



Australian  
National  
University

---

THESES SIS/LIBRARY  
R.G. MENZIES LIBRARY BUILDING NO:2  
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
CANBERRA ACT 0200 AUSTRALIA

TELEPHONE: +61 2 6125 4631  
FACSIMILE: +61 2 6125 4063  
EMAIL: [library.theses@anu.edu.au](mailto:library.theses@anu.edu.au)

## USE OF THESES

This copy is supplied for purposes  
of private study and research only.  
Passages from the thesis may not be  
copied or closely paraphrased without the  
written consent of the author.

BELIEF

by

REGINALD ANTHONY NAULTY

This thesis was submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy in the Australian National University.

April 1972

This thesis is my own work, and to the best of my knowledge all sources have been acknowledged.

*R. A. Naulty*

R.A. NAULTY

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was produced while I was a Research Scholar in the Philosophy Department of the Research School of Social Sciences of the Australian National University. I owe much to the comments and criticisms of my supervisors, Professor J.A. Passmore and Dr P.J. Sheehan, and have also benefited from discussions with all members of the Department, especially Dr E.M. Curley and Mr G.W. Mortimore.

Miss Isabel Sheaffe and Mrs Margaret Capper have typed numerous last drafts of the various sections with surprising good humour, and I express my gratitude to them.

## CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
<u>Introduction</u>	1
<u>Chapter 1. Locke</u>	4
1. Sketch of Locke's Theory of Knowledge	4
2. Judgment and Probability	11
3. The Grounds of Probability	15
4. The Freedom to Believe	18
<u>Chapter 2. Cardinal Newman</u>	29
1. Introduction	29
2. Assent and Its Object	30
3. Notional and Real Assent	36
4. The Classification of Notional Assents	39
5. Complex and Reflex Assent and Certitude	44
6. The Dispute with Locke	49
7. Newman on the Freedom to Believe	55
<u>Chapter 3. Hume</u>	61
1. Hume on Belief	61
2. Probability	70
3. Testimony	74
4. Hume's Skepticism and His Rules of Just Reasoning	80
<u>Chapter 4. W.K. Clifford</u>	87
1. W.K. Clifford and the Freedom to Believe	87
2. Clifford on the Morality of Acquiring Belief	91
3. Clifford on Testimony and the Weight of Authority	96
<u>Chapter 5. William James: The Will to Believe</u>	103
<u>Chapter 6. The Freedom to Believe</u>	113
1. Conclusions and Refutations	113
2. Findlay's Objection	120
3. Confidence and Choosing to Believe	124
Appendix: Discussion of Price on Assent	128
<u>Chapter 7. Testimony</u>	133
1. The Diversity of Justification	133
2. The Circularity Problem	140
3. Postscript on the Use of "Testimony" and "Authority"	144
<u>Bibliography</u>	147

"All that we can do by voluntary and conscious effort, in order to come to a conclusion, is, after all, only to supply complete materials for constructing the necessary premises. As soon as this is done, the conclusion forces itself upon us. Those conclusions which (it is supposed) may be accepted or avoided as we please, are not worth much."

HELMHOLTZ.

"... wherever no hypothesis can be scientifically proved or disproved, and yet some hypothesis must be accepted as a starting-point for thought or as a basis for conduct, the individual is justified in selecting the hypothesis which yields the richest results in the discovery of truth or in the leading of a good life."

BEATRICE WEBB.

## INTRODUCTION

Clement of Alexandria remarks that 'not only the Platonists, but the Stoics, say that assent is in our power.'<sup>1</sup> In the opening chapters of Clement's Miscellanies, the voluntariness of faith is of crucial importance, for he maintains that if we have faith, God will then grant us knowledge of himself, and that it is only by faith that we can acquire this knowledge. He takes as literally true the words of the Prophet 'Except ye believe, neither shall ye understand.' Clement unfolds this cryptic statement: 'Faith, by a kind of divine mutual and reciprocal correspondence, becomes characterized by knowledge.'<sup>2</sup> Clement sees love or fear as the foundation of this voluntarily accepted faith, but clearly, from what has already been said, there may be at least one other motive - desire for knowledge of God. Furthermore, according to Clement, faith is the foundation of all knowledge. If anyone should hold that knowledge is founded on demonstration, he should be reminded, says Clement, that first principles are incapable of demonstration.<sup>3</sup>

Anyone who believes that philosophical positions are never refuted but only go out of fashion and come back again, will be encouraged to learn that William James virtually reproduces Clement's position in his article The Will to Believe. For James argues that we have a right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, and he suggests pretty strongly that evidence for the existence of God will only be forthcoming after we have believed. And to parallel Clement's point about demonstration it will be found that Hume's skeptical arguments make it appear that certain fundamental propositions cannot be justified, but only accepted.

---

<sup>1</sup> Clement of Alexandria. The Stromata, or Miscellanies ch. 12 from The Ante-Nicene Fathers. ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1962 P. 360.

<sup>2</sup> Clement. Miscellanies ch. 4. op. cit. P. 350

<sup>3</sup> ibid.

It will be seen that, in direct opposition to these views, both Locke and Hume think it absurd to assert that it is within our power to believe anything. Nevertheless, in recent years R.M. Chisholm has made famous the concept of the ethics of belief. He has contested the ethical point of view put by W.K. Clifford - 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' - with the view that 'we may accept any proposition we would like to accept provided only that we do not have adequate evidence for its contradictory.'<sup>4</sup> Quite obviously, this implies that there is a very wide range of propositions that we are at liberty to believe. Chisholm is well aware of this, and argues that our believings are 'acts', since they are characterized by self-control, which, Chisholm argues, is the essence of activity.<sup>5</sup> But other contemporary philosophers, for example, Bernard Williams and Roy Edgley, argue that it is not even a contingent fact that we cannot choose to believe.

So it has long been the case, and is still the case, that what some philosophers have offered as a practical proposal, others have seen as a logical impossibility. In order to discover what sort of freedom we have to believe I shall investigate the writings of a succession of philosophers in the empiricist tradition to see what they say about this subject, and, more importantly, to determine whether or not positions they establish commit them to some sort of freedom to believe. As this examination of particular philosophers proceeds, points relevant to the voluntariness of belief suggest themselves, and I shall not hesitate to pursue them.

---

<sup>4</sup> R.M. Chisholm, Perceiving, A Philosophical Study. Cornell University Press, 1957. P. 100.

<sup>5</sup> R.M. Chisholm, 'Lewis' Ethics of Belief' in The Philosophy of C.I. Lewis. ed. P.A. Schilpp Open Court, 1968. P. 224



Most of the philosophers selected here are not interested in the freedom to believe per se, or even in belief per se, but in judgment, which is one way of coming to believe. Now it is impossible to explicate Locke's theory of judgment without also explicating his theory of probability, which in turn makes it necessary to discuss his theory of testimony. In the philosophers studied here after Locke, only Hume had a developed theory of probability, and as that theory has received ample discussion in the literature, I have dealt with it quickly. But both Hume and Clifford have expounded views about testimony. Now testimony is a fundamental source of information right across the spectrum of human activities. In our everyday lives we rely on it for the news of the day. In our workaday lives we rely on it to learn what our colleagues are working on and what they have read or heard. Scientists rely on testimony to ascertain whether or not co-workers have made corroborating observations. Individuals outside the pale of religion must, if Clement and James are correct, rely on it to learn if those who believed before them were rewarded with evidence. Yet testimony is not well covered in the literature, so I have made the discussion of it, along with the discussion of the freedom to believe, the main theme of the thesis.

When the historical examination is complete, I list the conclusions arrived at and comment on them, and defend them against the arguments of contemporary philosophers. The final chapter is an independent discussion of testimony.