




Research Paper

Analysis of the Relationship between "Will" and "Belief" in the Thought of William James

Masoud Zein-al Abedin*¹  Abdullah Salavati²

,



¹ PhD student of Islamic philosophy and theology, Faculty of Humanities, Shahid Rajae Teacher Training University (SRTTU), Tehran, Iran. Email: massoudzz@yahoo.com

² Professor of Philosophy, Faculty of Humanities, Shahid Rajae Teacher Training University (SRTTU), Tehran, Iran. Email: a.salavati@sru.ac.ir



10.22080/jre.2024.26567.1191

Received:

April 8, 2023

Accepted:

July 24, 2023

Available online:

September 5, 2023

Keywords:

Belief, Will, William James, Voluntarism, Ethics of Belief

Abstract

Obligationism is one of the consequences of voluntary belief; therefore, the relationship between will and belief is of interest to epistemologists. The main question of this research is to investigate this relationship from William James' point of view, to determine whether from his point of view, non-cognitive factors are also effective in belief, and what effect human will and voluntary nature have on a person's beliefs. This study concluded that although William James disagreed with Clifford's command of direct voluntarism, he was a voluntarist himself. From his point of view, man's emotional nature not only can, but must choose between hypotheses, and of course, this is only possible in the case of "genuine" choices. From James' point of view, previous acceptances, reputation, and authority of others; practical application of belief; and inclinations are effective in the will to believe. In contrast to Clifford, who did not believe in the belief without sufficient evidence, he believes that man should experience, repeat this experience, and reach the truth by thinking about the results obtained from these experiences. From his point of view, the role of will is prominent in ethics, and the will also plays a role in personal relationships. James believes that one's prior tendencies and belief in reality play an active role in the realization of that reality.

*Corresponding Author: Masoud Zein-al Abedin

Address: Shahid Rajae Teacher Training University (SRTTU), Tehran, Iran Email: massoudzz@yahoo.com



Extended Abstract

1. Introduction

One of the controversial points in epistemological discussions is the relationship between "will" and "belief". The main question is, are our beliefs under the control of our will? Can we create or destroy a belief in ourselves with our will? These are some of the questions raised in this field.

One of the most important topics that is affected by our response to whether or not a belief is voluntary is "epistemological/moral responsibility" towards beliefs. Relativism is based on two important presuppositions, namely voluntarism and obligationism. What is meant by duty orientation is whether a person has a duty and responsibility in relation to his beliefs that if he does not fulfill this duty, he cannot justify his knowledge or not. The main question of this research is to examine this relationship from William James' view point, to determine whether, from his point of view, non-cognitive factors are also effective in belief. And in the meantime, what effect does human will and voluntary nature have on a person's beliefs?

2. Method

This research follows the library method and is based on the works of William James, as well as the analysis and explanations of his commentators and critics or written works by other like-minded people.

This study aimed to present this question to William James, the American philosopher and psychologist, and analyze his answer. Most of the research activities that have been carried out in this field have expressed the conflict between Clifford and James. Because Clifford believes in direct command volitions, sometimes James, who is at his opposite point, has been considered as a non-voluntarist. Most of the papers written in the analysis of James's

point of view have either focused on the dispute between Clifford and James and the issue of the ethics of belief or have put the concern of religious belief as their main concern and have not independently and directly analyzed the relationship between belief and will from James' point of view. Therefore, the current research is innovative from this point of view.

3. Results

the components mentioned in James' volitions are selection tasks based on emotional nature, original choices, and living hypotheses, prior acceptance, authority (certificate) and reputation, practical application, aggregation of experiences, the role of desires in belief, the role of will in ethics, the role of will in personal communication, and the role of will-based faith in the realization of reality.

This research revealed that although William James disagreed with Clifford's direct voluntarism prescriptive, he was a volitionist himself. From his point of view, man's emotional nature not only can, but must choose between hypotheses, and of course, this is only possible in the case of "genuine" choices. From James' point of view, previous acceptances, reputation, and authority of others; practical application of belief; and inclinations are effective in the will to believe. In contrast to Clifford, who did not believe in the belief without obtaining sufficient evidence, he thinks that man should experience, repeat this experience, and reach the truth by thinking about the results obtained from these experiences. From his point of view, the role of will is prominent in ethics, and the will also plays a role in personal communications. James believes that one's prior tendencies and belief in reality play an active role in the realization of that reality.



The results of this research regarding James's point of view on the relationship between belief and will are as follows:

From James' point of view, man's emotional nature not only legally can, but must choose between hypotheses. In James' view, stopping and taking a break in decision-making is not acceptable, and if one finds himself in a situation where he cannot find enough evidence, he should listen to the call of his voluntary nature and select a belief. However, James raises some conditions; first, the selection must be genuine, and second, the intellect cannot inherently make decisions based on rational reasons. Therefore, a person does not have the right to make a voluntary and emotional decision about all beliefs.

That we can accept a hypothesis compatible with the needs of our voluntary nature is possible only in the case of "genuine" choices, and this genuine choice is when both hypotheses are alive, that is, they are alive, unavoidable, and serious.

Previous acceptances are effective on the will to believe. Even Pascal's condition without such previous acceptances will not be considered a living option because if a belief is based solely on a machine calculation, the reality of faith will lose its soul.

Many beliefs are placed in the area of will to believe due to the reputation and authority (testimony) of others.

Practical application based on James's pragmatist philosophy plays an important role in the will to believe and is considered an important motivating factor in this issue.

Gathering experiences is James' solution against the doctrine of "obtaining sufficient evidence" proposed by Clifford. James believes that man should experience, repeat this experience, and reach

the truth by thinking about the results obtained from these experiences.

Desires play a role in the formation of beliefs. James believes that reaching a belief does not happen in a vacuum and the progress of science is due to these prejudices and previous beliefs that exist in us.

The role of will in ethics is also prominent. Ethical issues are not pending tangible proof and are concerned with good and bad. Therefore, the role of the heart is prominent in this field.

The role of will is also evident in personal communication. Living hypotheses stimulate our motivation and will, and extreme rationalism and strict relativism, which cannot be believed except with sufficient evidence, cannot justify and facilitate human emotions and movement and dynamics in human relationships and emotions.

Will-based faith is effective in realizing reality. According to James, truths based on personal action and all kinds of religious beliefs do not need evidence and faith can bring about its own realization. As James explains, man's previous tendencies and belief in reality play an active role in creating and realizing that reality.

Funding

There is no funding support.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.



References

- Akbari, R., & Khosravi, A. (1389). William James' translation of Pascal's condition. *Qobsat*, 15(55), (Spring 1389), pp. 95-120.
- Akhawan, M., & Mousavizadeh, S. (1394). Criticism of William James's arguments in the essay "Want to Believe". *Essays on the Philosophy of Religion, Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies*, 4(1), (Bahar and Summer 2014), pp. 1-14.
- Azarbajjani, M. (1383). Justification of faith from the point of view of William James. *Philosophical-theological researches of Qom University*, 6(1), pp. 3-16.
- Clifford, W. K. (1901), *Lectures and Essays*, vol 2, ed. Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock, New York, The Macmillan Company.
- Copleston, F. C. (1388). *History of Philosophy; From Bentham to Russell*. Volume 8. translated by Bahauddin Khorramshahi, Scientific and Cultural Publications, Tehran, sixth edition.
- James, W. (1993). *The Will to Believe The Theory of Knowledge*, Wadsworth Press.
- Javadpour, G. (1389). Epistemological Backgrounds of Ehlak Bawar. *Ayan Hikmat Quarterly*, 2(6), (Winter 1389), pp. 35-63.
- Javadpour, G. (1390). Ethic of Belief, an Approach to the Link of Ethics and Epistemology. *Research Quarterly of Ethic Research*, 4(11), (Spring 2010), pp. 55-84.
- Kashfi, A. (1385). Categorization of epistemological justification theories. *Nameh Hikmat*, (8), (autumn and winter 2015), pp. 65-87.
- Poyman, P. L. (1396). *Epistemology: an introduction to Reza Mohammadzadeh's theory of cognition*. translation and research, Tehran: Imam Sadegh University.
- Safari Abaksari, M. (1399). Examining the views of William James in the ethics of belief. *philosophy and Islamic theology*, 53(2), pp. 461-483.
- Salavati, A. (1400). *Epistemological evolution of virtual space*. Tehran: Samit Publications.
- Shahab, M. H. (1387). Emotional tension and rationality of faith and religious belief from the perspective of William James. *Philosophical-Theological Researches*, 10(2), (series 38), pp. 41-58.
- Yazdani, A. (1387). Review and criticism of Clifford and James's view on the rationality of religious beliefs. *Qobsat*, 13, (autumn 1387), pp. 119-136.