

Guidelines for Critiques

Intro. to Philosophy (Beals)

The *purpose* of a critique is to demonstrate your ability to *summarize* the arguments of a noted philosopher and *examine* their arguments in light of the ideas of other thinkers who dealt with the same issues. For each critique, you will select an article from the Voices of Wisdom text, drawing on the Invitation text and related articles in Voices to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the position presented in your chosen article. For example, if your article defends “common sense realism,” you might raise some of Descartes’ arguments against relying on sense experience.

Your critique should include your own reflections upon the issues being raised (not just expressing an opinion, but examining the arguments). You should note any logical fallacies, inconsistencies or vagueness you find in the article. Be as specific as possible about your objections. For example, if you note an inconsistency, don’t just say the article was inconsistent but note the specific passage that reveals an inconsistency, and describe the problem. Just saying an article “doesn’t make sense” or is “unclear” won’t do. Relating the article to real-life tests of applicability is always encouraged.

Generally critiques will be about 4-6 pages in length, with roughly two-thirds of the paper summing up the article’s argument in your own words, with appropriate citations (using any standard form – Chicago, MLA etc.) to clarify their position. The closing will draw on your other reading and reflection to examine the strengths and weaknesses of the article’s position in light of available alternatives. You might want to make use of basic reference works beyond the text to assist you in understanding the issues, but extensive research beyond the two texts is neither expected nor required.

Please don’t hesitate to check with me for any clarification or questions you might have about the article you’re examining (well in advance if you are involved in a class presentation!). If your critiques are submitted when due, one week following the class discussion of the topic being considered, you will have an opportunity to make revisions based upon comments from my teaching assistant and myself. Late papers will be penalized one letter grade for each week they are late, and no papers will be accepted once they are more than three weeks late. Be aware that if you select a topic being discussed late in the semester, there will only be one revision opportunity, since we will need to skip the teaching assistant comment step.

Keep in mind that you will also be selecting one of the articles you are critiquing as the basis for preparing an oral presentation, and be aware of the date of that presentation to avoid scheduling conflicts.

so this theory would maintain. "My cat is on the rug" is true if, indeed, that is where the cat is and is false if the cat is not there. Even if I don't look and no matter how I feel or what I believe, it is true or false independent of my actions or beliefs.

The second theory of truth is called the coherence theory of truth. According to this view, p is true if and only if p is logically implied by q , where q is a true statement, and q in turn is logically implied by r , and so on. Truth, on this account, is the coherence of a whole system of statements in which each statement is entailed by all the others. We have only fragments of this whole, but when and if we ever discover the entire system, we will have arrived at absolute truth. Thus, "My fat, blind cat is on the rug" is true if a whole host of other propositions are true such as "My cat is blind," "The rug exists," "Cats exist," and so on.

James ascribed both the correspondence and coherence theories to philosophers he called "intellectualists and rationalists." He objected to these theories on the grounds that they present truth as a static property existing prior to and independent of human experience and investigation. James saw truth as something dynamic, something that happens to ideas when they lead humans into ever more satisfactory experiences. The rationalists accused James, in turn, of denying objectivity, reducing truth to a matter of what we want to believe, and making it relative to the context in which we verify propositions.

From James's point of view, Clifford's argument rests in part on a reliance on a static theory of truth, which too narrowly confines our thinking. His insistence on purely epistemic standards, and his refusal to admit practical standards, not only denies the facts involved in how humans come to hold many of their beliefs, but also restricts us to a very narrow range of beliefs and forbids us to have beliefs about some of the most important matters that make human life worth living.

What follows are selections from both Clifford's essay and James's. Read their arguments and decide for yourself whether we have a right to believe beyond the evidence.

READING QUESTIONS

1. What do the examples of the shipowner and the commission show?
2. Summarize Clifford's argument in your own words.
3. What, according to James, is a genuine option? Give an example.
4. What is James's thesis?
5. How, according to James, does Clifford's attitude differ from James's with respect to "our first and great commandments as would-be knowers?"

The Ethics of Belief

WILLIAM K. CLIFFORD

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs.

Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly

From *Lectures and Essays*, Vol. 2 (London: Macmillan, 1897), pp. 177-188. Footnotes deleted.

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overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because *he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him*. He had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts. And although in the end he may have felt so sure about it that he could not think otherwise, yet inasmuch as he had knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind, he must be held responsible for it.

Let us alter the case a little, and suppose that the ship was not unsound after all; that she made her voyage safely, and many others after it. Will that diminish the guilt of her owner? Not one jot. When an action is once done, it is right or wrong for ever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that. The man would not have been innocent, he would only have been not found out. The question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of his belief, not the matter of it; not what it was, but how he got it; not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him.

There was once an island in which some of the inhabitants professed a religion teaching neither the doctrine of original sin nor that of eternal punishment. A suspicion got abroad that the professors of this religion had made use of unfair means to get their doctrines taught to children. They were accused of wresting the laws of their country in such a way as to remove children from the care of their natural and legal guardians; and even of stealing them away and keeping them concealed from their friends and relations. A certain number of men formed themselves into a society for the purpose of agitating the public about this matter. They published grave accusations against individual citizens of the highest position and character, and did all in their power to injure these citizens in the exercise of their professions. So great was the noise they made, that a Commission was appointed to investigate the facts; but after the Commission had carefully inquired into all the evidence that could be got, it appeared that the accused were innocent. Not only had they been accused on insufficient evidence, but the evidence of their innocence was such as the agitators might easily have obtained, if they had attempted a fair inquiry. After these disclosures the inhabitants of that country looked upon the members of the agitating society, not only as persons whose judgment was to be distrusted, but also as no longer to be counted honourable men. For although they had sincerely and conscientiously believed in the charges they had made, yet *they had no right to believe on such evidence as was before them*. Their sincere convictions, instead of being honestly earned by patient inquiring, were stolen by listening to the voice of prejudice and passion.

Let us vary this case also, and suppose, other things remaining as before, that a still more accurate investigation proved the accused to have been really guilty. Would this make any difference in the guilt of the accusers? Clearly not; the question is not whether their belief was true or false, but whether they entertained it on wrong grounds....

In the two supposed cases which have been considered, it has been judged wrong to believe on insufficient evidence, or to nourish belief by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation. The reason of this judgment is not far to seek: it

is that in both these cases the belief held by one man was of great importance to other men. But forasmuch as no belief held by one man, however seemingly trivial the belief, and however obscure the believer, is ever actually insignificant or without its effect on the fate of mankind, we have no choice but to extend our judgment to all cases of belief whatever....

It is not only the leader of men, statesman, philosopher, or poet, that owes this bounden duty to mankind. Every rustic who delivers in the village alehouse his slow, infrequent sentences, may help to kill or keep alive the fatal superstitions which clog his race. Every hard-worked wife of an artisan may transmit to her children beliefs which shall knit society together, or rend it in pieces. No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe....

The harm which is done by credulity in a man is not confined to the fostering of a credulous character in others, and consequent support of false beliefs. Habitual want of care about what I believe leads to habitual want of care in others

about the truth of what is told to me. Men speak the truth to one another when each reveres the truth in his own mind and in the other's mind; but how shall my friend revere the truth in my mind when I myself am careless about it, when I believe things because I want to believe them, and because they are comforting and pleasant? Will he not learn to cry, "Peace," to me, when there is no peace? By such a course I shall surround myself with a thick atmosphere of falsehood and fraud, and in that I must live. It may matter little to me, in my cloud-castle of sweet illusions and darling lies; but it matters much to Man that I have made my neighbours ready to deceive. The credulous man is father to the liar and the cheat; he lives in the bosom of this his family, and it is no marvel if he should become even as they are. So closely are our duties knit together, that whoso shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.

To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence....

The Will to Believe

WILLIAM JAMES

Let us give the name of *hypothesis* to anything that may be proposed to our belief; and just as the electricians speak of *live* and *dead* wires, let us speak of any hypothesis as either live or dead. A live hypothesis is one which appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed. If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature—it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi's followers), the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: it is alive. This shows that deadness and liveness in an hypothesis are

not intrinsic properties, but relations to the individual thinker. They are measured by his willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all.

Next, let us call the decision between two hypotheses an *option*. Options may be of several kinds. They may be—1, *living or dead*; 2, *forced or avoidable*; 3, *momentous or trivial*; and for our purposes we may call an option a *genuine* option when it is of the forced, living and momentous kind.

From William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (New York: Henry Holt, 1912), pp. 1–31.