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**Faith, Support & Rationality**

*Respond to the following statement, “For anyone having religious beliefs it is unnecessary to rely on rational inquiries and arguments to validate them; one has to rely on one's own experience and just have faith.”*

I will begin by saying that I think this paper will have real value for me in my personal life, and not just in the mental acuity and brain health generated by doing philosophy; as a person who has not experienced the divine and who has a commitment to seeking answers and who is also surrounded by people of faith, the above is a statement I hear all the time, in some form or another. My thought at the beginning of this exercise is that the writing of this essay will likely help me in arranging my thoughts on the matter for the next real conversation about this I have, and for this, I extend my gratitude for the opportunity.

While I understand the sentiment as it is borne by people who say this – in the vernacular, “I see what they mean,” I couldn't possibly disagree more with the baseline impulse to simply decide that this kind of knowledge – of God, the divine, or whatever – is not beholden to the same standards as is every other kind of knowledge human beings encounter. I understand that

William James, among others would disagree with me: the experience of the divine, he would contend, differs enough with the non-divine by virtue of his four categories of passivity, transiency, noetic quality and ineffableness, that it deserves to be treated and examined using completely different tools, that the rational questioning and data acquisition that we use to measure the truth of things non-divine simply do not do the job – the divine is, by its very nature, different. I have the same problem with this assertion though, that I have with Pascal's Wager; in order for me to accept that either these experiences as qualified by James or the rewards upon which Pascal would place his marker are worth the additional consideration or effort that they would grant the potentially divine, I must, in a classic Catch-22, accept that they are divine, or I wouldn't be giving them the time of day, much less consideration of such import.

And I do not. Pascal seems to undervalue the human experience, so much value does he place on the divinely-promised afterlife; it's not just “golf on Sundays” one gives up to be a good adherent or even simply time in church that could have been spent doing something else, it's the ability, to my mind, to be properly human, to live to our potential. Once our “acuteness is deadened” through the process of deciding to have faith, (what pop psychology would call “going along to get along,”) what good are we to ourselves or others in any application outside of basic adherence? So: giving up my life for a theoretical afterlife? Not an acceptable wager, even based in simple risk assessment.

What of James, then? Aside from what I see as an “accept it before you accept it” sort of barrier to this way of thinking, his criteria don't do the job for me, either, as none of them can be proved to be exclusive to religious experience, unless he wants to claim that every drink and drug fugue, every hormone-fueled epiphany and every sense of community and euphoria at

things clicking into place on the rare occasions that this happens is a religious experience. If that's true, I've had religious experiences at the births of both my kids, my wedding, during at least one fistfight, countless Autumn days, a funeral or two, during several ill-advised acid trips in my 20s, and almost every time I spend more than a few hours in a row in a pub when someone else is buying. I'm going to say that James is not open to considering these experiences divine.

His factors can be used for measuring / describing all of those experiences in my life, though: There's no way I can describe it to you in a way that will put you in that mindset, the closest you can get is a correspondent experience that you have had and can use for comparison, and then only if I exert a masterful use of language in the post-event description. I feel lifted above my everyday knowledge and thinking to a higher plane of understanding every time this happens – the feeling passes, to be sure, to be subsumed by the workaday progress of normalized thoughts, but the insights do not necessarily fade. One suspects, if one could sustain the circumstance that resulted in the epiphany, one could sustain the epiphany itself, but this cannot be proven, any more than James' “superior power.” However, this does not stop people from trying, myself included. For science, of course.

On a side note, it is not that I mind this argument being used outside of the process of doing philosophy as a real world justification for faith; when a person tells me that they have a personal relationship with God because they have “felt His presence in their lives” or some language akin to that statement (which is the one I most often hear during these discussions), then that is the point at which only one more agreement must be made: If they can agree not to judge my life and actions through the filter of their beliefs (which are most often book-based) and most importantly, keep quiet if not tolerant about any judgments that might ensue, then we

have nothing further to discuss. Simply put, as a citizen, I am respectful of any belief a person wants to hold so long as they do not A) expect me to understand it without a rational framework for how they achieved it; B) expect me further to share their belief with them, and C) project their beliefs into or onto my life, or the lives of others (unless those others be like-minded and/or acquiescent) in any way.

Of course, this mostly does not hold up in real life, which is why William Clifford rang so true to me when we read him for class. While I do not think that his rigorous system for interrogating beliefs beyond their ability to exist without concrete evidence is possible (or even, perhaps, desirable) for the largest mass of people, I certainly wish that it were.

In the final analysis, while I might decide to be more polite about it, I would also agree with Clifford's warnings about what the practice of simply believing things without empirical testing would do to society/humanity. When Clifford warns against "potentially harmful actions," one needn't look too far into history for Crusades, persecutions, Inquisitions and witch burnings, female subjugation, slavery and Manifest Destiny to assert that this has already happened, and in the name of God. In the present day, we have 9/11, Mideast conflict, ethnic cleansing, female genital mutilation, gay "reparative therapy," numerous acts of terrorism, and narrow-mindedness that leads half of a nation to justify its racial hatred of a US President with the label "Muslim," as if that were, on its own, a good enough reason to hate. Harmful actions perpetuated by holy people are the norm, not the exception.

Clifford also warns against the potential for "fostering credulity" among people who believe in the irrational; we see the effects of that now as well, whenever people disagree these days in public forums. The problem is not that we disagree, but that we cannot even seem to

agree on what the tools for finding truth are, because so many have rejected the time-honored techniques of logic and science and now hold that their emotions and feelings are just as valid as something that can be empirically proven. This is a two-fold problem: Since those of us without the requisite feelings and emotions cannot understand the points made by those who have those feelings, we are left out of being able to understand. Additionally, those with those feelings reject the only tools that we and they can have in common, those of rational inquiry. They control the situation by rejecting rationality, while it is impossible for those of us on the other side of the equation to reject emotions we have not had. This creates an unbridgeable gulf between us, with one party being able to reach halfway but not in a way that the other will accept, while that party refuses to even reach at all.

Finally, there is Clifford's exhortation that one of the conditions for my personal continued tolerance for belief in others (condition C) is impossible; beliefs, he contends, are not private things. Rather, they are the "common property" of the society in which an individual who holds them lives, and as such, will generally project into the lives of those – usually in a most unwelcome fashion – who do not hold them. So there is no escape, and to my mind, no morally defensible reason for what often becomes the tyranny of the faithful.

The risks of the non-believer as covered in class (again, during a discussion of James) were "the risk of error, and the risk of vital good in pursuit of truth," if such can be said to objectively exist. I disagree with the importance, as stated, of these risks. The risk of error is negligible, usually more damaging to ego than it is to circumstance. Error in regards to an afterlife is surely only as hazardous as one system or another would have us hold according to its precepts, and here again – unless one accepts the whole of the dogma, one is not required to put

much stock in these. Without that worry, a wise person does not seek to avoid error, because error is a great teacher.

After that, there is only the “risk of vital good,” and for this to be something that is risked, one must already believe that the vital good stems from something outside ourselves, something greater than the mass of humanity. I think – based on my perception of the results of people's group efforts when they focus on community benefit – that people are capable of making their own vital good by being responsible to one another, and that abandoning the community process of empirical proofs and scientific inquiry is the greatest loss of vital good there is.

In closing, my primary issue with the argument that “faith is enough” is that in practice, within the real world, it seems to generate, as Clifford pointed out, all kinds of secondary problems when it comes to believers interacting with non-believers. I suppose that they would view the problem differently from within their communities of belief, but that seems to be an argument for another paper. The chief problem I have with this argument within a philosophical framework is that the argument seems to defeat itself due to its “end-run” prerequisite of faith to have faith. All of these arguments – Pascal, James and their like-minded fellows – seem to require the Calvinist *sensus divinitatus*, which implies human hard wiring already built into factory models for perceiving God's existence. (I pointed out in class that while I acknowledge this propensity, especially in children, I assert that Calvin has mislabeled it, due probably to his inclination in the direction of God as an explanation.) These thinkers, along with Calvin himself, take the existence of the divine so for granted that they fall into a trap of assumption – one must believe in God to believe that He instilled in us the ability to recognize His presence. So without

believing, one cannot believe.

That is a tautology, and not useful for real discussion.