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The Epistemology of Religious Belief

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Verification, falsification

Sufficient evidence

The Will to Believe

Is religious belief rational – or can it be?

- ① **Positivism** (cf. Ayer, vs. Swinburne): no; it is not only not rational, but in fact meaningless
- ② **Clifford**: a belief is only rational if there is sufficient evidence for it; there is no such for God's existence
- ③ **Others** (James, Nagel, etc.): we can and sometimes must believe things without evidence/proof (ethics; but even some fundamental bases of science).

Verification, Falsification

Vienna circle: Moritz Schlick (1882–1936); Otto Neurath (1882–1945); Friedrich Waismann (1896–1959); Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970).

Meaningful statements:

- ① **analytic statements**: mathematical claims ($2 + 2 = 4$), tautologies ('all cats are cats'), logically necessary claims (' p and $\neg p$ cannot be true at the same time')
- ② **factual claims**: they can be confirmed by means of sense experience.

Cf. David Hume (*Enquiry*, Oxford 1975, 165.)

"If we take in our hand any volume; of divnitiy or school metaphysics, for instance, let us ask, *Does it contain any abstract reasoning concerning quantity or number?* No. *Does it contain any experimental reasoning concerning matter of fact and existence?* No. Commit it then to the flames; for it can contain nothing but sophistry and illusion."

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Anthony Flew: [the parable of the jungle clearing](#)

- religious claims seem suspicious since there is no experience that could count against them
- the jungle clearing and the invisible gardener
- It makes no difference!



Verification, Falsification

But:

- Maybe religious claims are not empirical hypotheses
- The verificationist principle (even in the weak form) does not satisfy its own criterion of meaningfulness.

Swinburne

"A man can understand the statement 'once upon a time, before there were men or any other rational creatures, the earth was covered by sea', without his having idea of what geological evidence would count for or against this proposition."

- So we don't always know what counts for or against a claim, even if we understand the claim.
- Maybe religious claims are like that.
- **But does this mean we can just believe *any* religious claim?**

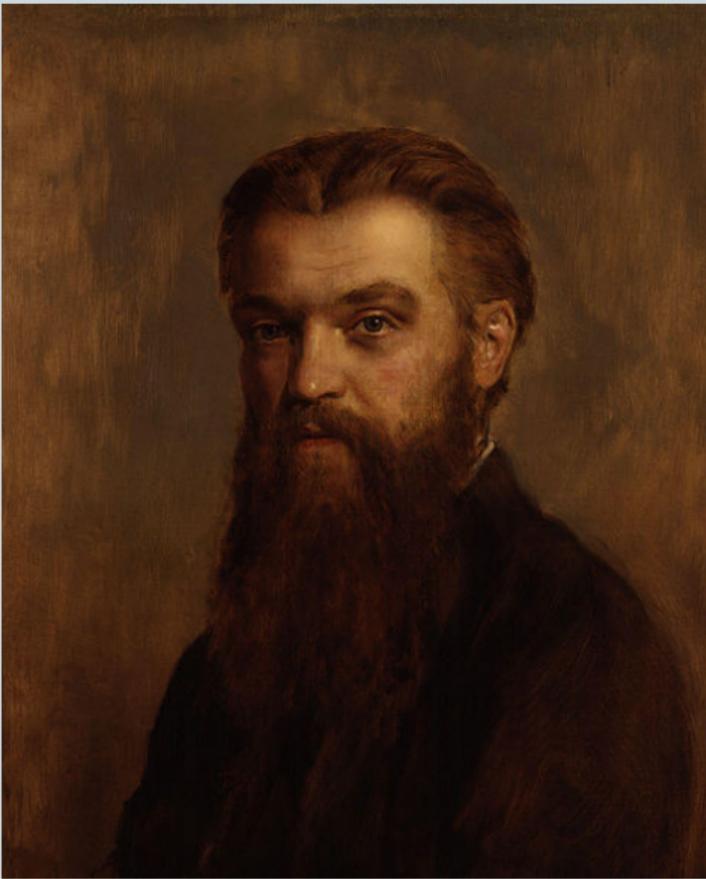
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Sufficient Evidence (Clifford)



William Kingdon Clifford

- 1845–1873, England
- English philosopher,
mathematician
- Travels to Italy, survives a
shipwreck



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Sufficient Evidence (Clifford)

The Cliffordian Thesis:

“It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”

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Sufficient Evidence (Clifford)

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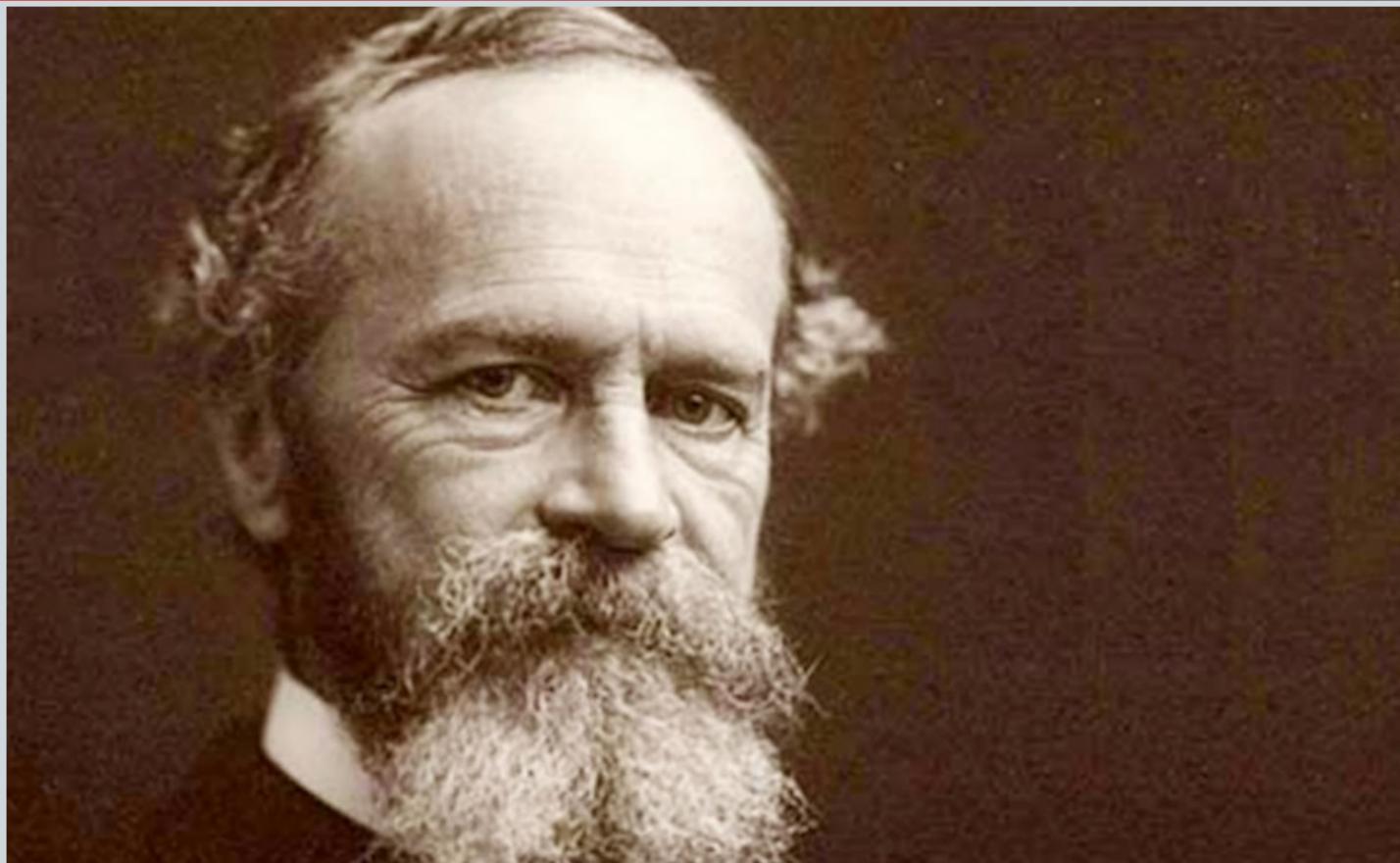
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- In what sense is it wrong? Is it morally wrong?
- What if we really lived this way? What would you still believe?
- What counts as (sufficient) evidence? Is it context-dependent?
- If we can prove neither God's existence nor his nonexistence, what should we do? (cf. Pascal!)
- Can there be practically useful consequences of believing in something we should not believe in?

The Will to Believe (James)



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