“The Will to Believe”

Long defended to my students the lawfulness of voluntarily adopted faith but they refused it as lawful philosophically.

1. Hypothesis: anything that may be proposed to our belief, either live or dead: live one appeals as a real possibility (believe in the Mahdi example).
   1. Decision between two hypotheses is an option.
      1. Living option: being an agnostic or a Christian [for his current audience]
      2. Forced or avoidable: may avoid judging a theory for example
      3. Momentous or trivial
      4. Genuine if forced, living and momentous.
2. Psychology of human opinion. It seems as if our passional and volitional nature lay at the root of all our convictions.
   1. When we look at others, it seems as if they could do nothing when the intellect had once said its say.
   2. We cannot, just by willing, believe something. [but he modifies this later]
   3. Pascal’s wager.
      1. any finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain.
      2. Take holy water etc.: belief will come.
      3. A last desperate argument for others.
      4. Unless there be some pre-existing tendency to believe in masses and holy water, the option offered is not a living option.
      5. Imagine the Mahdi using the same argument for himself as the Expected One.
      6. Men of science would think it vile to be so subjectivist as to believe that one can will oneself to believe.
         1. Huxley: don’t pretend to believe what you have no reason to believe.
         2. Clifford: If [a] belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence [even though the belief be true] the pleasure is a stolen one and is sinful, violating our duty to mankind. “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for every one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."
3. Free will and simple wishing seem to be fifth wheels.
   1. But to believe that intellectual insight or pure reason remains and settles it goes against facts.
   2. Willing nature: all such factors of belief as fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and set.
      1. Balfour: authority is those influences of intellectual climate that make hypotheses possible.
      2. We believe in things for no real reasons, but based our conclusions on prestige of opinions.
      3. Our belief in truth is but a passionate affirmation of desire with social backup.
      4. Logic cannot answer the pyrrhonistic sceptic. We are willing to trust, and the other is not.
   3. We generally disbelieve all facts and theories for which we have no use.
      1. Huxley and Newman disagree about priesthood [because for one it has use and not for the other].
      2. Scientists reject telepathy because it would undo the uniformity of Nature, but if they were shown what they might do with it they might find the evidence good enough.
      3. Logicians would impose Clifford’s law on us based on their natural wish to exclude elements which they cannot use.
   4. Our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions.
      1. Passional tendencies and volitions that run before belief are not too late.
      2. Pascal’s argument then seems a clincher.
      3. Pure insight and logic are not the only things that produce our creeds.
4. Is this state of affairs reprehensible and pathological or is it normal?
   1. “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.”
   2. To say, do not decide, is itself a passional decision.
   3. It is attended with the risk of losing the truth.
5. We are leaving systematic philosophical skepticism out of it here.
   1. We are assuming that there is truth.
      1. The faith that there is truth and it can be found can be held in the empiricist or the absolutist way.
      2. The latter believe we can know when we have attained it, while the empiricists do not.
      3. To know is not to know for certain that we know.
   2. The empiricist tendency has prevailed in science, while in philosophy the absolutist tendency.
      1. Happiness in philosophy is that certitude has been achieved.
      2. A system to be a system must be closed.
   3. Scholastic orthodoxy says that if I am unable to doubt that I now exist, etc., it is because these things illumine my intellect irresistibly [Descartes]
      1. Intellect is then adequate to things.
      2. We have attained certain assent and thought is at rest.
      3. The entity of the object operates on the entity of the mind.
      4. We are like this when we believe we know that we know.
      5. Even the greatest empiricists when left to their instincts dogmatize like popes.
      6. For people like Clifford the evidence is absolutely sufficient: for them Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start.
6. Since we are all absolutists by instinct what do we do about it?
   1. We should try to free ourselves.
      1. Objective evidence and certitude are fine ideals but where can they be found?
      2. I am an empiricist: the practical faith that we must go on experiencing and thinking over our experience to make our opinions grow more true. But they are not re-interpretable or incorrigible.
      3. The only certain truth is that the present phenomenon of consciousness exists.
      4. This is just the stuff to be philosophized about: philosophies express what this stuff really is.
      5. The only propositions agreed on are abstract ones such as in math which tell us nothing by themselves about concrete reality.
      6. All other propositions have been called false or at least questioned by someone.
      7. For example, the Hegelians have rejected Aristotelian logic.
   2. No concrete test for truth has been agreed on.
      1. Some make the criterion external to perception, in revelation or in instinct, or in the experiences of the race [humanity?]
      2. Others like Descartes, Reid and Kant, make the perception its own test.
      3. “To claim that certain truths now possess [objective evidence] is simply to say that when you think them true and they are true, then their evidence is objective, otherwise it is not.”
      4. But practically this is only one more subjective opinion among many contradictory opinions about objective certitude.
      5. No one considers that the intellect may have no infallible signal for this.
      6. The most striking application of the doctrine of objective certitude has been the Inquisition.
   3. As empiricists we give up the doctrine of objective certitude.
      1. We do not give up the quest of truth itself.
      2. We still pin our faith on its existence.
      3. We differ from the scholastic is that the strength of his system is in the origins of this thought whereas for us it is in the outcome, what it leads us to decide.
      4. It does not matter that the thought may have come from passion or accident but whether the total drift of thinking continues to confirm it: that is what it means to be true.
7. Two ways of looking at our duty regarding opinion: we must know the truth and we must avoid error: two great commandments.
   1. They are two separate laws.
      1. Disbelieving falsehood B does not lead us necessarily to believe the truth of A.
      2. We may go to other falsehoods.
   2. If we choose between the two duties this colors our thought.
      1. Clifford exhorts us to avoid error primarily.
      2. “Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies.”
      3. But you might believe that the risk of error is a small matter in this case in comparison to the chance of guessing true.
      4. I cannot go with Clifford.
      5. Our feelings about this are only expressions of our passional life. Clifford is just horrified of being a dupe, slavishly obeying this fear.
      6. I think worse things than being duped may happen: so to me, Clifford seems weird.
      7. It is like a general informing his soldiers that it is better to keep out of battle forever than to risk a single wound.
      8. Our errors are not so solemn: a certain lightness of heart seems healthier.
8. After the introduction, to the question.
   1. You might think it necessary to take no further passional step beyond the first two, to avoid dupery and think to gain trutbh.
   2. I agree that wherever the option between losing truth and gaining it is not momentous we can throw the chance of gaining truth away and save ourselves from believing falsehood.
      1. Wait till objective evidence comes.
      2. In science this is almost always true and even in human affairs in general, although not in law courts where we must decide on the best evidence and on any acceptable principle.
      3. But in objective nature, science, we are recorders, not makers of the truth, an decision to get on would be out of place.
      4. In physical nature facts are independent of us and we should avoid being duped.
      5. The questions here are trivial options and the hypotheses hardly living and the choice seldom forced.
      6. Whether we believe or not in mind stuff is also of this character.
   3. However, for purposes of discovery such is not as highly recommended.
      1. The man who has no interest in the results is the positive fool.
      2. The most sensitive observer is the one with eager interest in one side with equal interest in not being deceived.
      3. This is the technique of the method of verification: it is only truth as technically verified that interests science.
      4. Concrete investigators are always in love with some pet live hypothesis.
   4. There may be some forced options in our speculative questions.
9. Moral questions are ones whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof.
   1. Science can tell us what exists but it cannot compare the worth of what exists or what does not exist: we must consult our heart.
      1. Science consults her heart when it says that determining the facts and correcting false belief are the supreme goods.
      2. Having moral beliefs at all is decided by our will.
      3. If your heart does not want a world of moral reality your head will not convince you.
      4. Mephistophelian skepticism may convince it more.
      5. The hot young moralist feels uneasy in front of the cool hearted amoralist.
      6. The moralist agrees with Emerson that there is a moral realm where wit and intellectual superiority is of no worth.
      7. We cannot refute moral skepticism by logic.
      8. The sceptic adopts the doubting attitude with his whole heart.
   2. Some questions of fact: do you like me or not, depend on whether I meet you half-way and show you trust. In some cases it is what makes your liking come.
      1. If I wait for objective evidence your liking may never come.
      2. A man may vanquish a woman’s heart by insisting they must love him.
      3. A desire for a kind of truth brings about its existence.
      4. Other sorts: gaining a promotion, for example: his faith creates its own verification.
   3. A social organism is what it is because its members proceed to their own duties with trust in other members.
      1. Such institutions exist on condition of faith: train passenger example.
      2. A fact cannot come at all in such cases unless a preliminary faith exists: faith in a fact can help create the fact.
10. In truths dependent on our personal action faith based on desire is certainly a lawful and possibly indispensable thing.
    1. Do these matters relate to religious faith?
    2. Religion says first that the best things are the more eternal things, the final word.
       1. This affirmation cannot be verified scientifically.
    3. Second affirmation of religion: we are better off even now if we believe the first.
    4. What if both are true? This must be a living option for you, if not you can go no further.
       1. Religion offers itself as a momentous option: belief gains a vital good now.
       2. It is a forced option: we cannot escape by remaining skeptical. For we would lose the good if it were true.
          1. It would be like a man hesitating to ask a woman to marry …cuts himself off from the angel possibility
          2. Skepticism is not avoidance of option but an option with a certain risk. Better risk loss of truth than chance of error.
          3. He is backing the field against the religious hypothesis: it is yielding to fear of error over hope that it is true.
          4. It is not intellect against passions but intellect with one passion.
          5. What proof is there that dupery through hope is worse than dupery through fear.
          6. My own stake is important enough here to give me the right to choose my own form of risk.
          7. Don’t forfeit my sole chance of getting on the winning side and acting as if my passional need of taking the world religiously might be right.
    5. The mor perfect and more eternal aspect of the universe is represented in our religions as having a personal form: a Thou.
       1. We have a curious autonomy: we feel as if evidence might be withheld unless we met the hypothesis half-way.
       2. Try to make God extort our recognition?
       3. Feeling that by obstinately believing there are gods we are doing the universe the deepest service seems part of the religious hypothesis.
       4. If the hypothesis were true then intellectualism would be absurd.
       5. I cannot then keep my willing nature out of it: a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging truths if those truths were really there would be an irrational rule.
    6. This logic cannot be escaped. We have the right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough.
       1. But perhaps you are thinking of a particular religious hypothesis which for you is dead.
       2. You may think of faith as believing what you know is not true.
       3. This is wrong: the freedom can only cover living options and living options never seem absurd to him to whom they are living.
       4. Put a stopper to our heart, instincts, and courage and wait tillto wait.
       5. ee doomsday or until we have enough evidence is a queer idol command.
       6. As empiricists it seems idle to ask us
       7. We should lrespect one another’s mental freedom.
    7. Stephens: we decide to leave the riddles unanswered, that is a choice, …each man must act as he thinks best.

error