Belief and Evidence

I. Clifford’s “The Ethics of Belief” (1-6)

A. Focusing on the first hypothetical example Clifford gives of the shipowner who believes his ship to be seaworthy, why does Clifford believe that the shipowner did not have a right to believe what he believed? Why, in particular, does Clifford believe that it wouldn’t matter if his belief turned out to be true; that he would still have no right to believe what he did? (1-2)

B. Why does Clifford believe that it is not just the action undertaken by the shipowner which is wrong, but the fact that he held the belief he did without proper evidence? (2-3)

C. Why does Clifford believe that no belief - however trivial - is a private matter and that we have a “duty to mankind” to take care that we have adequate evidence for thinking what we believe to be true? Why does Clifford believe that “The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them”? (3-6)

II. James’ “The Will to Believe”

A. How does James distinguish a live from a dead hypothesis? What does James mean in speaking of an option between two hypotheses as living or dead, forced or avoidable, momentous or trivial? (1-2)

B. How does James answer the objection that we cannot voluntarily choose to believe something? (2-5)

C. How does James distinguish an absolutist vs. empiricist way of believing in truth? (6-8)

D. How does James distinguish 1) our duty to know the truth from 2) our duty to avoid error? (8-9)

E. James grants that when matters are not momentous, it may be advisable to prioritize our duty to avoid error over our duty to know the truth and simply refrain from belief when the evidence for the belief is insufficient to establish its truth. (9-10) But in other cases, he believes we have a right to allow our “passional nature” to influence our beliefs. How does he argue that this is the case with . . .
1. Moral beliefs (10-11)

2. Questions concerning personal relations (11-12)

F. Willing to Believe in God (12-150)

1. What are the two things “religion” (we mean, as James specifies, religion construed ‘very generically and broadly’ - not just Christianity or Judaism or Islam, specifically, but religion generally) says? (12)

2. Assuming religion to be a live hypothesis (for some of us, anyway) how does he argue that it is also a forced option? (By the way, he appears to simply assume that it is a momentous option - a point that seems reasonable to grant him, don’t you think?) How does the forced character of the religious option lead him to argue that it is unreasonable to demand that we withhold belief concerning religion lacking sufficient evidence to settle the question? (12-13)

3. How does James further argue that it is unreasonable to withhold belief because of insufficient evidence by suggesting: “We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might be forever withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis half-way.” (13)

III. Bernard Williams’ “Deciding to Believe”

A. Why does Williams believe “beliefs aim at truth”? What are the three points he makes to amplify this thought? (136-137)

B. From the last paragraph on p. 136 to the last full paragraph on p. 147, Williams discusses several other characteristics of belief: that 2) an assertion is the most straightforward way of expressing a belief, that 3) despite this, beliefs need not be expressed in assertions and assertions need not express beliefs (since we can be insincere in making an assertion, that 4) factual beliefs can be based on evidence for their truth, and that 5) knowing a person’s beliefs can help us to explain her/his behavior. Some of this is quite interesting (for instance, you might find the discussion of attributing beliefs to animals on pp. 138-139 interesting) but none of it is essential to his main concluding point about deciding to believe. You may want to skim these pages just to get a sense of what’s going on here, but I don’t think we need to discuss it in class.

C. Why We Can’t Just Decide to Believe (Last paragraph on p. 147 to 151)
1. What is the “one connexion between belief and decision” Williams notes in the last paragraph on p. 147?

2. What does Williams mean when he says that Hume believes it’s a contingent fact that we cannot decide to believe something? (148)

3. Why does Williams believe that it is not a contingent fact that we cannot decide to believe something? What does the fact that “beliefs aim at truth” have to do with this? (148)

4. What are the “more roundabout routes” that Williams suggests someone might use to decide to believe something? (149)

5. At the end of the last full paragraph on p. 149 Williams says he wants consider why we must use self-deception to decide to believe in these more roundabout ways. Why does he think this? (Hint: you want find his answer until the last paragraph of the essay.) (149-151)

IV. Louis Pojman’s “Faith as Hope” (217-230)

A. Why does hope involve belief in the possibility of the state of affairs one hopes for, but not belief that it exists, let alone certainty that it does. Why does hope rest more on a desire that the state of affairs be true than a belief that it does? (217-218)

B. How can hope also involve “belief in” what is hoped for? How does this “belief in” involve a relationship of trust but not necessarily a belief that what is hoped for is true? How does it involve living as if what we hope for is true? What does Pojman mean by “profound hope?” (222-225)

C. How does Pojman try to make his case that religious faith need not involve belief, but only hope with his “parable” of Moses and Aaron? What do you think? Is he right that one could be an agnostic or even an atheist and still have faith in God? (226-230)