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TO BELIEVE**

Scott F. Aikin

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Evidentialism and the Will
to Believe

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Contents

Acknowledgments	viii
Copyright Acknowledgments	x
Introduction	1
1. <i>The objectives of commentary</i>	1
2. <i>Three themes</i>	4
3. <i>Five evaluative theses</i>	6
1 Reading William Kingdon Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief"	9
William Kingdon Clifford and the Metaphysical Society	9
Section I – The duty of inquiry	13
1. <i>The ship owner case</i>	13
2. <i>The island case</i>	22
3. <i>Beliefs and actions</i>	27
4. <i>Beliefs and their consequences</i>	32
5. <i>Ethics and belief</i>	42
6. <i>Endorsing evidentialism</i>	47
Section II – The weight of authority	50
1. <i>Anti-skepticism</i>	50
2. <i>Testimonial evidence</i>	53
3. <i>Miraculous testimony</i>	56
4. <i>The publicity requirement</i>	59
5. <i>The sacred tradition of humanity</i>	64
Section III – The limits of inference	69
1. <i>A burnt child dreads the fire</i>	69
2. <i>Regulative principles</i>	72
3. <i>Three norms</i>	78
2 Reading William James's "The Will to Believe"	79
William James and "The Will to Believe"	79
Preamble	81

Section I – Hypotheses and options	86
1. <i>Introduction and definitions</i>	86
2. <i>Live and dead hypotheses</i>	87
3. <i>Forced options</i>	91
4. <i>Momentous options</i>	95
5. <i>Religion as a genuine option</i>	96
Section II – Pascal’s Wager	98
1. <i>Four stages of “The Will to Believe”</i>	98
2. <i>Voluntarism and its limits</i>	100
3. <i>The wager</i>	101
4. <i>Clifford’s veto</i>	102
Section III – Psychological causes of belief	103
1. <i>A concession to evidentialism</i>	103
2. <i>Truth and other useful ideas</i>	106
3. <i>Pascal is a regular clincher</i>	108
Section IV – The thesis of the essay	109
1. <i>A thematic transition</i>	109
2. <i>The thesis</i>	111
Sections V and VI – Absolutism and empiricism	114
1. <i>Two forms of faith</i>	114
2. <i>Objective evidence and its discontents</i>	118
3. <i>Truth for empiricism</i>	121
Section VII – Two different sorts of risks in believing	123
1. <i>The two commandments</i>	123
2. <i>The case for the Truth Norm</i>	125
3. <i>Two critical points</i>	128
Section VIII – Some risk unavoidable	131
1. <i>Applying the meta-epistemology</i>	131
2. <i>Interested inquiry</i>	133
3. <i>Two analogies</i>	135
Section IX – Faith may bring forth its own verification	136
1. <i>Moral and scientific questions</i>	136
2. <i>Moral skepticism</i>	137
3. <i>The argument from friendship</i>	140
4. <i>The argument from social coordination</i>	145
5. <i>Doxastic efficacy and the Will to Believe</i>	148

Section X – Logical conditions of religious belief	154
1. <i>The overall form of James’s argument</i>	154
2. <i>Religion’s dual essence</i>	160
3. <i>Religion as live and momentous</i>	163
4. <i>Religion as forced</i>	167
5. <i>The conversion fallacy</i>	170
6. <i>Religion as doxastically efficacious</i>	172
7. <i>Evidentialism as irrational</i>	175
8. <i>Religious tolerance</i>	178
3 The Ethics of Belief and Philosophy of Religion	181
Question 1: Must evidentialism be an ethical doctrine?	181
Question 2: Can practical reasons trump theoretical reasons?	184
Question 3: Can religion be pragmatically reconstructed?	190
Question 4: What about the power of positive thinking?	192
Notes	195
Bibliography	203
Index	210

Acknowledgments

This is a book that has, in some form or other, been brewing for a long time. Since my first exposure to the ethics of belief debates in graduate school, I wanted to know the issue inside and out. One of the real benefits of falling into this matter at that time in my education was that I had a cadre of other like-minded students with whom to discuss the issue. Vanderbilt in the late nineties and early aughts provided a rich variety of attitudes. My two regular partners in conversation on the Clifford–James debate were James Bednar and Allen Coates. My understanding of and views on the ethics of belief are all descendants of the ideas that survived our joint critical scrutiny. Others at Vanderbilt who contributed mightily to my understanding of the issue were Jason Aleksander, Erin Bradfield, Carolyn Cusick, Jeff Edmonds, Paul Ford, Lenn Goodman, David Miguel Gray, Michael Hodges, John Lachs, Mason Marshall, Emily McGill, Jose Medina, Jonathan Neufeld, Brian Ribeiro, Aaron Simmons, Robert Talisse, Jeffrey Tlumak, Derek Turner, and Dylan Wittkower. Additionally, another Vanderbilt alum, Micah Hester organized a session on “The Will to Believe” at the 2012 William James Society, and he was good enough to invite me to present a short version of my main critical line against James. The session was incredibly rewarding. Micah and the other panelists, Jeff Kasser and Michael Slater, provided me with very helpful feedback and justly critical pushback. Others who have given me very useful thoughts on the issue at various conferences and over email have been Jonathan Adler, Guy Axtell, Bryan Baird, Antonio Bendezu, Robert Brandom, John Casey, Mylan Engel, Richard Gale, Cynthia Gayman, Russell Goodman, Charlie Hobbs, Christopher Hookway, Henry Jackman, Ralph Johnson, Jason Kawall, Peter Klein, Mary Magada-Ward, Cheryl Misak, Ted Poston, Harvey Siegel, and Brian Zamulinski. Another very hearty word of thanks is reserved for Colleen Coalter at Bloomsbury for contacting me with the idea of pursuing this book. She, Andrew Wardell, and the rest of the editorial staff at Bloomsbury have been a pleasure to work with.

One of my main motives for writing this book was that I thought that Clifford’s view and his argument for it has been all too ignored in the critical literature on the ethics of belief. Beyond the careful work of Brian Zamulinski (2002 and 2004) and Tim Madigan (2012), there have not been really any tight-

focus readings of Clifford's essay or sympathetic replies to James's criticisms. I concede that Clifford's argument, ultimately, doesn't work. Its final move is a confusion of contraries with contradictories—he takes it that if one holds that it is false that *All events are parts of the uniformity of nature*, then one must hold that *No events are uniform*. Despite this error, Clifford's argument fares much better than for what James gives him credit. It's worthwhile to clarify the view—and to extend and supplement Clifford's argument where it can be. Evidentialism is the correct attitude, I think, and Clifford's arguments are the right ethical lines to take when they are properly framed. I, further, believe that far too many of the close readings of James are altogether insufficiently critical. They neither challenge James on his interpretations of Clifford nor do they subject James's substantive philosophical claims to much scrutiny. That, I think, needs fixing, and I'll have some very critical lines of argument against James's position here. My main charge against James's case is that it relies on an illicit conversion of the plausible *All belief directs action* to the implausible *All action is directed by belief*. James's argument depends on the thought that only by holding a positive belief can the actions comprising and making possible successful living can be performed. But it is far from clear that one must believe in order to act. One most certainly can act without thinking—people do it all the time.

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Introduction

1. The objectives of commentary

William Kingdon Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" and William James's "The Will to Believe" are yoked together in the story of philosophy.¹ The two essays are taken as the classic starting point for reflection on the norms governing responsible belief. Clifford captures his view, evidentialism, with the stark pronouncement that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe on insufficient evidence." Clifford, thus, stands poised as the spirit of intellectual honesty, as the one who follows the arguments where they lead, as a thinker who spurns comforting fictions. In contrast, James's doctrine of the will-to-believe is exemplified by the claim that "our passional 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 grounds." James offers a defense of the sentiments' role in intellectual life, he stands as the Romantic resistance to the demands of bloodless reason, he defends belief in the face of withering skepticism. Clifford and James are iconically opposed. Their respective essays are anthologized, taught, discussed, and cited alongside each other as the natural introduction to the ethics of belief. Yet, surprisingly, these essays have never received a book-length joint commentary. That fact is particularly surprising in light of the wide and varied discussions of them in epistemology, American philosophy, and philosophy of religion. The clash between evidentialism and the will-to-believe has spawned many conference essays, journal articles, and book chapters. But, again, none have been devoted to a complete reconstruction of and commentary on the two essays. With this book, that changes.

Commentaries are useful scholarly tools, and for influential works that are touchstones for progressively divergent traditions, they are necessary. First, commentaries can show how the deep differences arose from shared background views. With this commentary, I will highlight how much Clifford and James

share in practical vision and philosophical aspiration. Despite the fact that the two make cases for radically different directions in thought, they share a common set of values and commitments to philosophy contributing to real practical good. Those who stand as torchbearers of the traditions Clifford and James founded can use a reminder of their common ground.

The second reason why commentaries on influential works such as these are useful is that landmark books and essays are too often read in the light of the traditions arising from them and applications to which they are put, but not in the light of their own stated goals and arguments. This happens often, and a literary case may highlight this phenomenon. Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* is a story about how, in the turn of the twentieth century, people working in the Chicago stockyards and meat-packing plants were exploited, but the public response to the book was to the depictions of disgusting conditions of food preparation. Its role in the American story is that it precipitated the Meat Inspection Act, but very few reference its role in the development of the labor movement. In a way, the book is known more for what seems a misinterpretation (if not misplaced emphasis). This is not to say anything as drastic as what happened to Sinclair's book has happened to Clifford's and James's, but that the effects and consequent ways of conceiving of a work can be very different from what actually happens in it. Once a work has that iconic status, it can be difficult to interpret it in anything but the mode of contributing to or making sense of that icon. Again, nothing quite so much is the case with Clifford and James, but there are some distortions that the essays' reception and status in the received story of philosophy have precipitated. I'll be working to correct those.

In commentaries, especially on iconic works, it is useful to provide historical contextualizations of such intellectual iconography. The historical contextualizer may supplement a reading of a text with other materials the author wrote or was reading. And so we may make sense of what the author said in essay X by finding something similar in book Y, or we may look to a book Z by some other author. In such a process, we place the author's work in a web of relations, and we see the work as it relates to the rest of the author's work and that of others. Such is historical commentary, and its demands are high—both in the scholarship to do it and in the patience to read it.

I have no intention for this commentary to be heavy historical scholarship. I will reference and explain other works where Clifford and James do, and I will try to briefly set out the stakes for their essays. But otherwise, the rest of the other voices in their milieu will be mostly silent here. The reason is that both Clifford and James wrote their essays for popular consumption, for the

educated but lay audience. These two essays were not written for scholars. They were written for people who could listen and read closely. Both of these authors wrote their essays to stand on their own, without the need of importing a grand philosophical system to make their claims seem plausible, and without the need of heavy historicizing to make their prose intelligible. As such, this book is an exercise in *internal interpretation*. The historical and larger philosophical approaches to commentary are devoted to making sense of the texts in terms of how they hook up with things *external* to them (other essays, other authors, the traditions they motivate). I wish to read these essays on their own terms, as essays that were presented to educated, but not philosophically advanced, audiences. As such, I take them as essays that articulate philosophical positions on the basis of arguments they themselves provide. And as a consequence, my commentary will have relatively sparse scholarly apparatus, as I do not believe one must wade through the various others who have made similar observations or not in order to state the basic argument in the text. The arguments are there, with their markers for premises and conclusions, and we just need to open our eyes and read them. This said, there are places where scholarly disagreements are significant enough to require me to lay out a few interpretive options. I will do my best not to let my own preferences tilt the presentation excessively, but I will be clear about where I believe the evidence leads us.

There are certainly those who will make postmodern scoffing noises at my naïve contention that we can go back to the texts themselves. We always read with an agenda, through a lens, or with a bias. That's how the story goes. However, it's clear that attitudes like this are self-defeating. Here's how: when someone who's read too much French philosophy says "It's all interpretation" or some such fashionable nonsense, I would nevertheless *misinterpret* her were I to take her to be ordering a cheeseburger, and whereupon hand her one. And that misinterpretation would be because of the fact that I should have read or attended to what the words she spoke or wrote meant. Once we've fixed my misinterpretation, we see she was wrong about it all being interpretation. If it's all interpretation, my interpretation of her sentence isn't *wrong*. But it was. So it can't *all* be interpretation. Otherwise, there wouldn't be *mis*-interpretation. There is interpretation, but interpretation is out to get something right. There is a fact of the matter of what was meant. So as it turns out that what the postmodern critic meant was also false. At least someone got a cheeseburger out of the deal.

My point is that this project of internal commentary is, on the one hand, modest. Many of the going scholarly disputes are at most going to have brief exposure. Those disputes are to be worked out piecemeal once we are clear what

the arguments actually are. On the other hand, though, internal criticism is where it all should start. A close reading of the text, even if the ultimate objective is to connect it up with other works or to interpret according to some program, must start with the text itself. It seems a truism, but in philosophy, saying things that are obviously true is necessary. In this discipline, it's easy to get lost to the point where you've forgotten good sense. It's best to mark the path out of nonsense clearly.

Finally, it is important with these two essays specifically that we approach them with this comportment of internal reading. Since they were presented and published for popular audiences, such modesty is necessary. Neither James nor Clifford expected us to read the essays through the lens of scholars (especially scholars of their own larger corpus), but as thoughtful people. Further, given the traditions the two essays have spawned, it is crucial that we see what of those traditions now are traceable back to these essays and what are later accretions. This book only fixes what's in the essays. The contrast with the traditions requires more work beyond this commentary, but my final chapter on what I call the *lingering questions* from the two essays will lay out what I take to be the intellectual terrain one encounters in light of their arguments.

2. Three themes

My objective with this commentary is to present the core arguments of W.K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" and William James's "The Will to Believe." The two essays are written in sections, and my commentary will proceed section-by-section through them. I will explain what happens in each section, how it builds on what happens in previous sections, and what might be said further about the case presented. I will pause here and there to untangle the odd interpretive issue or state (and sometimes answer) what seem to be the most challenging objections. Further, James's essay is presented as a response to Clifford's evidentialist viewpoint, and so with James, I will additionally discuss how the case proceeds against Clifford and how the Cliffordian evidentialist might reply.

Three themes will emerge in this commentary. The first is that Clifford and James, despite their differences, share a core commitment to a broad form of pragmatism. Their views on how beliefs are acquired, how they function, and why it is important to responsibly hold them both take the form of a concern for the role of belief in practical life. Both philosophers take the view that beliefs

have not only a *representational* side, that of presenting the world as one way or another, but also an *actional* side in being plans for action. Further, both make their respective cases on the basis of the *practical consequences* that follow from believing one way or another. Both of their cases are practical and ethical arguments for certain norms of belief, and as such, both share a core pragmatic vision.

The second theme of this commentary, in light of the authors' shared pragmatism and ethical aspirations, is the question of how practicable the two views really are. On the one hand, there is the question of how demanding Clifford's evidentialist requirement really is. Clifford, himself, was aware of this concern, as he notes at the beginning of the second section of his essay that he may be flirting with an untenable global skepticism. He argues that he is not a skeptic, but this protest regularly falls on deaf ears. James's interpretation of Clifford's evidentialism certainly contributes not only to this concern but also to the view that it actually is far too stark. A running question, then, is just how practically wise would it be to be an evidentialist of Cliffordian stripes? Is James's case that it wouldn't a fair representation of Clifford's stated views?

On the other hand, we have the same question of practicability posed for James's will-to-believe doctrine. Is it a sound attitude for practice? Is it wise to have confidence in some propositions when there is no evidence to support them? James, like Clifford, sees the extremes to which his view could be taken if untempered and put to use improperly. He holds that when properly deployed, the will-to-believe is not mere self-confidence or wishful thinking run amok. It is a responsible and useful pattern of belief. But then the question is what those conditions for proper deployment are and whether James is right that the will-to-believe really is that wise.

The third theme is laying out the stakes for Clifford and James's ultimate philosophical quarry: *religious belief*. It is important to note that both philosophers agree that the traditional natural theological case for God's existence has failed. Both agree that the evidence for God is weak at best, certainly not enough to justify religious belief on its own. Clifford's case proceeds along two lines. The first is simple: because the evidence is not sufficient to show that belief in God is true, one should not believe. That's just Cliffordian evidentialism. Clifford's second line is that the evidence also shows that belief in God under these conditions is conducive of other intellectual and moral errors. So it would be no mere one-off case of breaking a rule, one with no consequences if you harbor religious belief without the requisite evidence. To the contrary, Clifford holds, religious belief brings with it a host of other intellectual vices, too.

Alternately, James's will-to-believe doctrine is considerably more conciliatory with religious belief. Again, James has conceded that we face the question of belief in the face of an absence of sufficient evidence for the belief. What happens to religious belief when its standard intellectual defenses fail? And, again, James holds that they have failed. James is nevertheless committed to the proposition that religious belief may be responsibly held even after the proofs for it have come crashing down. But, again, only under very specific conditions that James lays out at the beginning of the essay (those of genuine options) and under very specific descriptions of what James calls the "religious hypothesis." These descriptions of the religious hypothesis are what are of import, as the beliefs that survive scrutiny here and are held responsibly have been transformed in the process of willing-to-believe. It seems that as the traditional arguments for the traditional conception of God fall, so falls the traditional conception of God. Belief in God, in the wake of James's defense, is *reconstructed*. The religious hypothesis is less a view about ultimate reality and God's place in it and more a view about the place of hope in our lives. The lesson is that part of James's defense of religious belief is to change it into something defensible in light of the lack of evidence for God's existence. And so religious belief in James's hands is no longer about God, Jesus, Heaven, Hell, angels, or miracles. It is simply that "the more eternal things are best" and that believing that is good. This is what of religious belief that the will-to-believe doctrine can salvage. The question for religious believers coming to James's program as a source of support for their antecedent beliefs in God is whether James is really much of an ally in the defense of faith traditionally conceived. Is Jamesian reconstructed religious belief much better an option than Cliffordian nonbelief?

3. Five evaluative theses

I've always admired philosophers that make clear what it is that they take to be at issue in a discussion, what they will argue, and where the twists and turns in the argument will be. Doing philosophy well depends largely on doing it clearly. In the service of this, I want to make clear the central theses of this commentary. There are five main evaluative theses I will be presenting:

1. Clifford's case for evidentialism must be supplemented with an explanation of why false belief is bad and credulity is unacceptable. Clifford's slope arguments perform this task better than they are regularly appreciated.

2. Clifford's defense of the Assumption of the Uniformity of Nature ultimately suffers from the fallacy of confusing contraries with contradictories.
3. James's will-to-believe cases fail as counterexamples to Clifford's evidentialist rule. Instead, they are better posed as cases for a belief-dependent notion of evidence, what I call *doxastic efficacy*.
4. James's will-to-believe doctrine as a practical attitude depends not only on the plausible view that *All belief is a guide to action*, but also on its implausible converse, *All action is guided by belief*. This consistent confusion I will call *the conversion fallacy*. It is rampant in James's argument.
5. James's reconstructed account of religious belief fails to salvage recognizably religious belief.

The takeaway is that Clifford's argument needs some tweaking and that James's argument is widely misconstrued as having refuted Clifford's evidentialist requirement. Moreover, I believe that even were James's critique of Clifford successful, the positive program for James is insufficient as a defense of the religious life he portrays it to be. In fact, I believe that religious believers who take Jamesian willing-to-believe as a means to defend their commitments have made a serious error assessing what the content of the commitments supported is. As such, I will be presenting Clifford as having come out better in the dialectic than James. This, by the way, is a very unpopular view of the exchange in the received story of philosophy. It is a much more widespread opinion that James got the better of Clifford. But in philosophy, as it is in many other areas of our lives, popularity is rarely a reliable guide to truth.

Reading William Kingdon Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief"

William Kingdon Clifford and the Metaphysical Society

William Kingdon Clifford died of tuberculosis on March 3, 1879. He was 33 and left Lucy, his wife of three years, and two daughters. Before his illness he was a Fellow in the Royal Society, an honor reserved only for the most accomplished academics. He was Professor of Applied Mathematics at University College, London, and before that, he had been a fellow at Trinity College, Cambridge. Clifford was born on May 4, 1845, in Exeter, England, to a bookseller, and he went early to his undergraduate education at 15. First, to King's College in London, but after excelling, his studies took him to Cambridge. Clifford translated works on non-Euclidean geometry into English, and he defended a view of geometry as an experimental and applied science in his essay, "The Aims and Instruments of Scientific Thought." He showed, further, that three parallel lines define a ruled second-order surface, now named "Clifford Surfaces," and parallel lines in "elliptic space" are also called "Clifford Parallels," after him.¹ Clifford was interested in the application and the accessibility of mathematics. He, early in his career, travelled on an eclipse expedition to the Mediterranean. The ship he was on struck rocks outside Catalina. It was lost, but all the passengers and scientific equipment were saved. The shipwreck was full of portent, as will be seen in Part I of "The Ethics of Belief." Clifford was also an advocate of mathematical education, and his *Common Sense of the Exact Sciences* was written with an eye to explaining the state of the art in scientific and mathematical research to the layman. Scientific literacy, Clifford thought, was a key to social change.

Connected to his activism in popularizing scientific findings was Clifford's advocacy of religious freethinking. At Cambridge, Clifford was, at first, an avid

reader of St. Thomas Aquinas and he was an enthusiastic supporter of Catholic doctrine. But then he read Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, the regular thought that science was to be pursued within the confines of a religious perspective no longer seemed defensible. In fact, Clifford came to see much of Christian doctrine and the organizations of churches as positive impediments to the progress of scientific understanding and the improvement of society. In his fiery "The Ethics of Religion," Clifford concludes: "If men were no better than their religions, the world would be a hell, indeed" (L&E 218).

Importantly, Clifford holds that most people are not as bad as their religions, because they have a conscience. This conscience, an inborn capacity to see the reasonable connection between facts, the rational response to challenges, is the fount not only of our capacity to understand the world, but also human morality. In short, science and morality share the same cognitive foundation. Clifford calls it a "natural ethics," in "Right and Wrong: The Scientific Ground for the Distinction" (L&E 156), and in "The Ethics of Belief," he terms it "the sacred tradition of humanity" (L&E 197). And so, according to Clifford, religion has no role except that of confusion and error in science and ethics.

These views made Clifford a lightning rod for the religious concerns of the day. This was the time of what's regularly called *The Victorian Crisis of Faith*. Darwin's works and Thomas Huxley's public avowals of *agnosticism* brought many of the intellectuals, religious leaders, and politicians of the day to ask whether England was on the wrong track. In essence, the question was whether the world was intelligible and whether people could be moral without God's guidance. God, in both ethics and science, is the ultimate explainer. He made the universe and He made the rules for our behavior. In ethics, this concern is felt more acutely, as many worried (and still do today) that God is not only required to explain ethics but also provide motivation to be ethical. Without a God who punishes misdeeds in the life to come, it would be nothing but immorality down here, for sure. Fear of everlasting punishment keeps society together. And so the Victorian Crisis of Faith was not just an academic or intellectual concern. It was a discussion about what kind of society England would be. "The Ethics of Belief" was Clifford's signal contribution.

"The Ethics of Belief" was originally presented at the April 11, 1876, meeting of The Metaphysical Society. The society was a gathering of England's top intellectuals from across various disciplines. Alfred Lord Tennyson, then the Poet Laureate, was a member. As were Arthur Stanley, Dean of Westminster; the current prime minister, William Gladstone; Arthur James Balfour, the later prime minister; the biologist (and "Darwin's Bulldog") T. H. Huxley; the Catholic

Archbishop of Westminster, Henry Edward Manning; the Anglican Archbishop of York, William Thomson; and other philosophers, scientists, lawyers, and mathematicians. Another member and prominent architect, Sir James Knowles, edited the popular *Contemporary Review*. He organized the Metaphysical Society meetings for the purpose of addressing the fact that disbelief seemed rampant among the intellectuals of the day. There needed to be a forum where the best cases for (and against) belief could be heard. He regularly published the papers presented and many of the discussions at the meetings in his journal. Clifford had a chance to revise his essay in light of the discussions, and Knowles published it in the January 1877 issue.

The Metaphysical Society, leading up to Clifford's 1876 presentation, had a lecture series specifically focused on miracles, and Clifford's essay was an extension of that discussion. The core question regarding miracles related by testimony is: *How trustworthy must the testimony be in order for anyone to reasonably believe solely on the basis of this testimony that the miracle occurred?* Many other lectures in the series were critical of believing on the basis of miracle testimony. James Fitzjames Stephen, the famous jurist, opened the discussion of Miracles for the Society in 1874. He took on the perspective of a judge's assessment of evidence for the event. Would testimony in the form of what we have for miracles be sufficient in a court of law? Stephen's view was that without any other corroborating evidence, mere testimony is not sufficient for conviction. No jury would convict Mr. A for the murder of Miss. C merely on the basis of Mr. B's testimony that he'd seen, say, A push C off a cliff. Even were B otherwise trustworthy, we know that we "cannot leave this weighty matter only to his say-so." And so it goes for miracles.²

Along different lines, W. B. Carpenter approached the issue of testimony for miracles under the purview of psychology. Because all experience requires interpretation, Carpenter reasoned, those wanting to see or who are properly cued to see miracles will see them. There is always a "subjective" element to what we see, and as a consequence, mere testimony about what was witnessed is not much evidence without further investigation. It was not that those reporting the miracles lied or intentionally distorted anything, but that their experiences, being affected by their presuppositions, will not be reliable.³

T. H. Huxley then gave an address titled "The Evidence of the Miracle of the Resurrection," which became widely notorious. Cardinal Henry Newman, who was not a member of the Metaphysical Society, heard about the paper, and he wrote to R. W. Church (then Dean of St. Paul's), who planned on attending the meeting:

I hear that you and the Archbishop of York ... are going to let Professor Huxley read in your presence an argument in refutation of Our Lord's Resurrection. How can this possibly come under the scope of a Metaphysical Society? I thank my stars that, when asked to accept the honor of belonging, I declined. (Ward 1912: 333; cited by Brown 1947: 140)

Clifford's essay came after these presentations and consequent discussions, and his view was unique in that the essay was not devoted to the analysis of some piece of evidence or other or over some miracle's appeal. Rather, Clifford was focused on whether it matters at all that there is or is not evidence. That is, it seems a natural response to Stephen, Carpenter, and Huxley's essays that the miracles reported are insufficiently supported by the standing evidence with the reply that the miracles reported are *matters of faith*, that we *accept* that they happened. They prove that God exists, that He is good, and He has had interaction with us. But they do so in a less direct fashion than simply by being established to have occurred in the way that any old historical event is established. Instead, they and the religious believer's belief in them are part of a life of commitment to God, and they make sense only once one is in the right relation to God. To push on miracles as matters of *evidence* is, so goes the reply, to misunderstand what role they play in creation and in the life of faith.

Clifford's essay is a full-throated defense of the importance of our cognitive lives dictated by evidence, that this fideistic reply to the evidential challenges to claims of miracles and revelation is not only wrong, but also morally bad. Evidence matters, and it is not something to forego or deny lightly.

Miracles are more than just unlikely events. They are supposed to be virtually impossible ones. Laws of nature must be broken for them to occur. The challenge with regard to miracles can be captured by the old Humean line: *What is more likely, the miraculous event actually occurring or the person telling you about it is in error?*

Let's take a very simple case to feel the weight of the Humean parity challenge. Imagine that you are told by your good friend that *a Little League baseball team just beat the New York Yankees*. In fact, they didn't just *beat* the Yankees, they *schooled them, smoked them, took them behind the woodshed*. It wasn't a publicity stunt. It wasn't a stupid feel-good movie. It was a bunch of fifth- and sixth-graders throwing strikes against and hitting home runs off the best team in baseball. For real.

No way, you'd say. And reasonably so. For this reason: it's more likely that your friend is mistaken, was tricked, is lying, or is consistently misspeaking than that would happen. Seriously, the Baltimore Orioles are grown men and professional baseball players, and *they* can't beat the Yankees, for Pete's sake.

There are a few things to note about the Little Leaguers versus Yankees case to note. The first is that such an event isn't technically a *miracle*. It is just something highly unlikely. Miracles are those sorts of things, but on steroids (we *are* talking baseball). Miracles are supposed to be things that not only just *don't usually happen* or are *highly unlikely things*, but instead, they are things that *don't happen, can't happen*. Why? Because miracles are supposed to be proof of the divine, supernatural intervention in the world. If they are mere coincidences or improbabilities, then they nevertheless are natural events and not cases of supernatural entities inserting themselves into the ebb and flow of events down here. Miracles, then, likely require better testimony than people can give.

The second thing to note about the Little Leaguers versus the Yankees case is that how one believes is determined by the *evidence* about the situation, not how one feels about one's friend, Little League teams, or even the much-hated Yankees. So, despite the fact that you hold your friend dear, have a soft spot for the can-do attitude of 12-year-old baseball players, and hate those Yankees with every sinew of your body (which are all perfectly reasonable attitudes), that would not change the fact that the reasonable conclusion is: *No Way*. That it would be awesome if a Little League team blew out the Yankees does not make it any more so than the horribleness of a Yankee baseball dynasty makes it any less so.

It is precisely here, again, that *faith* might be invoked. One should *trust* one's friends, one should *have a little faith* in scrappy middle schoolers. Without this element of taking a risk, doing something with one's heart every once in a while instead of just with one's head, of feeling a deep pull to some thought or commitment, we wouldn't be having this discussion about miracles. The question is: *What would be so wrong about believing the Little Leaguers story? Where's the harm in it?* For sure, one can concede that the evidence doesn't support the commitment, but because it would be *nice to believe*, what's so wrong about that? And it is here that Clifford's essay makes a case that such thoughts as these are not only in error, they are immoral.

Section I—The duty of inquiry

1. The ship owner case

Clifford opens "The Ethics of Belief" with a story of a ship owner about to send ship to sea. He has reason to doubt that the ship will make the voyage and bring