William Clifford and William James on sufficient evidence for belief
William K. Clifford (1845-1879)

- An English mathematician and philosopher, he lived during the Victorian Era
- He was the son of a justice of the peace from Exeter
- Attended Cambridge University
- Shipwrecked off Sicily while participating in a scientific expedition in the late 1860s
- Made important contributions to the study of geometry
- Greatly influenced by Charles Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* and non-Euclidean geometry
- A member of the exclusive Metaphysical Society, Clifford delivered the short but influential “The Ethics of Belief” to that group in 1877
- Died of tuberculosis
Should we believe beyond the evidence?

• Clifford’s response: “It is wrong always, everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”
Clifford is thus a supporter of evidentialism

- **Evidentialism** = we should not accept any statement as true unless we have good evidence to support its truth
- Consequences for religious belief?
- If Clifford is right, then believing in God without sufficient evidence is wrong
- Clifford is considered to be an advocate for a kind of radical agnosticism
What arguments does Clifford make to support his position?

- 1) The shipwreck example
  - Is the shipowner morally at fault if the ship goes down?
  - Is the shipowner still at fault even if the ship does not go down?

- 2) The commission appointed to investigate the charges of mistreatment of children
  - Is the commission at fault for making charges on the basis of insufficient evidence and conducting a wrongful prosecution?
Some questions for Clifford:

1) What is sufficient evidence?
2) When do we know that we have sufficient evidence?
3) Is evidence something objective (corresponding to the external world) or subjective (i.e., depending on personal experience)?
4) Can we in practice subject all of our beliefs to such scrutiny?
An ethics of belief?

- For Clifford we have a moral responsibility to “create the world in which posterity will live”
- False belief is wrong and harms not only ourselves but also others
- Respect for truth will be eroded if we don’t all live up to this high standard
William James, “The Will to Believe “ (1896)

- William James (1842-1910) was an American psychologist and philosopher
- His brother was the novelist Henry James
- James initially wanted to be a painter, then he attended Harvard Medical School
- Despite his medical degree, he never practiced medicine; he became a professor or psychology at Harvard and made major contributions to the history and philosophy of religion
Should we believe beyond the evidence?

• William James: Yes, there are situations in which it is proper, rational even, to believe without sufficient evidence

• Two commandments for James: We must know the truth and avoid error

• These two things are not always compatible
William James’ terminology

• Hypothesis = anything that may be proposed to our belief
• Forced wagers
• Conditions/ options:
  1. Forced (i.e., not avoidable)
  2. Live options (i.e., not dead)
  3. Momentous choice (i.e., not trivial)
For James, belief in God is a forced wager

- 1. The situation: there is not enough evidence one way or the other
- 2. Must choose (2 choices: be a believer or a non-believer)
- 3. Live options (at least for most people)
- 4. Choice (for most people it will make a great difference in their lives)
James is a pragmatist

• For pragmatists, the value of a belief lies in its usefulness, the practical difference it makes in our lives

• Although faith is in James’ opinion not based on reason, it is still reasonable

• This is because the results of the wager show that it is more prudent to believe than to disbelieve
Compare James’ position with Pascal’s wager

• If God exists and you believe: infinite reward
• If God exists and you don’t believe: infinite loss
• If God does not exist and you believe: finite loss
• If God does not exist and you don’t believe: finite gain
If judgements based on reason are not the only guide, what then does James think should also play a role?

- As it turns out, James attaches considerable importance to one’s emotions or passions.
- This does not, though, mean that James is a staunch defender of a more personal, evangelical type of religion.
- In fact, James’ support for organized religion overall is rather lukewarm.
Different views of truth

• 1) **Correspondance theory** = truth is correspondence to, or with, a fact (i.e., in relation to reality)

• 2) **Coherence theory** = the truth of any proposition consists in its coherence with some specified set of propositions or beliefs

• 3) **Pragmatic theory** = beliefs are considered to be true if and only if they are useful and can be practically applied