

6-19-2013

Can We Believe Without Sufficient Evidence? The James/Clifford Quarrel and the Response of Alvin Plantinga

Fabio Lampert
St. Benedict's College

Follow this and additional works at: <http://commons.pacificu.edu/rescogitans>

 Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lampert, Fabio (2013) "Can We Believe Without Sufficient Evidence? The James/Clifford Quarrel and the Response of Alvin Plantinga," *Res Cogitans*: Vol. 4: Iss. 1, Article 13. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7710/2155-4838.1081>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by CommonKnowledge. It has been accepted for inclusion in Res Cogitans by an authorized administrator of CommonKnowledge. For more information, please contact CommonKnowledge@pacificu.edu.

Can We Believe Without Sufficient Evidence? The James/Clifford Quarrel and the Response of Alvin Plantinga

Fabio Lampert
St. Benedict's College

Published online: 19 June 2013
© Fabio Lampert 2013

Abstract

This paper aims to be a brief discussion about the character of “evidentialism” in the discussion between William Clifford and William James. Known under the topic “the ethics of belief,” it discusses the problem of religious epistemology, specifically the status of the rationality of religious beliefs. After such discussion, we shall adduce in an introductory way Alvin Plantinga’s so-called “reformed epistemology” as a proper response to the problem of evidentialism.

I. William Clifford

In an essay called “The Ethics of Belief”¹ the Cambridge philosopher and mathematician William Clifford wrote what it was maybe the most passionate defense of what today is called *evidentialism*. According to Clifford, “it is wrong, always, everywhere and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” Evidence is the justifying component of belief; whereby, we can say that *S* is justified in believing *p* only when *S* believes upon sufficient evidence. Besides that, according to Clifford there is a moral component in belief; i.e., it is *immoral* for *S* to believe *p* upon insufficient evidence. Since it is immoral for *S* to believe *p* upon insufficient evidence *S* should believe *p* only upon sufficient evidence. What it seems is that if someone *should* choose between conflicting beliefs, such a person has the capacity to choose her beliefs. In this way Clifford assumes a kind of doxastic voluntarism, which provides the basis for his deontologism – the notion that says there are epistemic duties to be fulfilled by the believer. Thus, we might reformulate Clifford’s principle in a very simple way:

(CPI) It is immoral – *deontologism* – to believe anything upon insufficient evidence – *evidentialism*.

Clifford's principle (*CPI*) is traditionally conceived as a critique of the justification of religious beliefs. In spite of the absence of direct references, the text is filled with biblical allusions and has been inserted in manuals of Philosophy of Religion amidst analytical tradition.² As Peter van Inwagen said, "everyone I know of who has written on "The Ethics of Belief" has taken for granted that Clifford propounded evidentialism with a certain target in mind, and that target was religious belief."³ Moreover, the fact is that many philosophers of the twentieth century followed Clifford's principle in sustaining theistic beliefs – given the absence of sufficient evidence – as irrational, intellectually irresponsible, unreasonable, and of a dubitable noetic standard. These were Antony Flew, Brand Blanshard, John Mackie, Bertrand Russell, among others.⁴ Furthermore, Russell is always remembered in this context by his famous answer when questioned about what he would answer if God asks him the reason of his disbelief: "Not enough evidence God, not enough evidence."

II. William James

Now, in the same way that Anselm's ontological argument comes followed by an indefatigable Gaunilo in every publication, Clifford's essay has as stone in the shoe William James' famous response. In the well-known essay "The Will to believe" (1897), James argues that there are situations in which believing, or sustaining a proposition, upon insufficient evidence is rationally permissible – besides not being morally inadequate. James asserts that our beliefs are followed by consequences and that there are circumstances in which it is better to act than not, even the action itself not being based upon sufficient evidence. When this happens we're facing hypotheses, and we must evaluate which one of them is the best option.

Among available ones, James calls *genuine option* that which is *live*, *forced* and *momentous*.

- An option is *live* when it really matters to the one that believes in it; that is, when a real possibility of belief is involved. For a Brazilian, the option of "being either a Catholic or a Protestant" is a living one, but that isn't the case when the option is believing in Zeus or Odin.
- An option is *forced* when there is no possibility of suspension of judgment; that is, where only two excluding hypotheses are available, and not to choose is the same as choosing one of them. On this case, not believing *p* is the same as believing *not p*. If someone tells you: "believe or perish", you either believe or don't. If you simply ignore it, then you just don't believe.
- An option is *momentous* when something big or really valuable depends on it. It's not a trivial option. To sit in the first or the last desk of the classroom isn't a *momentous* option, but rooting for Gremio/RS is, since this can mean discarding a happy life.⁵

Given that, when we're facing a genuine option – live, forced and momentous – and don't have sufficient evidence to justify our belief, we might choose believing with a step of faith. In this case, we use our *passionate* nature, given the character of intellectual indetermination of the belief in question.

Now, James' contention is that religious belief is a genuine option. There is so much to lose if we err with respect to religion; and we must take a position even without sufficient evidence. He defends that, if we follow Clifford's principle we'll be just avoiding error, and not seeking truth. "To avoid error" is the counsel of fear, and we might not see the truth because of it - even if is necessary, for us to see it, to believe upon insufficient evidence.

Jeff Jordan⁶ classified James' argument as "independent of truth", that is, even if theistic belief is false there are still pragmatic reasons for sustaining it. As Cleanthes, famous David Hume's character in *Dialogues concerning natural religion*, "religion, however corrupted, is still better than no religion at all. The doctrine of a future state is so strong and necessary a security to morals that we never ought to abandon or neglect it."⁷ Still, even with his response to Clifford, it is not the case that James hasn't presupposed some kind of evidentialism too. For him, beliefs are hypotheses that wait for verification. And it is not different with religious beliefs; they might and should be verified being put into practice so we can see if our expectations in relation to them are fulfilled.

At the same time that he presupposes evidentialism, James sustains that beliefs are related to responsibilities, endorsing deontology in Clifford's fashion. In fact, Clifford could respond affirming that, even if there are beneficial consequences following beliefs upon insufficient evidence, that proves neither that we are fulfilling our epistemic duties nor that the belief in question is rational, given that to justify them James brings to light only the passionate nature of that who believes. On the other hand, evidentialist justification also faces many problems. After all, what is "sufficient evidence"? Is there a specific criterion, accepted by many, capable of saying when someone is sufficiently armed with evidences for sustaining a proposition?

Now compare this case with the belief in God. Most people in fact believe in God or something similar. However, according to many, there isn't sufficient evidence to justify such belief. Do those persons believe in an irrational way? Is it reasonable to say that all of Thomas Aquinas' or Augustine's works are based upon some kind of irrationalism? Perhaps not. Perhaps, and just perhaps, they were as rational and sophisticated as we are.

III. Alvin Plantinga

The evidentialist argues that one who believes in God upon insufficient evidence is not justified in his belief. Nonetheless, why say that there isn't sufficient evidence? Many theists are also committed to evidentialism, but defend the idea that the belief in God actually corresponds to evidence. Given that, the evidentialist theist would assert that there are *propositional* evidences for sustaining belief in God, in the way of arguments – the famous ones of Natural Theology. But what if the whole enterprise of Natural Theology didn't work?

What if the arguments for the existence of God weren't sound? Furthermore, is there an argument which its premises are accepted by everyone and leads to the conclusion that God exists? Is there a good argument at all? According to many, the answer is negative. But then, how does the evidentialist theist remain? Does he lose his justification? Is his belief demoted to a substandard doxastic level? There must be some other way for the theist to defend the rationality of his belief. And in fact there is.

According to Christian Reformers, it is “entirely right, reasonable, and proper to believe in God without any evidence or argument at all; in this respect belief in God resembles belief in the past, in the existence of other persons, and in the existence of material objects.”⁸ In fact, it seems that the majority of people who believe in God have no argument at all for its justification. They simply believe. But how can they be justified? One of the most meaningful contributions for the so-called *religious epistemology* was developed by Alvin Plantinga. Plantinga follows the Reformers in declaring that Natural Theology isn't *necessary* for the justification of the belief in God, and that the theist should follow another path for properly responding the evidentialist objection. Plantinga declares that the evidentialist is conscious or unconsciously rooted on some version of *classical foundationalism*, and that its soundness is not obvious at all. By foundationalism we can understand the idea that one belief is followed by another; therefore, if I believe in *A* and *B*, my *noetic structure* is constituted in such a way that *B* is founded upon *A*. Thus, I know that $89 \times 14 = 1246$, but this belief isn't immediate, it is based upon others as $1 \times 89 = 89$, $13 + 1 = 14$ etc. And these beliefs, on the other hand, seem immediate to me. Let us call the last *basic beliefs*. Consequently, $1 \times 1 = 1$ is a basic belief, just as *it seems to me that I am presenting this paper right now, there are people in front of me and this morning I had a coffee latte*.⁹ Besides, the evidentialist argues that someone is justified in believing only if her belief is basic or derived from some basic beliefs and justified by means of evidence. Basic beliefs, obviously, are not in need of evidence, since they are *prima facie* justified. Now, given that belief in God is not basic, nor justified by means of evidence, it would not be rational. But why, asks Plantinga, belief in God can't itself be a basic belief? The evidentialist would respond that, “only the *properly* basic beliefs are the ones that could be found in our noetic structure”.¹⁰ But what is the criterion for determining whether a

belief is properly basic? Plantinga alleges that the condition of foundationalism for a properly basic belief is the following:

(F) A proposition p is properly basic for a person S if and only if p is self-evident, incorrigible, or 'evident to the senses' for S .

This is classical foundationalism, based in Descartes and Locke. However, once the proposition *God exists*, or some other that necessarily implies it, it isn't self-evident, incorrigible or 'evident to the senses', it is not properly basic, demanding evidence for its justification. In the absence of the last, the belief in God might be considered irrational or unreasonable.

The problem with this criterion, argues Plantinga, is that it is too restrict. In the first place, it excludes beliefs that are accepted by all as the existence of an external world or the belief that there are other minds. Compare it with the belief that the universe wasn't created five minutes ago "with dusty books and holes in our socks" as once said Bertrand Russell; is this belief self-evident, incorrigible or 'evident to the senses'? How could we justify it? How can I justify that I am not a brain in a vat? Or some victim of a mad doctor – say, House – that, through me, performs experiments activating and deactivating different areas of my brain to give me the impression that I was born in Brazil and I like soccer? While not justifying beliefs that seem rational to almost anyone, in the second place, the criterion seems to have self-referential problems. After all, the foundationalist criterion is not in itself self-evident, incorrigible or 'evident to the senses'. Thus, since the criterion is not a properly basic belief, we should have evidence or proof of it. But what is the evidence? According to Plantinga, the foundationalist criterion seems arbitrary and in need of serious revisions. Therefore, it is necessary an argument that shows why belief in God cannot itself be properly basic. If such an argument doesn't exist, there is nothing wrong with one who affirms the basicity of belief in God.

Given that, Plantinga discriminates three kinds of what he calls *positive epistemic status*:¹¹ *justification*, with respect to epistemic duties, in a deontological sense; *rationality*, taken in the sense of proper function, and *warrant*, the property or quantity enough of which distinguishes knowledge from a mere true belief. With respect to *justification*, it is right that an immense variety of beliefs, including theistic belief, can be properly basic. Justification occurs, according to Plantinga, when someone does not flout his epistemic rights and duties, for example, the duty of believing in a proposition if it seems true. A child that believes in Christianity based on the testimony of her parents and older siblings can be within her epistemic rights. In the same way, an adult who sustains Christian belief affirming that the last seems just obvious to him doesn't flaw any intellectual maxim. Apropos, in the case of justification it seems difficult even to affirm that someone could choose in what to believe. Could I simply opt to believe in

God after reading Thomas Aquinas? Or opt to abandon belief after reading Nietzsche? With respect to *rationality*, Plantinga makes use of the notion of the *proper function* of a human's cognitive source, a constitutive condition for that true beliefs might be properly generated as the expected result of that same source of beliefs.¹² Our cognitive system might work in a proper way, or with a malfunction; a belief might be considered rational when it isn't generated by a cognitive system with some kind of malfunction. An immense number of beliefs might also be considered rational, as long as the believer isn't aware of some defeater, namely, a belief *p* which, if sustained, has the capacity to defeat a previously held belief. If a Christian reads Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, he faces many defeaters. But if he remains convinced of the truth of Christianity, considering those arguments not so impressive and in fact even answering them, so, therefore, we can say that he is rational in sustaining his belief.

Finally, Plantinga argues that the believer is justified also with respect to *warrant*. In the vast literature produced by analytical epistemologists in answering to the well-known *Gettier problems*, the notion of *justification* as the property that distinguishes knowledge from mere true belief was the most utilized until the 90's. Gettier opened Pandora's Box when in a three pages article, in 1963, he showed by means of examples that the traditional definition of knowledge as justified true belief had insoluble problems. Gettier demonstrated that true beliefs could be justified accidentally and, because of that, it did not constitute knowledge. Since then, many attempts of definitions of what justification actually is have emerged. Plantinga rejects them all, by arguing that justification, as understood, was a property of *persons*, and not of *beliefs*. For him, to speak of justification is to say that "someone is justified in believing in *p*" and that was the utmost response reached to Gettier problems. For a proper definition of when a true belief constitutes knowledge we need the notion of warrant, in a way that we can say "a belief *p* has warrant for the person *S*".¹³ But what Plantinga means by warrant? According to him,

(W) A belief *B* has warrant for a person *S* if and only if *B* was produced by properly functioning belief-producing processes; *B* was produced in an appropriate epistemic environment (i.e., where cognitive faculties as memory, for example, work properly) according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true belief and which is also good, i.e., reliable because it generates, at most of the time, true beliefs.¹⁴

The design plan, as the appropriate epistemic environment, might be a result of an evolutionary process, God's creation, or both. Thus, beliefs that seem basic, but could not satisfy the classical foundationalist criterion – belief in other minds, in the past etc. – can be properly basic with respect to justification, rationality and warrant in Plantinga's model. This is also the case of Christian belief. Plantinga cites Calvin's *sensus divinitatis*, an awareness of the divinity that is present in all men, producing our

beliefs about God in a large number of situations. Just as beliefs originated in perception are basic with respect to warrant, belief in God appears spontaneously when triggered through the *sensus divinitatis* in appropriate circumstances as a moment of gratitude, awe in the face of Nature's greatness, or even guilt.

According to Plantinga, if Christianity is in fact true, the *sensus divinitatis* is a very reliable belief-producing mechanism, whereby probably true beliefs result. Hence, if Christianity is true, "the natural thing to think is that he [God] created us in such a way that we would come to hold such true beliefs as that there is such a person as God. [...] And if *that* is so, then the natural thing to think is that the cognitive processes that *do* produce belief in God are aimed by their designer at producing that belief. But then the belief in question will be produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly according to a design plan successfully aimed at truth: it will therefore have warrant."¹⁵

As a whole, what Plantinga did was show that belief in God is not to be discarded as irrational, unreasonable, or as a kind of substandard belief. It is rational, and could be attacked only as an unwarranted belief, since being true is a condition for being warranted. The warrant of belief in God, therefore, cannot and shan't be decided as an epistemological question, but should be decided through metaphysics or theology.¹⁶ Hence, in the absence of good arguments showing its falsity we might sustain it as true. And if it is true, then, according to Plantinga's model, it is warranted.

References

Beilby, J. "Plantinga's Model of Warranted Christian Belief." In *Alvin Plantinga, Contemporary Philosophy in Focus*. Edited by Deane-Peter Baker. Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 125-65. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511611247.007>

Blanshard, B. *Reason and Belief*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1974.

Clifford, W. K. *Lectures and essays, Vol II*. London: Macmillan, 1879.

Craig, W. L. & Moreland, J. P. *Filosofia e Cosmologia Cristã*. São Paulo, Vida Nova, 2005. Translated by Justino, E., Heim, H., Lena, A., Portella, R., Saraiva, S. Original title: *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*.

Flew, A. *The Presumption of Atheism*. London: Pemberton, 1976.

Hick, J. *Philosophy of Religion*. Third edition, Prentice Hall, 1983.

- James, W. *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*. New York, Longmans, Green, 1897.
- Jordan, J. “Pragmatic arguments.” In *A companion to philosophy of religion*. Taliaferro, Draper & Quinn (eds.). Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2010, second edition, pp. 445-53.
- Mackie, J. *The Miracle of Theism*, Oxford University Press, 1982.
- Meister, C. *Introducing philosophy of religion*. Routledge, 2009.
- Pich, R. H & Müller, F. “Apresentação e uma nota sobre Alvin Plantinga.” In *Veritas*, v. 56, n. 2, Maio/Ago. 2011, p. 5-17.
- Plantinga, A. “On proper basicity.” In *Philosophy and phenomenological research*, Vol. LXXV, No. 3, November 2007, pp. 612-21.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2007.00095.x>
- _____. “Is belief in God properly basic?” In *Noûs*, Vol. 15, No. 1, 1981 A. P. A. Western Division Meetings (Mar., 1981), pp. 41-51.
- _____. “Reason and belief in God.” In *Faith and Rationality*. University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, third edition, pp. 16-93.
- _____. *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Rowe, W. *Philosophy of religion*. Fourth edition, Wadsworth, 2007.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/0195131932.001.0001>
- Russell, B. *Why I am not a Christian*. New York, Simon and Schuster, 1957.
- Van Inwagen, P. “Listening to Clifford’s Ghost.” In *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* (65), 2009, p. 15-35.

¹ Clifford, 1879.

² Cf. Hick, 1983; Taliaferro, raperR & Quinn, 2010; Rowe, 2007; Meister, 2009, *et al.*

³ Van Inwagen, 2009, p. 15,

⁴ Cf. Plantinga, 2000, for a longer list.

⁵ Gremio/RS is a Brazilian soccer team that was sent down to the B Series twice.

⁶ Cf. Jordan, 2010

⁷ Apud idem, p. 426.

⁸ Plantinga, 1991, p. 17

⁹ Cf. Plantinga, 1981, p. 41.

¹⁰ Craig & Moreland, 2005, p. 206.

¹¹ Cf. Plantinga, 2007, p. 615.

¹² Pich & Müller, 2011, p. 7, our translation.

¹³ Cf. Beilby, 2007, p. 127.

¹⁴ Cf. Plantinga, 2007, p. 615.

¹⁵ Plantinga, 2000, p. 190.

¹⁶ Cf. Craig & Moreland, *op. cit.*, p. 209.

Both James and Plantinga were vitally concerned about the intellectual propriety and philosophical reasonableness of theistic conviction. James counted himself among the "crass" supernaturalists, and he took seriously the charge by such eminent agnostics of his day like Clifford and Huxley that theism and religious belief were irresponsible or even immoral, a flouting of our epistemic duties. Concerned with the epistemic status of religious belief, both James and Plantinga examined the evidence for its truth and rationality; and when they did so they both concluded that the decision to accept or reject theism was not a question that could be definitively settled on evidential grounds. Alvin Plantinga quotes Showing 1-30 of 34. "Suppose we concede that if I had been born of Muslim parents in Morocco rather than Christian parents in Michigan, my beliefs would be quite different. [But] the same goes for the pluralist...If the pluralist had been born in [Morocco] he probably wouldn't be a pluralist." "Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. Hebrews 11:1" Alvin Plantinga, Knowledge and Christian Belief. 2 likes. Like. "The believer," says Aquinas, "has sufficient motive for believing, for he is moved by the authority of divine teaching confirmed by miracles and, what is more, by the inward instigation of the divine invitation." Alvin Plantinga, Knowledge and Christian Belief. 2 likes. Like. 17. Is there sufficient evidence? 13. Plantinga's argument. On to address the 2nd premise in the objector's argument: whether there is evidence of God's existence and what that might be. 18. Groundless vs. properly basic beliefs. So what might count as evidence? Plantinga says that just because one rejects the logical positivists' position does not mean one must necessarily accept that Lewis Carroll's famous opening to the nonsensical poem "Jabberwocky" makes sense. So what's the theist's problem? having a criterion for meaningfulness. We should not believe any claims without sufficient evidence. we should not avoid investigating claims based on a strong belief that they're false. we should not develop what a "credulous character". In articles that became well known almost as soon as they were published, Alvin Plantinga has avowedly been trying to establish the rationality of believing without evidence that God exists. 1 Others are also engaged in this project, which they sometimes call "Reformed epistemology". 2 The following quotation from Plantinga can serve as a statement of the thesis of Reformed epistemology: "It is. In one respect that version might seem preferable, since it is typically the evidence the believer has that counts for or against the rationality of his belief. Plantinga suggests that a "properly functioning brain" is apparent in most of us, and since a lot of people on Earth believe in god, then it follows that belief in god is rational. I didn't know that rationality is generally true among all elements across a person's entire mental space. Professor Plantinga (Notre Dame, Calvin College) argues that belief in God without conclusive arguments is not intellectually irresponsible, irrational, or unwarranted. permalink. embed. For people who believe in God, it seems that the belief is sourced from a feeling "a need for closure" and interpreting things in their perception as being sourced from God. I see this as not being comfortable with uncertainty. Of course, there either is a god or there is not.