between acceptance of a belief and failure to accept. A *genuine option* is one which is 'living', 'forced' and 'momentous'. An option is 'living' if each side actually has some appeal to us and 'momentous' if it offers a unique opportunity of some significance. It is 'forced' if the significant choice is between accepting the proposition and going without it. Its being 'forced' is what undermines the distinction between disbelief and nonbelief.³

Genuine options are also the cases in which *over-belief* is justified, the cases in which principle (5) does not apply. There is, however, a second condition which must be satisfied for James if (5) is to be set aside in a particular case. Not only must there be a *genuine option*, but the evidence must not clearly favour one side or the other of the question. What is important to notice here

¹ 'The Will to Believe', pp. 105–6.

² 'What Pragmatism Means', *Essays in Pragmatism*, p. 144.

³ See section 1 of 'The Will to Believe'.

is that there may be cases in which the first condition is met but the second is not, cases in which there is a genuine option with evidence clearly favouring one side. Suppose the genuine option is between believing or going without p , but that the evidence clearly favours p . Then, given the acceptance of (3) ('Do not disbelieve in the face of a preponderance of favourable evidence') and the obliteration in the case of *genuine options* of the distinction between disbelief and nonbelief (at least so far as practical considerations go), acceptance of (4) ('Do not *suspend* belief in the face of preponderance of favourable evidence') must follow. Thus, although at first it may have seemed as though it would be Clifford whose position might favour the first version of the obligation to believe, it actually turns out to be James who must accept it, although only in those special cases in which there is a *genuine option* together with a preponderance of favourable evidence.

III

Unbelief as a failure to venture beyond the evidence. The question now to be taken up is whether it is ever blameworthy to refrain from exercising propositional faith, whether we ever have an obligation to engage in *over-belief*. I want to take this up in the context of James' doctrine of the will to believe. Assuming that his doctrine is correct, does it ever take us beyond the *permissibility* of *over-belief* to its *obligatoriness*?

At least four possible lines of argument for such an obligation can be developed within the context of James' discussions and applications of his doctrine. Two of them are weak and fairly easily disposed of. The other two are more promising and require a closer examination. The first two are as follows: (1) We are unavoidably influenced in the formation of our beliefs by passional factors. Some of these influences are more harmful than others. Therefore, we have an obligation to exercise some control over these factors by choosing to be influenced by some rather than others, insofar as this is possible. (2) In some cases we have an obligation to consider as much evidence as possible on a particular question. And in some of these cases it may happen that the only way to get access to important evidence is by *over-belief*. If such a case arises, we thus have an obligation to believe beyond the evidence presently at hand.

The problem with the first of these arguments is that there is an alternative which is at least as plausible, and that is that it may instead be our obligation to fight against these influences, even though the battle may never be perfectly successful. Although the ideal of rationality may never be fully satisfied, as is generally the case with ideals, we ought to earnestly pursue it. We can never succeed at being perfectly kind, for example, but this fact does not justify selective cruelty.

Suppose, in connection with (2), that we assume that there are cases in which there is an obligation to consider all available evidence (within the constraints imposed by competing obligations and the practicalities of the situation). The important (and plausible) further assumption of the argument is that rational considerations may appear on more than one level. On one level, *evidence* is the consideration; but on another level, there may be rational grounds other than evidence for p which favour the acceptance of p . However, to say that factors on this second level permit *over-belief* is one thing: to say that they require it is another. Whatever considerations have led to the conclusion that in a particular case we have an obligation to consider the evidence, these considerations will not automatically take us to the further conclusion. We may be getting access to further evidence by *over-belief*, but we are also failing to operate according to the evidence which we already have. One obligation concerning evidence weighs against another. It *may* be that the obligation to go after further evidence obtainable only through *over-belief* outweighs the obligation to operate according to the evidence we have. But, if so, it is by virtue of factors other than simply a concern for evidence. It will then be these other factors which justify *over-belief*.

This brings us to the second pair of arguments: (3) There may be cases in which *over-belief* is a precondition for meeting some specific moral responsibility. In such cases an obligation to exercise *over-belief* will be entailed. Therefore, there may be cases in which we have a moral obligation to believe beyond the evidence. (4) In addition to our specific moral responsibilities, we have a more general obligation to be committed to morality. This higher level moral obligation requires acceptance, on faith, of certain general principles which cannot be established on the basis of evidence. Therefore, *over-belief* with respect to these principles is obligatory.

In connection with (3), consider one of James' examples: a man climbing in the Alps manages to get himself into a position where he can be saved only by making a treacherous leap. Never having been in similar circumstances before, he lacks clear evidence about whether he can make such a leap or not. However, if he manages to work up the belief that he can make it, his confidence will increase his chances of success. 'In this case', James says, 'the part of wisdom clearly is to believe what one desires; for the belief is one of the indispensable preliminary conditions of the realization of its object.'¹

We might say of the man in this example that 'he owes it to himself' to exercise faith. Whether obligations to oneself are *moral* obligations is a matter of dispute. But suppose that making the leap is the only way of keeping a promise or fulfilling some other clearly moral obligation. Consider a further example: a soldier in battle realizes that he may be able to save his comrades by some daring act, such as singlehandedly charging and overtaking an enemy position. It is not clear whether he can succeed. But success depends

¹ 'The Sentiment of Rationality', p. 27.

upon confidence and confidence upon a belief that he will succeed. In this case it seems clear that *over-belief* will be *meritorious* although not obligatory. I suggest that it is plausible to say the same of the previous sort of case, that to will to believe in such a case is meritorious, it is to go beyond the call of duty. If willing to believe were a simple act of acceptance, it might make good sense in the previous case to say there is an obligation. But to show that there is an obligation, we must establish clearly that the necessity for *over-belief* and its complexity does not relieve one from the obligation to keep a promise or fulfill some other moral obligation. The argument, as it stands at least, does not do this. Two observations, finally, can be made about this argument: (a) it makes some progress by at least showing that *over-belief* can be *meritorious*, if not obligatory, and (b) it does not seem to help much with the grander issues, such as belief in the existence of God.

The fourth line of argument more obviously applies to the grander questions. Perhaps the argument should be formulated in somewhat different terms. We might put it this way: a person who fails to be generally committed to morality may be said to be *morally deficient*, although in a different sense (but also a more serious one) than a person who breaks particular moral rules or fails to fulfill specific moral obligations. Maybe words such as ‘obligation’ and ‘blameworthiness’ ought to be reserved for specific cases within the context of morality. But still it is an offence, a much grander one, to fail to take ‘the moral point of view’.

This sort of formulation is more consistent with James’ actual formulations and applications of the doctrine of the will to believe. The applications which concern him primarily are to larger philosophical questions, such as the problem of free-will and the problem of objective values.¹ In so far as a general commitment to morality presupposes a belief in freedom and a belief in objective value, it can be argued that one is morally deficient if one fails to exercise the will to believe on these issues (assuming that one is capable of doing so). If it could be shown that the belief in objective values presupposes a belief in the existence of God, then the same could be argued in connection with that belief. All this depends, of course, on the making of certain connections. In ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’, however, a more direct variant is suggested. In that essay, James claims that values *arise* out of our belief in value. The belief in values is ‘self-verifying’, it ‘makes itself true’. Thus, it is up to us to make the universe a moral one by choosing to believe that it is. In the context of this view, a general commitment to morality is a matter of the creation of morality by the exercise of faith. Again, there is the suggestion that things will be somehow *better* if we do this and that in some sweeping sense we ‘ought’ to do it.

¹ On the value issue see ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’, ‘The Sentiment of Rationality’, pp. 31–6 and ‘The Will to Believe’, pp. 103–4. On the question of free will see ‘The Dilemma of Determinism’.

These, then, are our general results, at least within the context of James' view, with respect to the doctrine that we may have an obligation to believe: (1) in the case of what James calls a 'genuine option' a preponderance of favourable evidence obligates us to believe; (2) in some cases it may be at least *meritorious* to exercise *over-belief* about particular matters of fact, when some moral good may be accomplished through doing so; (3) if there are certain general principles whose acceptance is presupposed by a general commitment to morality and whose acceptance can only be brought about by *over-belief*, it may be that one who fails to make the appropriate efforts can be said to be morally deficient in a rather serious sense. One might even go so far, on this last point, as to argue that belief in the existence of God is obligatory, at least for those for whom it is a 'living option'.

There is one final issue which must be taken up briefly. To what extent are the sorts of obligations or responsibilities we have been talking about *moral*, as opposed to prudential or something else? There is no doubt that Clifford regards the entire issue as a moral one. But James' justification of faith seems to place more emphasis on rational and prudential considerations than on moral ones. Despite this, with arguments (3) and (4) the considerations appealed to are obviously moral, and it would be unreasonable to regard any obligations given rise to as non-moral. Even the considerations involved in (1) and (2) might be argued to be morally significant, although the demands appealed to seem to be *rational* rather than *moral* demands. It is beyond the scope of this paper to consider in any detail the possible connections between the demands of rationality and those of morality. But in conclusion I will suggest what seems to me to be a promising way of connecting the two. Moral responsibility presupposes the possibility of moral deliberation, evaluation and justification are essentially rational notions. A commitment to them presupposes a commitment to rationality. So a general commitment to morality presupposes a general commitment to rationality. Thus, ultimately the demands of rationality may be in part moral ones, just as the demands of morality are in part rational ones.