'Faith is believing something on insufficient evidence.' Is there any truth in this suggestion? *by* RichardErskine

Immanuel Kant distinguished 'opining, believing and knowing' in terms of their subjective and objective sufficiency. Believing was, in his terms, where something was held to be subjectively sufficient but not objectively sufficient. 'The subjective sufficiency is termed conviction (for myself), the objective sufficiency is termed certainty (for everyone).' The term that Kant uses for belief is glaube – the same term that he uses elsewhere for faith. As a result, faith in Kant's terms can be construed as belief on grounds that are objectively insufficient while at the same time sufficient subjectively.

This set of distinctions, considered in isolation, is highly congenial to a theism of revelation. For a theism of revelation requires that reason alone cannot finally nor adequately derive all of its postulates (otherwise the revelation would in itself be redundant). Therefore a goal of 'objective sufficiency' would in fact be destructive rather than helpful to such a theism.

Now, of course, it was part of Kant's enterprise to demonstrate the impossibility of a metaphysics that could in any case yield an 'objective sufficiency' through the use of speculative reason. But this was very far from a simple dismissal of 'reason in its merely speculative employment' from the scrutiny of knowledge of a supreme being 'derived from other sources'. This is a point of crucial importance, because in effect the direction in which Kant's argument takes us is to a reflexive employment of reason – one which does not derive the existence of a supreme being in itself but one which scrutinises the beliefs we hold about such a supreme being once that existence has already been 'derived from other sources'.

(For Kant himself these 'other sources' were morality. Whether this constituted the replacement of one form of metaphysics by another is not itself directly relevant to this discussion, although it is relevant to point out that when Kant, in his own terms anyway, subsequently does reach 'objective sufficiency' through the argument from morality it turns out to be unhelpful for the concept of a theism of revelation as argued in the second paragraph above that such 'objective sufficiency' should inevitably be.)

Where does this line of argument take us? First, what this does is to affirm, with an irony he could not intend, Hume's contention about 'those dangerous friends or disguised enemies to the Christian religion who have undertaken to defend it by the principles of human reason' when 'mere reason is insufficient to convince us of its veracity'. In a very real sense, 'it is a sure method of exposing it' [the Christian religion] 'to put it to such a trial as it is, by no means, fitted to endure.'

Not only is such an approach doomed to failure as a method of constructing a theism as an attempt to derive an 'objective sufficiency' when no such sufficiency can be derived from natural theology, but (a) it inverts the process of any possible theology for a theism of revelation (a theology by definition has to be theocentric and the nature of its revelation has to form at least a starting point rather than an end point) and (b) in doing so it removes the ground for any possible theology genuinely separate from a philosophy of religion.

Secondly, and directly following from the above, it suggests that there is a fundamental separation of intent between philosophy and theology in respect of which the concept of compatibilism, (by focusing debate on the attempt to locate the correct point of contact between faith and reason along a continuum ranging from Aquinas at one end to outright fideism at the other – in the presupposition that there is some such point or points) may be

in essence unhelpful. In this regard it is worth remarking that of the three figures generally regarded as the most important philosophers of the late medieval period (Aquinas, Duns Scotus and Ockham), Ockham can clearly be regarded as a separatist in this sense while Duns Scotus practised a clearer separation in fact than that with which he is traditionally credited.

If it is indeed 'necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith' (and the above argues that it is not only necessary but desirable for a theism of revelation), the question remains as to whether this loss of 'objective sufficiency' can itself afford a philosophically tolerable position as a basis for action. The objections of Clifford that 'it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence' may be countered reasonably straightforwardly by James' riposte that 'a rule of thinking which would absolutely prevent me from acknowledging certain kinds of truth if those kinds of truth were really there, would be an irrational rule.'

By the same standard, however, the rules for acknowledging such truths cannot reject Clifford's position as irrational and then proceed to defend what they perceive to be those rules in an irrational way themselves. 'Credo quia impossibile est: I believe, because it is impossible, might, in a good man, pass for a sally of zeal; but would prove a very ill rule for men to choose their opinions or religion by.' In fact, one might argue that it was, in the strict sense, no rule at all.

Locke laments the fact that 'religion, which should most distinguish us from beasts, and ought most peculiarly to elevate us, as rational creatures, above brutes, is that wherein men often appear most irrational'. And in this respect Locke is of particular interest because he comes from a position which does not dispute the actuality of revelation itself but which requires that there be stringent tests placed upon such revelation to establish whether it is revelation rather than 'enthusiasm'. 'Reason must be our last judge and guide in everything. I do not mean that we must consult reason, and examine whether a proposition revealed from God can be made out by natural principles, and if it cannot, that then we may reject it; but consult it we must…...'