

Pragmatism and Ideology

I. Recap

Evidentialism (Clifford): *"It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence"* (p. 113)

Pragmatism (James): *Faced with a genuine choice about what to believe, and where evidence does not decide the matter, we are free to decide it however we want.*

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. (127)

In the relevant cases, we are not *rationaly compelled* to believe p, but neither are we *rationaly compelled* to withhold belief; it is *rationaly permissible* to believe p or not believe p.

We considered James' argument that Clifford's commitment to evidentialism was based on "passion", not evidence, suggesting that Clifford's evidentialism was *self-defeating*. But the self-defeat argument does not show that evidentialism is false; nor does it show that pragmatism is true or preferable. Are there other arguments for pragmatism?

II. Arguments for Pragmatism?

James not saying that we can believe anything we like. There are special contexts where passion is permitted. In particular we must be faced with a "genuine choice". But what is special about these contexts that makes belief without evidence warranted? Examples: friendship, love, faith.

The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence...*And where faith in a fact can help create the fact*, that would be an insane logic which would say that faith running ahead of evidence is [wrong]. (129)

Consider religious faith:

One who would shut himself up in snarling logicity and try to make the gods extort his recognition willy-nilly or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods' acquaintance. (130)

St. Augustine:

How can you believe if you don't know? Answer: I believe so that I may know.

Possible Pragmatist principle: *"A rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule."* (131)

So:

- (1) By following evidentialism, we are completely shut off from certain kinds of truth.
- (2) A rule which completely shuts us off from certain kinds of truth is wrong.
- (3) So evidentialism is wrong. (1,2)

How compelling is this argument? Is (2), our "possible pragmatist principle", plausible? Problem: We *should* accept rules that shut us off from some kinds of truths--e.g., we should accept rules that shut us off from beliefs about exactly how many dinosaurs there were. We want to limit belief in cases where evidence is not forthcoming or where only guesswork is possible; So (2) seems like it too strong. Yet, we wouldn't want a rule that blocked us from all belief about the past, or about distant places, or about other people, etc. So (2) may be on the right track, but it needs to be refined to get at what James is looking for. (Exercise: can you refine it?)

III. Worries about Pragmatism

i Spirit of James's argument: When there is something of significance (love, immortality...) at stake, we are allowed to take, perhaps are even justified in taking, epistemic risks.

i Yet Pragmatism is compatible with entrenched dogmatism: where there is a genuine choice and insufficient evidence, one may opt for the status quo.

i Evidentialists in general and Clifford in particular are concerned that Pragmatism doesn't provide enough safeguard against prejudice, wishful thinking, and self-serving belief.

Examples of James's "special class" of propositions?

Theism: God exists.

Love: [So and so] cares about me. (God loves me.)

Morality: It is morally right/good to give generously to the poor.

What about: (do they sometimes, for some people, present genuine choices where evidence does not decide the matter? Should we conclude that believing them in such cases is "rationally permissible"?)

Intrinsic racism: People of racial group X are inherently morally inferior.

Extrinsic racism: People of racial group X tend to have the property P, and P is a morally objectionable property (e.g., dishonesty, laziness), or warrants subordinating treatment (e.g., stupidity, irrationality).

Intrinsic/extrinsic sexism: (same as above, substituting sexes for races)

(Meritocratic) Classism: People earn what they deserve: those who make more money work harder/contribute more than others.

Ethnocentrism: The [American way of life] is preferable to all others.

Questions to consider:

1. In the cases at hand, why is there, or why does there seem to be, no compelling evidence to decide between the proposition or its negation? Has compelling evidence been earnestly sought? Has the evidence been properly evaluated?

2. Why do we find ourselves considering whether to believe p (or not)? Have there been influences over what count as live or dead options for us that have prevented us from considering other viable hypotheses?

3. What is required to exercise rational autonomy over our beliefs? To say that it is "rationally permissible" for us to believe p, the suggestion seems to be that we may exercise our autonomy in choosing to believe p. But can we be truly autonomous in matters for which there is no (compelling) evidence? Aren't we just driven by custom (ideology?),

habituation, or impulse, rather than reason in such cases?

IV. Ideology and Systematic distortion

"practical consciousness": usually inarticulate beliefs, ideas, values, plus "patterns of actions" and "ways of doing things" (53)

"explicit ideology": an articulation of a group's practical consciousness (53), e.g., philosophy, religion, morals, common sense. Might be merely "one sided" (54, 55-6), or "imposed" (55-6).

Example: Religion. It is "an *expression* of real suffering and a *protest* against real suffering." It is also "the *opium* of the people". (53) (M: 157)

"literary ideology": the written account of a group's explicit ideology, constructed by intellectuals. It might be "vulgar" (simply capturing the commonly held beliefs, without a critique of their distortion), or "political" (an effort to debunk the explicit ideology to reveal their distortion).

Examples: (vulgar:) Traditional theology, (political:) Liberation theology, Marxism.

Questions:

1. Is explicit ideology inevitably "distorted"? Is there always an "imposed" ideology? Is such imposition "intentional"?
2. Is it possible for individuals to "see through" the distortions of their group's ideology?
3. What determines the shape and content of a group's ideology? How do we change existing ideologies?
4. Is science ideological, or is it a route to undistorted understanding?

REVIEW OF POSITIONS:

Mackie: Theism is irrational (because belief in God is inconsistent with the recognition of evil).

Pascal: Theism is (pragmatically) rationally required (because the EV of theism swamps the alternatives).

Clifford: Theism is not warranted by the Wager (because belief must be based on sufficient evidence).

James: Theism is rationally permissible but not required (because it is a genuine option).

Marx: Theism is ideological (a form of "explicit ideology") and serves the best interests of those in power. [It may be epistemically permissible, but is not practically wise for those in subordinate positions.]