

Review of *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe*. By Scott Aikin. Bloomsbury: London, 2014. 240pp. \$120

In *Evidentialism and the Will to Believe*, Scott Aikin appears to be pursuing distinct and perhaps conflicting goals: to offer an internal commentary on the debate between Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" and James' "The Will to Believe," and to advance novel interpretations of the philosophical commitments of each situated in the context of contemporary philosophy. Achieving the former goal is perhaps the book's greatest virtue, but this achievement sometimes comes at the expense of the latter goal.

This tension might best be expressed by a question posed to Aikin, who is so careful in the introduction to stress the methodological point of making one's authorial intentions clear to the audience: For whom is the book intended? It is all at once a generally accessible commentary and a work of original philosophical interpretation but one that frequently stops just short of truly engaging with the arguments so interpreted. If Aikin's intended audience is a general one with no investments in a background epistemology, then digressions on concepts like "epistemic infinitism" and "doxastic efficaciousness" appear inert. If instead the intended audience already has some stake in the game, so to speak, through some historical and philosophical perspective such as analytic epistemology, then the junctures at which Aikin decides to stop his commentary are frustratingly shy of the philosophical depth requisite to make the book of much interest. For that audience, all of the interpretive ingredients remain carefully laid out on the table, uncooked.

As he carefully maps out the eddies of the Clifford/James debate for the reader, Aikin makes clear his role as a table-setter for his favored positions. He parses the claims and supporting premises section by section. In places where some interpretive housekeeping is required (e.g., Aikin's invocation of the twin concepts of "epistemic sloth" and "epistemic insolence" in marking a distinction between Clifford's two cases of the ship owner and the islanders) Aikin delivers on his promise to "lay out a few interpretive options" (3) as a kind of temporary salve for the explicated view in question, while generally keeping in line with the spirit of the position so interpreted.

However, Aikin's defense of Clifford is weakened just where he does not succeed in the overarching interpretative goal. After discussing some objections from skepticism that would be waiting from any philosopher, Aikin nicely sets the stage for an infinitist interpretation of Cliffordian evidentialism. Analytic philosophers, if they've paid attention over the past century, are waiting for that move too. A seminal source for such a view, Peter Klein's "Human Knowledge and the Infinite Regress of Reasons", is there in the bibliography, so one might expect Aikin to deliver an interpretation well situated to address the basic objections (e.g., the Achilles paradox and the "finite mind" problem). He does not do this. After setting the stage perfectly for the space of such a view, it is disappointing that Aikin leaves off at just the point that a contemporary philosopher might take great interest in what Cliffordian infinitism would look like.

Nonetheless, Aikin's criticisms of James, and in particular his claim that Jamesian counterexamples to evidentialism are actually instances consistent with and confirmatory of evidentialism, are well-posed against the particular Jamesian cases in question. Aikin argues that the cases James provides, all instances of what Aikin

dubs “doxastically efficacious” beliefs (where having the belief makes it more probable that the belief is true), are such that the belief-holders in question actually do possess evidence for the truth of the belief just in virtue of holding the belief in question. Thus, contrary to James’s intentions, such cases are not so-called ‘lawful exceptions’ to Cliffordian evidentialism, but are rather merely special instances of the universal evidential rule, since belief on their basis is belief on the basis of evidence.

Aikin’s arguments in this vein, however, suffer a bit under closer scrutiny. Focusing on James’s so-called “friendship” and “Alpine Climber” cases, Aikin claims that while such cases are in fact cases where the agent in question fails to have evidence one way or the other regarding the target proposition’s truth, such cases are nevertheless “constrained by evidential considerations” (152). Aikin’s argument against the Alpine Climber case as counting as a legitimate counterexample to Clifford’s evidentialism relies on two considerations. One, that the evidential considerations constraining the case includes facts about things like how far the jump would be, what kind of jumps the climber has made in the past, and so on. Two, that “Only when the distance to jump is on the high end of AC’s jumping track record is AC’s attitude about the jump relevant. Only when it’s a *hard jump* does AC’s confidence matter” (152). Combining these two considerations, Aikin concludes that such confident belief, just in virtue of making a successful leap more probable, itself constitutes evidence for the truth of the content of said belief. This move against James is initially a persuasive one, as it does appear that the doxastically efficacious beliefs are in fact performing the same function in the Jamesian cases that everyday evidence performs in the case of conventional, non-doxastically efficacious beliefs: they give us reason to believe that the likelihood

of some proposition being true is greater than it was prior to the belief, or evidence, in question.

Aikin says that James requires that the cases are sufficient to serve as counterexamples to Cliffordian evidentialism and that such cases, despite the “efficacy of positive thinking”, are themselves “evidentially bounded.” Aikin asks us again to consider the Alpine Climber case: “The climber must make a jump across a crevasse. The confidence that he can make the jump makes his successful jump more likely, pessimism less. The climber, James holds, not only lawfully may but also must have the confident belief. But remember that this is appropriate only when the jump is feasible. If it is a 10-foot jump, this seems right, but not for a 100-foot or 1,000-foot jump. Appropriately using the power of positive thinking itself must be evidentially bounded—you must have evidence that the case is a feasible one in the first place” (158-9). From this he concludes that the subject in question has evidence for the target proposition in question, and that thus such cases fail as counterexamples to Cliffordian evidentialism.

While the feasibility constraint is appropriate enough as far as it goes (who besides a madman would be confident in taking a physically impossible leap?), it is questionable whether or not it is doing the evidentialist-friendly work Aikin interprets it as doing. Even if we grant that an agent’s awareness of the mere feasibility (taken to mean something like its physical, or perhaps more weakly its logical, possibility) of the jump constitutes a piece of evidence for the confidence that the agent has with respect to successfully making the jump, such mere feasibility does not on its own seem to entail anything like sufficient epistemic justification for one’s confidence in succeeding in the jump. The feasibility of some p ’s being true (in this case, “I will successfully make the leap”) appears more like a necessary condition on p ’s being true. But merely

having evidence of some necessary condition of some hypothetical p's obtaining is not usually taken to be, on any standard evidentialist reading, sufficient for epistemically justified belief in p's being true. So it appears we can grant that certain instances of evidence for the feasibility of the associated propositions being true are required in cases of doxastically efficacious beliefs. But this is still consistent with such evidence being insufficient for belief in the proposition in question, and as thus still standing as an exception to the Cliffordian rule.

Of course whether such an exception is *lawful* is a separate point, but Aikin's argument here is that such cases aren't even *exceptions* to the Cliffordian rule. Really, what seems needed here is an elaboration on what Aikin means by the climber's belief-formation in the face of evidence-for-feasibility being 'evidentially bounded'. The connection here with pre-existing debates about belief formation, evidence for predictions, and feasibility would again have been welcome and expected by readers familiar with these areas.

But the type of debate most conspicuously left alone, which would be quite familiar and occur to any reader of James with a background in modern philosophy, is that concerning testimony and the debate among analytic and social epistemologists about reductionism. Surely there is a reading in which James' overall case does not rely entirely on examples of "doxastically efficacious" beliefs in the sense potentially vulnerable to Aiken's objections. Taking directions from a stranger or taking the word of a historian about some event in the distant past seem to involve believing on insufficient evidence while having those beliefs does not bear on the probability of their truth, i.e., they are not doxastically efficacious beliefs. Such are the classical examples in epistemological debates over testimony. If only Aiken's detailed discussion of Feldman

would have been matched with an equally inviting discussion of C.A.J. Coady's (1992) *Testimony*, for example, it would have been closer to the sort of commentary promised. Proceeding right from the dispute between Hume and Reid on testimony that Aiken nicely explicates (55-56), Coady's work is the sort of touchstone that would engage a greater range of contemporary epistemologists. Yet, Aiken does not take us into that territory. He stops short of laying the icing on an otherwise well layered cake.

There is great value in the internally cosmopolitan goals of Aiken's interpretation: not quite analytic but firmly outside historicist, post-modern, or other "external" readings of the debate between Clifford and James. This is very important given that evidentialism is one of the main bridges between a range of contemporary philosophical debates and American pragmatism. Aiken helps to build that bridge. However, he falls short just where the sort of reading he promotes is most needed. Unsteady and occasionally unsure of its audience, Aiken's book is nevertheless the best joint commentary of its kind.

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