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Editors

Ethics of Belief: Essays in Tribute to D.Z. Phillips

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Acknowledgments

Six of the articles published here were products of the 2007 Claremont Conference on the Philosophy of Religion organized by D. Z. Phillips and held in Claremont Graduate University in February 2007. Regrettably, Phillips’ sudden death on July 25, 2006 prevented him from participating in the conference, adding his voice and publishing the proceedings as he had done in previous years.

This publication would not have been possible without the efforts of many persons, beginning with Patrick Horn, one of Phillips’ doctoral students and now Associate Dean and Assistant Professor in the School of Religion at Claremont Graduate University. It is a privilege to welcome him as co-editor. I also wish to acknowledge the generous financial support given to the conference by Claremont Graduate University, Pomona College and Claremont McKenna College and the authors of the essays who contribute to the funding of future conferences by waiving their claims to royalties.

In Swansea, Helen Baldwin was instrumental in facilitating correspondence with the conference participants. In Claremont Jacqueelyn Hunter managed most of the conference logistics and finances and Ray Bitar assisted with correspondence and the coordination of the work provided by graduate students during the conference. In South Carolina Margaret Weck facilitated correspondence and organized the papers for publication. Thanks to all of these persons whose expertise and cheerful assistance helped in significant ways to make the conference and this publication possible.

Eugene Thomas Long
Ethics of belief: introduction

Eugene Thomas Long

This volume is presented as a tribute to the life and work of D.Z. Phillips. Six of the articles were originally presented at the annual conference on the philosophy of religion organized by Phillips and held at Claremont Graduate University, February 9–10, 2007. Unfortunately, Phillips did not live to participate in the conference itself. He died unexpectedly July 25, 2006 in the library of his beloved University of Wales, Swansea. Previously published volumes of essays, based on conferences organized by Phillips in Claremont, included a chapter entitled, “Voices in Discussion,” in which Phillips provided his own reactions to the discussions written almost immediately after the conference. Sadly, this volume appears without the addition of his voice.

Born in Morriston, near Swansea, Phillips was a Welsh speaker, a strong supporter of Welsh speaking schools and the author of many works in philosophy and literature in Welsh and English. Known widely as the leading representative of the movement in the philosophy of religion called Wittgensteinianism, Phillips spent much of his effort challenging the tendency of philosophers to elevate one kind of discourse to the point where it becomes the norm by which other forms of discourse are to be judged. He argues that many contemporary philosophers of religion are obsessed by what they call the reality of God or the so-called real existence of God where real existence means existing in the manner of humans and physical objects. On Phillips’ view, coming to see there is a God is not like coming to see that an additional being exists, not even an absolute being. On his account, both idealists and empirical realists miss the point. To speak of God as a religious reality is to speak not theoretically, but from the religious context of a life of struggle and hope, of life transformed and absolutely grounded by grace and redemption. This point can be briefly illustrated by reference to the religious understanding of God as eternal love as discussed by Phillips in the second chapter of Faith and Philosophical Inquiry. Coming to understand eternal love, Phillips argues, is not a matter of adding new information to one’s knowledge. It is rather to be given new meaning, new understanding. Unlike temporal love, eternal love does not depend on how things are in the world. Eternal love is neither tentative nor dependent upon...
certain states of affairs being realized. Eternal love can neither change nor suffer defeat. It is inescapable and will not let go. Coming to see that there is a God is to come up against or be given a new understanding of a love that will not let go whatever happens. Coming to see the possibility of such love is coming to see the possibility of God.

Phillips, who always maintained the neutrality of conceptual analysis, argued in his later work for what he called the contemplative conception of philosophy of religion and attention to the world in its differences. Philosophy in this sense, as he says in the last chapter of *Philosophy's Cool Place*, seeks to go nowhere, seeks only to show what it means to believe in God or to deny his existence. This brings him into conflict with philosophers of religion who argue for the rationality of religious belief in God as the best explanation of how things are. This does not, however, make him a postmodernist in the ordinary sense of that term. While he does share common ground with some of the postmodernists in their efforts to free us from the control of metanarratives, Phillips challenges the conclusion that we create our own narratives and decide between the real and the unreal. He may also be said to share common ground with many philosophical theologians who are engaged in revising religious beliefs under the challenges of modernism. But he argues that he himself is not reforming anything, and in his characteristic way, that he is only “contemplating an old, old story and seeing what gets in the way of telling it today.”

Phillips was often frustrated by what he considered misunderstandings of his philosophical views, including in particular the charges of fideism and anti-realism. He defended his views with great energy, erudition and literary style, but also with a deep sense of humanity and appreciation of others. It was not unusual to see him, following a toe to toe argument with a colleague on the conference floor, entertaining that same colleague with his many stories at dinner. Indeed, it is difficult to recall Dewi, as his many friends called him, without at the same time recalling one of his stories and his hearty laughter.

Phillips began his academic career as an assistant lecturer in philosophy at Queens College, Dundee in 1961, returning home to the University of Wales, Swansea in 1965 becoming Professor and Head of Department in 1971. In 1992 he was appointed Danforth Professor of Philosophy of Religion at Claremont Graduate School, sharing his time with Swansea until 1966 when he retired as Rush Rhees Research Professor. For fourteen years Phillips spent every spring term at Claremont where among his many responsibilities he organized the annual philosophy of religion conference.

In organizing the conferences in Claremont it was never Phillips’ intent to promote his own views. On the contrary he relished discussion with philosophers who held views different from his own. This is shown in the list of persons invited and his letter outlining the purposes of the conference. In his letter of invitation to speakers at the conference on the ethics of belief, Phillips asked how belief is to be understood and whether beliefs are of the same kind. He also suggested that one might distinguish broadly between three different views of belief, beliefs that are answerable to evidence or the criteria of rationality, beliefs that are held within contexts where the ways in which we think are not open to choice, and beliefs that are regulated by religious, ethical, psychoanalytic or political values. Although the papers need not center on religious belief, he said, he hoped that the implications for religious belief would be explored.

The first three essays in this volume focus on the question of the ethics of belief and the evidentialist principle most frequently associated with W.K. Clifford. In contrast to those contemporary philosophers who argue against the evidentialist principle, Allen Wood provides a strong defense of it. In his essay, “The duty to Believe According to the Evidence”, Wood acknowledges that Clifford may have had in mind a too narrow definition of evidence, but Wood does not believe that an evidentialist has to follow Clifford in this regard. Given
the right epistemic standards, Wood argues, we still have to ask the question whether belief is morally permissible in cases where there is insufficient evidence. He defends evidentialism against several objections and argues for the duty to believe according to the evidence on self-regarding and other-regarding grounds.

In “The Virtues of Belief: Toward a Non-Evidentialist Ethics of Belief-Formation,” Richard Amesbury construes Clifford’s ethics of belief as entailing two independent substantive claims, an epistemological claim and a moral claim. He rejects the epistemological claim that entitlement is always a function of evidential support, but argues for preserving something of the moral claim that it is wrong to hold beliefs to which one is not entitled. The notion of a belief being wrong in this context has to do with the fact that belief is not a purely private matter and that it cannot be separated from other aspects of life. Building on this notion, Amesbury suggests an alternative way of conceiving the ethics of belief in which emphasis is placed more upon virtues than duties and more upon persons than just their beliefs.

In “The Ethics of Belief and Two Conceptions of Christian Faith”, Van Harvey distinguishes between what he calls the traditional conception of Christian faith in which faith is conceived as belief in a series of propositions and a conception of faith found in somewhat different forms in which belief has more to do with giving expression to religious affections (Schleiermacher), a gloss on religious experience (Wittgenstein) or “awe in the presence of the divine incognito” (Barth). Harvey argues that while the evidentialist principle does raise conflicts with the beliefs in the first conception of faith it does not do so in the second conception of faith. With regard to the second conception of faith, Harvey argues that Christian theologians, who believe they have the responsibility for grounding their interpretation of faith in the New Testament texts, are likely to find most sympathy with Barth’s conception of faith. This conception of faith neither requires believing a set of propositions that are defeasible by human inquiry nor a set of propositions about divine being.

Many contemporary philosophers have argued for the involuntariness of belief. In “Choosing to Believe”, Ronney Mourad challenges this widely held view. He argues that beliefs are sometimes voluntary and that these beliefs ought to be regulated by moral principles. Mourad develops a conception of belief in conversation with the work of J.L. Schellenberg, argues that some beliefs can be voluntary, and replies to William Alston’s objections to doxastic voluntariness. While agreeing that most of our beliefs seem to be involuntary, Mourad argues that some of our most important beliefs are voluntary and that these beliefs should be subject to moral regulation.

Jennifer Faust begins her essay, “Can Religious Arguments Persuade”, by acknowledging that arguments aimed at establishing or rejecting religious beliefs are seldom persuasive and offering an explanation for this. Rejecting the claim of some theists that non-believers are psychologically or cognitively defective, she argues that the persuasive power of an argument cannot be equated with the logical strength of the argument and may depend on features external to the argument itself. A person’s antecedent deep or fundamental commitments raise the bar for persuading a person to accept or reject a metaphysical or religious belief and may prevent an otherwise compelling argument from being persuasive. Taking religious belief to be a fundamental or framework belief of this kind, Faust argues that the expectation of the evidentialist that religious beliefs are or should be sensitive to evidential input is mistaken and that the prospect for an ethics of religious belief is bleak.

In “Belief, Faith and Acceptance”, Robert Audi argues that no one conception of belief is central in all discussions in religion and that ‘belief’ is sometimes used where ‘faith’ or ‘acceptance’ would better express what is intended. Audi engages in a detailed analysis of these terms arguing that there are many kinds of belief, faith and acceptance, that propositional faith need not be doxastic and that although attitudinal faith or belief-in is not a
doxastic attitude, it may embody beliefs. His purpose is to show that religious faith must be understood in its own terms and that these distinctions are important for understanding and appraising a person’s religious position. The question of evidence and rationality continues to be relevant for religious faith, but the conditions for rationality are different from or less strong than is the case with doxastic belief.

In earlier publications of the Claremont conferences organized by Phillips, he would at this point add his own voice, often in the form of a dialogue with the speakers. In the absence of this, John Whittaker was invited to add his article, “D.Z. Phillips and Reasonable Belief”. Whittaker, a sympathetic, but not uncritical reader of Phillips, would be the first to say that he does not and cannot speak for Phillips. However, he helps us better understand Phillips’ efforts to make us aware of the plurality of forms of belief and judgment and the failure of philosophers to find universal and mutually agreed upon standards of rationality. Philosophers, Phillips argues, often fail to distinguish the logic of moral and religious commitments from the logic that governs abstract hypotheses and requires some kind of inferential justification. Good judgment in matters concerning religion and morality is important, but judgment in these cases differs from the more objective model of rational inference. Judgments of truth in morality and religion are more personal in nature. They depend more on self-honesty, self-transformation and persuasion.

Anselm Min was also invited to add an essay in the absence of Phillips’ voice. In “D.Z. Phillips on the Grammar of ‘God’”, Min focuses on Phillips’ concern with understanding religious belief and the theory of language upon which talk of God depends, a topic that is at the root of many of Phillips’ discussions of the ethics and rationality of religious belief. Although an appreciative reader and sympathetic in many ways with the core of Phillips’ argument, Min appeals to his own more Hegelian and Thomistic point of view to extend the discussion. Min argues in particular for the need of religious games to be held in dialectical tension with other language games, for the importance of a more systematic metaphysical analysis of the nature of God to spell out the absolute character of divine reality, and for the need to recognize the irreducibility of transcendent reality to any form of human subjectivity.

The concluding piece, “Tribute to Dewi Z. Phillips”, is written by Patrick Horn. This is a slightly revised version of the tribute that Pat originally presented before family, colleagues and friends at the funeral service for Dewi in Swansea. Pat speaks for himself and largely from the Claremont context, but many will find in these words the Dewi they knew as colleague and friend.
The duty to believe according to the evidence

Allen Wood

Abstract ‘Evidentialism’ is the conventional name (given mainly by its opponents) for the view that there is a moral duty to proportion one’s beliefs to evidence, proof or other epistemic justifications for belief. This essay defends evidentialism against objections based on the alleged involuntariness of belief, on the claim that evidentialism assumes a doubtful epistemology, that epistemically unsupported beliefs can be beneficial, that there are significant classes of exceptions to the evidentialist principle, and other shabby evasions and alibis (as I take them to be) for disregarding the duty to believe according to the evidence. Evidentialism is also supported by arguments based on both self-regarding and other-regarding considerations.

Keywords Evidentialism · Belief · Clifford · James

Is there an ethics of belief?

Are beliefs a matter for morality? Can we be blamed for what we believe, or have an obligation to believe one thing and not another? Some think that nothing of this kind makes sense, on the ground that our beliefs are not voluntary. I believe that G. W. Bush is President of the United States, that koalas are marsupials, that Charlotte Brontë wrote Jane Eyre, and that gold has atomic number 79. I cannot change any of these beliefs at will. Neither offering me money to change them, nor threatening me with blame or punishment if I do not, will have any effect. I may wish that Bush were not President, but that wish is powerless to affect my belief about who is President. My beliefs might change in response to new arguments or evidence, but it is also not in my power whether such evidence is put before me. In short, what I believe is not up to me. What I cannot help, what isn’t voluntary, can’t be a matter
for morality. So belief can’t be a matter for morality. That’s one case that is sometimes made against the ethics of belief.

There are at least two ways, however, in which beliefs have been regarded as subject to morality. First, it is sometimes held that we have an obligation to believe certain things, and that it is wrong to believe others, simply on the ground of the content of what is believed or not believed. Some people have held that we ought to believe in God, or even that we will be damned to hell, and deservedly, unless we believe that Jesus Christ was crucified and then rose from the dead on the third day. Others find it blamable to believe that some races are naturally superior to others or blamable not to believe that the Holocaust occurred. I will call such supposed obligations regarding belief ‘content obligations.’

Second, some hold that some beliefs can be obligatory or blamable on account of something about the way in which they are formed and maintained. Some people think that we ought to believe what we are told by the Bible or by certain religious authorities simply because that is what they tell us. Others think it is wrong to hold beliefs on any basis except your own untrammeled thinking and experience. Some also think we have an obligation to believe only that for which we have good reasons or evidence. All these people think we have what I will call ‘procedural obligations’ regarding belief.

Both content and procedural obligations to believe at least make sense, and easily survive the objection that belief isn’t a matter for morality because it is involuntary. For one thing, although it may be true of many beliefs that it is not up to us whether to hold them, this is by no means true of all beliefs. I’ve heard people say, “I choose to believe that the President is telling us the truth.” I once heard Stephen King, the author of horror stories, say in a radio interview: “I choose to believe there is a God.” I see no reason to doubt that such people are accurately reporting what is going on in their minds.¹ They believe certain things because they choose to, and they would hold different beliefs if they had chosen differently. Those beliefs really are up to them. Such cases typically occur where the evidence is scanty or mixed, especially where the subject of the belief is important to the person, so that their emotions, or hopes, or moral commitments have the opportunity affect their beliefs at least as much as the evidence does. Even if they admit that the evidence against God’s existence is stronger than the evidence for it, some people still try to believe in God, and some apparently succeed.

William James, using a metaphor derived from electric wires, distinguished between what he called ‘live hypotheses’ and ‘dead’ ones. For James, a ‘hypothesis’ is anything proposed to our belief. It is live if we are capable of believing it if we will to do so, while it is dead for us if (as James puts it) it “scintillates with no credibility at all” and so it is beyond our power to believe it.² Whether we actually have any content obligations to believe, such obligations at least pass the test of voluntariness when they have to do with live hypotheses. Perhaps, on grounds of involuntariness, you can have no obligation to believe a hypothesis that is dead for you, but as far as voluntariness is concerned, you might be blamed for believing or not believing any hypothesis that is live for you. In that case, the obligation to believe in God or

¹ I take belief to be fundamentally a dispositional state rather than a psychic occurrence, much less an act. So choosing to believe something cannot be like choosing to crook your finger or stick out your tongue. The choice to believe that p no doubt involves a complex set of choices—to affirm rather than deny p on various occasions, to attend to evidence favoring p and to avert attention from considerations that might lead to doubting p, and so on. But it would be impossible to specify all the chosen acts of this kind that have gone into the choice to believe that p, and even more impossible to specify in advance all the choices that will constitute in the future one’s continuing to choose to believe that p. Therefore, “I choose to believe that p” is exactly the right locution to describe what Stephen King is doing. No philosophical quibbles should lead us to say that he misspoke, still less that what he said cannot be literally true.

in the Holocaust, might in principle apply to all those for whom the existence of God, and the occurrence of the Holocaust are live hypotheses.

As for procedural obligations to believe, they simply aren’t the least bit dependent on the idea that it is voluntary what we believe. They depend instead the voluntariness of the actions of thought, attention and inquiry through which we form and maintain our beliefs. It is often up to us whether we defer to authorities or think for ourselves, whether we let ourselves consider arguments or evidence, or undertake further research before making up our minds. Wherever this is so, procedural obligations to believe or not believe pass the test of voluntariness. Some beliefs, of course, are formed through psychological mechanisms such as wishful thinking, self-deception, or accepting the beliefs of those around us. It may not always be easy to resist such mechanisms, or even to be aware of them, but it is up to us whether we try or not try to be aware of them, and whether we try or not try to resist them. Often such voluntary tryings, when they occur, meet with success. In fact, procedural obligations regarding belief are important precisely because our beliefs are not wholly up to us or under our voluntary control. For in general, when a state that affects our behavior (for instance, an emotional state, such as anger) is not under our voluntary control, it is all the more important to watch carefully over all the voluntary processes through which you might get yourself into such a state. In this respect, belief is like anger or other emotional states.

The obligation to believe on the basis of evidence or reasons

I won’t be considering content obligations to believe any further here, simply because, on moral grounds, I deny that there are any content obligations to believe. If it is wrong not to believe in the Holocaust, for instance, that is due to procedural obligations to believe, such as that we have a duty to believe according to the evidence, together with the fact that evidence for the Holocaust is overwhelming. The main principle that I think governs the ethics of belief, in fact, is the procedural principle I have just invoked and also stated in the title of this talk: Apportion the strength of your belief to the evidence; believe only what is justified by the evidence, and believe it to the full extent, but only to the extent, that it is justified by the evidence.  

3 Of course there are some who think that nothing at all is voluntary or up to us, and that everything we say or think or do is involuntary and happens by a necessity that is beyond our power, determined by our genes or operant conditioning or the laws of physics. But unless you take that extreme position (which would do away not merely with obligations to believe, but with all obligations whatever), you should admit that it is up to us what we believe and how we form and maintain our beliefs often enough for an ethics of belief to pass the test of involuntariness.

4 Clifford writes as if belief is an all-or-nothing matter—either you believe something or you don’t, and there are no degrees of belief. (He never directly asserts this, however, but merely omits to consider issues raised by strength of belief or degree of subjective certainty.) Since I think degree or strength of belief, and strength of evidence, are sometimes real factors in belief, I do not want to make a similar omission. But I do not think that the notions of strength of belief and strength of evidence are equally applicable to all cases. They seem most appropriate in cases where there is a careful, disciplined weighing of evidence that is hard to come by, or mixed—as it is for historians, for example, or in many branches of science. In many cases, however, it seems right to say that a person simply believes something or doesn’t, and not to speak at all of degrees or strength of belief. Especially artificial is the practice of some epistemologists who think of all belief as the assignment of a precise probability—as though my saying that I believe fairly strongly that the outcome of the Iraq war will be unfavorable to the U.S. must consist in my assigning some precise probability (60%? 75%? 90%?) to the proposition “The outcome of the Iraq war will be unfavorable to the U.S.” I do not think the assignment of such probabilities, even when it occurs, belongs to the same category as having a strong or weak belief. For instance, I might assign a probability of 80% to the proposition “The U.S. adventure in Iraq will be rightly judged in retrospect to have been a failure,” while having either a strong or a weak belief that this is the correct
Using a term that is employed more often by opponents of this principle, I will call this the ‘evidentialist principle.’ The evidentialist principle is perhaps most often associated with the name of the 19th century British mathematician, scientist and philosopher William Kingdon Clifford. But other contemporaries of Clifford, such as Thomas Henry Huxley, were equally strong supporters of this principle, and its pedigree in modern philosophy goes back much farther. Among the important modern philosophers who explicitly endorse the evidentialist principle in one way or another are Descartes, Locke and Hume.

The evidentialist principle is a moral principle. It holds that beliefs not justified by the evidence are immoral. Yet if the term ‘justified’ that occurs in it referred to moral justification, then the principle would seem tautological, or even vacuous. However, I do not intend the term ‘justified,’ as it occurs in the principle, to refer to moral justification. Rather, I mean employ a notion of justification that is wholly epistemic in character. The evidentialist principle, in other words, is to be understood against a background of a set of epistemic standards telling us, relative to a given context, what a certain set of considerations, regarded as rational arguments or evidence, justify a person in that context in believing. In the evidentialist principle, I therefore understand the term ‘evidence’ in a very broad way, encompassing not only empirical information but also a priori arguments and anything else that can authenticate itself as a genuine epistemic ground for assent, acceptance or belief. Clifford probably intended ‘evidence’ too narrowly (having in mind only empirical evidence, and a certain then fashionable interpretation of ‘the scientific method’), but there is no reason that an evidentialist has to follow him in this. To broaden the notion of evidence, however, by no means trivializes the evidentialist principle. For no matter how you think of evidence or epistemic justification, people do often hold beliefs that fail to meet the epistemic standards, and it is still highly significant to point out that this is morally wrong. The point is rather that the evidentialist principle itself does not take a position on what our epistemic standards should be. That is for epistemologists to decide. And it is also open to the evidentialist to insist that the proper standards for a given person on a given occasion are contextual, depending on that person’s epistemic position (the questions it is reasonable for them to ask, the information available to them, and so on). To say that epistemic justification is contextual in this way is not, however, to say that the standards of epistemically justified belief are “subjective” or “person-relative.” It is only to say that the objective standards (which, however, may be subject to controversy, even to endless controversy and endless correction) apply differently to different people because different people begin in different situations, are asking different questions and have different evidence available to them.

Alvin Plantinga and others have sometimes tried to attack evidentialism on the ground that it presupposes a mistaken epistemology. But in this they are clearly on the wrong track. The evidentialist principle is compatible with any epistemology that has any use at all for some notion of epistemic justification that can be employed in determining what to believe. It is suspicious, however, that those who wish to dispute the evidentialist principle fasten on epistemological issues (which are essentially irrelevant to it). For this suggests that they realize they cannot controvert the evidentialist principle directly, and must resort to obfuscating or diverting attention from the real question. The real question is simply this: Given

Footnote 4 continued

probability assignment. Theorists who think this last strong or weak belief must consist in my assigning yet another probability are merely being silly, and if they do not see this, that shows only that they are hopelessly committed to a wrong theory.

Even those, such as William Alston, who have questioned the common notions of epistemic justification, still endorse using a set of evidential criteria to assess beliefs. Whether we use the term ‘justification’ to sum up the results of using such criteria seems to me a verbal matter, not a substantive one.
the right epistemic standards—whatever we decide the right ones are—if it is decided that there is insufficient evidence to justify a belief epistemically, there is still the moral question whether holding the belief is morally permissible. Some people, such as James and Pascal (to name only two), think this is permissible. But the evidentialist principle says it is not morally permissible, that it is morally wrong and blameworthy.

Belief, as I have said, sometimes comes in degrees of strength. At the time he was first running for President, George W. Bush’s belief that Clinton was President was clearly stronger than his belief that Atal Bihari Vajpayee was Prime Minister of India, since he could not name the then Prime Minister of India when asked, but he certainly could name the abominable adulterer who defeated his father for the Presidency in 1992. Evidence that justifies a weaker belief may not justify a stronger one. For instance, Bush thought he had some evidence at the beginning of 2003 that there were weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, but this evidence pretty obviously justified only a much weaker belief in the existence of these weapons than Bush held at the time. If so, then when he ordered the invasion of Iraq, offering the existence of weapons of mass destruction as his chief reason for doing so, Bush was violating the evidentialist principle. Long after it was determined that there were no weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Bush still avowed on national television the belief that in 2003 Iraq posed an immediate military danger to the security of the United States. Whatever may have been true before the invasion, that belief was clearly not justified by the evidence about Iraq’s military capabilities that we all obtained quite soon after the invasion. The evidentialist principle thus clearly condemns that belief as immoral.

It will often be a non-trivial, or even a difficult and controversial matter to determine what standards of evidence apply to a given context or justify a certain person in holding a certain belief to a certain degree of strength or certainty. For instance, it may be a non-trivial question how strong a belief in the existence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq was justified by the evidence U.S. intelligence services provided the Bush administration (or whether any belief at all in their existence, even a weak one, was justified then). But for almost every significant moral principle, such as the moral principle condemning all wars of aggression, there are non-trivial issues of fact, and sometimes even deep issues of theory, involved in applying the moral principle to particular cases. So the evidentialist principle is no different from many other moral principles in that respect.

Evasion and denial regarding the evidentialist principle

How often is the evidentialist principle violated? Pretty often, I think. A majority of those who voted for Bush in 2004 told pollsters they believe both that weapons of mass destruction had actually been found in Iraq, and that Saddam Hussein was behind the terror attacks of September 11, 2001. These beliefs were never at any time supported by any credible evidence whatever. The violation of the evidentialist principle not only occurs very frequently, it is also quite often not merely winked at but even approved, sometimes even provided with a philosophical defense, such as the one offered by William James in “The Will to Believe.” A world in which people always abided by the evidentialist principle, like a world in which human rights were always respected, in which there were no wide gaps between rich and poor, and in which all nations and peoples were at peace with one another, would be a very different world from the one we live in, and like those other possible worlds, I think it would also be a much better world than the one we live in.

I think that many realize at some level how far most people are from complying with the evidentialist principle, but for various reasons they fear having to abide by the evidentialist
principle in their own lives, so the main effect of this awareness is to induce in them a state of denial regarding the evidentialist principle. By a ‘state of denial’ I mean that they find all sorts of indirect ways of evading the principle or putting it out of action. The idea we examined right at the start, that beliefs are not a matter for morality at all, is one of these ways. So is the idea that the evidentialist principle assumes a doubtful epistemology.

The context in which disputes about the evidentialist principle have most often taken place is the philosophy of religion. Some people seem to think that religion is a special area of human life where beliefs are simply exempt from the evidentialist principle. They often express this by saying things like: “Religious questions are matters of faith, not of evidence or proof.” Sometimes they even infer that religion has to be exempt from the evidentialist principle merely from the premise (which they apparently take to be too obvious for meaningful dispute), that there could not possibly be adequate evidence for religious beliefs. Their inference is invalid to the point of downright impudence: You might as well argue that professional hit men should be exempt from the laws against premeditated murder just because it is obvious that killers for hire can’t justify their actions under those laws. In any case, religious beliefs clearly differ in the degree to which they are justified by evidence. A belief in divine creation that is consistent with astronomical and biological science is clearly better supported than one that requires us to deny the facts of evolution or to claim that the universe only 4,000 years old. The Judaeo-Christian scriptures themselves frequently offer what they take to be evidence in favor of the true faith and against contrary religious beliefs, as when they report that Elijah’s sacrifice was miraculously accepted while those of the prophets of Baal were not (1 Kings 18:30–40). An evidentialist need not agree with the scriptural conclusion that the people were justified, at Elijah’s command, in killing the proponents of the evidentially unsupported religious belief. But evidentialism does agree with Scripture in maintaining that evidence is relevant to religious beliefs, as to beliefs of other kinds.6

James accuses Clifford of holding that we must abstain from every belief until it has been evidentially certified, and then points to the absurd practical consequences of such a policy. But this is a red herring, since Clifford accepts no such picture. When Clifford’s famous ship owner is about to send out his emigrant ship, his belief that it is seaworthy is taken for granted until doubts about this are suggested to him. His wrongdoing consists in ridding himself of these doubts in the wrong way, not in failing to provide an evidential justification for each of his beliefs separately and singly before believing anything.7 James’s criticism here seems to me typical of the dishonesty and evasion we find in all attempts to challenge or quibble with the evidentialist principle.

When people become truly desperate, the form taken by the state of denial is sometimes a sudden and extremely acute attack of epistemic scruples. The believer, for whom skepticism in any form is normally the most deadly enemy, all of a sudden falls into a state in which there seems to be no good evidence for believing anything—that the sun will rise tomorrow, that

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6 I submit that whenever it is stated or implied that religious beliefs are all equally unsupported evidentially, this is either a simple case of anti-religious bigotry or else a patently dishonest attempt to exempt one’s own religious beliefs, which one knows to be unreasonable, from all critical standards.

7 The obvious instance of a philosopher who does something like what James is attacking here is Descartes, in the practice of his method of first philosophy. But anyone who reads Descartes’ Discourse on Method with any care will see clearly that requiring us to support our beliefs from scratch by intuitive certainty or demonstration applies only within the domain of philosophical method, which Descartes clearly partitions off from all the beliefs he holds for practical purposes. Further, even within the specialized method, Descartes does not require his beliefs to be separately authenticated until after they have been called into question by his special methodological doubt. Even there he does not begin by considering all his beliefs guilty until proven innocent, and then asking for a justification from scratch for each one. James’s charge would therefore be a red herring even applied to Descartes, much less to Clifford, or any other evidentialist I know of.
fire will burn you, that drinking water is any better for you than drinking gasoline. From this the believer immediately draws the wildly invalid conclusion that we are at liberty to believe anything we like without ever attending to any evidence at all. The fallacious reasoning and even more desperate dishonesty represented by this form of denial are so dismayingly transparent that it is hard to keep a straight face in dealing with those who have subverted their intellects in this degrading manner.

I won’t have time here to go through all the shameless evasions I’ve run into in the course of defending the evidentialist principle. The kinds of prevarication and sophistry people go through in the course of rationalizing their evasions of the evidentialist principle are virtually inexhaustible, so even an infinite time would not suffice to reply to all the possible quibbles, alibis and excuses that might be dredged up from the bottomless pit of human self-deception. What I do want to address here are some philosophical arguments, such as those of William James, for the thesis that the evidentialist principle is too restrictive. I should preface this discussion, however, by saying that I think those who, like James, directly dispute the evidentialist principle through such arguments are less in a state of denial about it than those who engage in the wide variety of more dishonest evasions. Worse even than they, however, are those who do not dispute the evidentialist principle at all, but merely interpret all evidence they get dishonestly, so as to confirm their pet faiths and prejudices, without even acknowledging that their conduct even raises a moral issue.

The basic idea behind the most thoughtful objections to the evidentialist principle is that there is a class of beliefs that are not justified by the evidence, but holding then either does no harm or even does some positive good. For instance, James and others argue that religious beliefs unsupported by evidence provide joy and consolation to those who hold them, enrich their lives, and encourage the believers to engage in actions that benefit others and the world at large. There is even a body of empirical evidence, summarized in a 2003 article in *American Psychologist* by Carl E. Thoresen and William R. Miller, that religious involvement leads to a longer life and greater contentment. James argues that sometimes people can succeed in doing something worthwhile only if they believe in advance that they will succeed, so that to forbid them the belief that they will succeed (when it is not supported by evidence prior to the attempt) is to condemn them to failure, which James argues would be harmful and even irrational.

There are several different worries that an evidentialist will have about these supposed cases and the arguments based on them. First, as regards the joy and consolation afforded by unsupported beliefs, the empirical studies do not deal directly with religious belief (as distinct from participation in religious activities), and do not distinguish among religious beliefs regarding their evidential support, or even between beliefs that the believers themselves do and do not take to be evidentially supported. So the studies do not directly address the question whether evidentially unsupported beliefs contribute to human well-being.

It cannot be denied that in exceptional cases, it can benefit someone to hold a belief that is false. For example, a cancer patient’s morale, and hence his chances of beating the disease, might in some cases be improved by his not believing he has cancer at all. In that case, the

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8 See Thoresen and Miller (2003). The American social psychologist Shelley Taylor regularly praises what she takes to be the biologically advantageous tendency of medical patients to hold illusions about their condition. See Taylor and Brown (1988). These claims raise somewhat different issues from those I am discussing, since Taylor and Brown are claiming that people are benefited by holding false beliefs as well as beliefs not supported by evidence. But it should be clear that in a case like this no one could stably hold both the belief that is supposed to benefit them and also know that it is false. So no one could know about themselves that they are being benefited by such a belief while continuing to hold the belief. Hence even if illusions do benefit people’s health, it does not seem that this is a justification a person could stably or self-consistently apply to their own beliefs.
issue would arise for his physician and family whether to deceive him for his own good. This is not an easy issue to decide in general, however, since to deceive someone is to treat them paternalistically, so it needs to be carefully considered whether the benefit to them of holding a false belief outweighs the disrespect shown them by deceiving them. But the fact erroneous beliefs can sometimes benefit people does not show that it is ever permissible to seek such supposed benefits for yourself by manipulating yourself into believing something that the evidence shows is probably not true. For to do this would be to corrupt your procedures of belief formation and deliberation in a fundamental way. It is to show lack of respect for yourself that is so radical that it is hard to see how you could permit this and still retain intact even your capacity to deliberate rationally about what benefits you and what does not, in which case there would be no reason for you to trust your judgment that the evidentially unsupported belief really benefits you.

Even if we grant that evidentially unsupported beliefs do sometimes make people feel joy and consolation, it is still not clear that a person is really better off feeling joy and consolation in cases where those feelings are based on illusions.

Suppose I am elected “Most Popular Guy” in my high school graduating class, and feel joy and consolation in receiving this token of esteem and affection from all those cool jocks and groovy chicks who I never thought liked me at all; but in fact I was elected to this honor only because the election was a sham, a nasty conspiracy, a cruel joke played on me by my malicious classmates, who in fact without exception regard me as a contemptible dweeb, and now laugh at me behind my back for being such an easily deceived geek. In this case, it seems to me, my condition is pitiable rather than enviable, and my feelings of joy and consolation even constitute a significant part of why my state is so pitiable. (If I knew they were kidding, I might still be a revolting nerd, but at least I would not be such a ridiculous sucker.)

If this is right, then the joy and consolation afforded by beliefs unsupported by evidence normally count as something good for the person only if those beliefs are actually true. To think that a person’s real condition is so bad that they would truly be better off living an illusion surely is to rate the person’s state as wretched beyond any hope of improvement. To lie paternalistically to people may sometimes help them (for instance, to overcome a life-threatening illness), but like most forms of paternalism, it shows a lack of respect for the person, and seems justifiable only temporarily, under very special conditions. To regard it as an acceptable general policy in forming people’s basic beliefs about themselves and the world (for example, their religious beliefs) is incompatible with respecting people at all. And of course to adopt such a policy regarding yourself, when it is possible at all, is to engage in a systematic pattern of self-deception that is incompatible with self-respect. Hence even if we considered it possible that we might really be better off holding beliefs that are not only evidentially unsupported but also false, we should not consider the miserable and contemptible level of well-being we might achieve by this device to be any genuine good, certainly not a good sufficient to justify making exceptions to the evidentialist principle.

In general beliefs unsupported by evidence are false more often than true. (If you doubt this, then I think you would also have to doubt that there is anything deserving the name ‘evidence.’) So granted that we truly benefit from holding epistemically unjustified beliefs only if the beliefs are true, it could never be true in general, but only in exceptional cases (when, namely, contrary to the evidence, the beliefs are true), that the joy and consolation afforded people by such beliefs will turn out to be genuinely beneficial to the believers. It follows that the general policy of seeking joy and consolation in beliefs not supported by the evidence could never benefit people, even if in exceptional cases people do sometimes accidentally benefit from holding such beliefs. But then let’s ask this question: Could we ever know that a given case is exceptional in this way? Defenders of epistemically unjustified
belief often argue by simply stipulating, plausibly enough, that there are such cases, and then claiming that the evidentialist principle is mistaken in condemning those beliefs. If such cases are necessarily exceptional, and we can never know whether we are dealing with one of them, this objection to the evidentialist principle can never justify any particular belief that violates the principle, even granting for the moment that the benefits of believing would suffice to justify it. Yet it is not clear how we could obtain good evidence that we will succeed if we believe without also getting pretty good evidence that success is pretty well within our grasp anyway, which casts doubt on the supposition that our belief that we will succeed is evidentially unsupported.

These arguments also do not usually distinguish between the effects of believing we will succeed and the effects of hoping we will succeed. It probably also requires evidence to be justified in hoping something will be true, since (as I would argue) hope always requires at least a very weak or tentative belief. (It makes no sense to hope for what you are firmly convinced is not the case.) How, then, can we be sure we are not dealing with a case in which epistemically justified hope will do just as good a job of promoting success as epistemically unjustified belief? In the face of such subtle and difficult questions, I am tempted to offer the modest suggestion that we might try just being honest with ourselves, both hoping and believing what the evidence justifies hoping and believing, and see if we can’t somehow muddle through without having to lie to ourselves.

We might also raise the question in these cases whether there really is good evidence that evidentially unsupported beliefs enrich people’s lives, or promote success, more than possible alternative beliefs that are better supported by the evidence. (The empirical studies about religion, once again, never specifically address that question, since they do not even ask about the evidential support there might be for various religious beliefs.) It seems to me a telling point that James, in the course of his defense of evidentially unsupported religious beliefs, counts it as one of the affirmations of religion—hence one of the beliefs for which he claims evidence is unnecessary—that we are better off believing that religion is true.9 This might seem illegitimate and question-begging. Yet it is only consistent with the basic position for which James is arguing. For if the joys and consolations to be derived from a belief are truly beneficial to a person only if the belief is true, then in the case of evidentially unjustified beliefs, it is evidence for that which is lacking. And as we have already seen, someone who is prepared to subvert his belief-forming procedures by believing what is unsupported by the evidence can also not trust himself to deliberate reliably about what it might benefit himself (or other people) for him to believe. It follows that particular violations of the evidentialist principle simply cannot be honestly defended to the believers themselves by providing evidence that they are beneficial to the believer, even if we agree that such beliefs might occasionally exist. In order to accept such justifications, we must shift to a kind of third person perspective on beliefs, in effect treating ourselves with a disgusting attitude of condescending paternalism, and assert propositions about ourselves that we cannot consistently hold while also holding the beliefs that are to be justified.

Generally speaking it is obvious that true beliefs tend to lead to good consequences and false beliefs to bad ones. There may be ironic exceptions to this general truth, but it would be folly (or worse) to live your whole life as if just the opposite generalization were true. Further, if the word ‘evidence’ means anything at all, it means that beliefs supported by evidence are more likely to be true than those lacking evidential support. So if, as we have admitted, there are cases in which good consequences follow from holding unsupported beliefs, they

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are necessarily exceptional, and when these exceptional cases occur, we can never be in a position to know (or justifiably believe) this.

The mere existence of such cases would be far from constituting a moral justification for holding those beliefs. This is especially the case when the good consequences consist solely in some alleged benefit to the believer—such as pleasant feelings of joy, consolation and contentment. For it is often true of immoral actions (for instance, betraying the trust of a friend) that they benefit the person who performs them. (By betraying your friend, you can get his money away from him, or you can get away with some of your other bad actions by causing your innocent friend to take the blame for them.) These benefits to yourself obviously do not show that your act of betrayal is morally justified. Just as little would the fact that a believer benefits in some specific way from holding an unsupported belief (by feeling joy or consolation, or by succeeding in his projects) show that belief to be morally justified.10

Sometimes beliefs on insufficient evidence are defended on the grounds that they make the believer a morally better person. But what is the evidence for this? Does religious belief in general make people better? (Often enough, people who make such a claim simply take the question-begging and dishonest Jamesian line of treating it as one of the affirmations of religion, for which therefore no evidence is necessary.) But if we ask seriously and honestly whether religion makes people better, this turns out to be very hard to say, partly because there is considerable controversy about what counts as a good person, and partly for other reasons. There is empirical evidence, however, that criminal behavior is not negatively correlated with religious belief.11

There is a lot of anecdotal evidence that some religious people are, on the whole, very good people, and often these people themselves think that their religious faith contributes to whatever moral virtue they possess. But there is also massive anecdotal evidence that other religious people are not good people at all, yet they too usually believe they are good, and that their religious beliefs make them good. So the former group, who are good, might be mistaken in believing that religious belief makes them good, just as the latter group, who are not good, are mistaken in thinking both that they are good and that religious belief makes them good. In both cases, both the religious belief and the belief that religious belief makes

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10 It is quite possible, of course, to imagine cases in which the benefit of violating the evidentialist principle is not supposed to go to the violator but to others. And it is equally possible to imagine cases where the motive for violating the principle is not self-interest but some generous or otherwise laudable motive. But people can have laudable motives for doing blamable actions, and the actions can be blamable nonetheless. And not just any means is permissible to reach a state of affairs, even if the state of affairs is good, and something a good person would want to bring about. If we have very general and very powerful moral reasons, of both a self-regarding and an other-regarding character, for adhering to the evidentialist principle—as I will argue later that we do—then it is merely a corrupt way of thinking that tries to tempt us to violate the principle by pointing to the good that can be obtained, or the evil averted, by violating it. This is a point that can be made equally well by a consequentialist and a non-consequentialist moral theorist, as long as the consequentialist understands the powerful reasons (which for him are consequentialist ones) for following the moral principle in question. It is a general human failing to rationalize the violation of important moral principles by magnifying the importance of some immediate good to be obtained or evil to be averted. And people make moral judgments all the time that are bad and corrupt when they think that the desirableness of some immediate end outweighs the importance of some principle of honesty or integrity But as John Stuart Mill points out, a thinking utilitarian is no more susceptible to this failing than anyone else (see Mill (1979), pp. 22–23, 25). It should not be thought that consequentialist theories can be criticized by charging them with a tendency to reason in such corrupt ways, or, conversely, that such corrupt reasoning can be defended by subscribing to a consequentialist moral theory. But the basic point, which is valid generally of all moral principles, was stated quite precisely by St. Paul when he condemns “doing evil that good may come” (Romans 3:8).

them good seem to belong to the class of evidentially unjustified religious beliefs, rather than counting as beliefs for which there is good evidence.

Some argue, however, that it is not a question of the actual effect of religious belief. The point, they say, is rather that without evidentially unsupported beliefs, you would not have any reason to be good, and it’s to give yourself such a reason that you ought to hold those beliefs. For instance, they hold that the belief that there is a real difference between good and evil, or the belief that there is some powerful cosmic force co-operating with our efforts for good and opposing the forces of evil, is required to motivate us to do right and avoid doing wrong. Their claim is that if we did not hold these epistemically unjustified beliefs, we would have no reason to care about morality at all, but would be justified instead in taking the selfish and unprincipled course in everything we do. To put it bluntly, those who think this way have to believe that based on a rational assessment of the evidence, being honest and kind is only for fools and suckers and the only rational course of life is that of an unprincipled sociopath. But I submit that if that’s how you see the world, then I you are already a person of very bad moral character, since this is not how a morally decent person could possibly see the world. Moreover, I don’t think your attempts at dishonest self-manipulation, through professing beliefs you know lack evidential support, are likely to do much to improve your bad character.12

More often, I think people who argue this way are thinking of themselves (perhaps rightly, and with admirable candor) as susceptible at times to this corrupt view of the world, even though when things appear from the standpoint of the better side of their character, they do not truly think that dishonesty and selfishness are the only rational way to live. They think they need unjustified beliefs in order to have something to say to themselves when their bad side is in danger of gaining the upper hand over their good side. But I submit that their bad side is not likely to be fooled by such transparent attempts at self-deception, and their good side stands in no need of them. I suspect that what attaches them to the beliefs in question is not their moral effects at all, but various motives of wishful thinking, habit and self-complacency which, seen for what they are, belong to their bad side and not to their good side at all.

Obviously good consequences of any kind cannot provide a justification for violating a principle whose validity is not based on its conduciveness to good consequences. Even for a moral consequentialist, however, merely to pointing to some good consequences is not enough to justify anything. It would have to be shown that the consequences are on the whole better than those of any alternative. If we remain neutral for now between consequentialist and non-consequentialist moral theories, it still holds true in general that citing the good consequences of holding a belief on insufficient evidence could provide a moral justification for the belief only if these consequences constitute a moral reason that is not outweighed by moral reasons, whether based on consequences or on something else, that count against holding the belief. This point leads directly to the next topic I want to take up, namely, the grounds for the evidentialist principle.

Grounds for the evidentialist principle

The evidentialist principle seems morally compelling both on self-regarding and on other-regarding grounds. Each type of ground opens up a broad field in moral theory, and it will

12 As David Hume put it: “The smallest grain of natural honesty and benevolence has more effect on men’s conduct than the most pompous views suggested by theological theories and systems.” See Hume (1970), p. 115.