

Reading Questions for December 5

These questions cover excerpts of an article by William James called “The Will to Believe.” The answers do not have to be turned in. You will probably have to do the reading more than once to get the answers.

*Background:*

James’s article responds to the article we read from William K Clifford. Clifford had argued that it is always wrong to believe without sufficient evidential support. James thinks that in certain cases, such as the case of religious belief, it is acceptable to believe something even if your evidence doesn’t sufficiently support it.

*Questions:*

1. On page 1, James says what it is to be a forced, living, and momentous option. What does he mean by these terms?
2. On page 2 James addresses the question of whether we can choose to believe things at will. He says in response: “it is only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature is unable to bring to life again.” What do you think he means by this response? Is he right?
3. On page 2, in the paragraph starting “Believe truth! Shun error!” James indicates that he and Clifford disagree about something. What do they disagree about it? How does James defend his ideas? Is what he says plausible?
4. On page 3, James argues that the religious option is forced and momentous. He concludes that, assuming it is a live option for you, it is acceptable for you to be religious. How does he argue for this? Is his argument convincing?