

# The Undercover Philosopher

A guide to detecting shams,  
lies, and delusions

Michael Philips



O N E W O R L D  
O X F O R D

A Oneworld Paperback Original

First published by Oneworld Publications 2008  
Reprinted 2009

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A CIP record for this title is available  
from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-85168-581-3

Typeset by Jayvee, Trivandrum, India  
Cover design by D.R.Ink  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Antony Rowe

Oneworld Publications  
185 Banbury Road  
Oxford OX2 7AR  
England  
[www.oneworld-publications.com](http://www.oneworld-publications.com)

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## CHAPTER 7



# Deciding What to Believe

The previous chapters detail the ways in which we are fooled by our own psychological tendencies, and the ways we are tricked, cheated, and unintentionally misled by trusted sources. But they also remind us (from time to time) of our achievements. That's important, since all this debunking could lead to an unwarranted, knee-jerk skepticism toward all established intellectual authorities. A healthy dollop of skepticism makes sense. But how much is enough? And in relation to what? We don't want to escape the grip of failed authority only to rush headlong into the arms of cynics or cranks. As Aristotle (and Goldilocks) emphasized, it's always possible to do, have, or be too little or too much of something. The trick is to find the right amount. But it's rarely possible to say what that is in some general and meaningful way. This certainly applies to degrees of skepticism. There is no algorithm for assigning appropriate degrees of doubt to our beliefs. But this much is true. Authoritative sources with strong track records have earned credibility. We should doubt them in particular cases only when we have good reason.

## Reasons to Doubt

What are good reasons to doubt? There are at least nine candidates. As a matter of practice, we tend to doubt a conclusion of an authoritative source if: (1) we are competent directly to evaluate the arguments, evidence, methods, and assumptions that generate the conclusion, and find them wanting; (2) the conclusion conflicts with the conclusion of another trusted source; (3) we question the competence of the people who arrive at the conclusion; (4) we question the honesty of the people who arrive at that conclusion; (5) we question the objectivity or point of view of the people who arrive at the conclusion; (6) the conclusion conflicts with common sense; (7) the conclusion conflicts with our personal experience; (8) the conclusion conflicts with our intuitive judgment; and (9) the conclusion conflicts with our faith.

Ultimately, the credibility of a conclusion depends on the evidence and arguments in its favor, the methods by which it is generated, and the assumptions on which it rests. If we are competent to evaluate these things, that's what we ought to do. Most other reasons for doubting are just indirect indications that something is wrong with the evidence, arguments, methods, or assumptions. Often, it takes an expert to evaluate these things directly. But, surprisingly often, it doesn't. We've seen plenty of examples of that in psychology, survey research, medicine, cosmology, and so on. Mostly, though, laypersons don't know enough to evaluate conclusions in specialist literatures and must rely on indirect reasons for doubting.

One such reason is disagreement among experts. Sometimes the experts within a field disagree. And sometimes experts in one field disagree with experts in another on the same question (for example, the dispute between clinical psychologists and

research psychologists on the issue of “recovered memories”). One response to such conflicts is agnosticism. But agnosticism is not always a practical option. We may need to decide who to trust in order to decide what to do. If we can’t decide this directly (e.g. by evaluating the arguments) we may be able to decide it indirectly.

For one thing, we may consider the competence of our sources. Perhaps we have reason to believe that a particular doctor, journalist, psychologist, etc. doesn’t know what he or she is doing (remember, fifty percent of all doctors finished in the bottom half of their class). Or perhaps we have reason to doubt the competence of most practitioners in a field, at least on *this* question. For example, since most science journalists are badly trained in science and many write stories in areas in which they have no training at all, we have reason to worry about the accuracy of any newspaper science stories on complicated questions. This is not just a reason to doubt a source when it conflicts with another source. It’s also a reason to doubt on its own.

For another thing, we may evaluate the honesty and integrity of our sources. There may be reason to think the books are cooked, the data are faked, or conclusions are spun (recall the cases of science and accounting fraud). When authorities conflict, that may be all we have to go by. In that case, we need to ask who has the most incentive to lie, who has the most suspicious track record, who has the most effective safeguards in place against lying, and so forth. That is, our judgments are comparative. Where there is no conflict – when we’re simply deciding whether to trust a conclusion – matters get trickier. Here we have to decide how much reason for suspicion is enough. For example, does the amount of fraud uncovered in research funded by drug companies justify skepticism about all drug-company-sponsored research? Do the cases of

accounting fraud we've looked at mean we should never trust another big corporation's auditors' reports? It's hard to formulate hard and fast rules here. Reasonable people will disagree because some of us are just more trusting than others.

We may also doubt because we question the objectivity of the investigators. Although they may be honest and competent, they may have a stake in the outcome that affects their thinking. Or they may simply be looking for results that support a certain point of view. This is true, for example, of partisan political think-tanks. Often, for this reason, those on one side of the political spectrum simply dismiss the research of those on the other side as "advocacy research." The danger of this is that it leads to a closed-minded, blind allegiance to one's own point of view. On the other hand, engaging and evaluating all the research on the other side is more than a full-time job. Again, this is a question of balance. I will say more about this later.

In addition, our trusted authorities may reach conclusions that conflict with common sense. For centuries, common sense told us that the earth was flat. If it were round, people on the bottom would fall off (or, if they were kept in place by gravity, they would be upside down). Common sense also told us that solid objects were compact. Physics tells us they are mostly empty space. As these and other celebrated triumphs of science over common sense suggest, common sense is not a good reason to reject solid results in physics, chemistry, biology, and other hard sciences. Common sense has a somewhat stronger claim in sociological and psychological matters. There too it has led us astray. Only fifty years ago British and American common sense were bastions of racist and sexist ideas. But there are also cases in which common sense does better than the prevailing intellectual authorities. Recall that in the 1980s clinical psychologists convinced many Americans that people we

had known and respected for years – neighbors, friends, relatives – had raped their own children, sometimes in Satanic rituals and drug-induced frenzies. In this case, common sense, abandoned by so many in favor of “expert” opinion, turned out to be right. So, although common sense is fallible in social and psychological matters, it should not be surrendered without good reasons. Fortunately, these are cases in which many of us can directly evaluate the arguments.

Like common sense, beliefs based on personal experience are sometimes wrong. As we’ve seen, we may be misled by perceptual illusions, problems with memory, and by heuristic-based thinking. If the conclusions of an authoritative source conflict with our personal experience, we need to look further at each. Are there *other* reasons to distrust the source? How likely is it that our own conclusion is skewed by problems of perception, memory, or thinking? This is not always an easy call. Generally, if there are no other reasons to distrust the source, the source is probably right. But not always. For many years, doctors and biologists discounted reports by body-builders that steroids built muscle mass, and physicists insisted that it is impossible for baseball pitchers to throw curve balls. Medical authorities currently tell us that many herbs and other alternative cures that seem to work for us are really just placebos. In this case, most of us trust personal experience, and I think we are right. Clinical tests of drugs, herbs, and other cures generally involve large populations. Usually, some people get better, some people get worse, and some people remain about the same. The overall test results average all this out. If there is no net gain, the cure is judged ineffective. But maybe there’s a reason that the cure works for those who get better and fails to work for those who stay the same or get worse (blood chemistry, brain chemistry, whatever). Maybe

we just don't know enough right now to know what that reason is. So if an alternative is working for you, you may be among those for whom it is biologically effective. Your doctor may insist that you are the beneficiary of the placebo effect. But even if she's right why should you care? The important thing is that you get better. Of course, things are more complicated if the medical establishment has an effective cure for your condition. It may be dangerous to reject that cure in favor of your alternative. The placebo effect may simply relieve your symptoms without addressing the underlying disease.

The conclusions of an authoritative source may also conflict with our intuitive judgment. Sometimes this is a good reason to doubt. If we are experts in a field and some widely accepted finding or theory just doesn't feel right to us, we should check it out (and perhaps even try to develop an alternative hypothesis). That's how progress is made in science and other intellectual areas. More generally, we have reason to take our intuitions seriously whenever they have a good track record (for example, if we predict rain more accurately than the weatherman). But few of us keep good records of the successes and failures of our intuitive judgments. Our impressions are based almost entirely on our memories, and our memories are vulnerable to distortions. Our intuitive judgments themselves are vulnerable to distortions as well. They may be based on inaccurate background theories, beliefs, or assumptions, they may be generated by unreliable heuristics (e.g. availability), and they may be affected by our hopes, fears, moods, and emotions.

Finally, many people also distrust authoritative sources when the conclusions of those sources conflict with their own faith-based beliefs. We will be discussing the claims of faith later in this chapter. For now, though, I will say only that faith-based belief is, by definition, belief without evidence. To

believe something on faith is simply to choose to believe it. To doubt an authoritative source because it conflicts with a faith-based belief is to doubt it because one simply prefers to believe something else. I'm sorry but mere personal preference is not a good reason to reject the evidence-based finding of an authoritative source.

These reasons for doubting apply not only in relation to socially authoritative sources, but also in relation to the various alternatives that flourish as the established authorities lose their credibility – the conspiracy theorists, the spiritualists, the psychics, the crystal healers, the cults, and the rest. Strangely, many people judge these alternatives by less stringent standards than they judge the established authorities. This is partly because most of these alternatives are loosely associated with spirituality in people's minds, and spirituality is loosely associated with religion. When it comes to religion, the bar of credulity is set remarkably low. In fact, to the extent that religion rests wholly on faith, there is no bar at all. Again, believing on faith is believing without evidence. One believes simply because one chooses to believe.

We now have some idea of how to evaluate what our authoritative sources tell us. It's far short of an algorithm, but there is no algorithm for deciding what to believe. As in so many areas in life, there are just guidelines with a lot of gray areas where reasonable people may disagree.

### An Ethic of Belief?

What should we do with this information? Do we need to examine *everything* we hear from authoritative sources to see whether there's some reason to doubt? More generally, how

much time and effort should we spend trying to discover which of our beliefs are belief-worthy and which are not? We could all do more of this than we actually do. We spend time reading to our children, watching movies, playing computer games, taking walks, and making love when we could be at the library examining our beliefs. Are we slackers in the Republic of Reason? Socrates famously announced that the unexamined life is not worth living. But what of the constantly examined life? Is there a balance?

In the late nineteenth century, the English philosopher and mathematician W. K. Clifford wrote a paper called “The Ethics of Belief” in which he concluded that “it is a sin against mankind for anyone, anywhere to hold a belief without sufficient evidence.”<sup>1</sup> William James responded to Clifford in a famous essay called “The Will to Believe” in which he argued that some beliefs can’t be decided by the intellect alone, and in those cases we are entitled to believe what we like (assuming a couple of other conditions are met).<sup>2</sup> These essays by Clifford and James are staples of introductory philosophy anthologies. Strangely, the discussion of that issue has not advanced very far since their original exchange. That’s a shame, since we all need to decide to what standards of evidence we should hold ourselves and others.

In effect, Clifford argues that we need to subject all our beliefs to close examination, and to reject those for which there is not sufficient evidence. If by “evidence” he means direct evidence, this is unrealistic. In this age of specialization, it is impossible for most of us to evaluate the direct evidence in favor of the claims of modern medicine, chemistry, physics, and so forth (for example, to look at the experimental results). Even where we could do this, it would be impossibly time consuming. Imagine examining the direct evidence for all

your beliefs about history (for example, the letters, official documents, and newspaper reports).

For Clifford's proposal to get off the ground, he needs to allow evidence to include the testimony of authoritative sources. Even then he proposes an unrealistically demanding standard. Imagine what it would be like to evaluate the evidence for *all* your beliefs. You would need to list them – *all* of them – remember your reasons for accepting them, and evaluate those reasons. We just have too many beliefs for that. Try listing everything you believe about your own past, world geography, politics, personal relationships, medicine, sports, the meaning of every word you know, and so on. Now try remembering why you believe all this (even if it's just testimony). Now evaluate those reasons. Few if any of us could get even close. Do you remember, for example, why you believe that Shakespeare wrote the plays of Shakespeare, that vitamin C boosts the immune system, that "criterion" is a synonym of "standard," that bad cholesterol is bad, and that the tobacco industry suppressed studies of the dangers of smoking? Of course, you can *guess*; for example, that you read them in some book. But what book? And how reliable was that book? Clifford responds to this by saying that we should remain agnostic about all matters for which we lack sufficient evidence. But that is also unrealistic. We act on our beliefs about medicine, exercise, child-rearing, psychology, social interaction, word meanings, education, ethics, finances, and the rest every day. So we can't remain agnostic about them. If we did, it would be as if we based most of our decisions in life on mere guesswork. But if you plan to follow Clifford's instruction and look for sufficient justification for all such beliefs, say goodbye to your friends and loved ones, and have your mail forwarded to the library. No, forget the mail; you won't have time to read it.

What then? The examples in Clifford's classic essay suggest a different direction than his pronouncements. His principle tells us what to do, viz. find sufficient evidence for all our beliefs. His examples tell us what *not* to do, e.g. don't suppress our doubts, or let our beliefs be dictated by our prejudices or desires. This suggests a less demanding direction: trust your beliefs unless you have a reason to doubt them, and if you have a reason, investigate. This limits the number of beliefs we are asked to investigate. But it still leaves us wondering how much investigating we are supposed to do. Clifford's insistence on "sufficient evidence" suggests he sets a high bar. For example, most of us have a wide range of political and social beliefs, and we have our reasons for them. But we could have still better reasons if we simply spent a day doing library research. And we could have even stronger reasons if we spent six months on an issue (as people who write books on these topics do). How much is enough?

There is no general answer to this question. It's not as though we can simply assign probability values to our beliefs and declare we have sufficient evidence for them if the probability is high enough. What would the magic number be? (Ninety percent? Sixty-seven percent?) How do we go about assigning these numbers to our beliefs in the first place? (Try it with a few.) How much time and energy are we required to invest in the effort? More importantly, though, there is no standard of sufficient evidence – no magic number – that applies across the board. What counts as enough evidence depends on a lot of contextual variables. It's one thing for a diagnosis by an emergency room doctor and another for a diagnosis by internist (who can take her or his time). In general, we set the bar lower when we must decide under time constraints. What counts as enough in almost any emergency may not be enough in normal conditions. On the other hand, all other things being equal, the

more that is at stake, the higher our evidential standards. What is enough to justify a belief about weeding is not enough to justify a choice between surgeries. Our standards may also vary depending on the abilities of the believer. Someone with very little intelligence is held to different standards than someone with a lot. In addition, the standards of evidence to which we are held vary with our responsibilities. If we are doctors or medical researchers, our beliefs need to be based on the research literature. If we are patients, we are entitled to trust what our doctors tell us (unless we have some specific reason not to). To make matters even more complicated, we have lives. The time and energy we put into examining our beliefs depend on what makes life meaningful or worth living for us. If we are highly driven physicists or artists, we may have little time or energy for examining much outside physics or art. If we are dedicated to *working* against world poverty (for example, by volunteering at refugee camps), we may have little time to master the scholarly literature on that topic. In short, the role of examination in our lives, what we examine and how much time and effort we spend examining it, will depend on who we are and in what circumstances we find ourselves. It will be one thing for Mother Theresa, another for John Cleese, and still another for Tony Blair. Since the time and effort we put into examining our beliefs will affect the amount of evidence we can get for them, our standards of evidence will depend on these factors as well. One-size-fits-all proposals like Clifford's ignore all this complexity.

In addition, the high bar Clifford sets for us is utopian. It would take a complete revolution in our values to implement Clifford's standard. Clifford's hope is to promote truth and squelch falsehood. But most of us just don't value truth as much as we value many other things (at least in First World

nations). We think nothing of shading, spinning, and even utterly forsaking the truth to avoid hurting someone's feelings ("O Agnes, I love that hat"). Most of us also respect and even admire people who are well paid to spin, hide, and misrepresent the truth – P.R. people, super-salesmen, political speech-writers, ad writers, celebrities who endorse products they don't use, and so forth. When truth competes with feelings, money, prestige, career advancement, or even a good joke, we are often willing to sacrifice the truth. In addition, we are rarely *offended* by the mindless blather and ignorant ranting of blowhards and airheads. We may be bored or annoyed, but we don't usually feel slimed, abused, insulted, or disrespected. Many of us are more offended by people who are underdressed for a party. With just a few specific exceptions, we think it rude to chastise people publicly for expressing groundless or even idiotic beliefs. If we valued truth highly, we might chastise them the way, for example, we chastise someone who jumps a queue. All this makes calls for Clifford-like standards pipe dreams.

### How Much Is Enough?

William James's response to Clifford is that some beliefs simply can't be settled "by the intellect alone" and that in some of these cases we have a right to believe without evidence. Before we get to that, though, we need to think a bit more about matters that can be settled by evidence and argument. If Clifford sets the bar too high in those cases, how high should we set it? As we've seen, if we were serious about seeking sufficient evidence for all of our beliefs – or even just the action-related ones – we would spend our lives in the library or online. Since

we have lives, we are forced to have beliefs for which we don't have sufficient evidence. How much time and effort are we required to spend investigating those beliefs? And, given that time and effort, how should we distribute it across our beliefs. What do we owe to ourselves and what do we owe to others?

If we are to flourish in life, it's in our interest to have accurate beliefs about practical matters like health, finances, child-rearing, personal relationships, and other areas that affect our well-being. That doesn't mean we should spend all of our time thinking about them. We may have other needs, responsibilities, interests, and passions as well. We need to compare the benefits of pursuing these other things with the harms and risks of ignorance and misinformation about matters of health, personal relationships, finances, and so on. We may prefer bowling to reading, but we need to consider which serves us better. Sometimes the answer is bowling. What we owe to ourselves in pursuing knowledge about practical matters varies from person to person.

In addition to beliefs about practical matters, we also have beliefs about social, political, moral, spiritual, and religious matters. These beliefs may affect both ourselves and others. If we have racist or sexist beliefs, we may act in ways that harm others and that also make us unpopular in some circles and popular in others. Our beliefs about practical matters may affect others as well. We may give them bad advice. Or we may destroy our own health and finances, forcing them to support us. These impacts on others are, in fact, Clifford's main concern. The reason that he declared belief without sufficient evidence a sin against humankind is that he was acutely aware of the social and political mayhem produced by ignorance and superstition.

The question of what we owe to family, friends, neighbors, strangers, fellow citizens, and unknown people in distant lands is hotly disputed by philosophers and raises too complicated a

set of issues to address in the few remaining pages of this book. But we can get some perspective on the question. Most of us identify our good with the good of others to some degree or other. We have concentric circles of concern. These circles may differ from person to person. Most people put themselves in the center (though some may put their children there, or even causes to which they are dedicated). For most people, family and friends come next, then neighbors, acquaintances, fellow citizens, etc. As a rough generality, proximity rules: the more closely involved we are with others, the more we care about them and the more we are willing to do for them (though some of us may care more about strangers we admire than neighbors or even family members). The more we care about others, the more reason we have to make our beliefs that affect them accurate. All other things being equal, we are willing to do more to assure the accuracy of beliefs that affect our friends than to assure the accuracy of beliefs that affect strangers. What makes things unequal is degree of impact. Depending on our degrees of caring, we may investigate beliefs that profoundly affect strangers more than we investigate beliefs that affect friends only a little. This is not to say how much we *ought* to care or *ought* to do from a moral point of view. We can't decide that until we decide how much one *should* care about others in these concentric circles. That takes us beyond the boundaries of our subject and into the dense thickets of ethics.

Instead of entering that terrain, I will close this section with an observation about the impact of our political and social beliefs on other people. For most of us, the impact seems minuscule. That's one reason so many of us are so casual about our political and social beliefs. Since we don't occupy positions of power or authority, or influence the people who do, we assume that it does not much matter what we believe about global

warming, globalization, Islamic terrorism, and so forth. The big decisions of the day are out of our hands. We may vote in elections, but so do tens of millions of other people. The fact that elections are won with money increases our sense of powerlessness (unless we're rich).

On the other hand, war, climate change, ecological degradation, and other big issues of the day affect billions of lives. When we think about our impact we also need to think about that. There is no algorithm for doing this, but here is a way to think about it. Imagine a tug of war with a million people on each side. Suppose that if the right side wins, a million lives will be saved. If you are an average tugger on that side, your responsibility for the outcome is one millionth, which is very small. But you also have a one-millionth part in saving one million lives. Arguably, that is equivalent to saving one life all by yourself. If we investigate an issue like global warming, join the right side, and win, our responsibility for the victory will be less than one millionth. But billions of lives will be affected by that outcome.

## Believing Without Evidence

I argued earlier that Clifford's proposal – that we believe only on the basis of sufficient evidence – is unrealistic. William James makes a different kind of objection. James thinks we are entitled to hold some beliefs without any evidence at all. To the extent that the Clifford–James debate lives on in American academic philosophy, it focuses on James's claim. This is partly because faith-based belief plays such a powerful role in American culture.

James argues that many beliefs "can't be decided by the intellect alone." We are attracted to some of these, and may get

important benefits by accepting them (for example, our religious beliefs may bring us peace of mind). Agnosticism and disbelief may each deprive us of those benefits. In these cases, James says, we have a right to believe whatever attracts us. (Actually, his view is a little more complicated, but this will do for present purposes.)

James doesn't say that everyone *should* believe under these circumstances. He is not evangelical about it. He thinks that whether or not we choose to believe depends on our cognitive style. He thinks that those of us who are error-phobic will suspend judgment on matters that can't be decided by the intellect alone, while those who are more interested in finding truth than avoiding error will take leaps of faith. He doesn't argue that one attitude is more reasonable than the other. Despite a few nod-nod-wink-winks, his official claim is only that it is reasonable to take the leap of faith (and by no means a sin against humankind).

Unfortunately, James never clarifies the meaning of "can't be decided by the intellect alone." Presumably, he doesn't want to include all doctrines we can't *prove* to be false. That's much too inclusive. There's a lot we can't prove to be false. For example, we can't *prove* it to be false that the leaders of the world are remotely controlled by aliens, that the King James version of the Bible – and only that version – was inspired by God, or that there is a planet revolving around Alpha Centauri that is inhabited by hermaphrodites who dress like circus clowns. So, if "you can't prove it false" were the standard, there would be very little prior intellectual constraint on beliefs that can't be decided by the intellect alone. On the other hand, many of us reject these hypotheses because we think there is no argument or evidence in their favor. But if we take *that* as our intellectual constraint, we can't have any non-evidentially grounded

beliefs at all (since non-evidentially grounded belief is by definition believing without evidence or argument). Any prior intellectual constraint James adopts must fall somewhere in between these two criteria. That is, it must disqualify more beliefs than “you can’t prove it false” does and fewer beliefs than “there is no evidence or argument in its favor” does. Here is a suggestion James might (or might not) want to accept. As a first approximation, a doctrine can’t be decided by the intellect alone if (1) there are no strong arguments or evidence for it and no strong arguments or evidence against it, or (2) the arguments for or against it are about equally weighty.

These criteria need some fleshing out. For one thing, we need to make it clear that in some cases the fact that there is no evidence for a claim is itself an argument against it; for example, claims for which there almost certainly would be evidence were they true (“At the time of the dinosaurs, three-headed monkeys were as plentiful as pteradactyls”). But we don’t need to fill in all such blanks for our purposes. A more serious concern is James’s use of the definite article in “the intellect.” That suggests he wants to limit his claim to doctrines for which there *can be* no conclusive evidence or argument. But if we’re trying to provide advice to real people, that’s too restrictive. People differ in their intellectual talent and training; that is, we differ in what we can decide by our intellects alone. We need to decide what, if anything, we have a right to believe about issues that exceed our capacity to decide. Most of us are in this position in relation to some beliefs – we are not experts, the experts disagree, and our indirect criteria are indecisive. In addition, we may not have the talent to become experts. What, if anything, do we have a right to believe in such cases?

With or without these refinements, criteria (1) and (2) do place prior intellectual constraints on non-evidentially based

beliefs. Although the Alpha Centauri hypothesis remains an option, the belief that the King James version of the Bible is written by God does not. It fails the first criterion, since we have historical and linguistic reasons against taking the King James version to be God's own truth. The first criterion also rules out many other faith-based beliefs for the same reason. These include one of the most important doctrines of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, namely, that God is perfect (that is, that God is both all-good and all-powerful). This doctrine seems to conflict radically with the way the world is made. On the face of it, God's work ("creation") does not seem to be the work of an all-good, all-powerful being. If God were all-good, he would want the best for his creation. If God were all-powerful, he could make that happen. So one would expect an all-good, all-powerful creator to produce the best of all possible worlds. But ours seems to have its imperfections. Why, for example, does it hurt so much when we break a limb? Of course, the pain has a purpose. It keeps us from moving the limb, which prevents further injury and promotes healing. But surely there are less painful ways to do *that*. Half the pain would work just fine. And why does there need to be any pain at all? That is, why didn't God design our limbs so that they were simply temporarily paralyzed when broken (and temporally restored to mobility when absolutely necessary). For that matter, why did he design limbs that are so easy to break in the first place and that take so long to heal? Why can't we heal in a matter of hours and simply regenerate severed limbs the way salamanders regenerate severed tails? Once we start thinking this way, it's obvious that the problem is bigger than limbs. Why aren't our eyes and ears more sensitive? Why does our hearing fail with age? Why didn't God design babies with horrible genetic defects like Tay-Sachs syndrome? And what about cancer? Or, to broaden our

concern, why is there so much pain and carnage in the animal world? Why did God design a nature red in tooth and claw? Why all those terrified prey desperately and futilely thrashing about in the jaws of predators? Why all the panicky little fish continually chased and eaten by big fish? Surely God could have limited the animal world to herbivores.

All theologians agree that these are strong arguments. They have labored to answer them for nearly two millennia, and they're still trying. That's because their answers never manage to convince religious skeptics, or adherents to other religious traditions. It's no wonder: these answers barely manage even to convince believers. The question of natural evil arises anew for believers with every drought and tsunami and every still-born child. How can God allow *that* to happen? Of course, natural catastrophes are consequences of the laws of nature, but God is supposed to have designed the laws of nature. In the end, most believers fall back on the solace that God works in mysterious ways. Our finite minds are incapable of understanding his infinite intellect. This conflict between reason and the faith is settled simply by new affirmations of faith; that is, by choosing to believe something else without evidence.

If we take him at his word, this is not a problem for James. As far as religion goes, his official goal in the "Will to Believe" is to defend what he calls "the Religious Hypothesis," which demands much less than a full-blooded religion. James's first description of the Religious Hypothesis asserts only that there is an eternal aspect to the universe and that we are all better off believing that. A couple of pages later, James adds that that eternal aspect is person-like (a Thou). Although there is no evidence or argument in favor of this, there is also no evidence or argument against it. According to the first criterion, it can't be decided by the intellect alone and so we are entitled to

believe it without evidence (since it also satisfies James's other conditions).

Beliefs that satisfy the second criterion are neglected by both Clifford and James and have had relatively little attention from English-language philosophers in general. But at some point almost all of us find ourselves trying to decide between beliefs the arguments for which seem equally strong to us (be they direct or indirect). Clifford says we should remain agnostic in these cases. But this can be quite costly. Suppose you are gravely ill and your doctors disagree about the most effective cure. You need to choose. You could choose on pragmatic grounds while remaining officially agnostic. For example, you could choose the one that least interfered with things you like to do while remaining doubtful that it is otherwise better than the other. But you might feel better about the whole thing if you could manage to convince yourself that your choice is not the horrible mistake one of your doctors keeps saying it is. Believing might also improve your chances of success (the placebo effect). So, unless there's a serious downside to believing, it's hard to see why you shouldn't choose to believe or try to convince yourself (if you can). In general, unless there is a serious downside to believing, it seems foolish to deny ourselves and each other the benefits of belief in these cases. (Of course, it's an open question to what extent we can convince ourselves.)

The main downside of non-evidentially based belief is the wrongful harm it can bring to others. Suppose someone wants to add to James's Religious Hypothesis that the "Who" – the personal eternal aspect of the universe – commands us to kill all adulterers, Jews, and homosexuals by 10/10/2010. Since there are no strong arguments for or against what the "Who" commands, this can't be settled by the intellect alone. But that

doesn't give anyone a right to believe it, even if he calls it a faith-based belief. Most faith-based believers recognize this and constrain their faith by their moral beliefs. But a minority are astonishingly audacious in the privilege they claim for themselves. "Because I choose to believe something without any evidence at all, you, Martha, cannot have sex with a woman!" Or worse, "Because I choose to believe something without any evidence at all, you, infidel, must be driven from the Holy Land!"

Despite what some of them say, most religious people don't base most of their religious beliefs on faith alone. When challenged or when evangelizing they make philosophical arguments, look for archeological evidence, inspire each other with testimonials, appeal to their own personal experience, and so on. As much as I'd like to discuss all that, there is no space for it here. The topic of religion came up because faith-based belief is the most important example of non-evidentially based belief.

James worried that if we deny ourselves (and each other) the right to believe under the relevant circumstances, we impoverish our lives. The reader may be wondering what's at stake here. What does it mean to have a right to believe, and why does it matter? The short answer is this. Since what we believe affects others, belief is an ethical matter. What's at stake, then, are the ethical standards to which we hold ourselves and each other. These standards guide our conduct and our judgment. Other things being equal, we think well of those who comply with them and think badly of those who don't (including ourselves). In theory, at least, this mobilization of public attitude changes our behavior.

If enough of us came down heavily on people who believed without evidence, fewer people would do it. Because we don't

come down heavily on people who lie and otherwise distort the truth for a living, more people do it.

## The Final Frame

In the end, the picture looks like this. Most of us have different levels of justification for our beliefs. We can make better cases for some of them than we can for others. This is inevitable. We can't thoroughly investigate and evaluate everything we believe.

We also differ as individuals in what it makes sense for us to investigate. We have different lives: different needs, interests, responsibilities, and passions. So we have greater and lesser need for accuracy in different areas. People with children need to investigate child-rearing theories more diligently than people without them. In general, the amount of time and effort we owe it to ourselves to invest in our beliefs, and the way we diversify that investment, depends on what we are like. In the end, what we owe to ourselves is to live well. That means investigating to the extent that best contributes to our well-being.

Since what we believe affects others, there is also the matter of what we owe to them. Again, that raises a nest of difficult ethical questions I'm not able to address here. But this much seems clear: the more the lives and welfare of others depend on the accuracy of our beliefs, the higher our standards of evidence should be.

Once we make peace with the fact that some of our beliefs are based on relatively little evidence, and that's okay, the thought that we are entitled to believe without evidence in certain cases may seem less shocking. I've argued that we do have such a right, subject to two strict requirements. First, the issues must

be ones we can't decide on the basis of the evidence and arguments (even when evidence includes what the experts say). Second, our adopting the belief in question must present no significant risk or harm to others.<sup>3</sup>

Some might take these conclusions as an endorsement of intellectual laziness. But they're not. I'm just being honest about the fact that few of us have the time, energy, need, or capacity to carry out Socratic missions. This is not to say we don't need more people like Socrates (or the child who declared the emperor naked). As the last six chapters have illustrated, the world is rife with charlatans, cheats, flimflam artists, incompetents, unscrupulous careerists, and fools in high places (often with big egos). In addition, the intellectual world is not immune to politics or fashion. At times it stampedes and at times it circles the wagons. As a result, bad things happen. We've seen plenty of examples. So we need our skeptics and iconoclasts, our unmaskers and our sticklers for the truth. We should build monuments to these whistle-blowers in the fields of knowledge and create an annual holiday in their honor. Above all, we should listen to what they say (without losing sight of how often our trusted sources also get things right).

But most of us are ill-equipped to walk in Socrates' sandals, and most of the rest don't want to. As we learned from Socrates, unmasking false experts can be hazardous to one's health. It usually involves speaking truth to (or about) power, and power didn't become power by turning the other cheek. What happened to Socrates is extreme by today's Western democratic standards, but, with the exception of stand-up comics, serious iconoclasts and unmaskers have a harder life than the rest of us (unless they are extraordinarily gifted, like Richard Feynman). As the old saw says, you have to go along to get along, and they don't. Insider whistle-blowers, in particular,

have a harder row to hoe than their more compliant and complacent peers. Exposing the weakness of a major research program in one's field makes one unpopular with colleagues invested in that enterprise. And exposing fraud by a respected or well-liked colleague may even seem traitorous. The fact that our unmaskers and debunkers risk all that is precisely what makes them heroes.

# Notes

## Chapter 7

1. W. K. Clifford, *Lectures and Essays: Volume II, Essays and Reviews* (London: Macmillan, 1879), pp. 163–176.
2. W. James, "The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy" (Boston: Longman, Green, 1897), pp. 26–34. This essay can be found in many beginning philosophy anthologies.
3. One could also say where the promise of benefits outweighs the expected burdens. The choice between these formulations raises some tricky questions about whether we should treat harms and benefits symmetrically in ethics: roughly speaking, should benefits count as much as harms when we construct our moral principles?