

**Dr Neville Buch**  
MPHA (Qld)  
Historian

*Understanding history is philosophy in  
practice*



**SOFiA**

---

[www.drnevillebuch.com/](http://www.drnevillebuch.com/)

[www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/](http://www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/)

ABN 86703686642

Sunday 12 March 2023

**Session 2. The Ethics of Belief in Response to the Will to Believe.**

Clifford, W.K., 1877 [1999], "The ethics of belief", in T. Madigan, (ed.), *The ethics of belief and other essays*, Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 70–96.

<https://openeducationalberta.ca/pop201/chapter/clifford-the-ethics-of-belief/>

See also James, William (1896, 1912). *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, Longmans, Green, and Co.

<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/26659/26659-h/26659-h.htm>

Sunday 12 March 2023 1pm-4:30pm

The ethics of belief refers to a cluster of related issues that focus on standards of rational belief, intellectual excellence, and conscientious belief-formation. Among the questions addressed in the field are:

- Are there standards of some sort ("epistemic norms") that ought to guide how we form beliefs and pursue intellectual aims, such as the pursuit of truth or the quest for understanding?
- If so, what kind of norms? Moral? Purely intellectual? Prudential?
- If there are such norms, how strong are they? Are they categorical (i.e., binding regardless of our desires and commitments) or merely hypothetical (applicable only if we have certain desires and goals?) Do they bind absolutely or only conditionally?

[1]

**18 Callendar Street**  
**Sunnybank Hills Qld 4109**  
**(07) 3342 3704**  
**0416 046 429**

**Dr Neville Buch**  
MPHA (Qld)  
Historian

*Understanding history is philosophy in  
practice*



**SOFiA**

---

[www.drnevillebuch.com/](http://www.drnevillebuch.com/)

[www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/](http://www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/)

ABN 86703686642

- Are beliefs within our voluntary control, or do we more or less automatically believe whatever we think is best supported by the evidence?
- What aims should we have as believers? Achieving significant truth? Avoiding significant error? Achieving knowledge? Pleasure? Peace of mind? Understanding? Wisdom?
- Must one always have sufficient evidence for one's beliefs (a view philosophers call "evidentialism"), or is it sometimes permissible to believe without sufficient evidence—or perhaps without any evidence at all?
- What sorts of "intellectual virtues" (admirable mental traits, skills, and habits) are necessary for intellectual excellence and high-quality critical thinking?

### **Who is W.K. Clifford?**

William Kingdon Clifford FRS (4 May 1845 – 3 March 1879) was an English mathematician and philosopher. In 1871, he was appointed professor of mathematics and mechanics at University College London, and in 1874 became a fellow of the Royal Society. He was also a member of the London Mathematical Society and the Metaphysical Society (UK).

In his 1877 essay, *The Ethics of Belief*, Clifford argues that it is immoral to believe things for which one lacks evidence. He describes a ship-owner who planned to send to sea an old and not well-built ship full of passengers. The ship-owner had doubts suggested to him that the ship might not be seaworthy: "These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy." He considered having the ship refitted even though it would be expensive. At last, "he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections." He watched the ship depart, "with a light heart...and he got his insurance money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no

[2]

**18 Callendar Street  
Sunnybank Hills Qld 4109  
(07) 3342 3704  
0416 046 429**

**Dr Neville Buch**  
MPHA (Qld)  
Historian

*Understanding history is philosophy in  
practice*



**SOFiA**

---

[www.drnevillebuch.com/](http://www.drnevillebuch.com/)

[www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/](http://www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/)

ABN 86703686642

tales." Clifford argues that the ship-owner was guilty of the deaths of the passengers even though he sincerely believed the ship was sound: "[H]e had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him." Moreover, he contends that even in the case where the ship successfully reaches the destination, the decision remains immoral, because the morality of the choice is defined forever once the choice is made, and actual outcome, defined by blind chance, doesn't matter. The ship-owner would be no less guilty: his wrongdoing would never be discovered, but he still had no right to make that decision given the information available to him at the time. Clifford famously concludes with what has come to be known as Clifford's principle: "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

This description of the argument goes to who W.K. Clifford was in the late nineteenth century with major concerns of the era around ship insurance and the regulation of sea-faring.

### **Who is William James?**

William James (January 11, 1842 – August 26, 1910) was an American philosopher, historian, and psychologist, and the first educator to offer a psychology course in the United States. Along with Charles Sanders Peirce, James established the philosophical school known as pragmatism, and is also cited as one of the founders of functional psychology. James also developed the philosophical perspective known as radical empiricism. James's work has influenced philosophers and academics such as Émile Durkheim, W. E. B. Du Bois, Edmund Husserl, Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, and Marilynne Robinson. James was the son of the Swedenborgian theologian Henry James Sr. and the brother of both the prominent novelist Henry James and the diarist Alice James. James joined in philosophical discussions and debates with Charles Peirce, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and

[3]

**18 Callendar Street  
Sunnybank Hills Qld 4109  
(07) 3342 3704  
0416 046 429**

**Dr Neville Buch**  
MPHA (Qld)  
Historian

*Understanding history is philosophy in  
practice*



**SOFiA**

---

[www.drnevillebuch.com/](http://www.drnevillebuch.com/)

[www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/](http://www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/)

ABN 86703686642

Chauncey Wright that evolved into a lively group informally known as The Metaphysical Club in 1872.

In William James's 1896 lecture titled "The Will to Believe", James defends the right to violate the principle of evidentialism in order to justify hypothesis venturing. This idea foresaw 20th century objections to evidentialism and sought to ground justified belief in an unwavering principle that would prove more beneficial. Through his philosophy of pragmatism William James justifies religious beliefs by using the results of his hypothetical venturing as evidence to support the hypothesis's truth. Therefore, this doctrine allows one to assume belief in a god and prove its existence by what the belief brings to one's life. There is in the concept of "The Will to Believe" several important links to Jamesian concepts of truth and knowledge. James defined true beliefs as those that prove useful to the believer. His pragmatic theory of truth was a synthesis of correspondence theory of truth and coherence theory of truth, with an added dimension. Truth is verifiable to the extent that thoughts and statements correspond with actual things, as well as the extent to which they "hang together," or cohere, as pieces of a puzzle might fit together; these are in turn verified by the observed results of the application of an idea to actual practice.

The place of "religion" and "free-will" in relation to the description of the "The Will to Believe" argument expresses the intellectual world of William James in the United States. These ideas links with the American national story in manifest destiny, libertarianism, and the American Dream.

[4]

**18 Callendar Street  
Sunnybank Hills Qld 4109  
(07) 3342 3704  
0416 046 429**

**Dr Neville Buch**  
MPHA (Qld)  
Historian

*Understanding history is philosophy in  
practice*



**SOFiA**

---

[www.drnevillebuch.com/](http://www.drnevillebuch.com/)

[www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/](http://www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/)

ABN 86703686642

## **The Argument of William James**

### ***Sections I–III: Preliminaries***

In section I, James embarks upon the task of defining a number of important terms he will be relying upon throughout the lecture:

- Live and dead hypotheses – "deadness and liveness ... are measured by [a thinker's] willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in a hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably"
- Option – "the decision between two hypotheses"
- Living and dead option – "a living option is one in which both hypotheses are live ones"
- Forced and avoidable option – an option for which there is "no possibility of not choosing"
- Momentous and trivial option – an "option is trivial when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it later proves unwise"
- Genuine option – "we may call an option a genuine option when it is of the forced, living, and momentous kind"
- Belief – "A chemist finds a hypothesis live enough to spend a year in its verification: he believes in it to that extent."

In section II, James begins by saying he will then consider "the actual psychology of human opinion." Here James considers and largely agrees with the criticism of Pascal's Wager that we either should not or are unable to believe or disbelieve at will. That is, James here seems

[5]

**18 Callendar Street  
Sunnybank Hills Qld 4109  
(07) 3342 3704  
0416 046 429**

**Dr Neville Buch**  
MPHA (Qld)  
Historian

*Understanding history is philosophy in  
practice*



**SOFiA**

---

[www.drnevillebuch.com/](http://www.drnevillebuch.com/)

[www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/](http://www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/)

ABN 86703686642

to reject doxastic voluntarism, "the philosophical doctrine according to which people have voluntary control over their beliefs." In section III, however, James qualifies his endorsement of this criticism of Pascal's Wager by arguing that "it is only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature is unable to bring to life again." By which James means that it is only things we already disbelieve that we are unable to believe at will.

#### ***Section IV: Thesis***

In his very brief section IV, James introduces the main thesis of the work:

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; for to say under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision—just like deciding yes or not—and is attended with the same risk of losing truth.

#### ***The Doctrine***

The doctrine James argues for in "The Will to Believe" appears often in both his earlier and later work. James himself changed the name of the doctrine several times. First appearing as "the duty to believe", then "the subjective method", then "the will to believe", it was finally recast by James as "the right to believe." Whatever the name, the doctrine always concerned the rationality of believing without evidence in certain instances. Specifically, James is defending the violation of evidentialism in two instances:

[6]

**18 Callendar Street  
Sunnybank Hills Qld 4109  
(07) 3342 3704  
0416 046 429**

**Dr Neville Buch**  
MPHA (Qld)  
Historian

*Understanding history is philosophy in  
practice*



**SOFiA**

---

[www.drnevillebuch.com/](http://www.drnevillebuch.com/)

[www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/](http://www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/)

ABN 86703686642

- Hypothesis venturing (see hypothetico-deductivism) – beliefs whose evidence becomes available only after they are believed;
- Self-fulfilling beliefs – beliefs that by existing make themselves true.

After arguing that for hypothesis venturing and with self-fulfilling beliefs a person is rational to believe without evidence, James argues that a belief in a number of philosophical topics qualifies as one or other of his two allowed violations of evidentialism (e.g. free will, God, and immortality). The reason James takes himself as able to rationally justify positions often not believed to be verifiable under any method, is how important he thinks believing something can be for the verifying of that belief. That is to say, in these cases James is arguing that the reason evidence for a belief seems to be unavailable to us is because the evidence for its truth or falsity comes only after it is believed rather than before.

[7]

**18 Callendar Street  
Sunnybank Hills Qld 4109  
(07) 3342 3704  
0416 046 429**

**Dr Neville Buch**  
MPHA (Qld)  
Historian

*Understanding history is philosophy in  
practice*



**SOFiA**

---

[www.drnevillebuch.com/](http://www.drnevillebuch.com/)

[www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/](http://www.historyandphilosophyinquensland.com/)

ABN 86703686642

### **The Argument of W.K. Clifford**

Clifford's argument, at its simplest, can be formulated as follows:

1. When our beliefs have a significant impact on other people, it is wrong to believe on insufficient evidence
2. Our beliefs always have a significant impact on other people
3. Therefore, it is always wrong to believe on insufficient evidence

The argument, like that of James' is conditional. Hence, the logic in the ethics of belief has much room to move.