



UNIVERSITÀ
DEGLI STUDI
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Theoretical philosophy: The ethics of belief

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Clifford and the ethics of belief

- William Kingdon Clifford, 'The Ethics of Belief':
 - It introduced the term «ethics of belief»
 - It clearly identifies an evidentialist principle: 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.' (186)
 - Two additional principles:
 - 'We may believe the statement of another person, when there is reasonable ground for supposing that he knows the matter of which he speaks, and that he is speaking the truth so far as he knows it'. (211)
 - 'We may believe what goes beyond our experience, only when it is inferred from that experience by the assumption that what we do not know is like what we know'. (211)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- The evidentialist principle: ‘It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.’ (186)
- Identifies an obligation or norm that determines the way in which we ought to form our beliefs.
- This ‘ought’ is both epistemic and moral.



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- Clifford's examples:
- 'A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. [...] Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. [...] In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy [...] and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.'



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- Clifford's examples:
- 'There was once an island in which some of the inhabitants professed a religion teaching neither the doctrine of original sin nor that of eternal punishment. A suspicion got abroad that the professors of this religion had made use of unfair means to get their doctrines taught to children.... A certain number of men formed themselves into a society for the purpose of agitating the public about this matter.... So great was the noise they made, that a Commission was appointed to investigate the facts; but after the Commission had carefully inquired into all the evidence that could be got, it appeared that the accused were innocent.' (178-9)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- The modified examples:
 - ‘Let us alter the case a little, and suppose that the ship was not unsound after all; that she made her voyage safely, and many others after it. Will that diminish the guilt of her owner?’ (178)
 - ‘Let us vary this case also, and suppose, other things remaining as before, that a still more accurate investigation proved the accused to have been really guilty. Would this make any difference in the guilt of the accusers?’ (179-80)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- In the modified examples, were the shipowner or the society of the accusers less guilty for the way in which they formed their beliefs?
- 'Clearly not; the question is not whether their belief was true or false, but whether they entertained it on wrong grounds'. (180)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- Possible objection:
 - '[I]t is not the belief which is judged to be wrong, but the action following upon it'. (180)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- Responses:
 - It is not possible to sharply separate between belief and action: having consequences for action is in the nature of belief:
 - ‘For it is not possible so to sever the belief from the action it suggests as to condemn the one without condemning the other. No man holding a strong belief on one side of a question, or even wishing to hold a belief on one side, can investigate it with such fairness and completeness as if he were really in doubt and unbiassed; so that the existence of a belief not founded on fair inquiry unfits a man for the performance of this necessary duty.’ (181)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- Responses:
 - Belief has a social nature: beliefs do not have only individual validity. They form and develop in a social context.
 - ‘But forasmuch as no belief held by one man, however seemingly trivial the belief, and however obscure the believer, is ever actually insignificant or without its effect on the fate of mankind, we have no choice but to extend our judgment to all cases of belief whatever.’
(182)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- ‘In like manner, if I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outward acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. 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; for then it must sink back into savagery.’ (185-6)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- Consequence of the social nature of belief: even though we do not act on the basis of a belief not based on evidence, we are nonetheless responsible of:
 1. the spreading of a potentially false belief;
 2. the actions that other people might perform on the basis of that belief (to the extent that our believing without justification contributed to its spreading).
 3. the spreading of a certain gullibility in the way in which we form beliefs.



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- How should we evaluate testimonies? Can they count as ‘evidence’?
- ‘In order that we may have the right to accept his testimony as ground for believing what he says, we must have reasonable grounds for trusting his *veracity*, that he is really trying to speak the truth so far as he knows it; his *knowledge*, that he has had opportunities of knowing the truth about this matter; and his *judgment*, that he has made proper use of those opportunities in coming to the conclusion which he affirms’. (189)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- How should we evaluate the testimony of a ‘prophet’ in revealed truths:
 - Revealed truths imply the attribution of a certain authority to a witness who claims to have received the revelation. Can we ever be in the position to rationally attribute this authority?
- ‘The goodness and greatness of a man do not justify us in accepting a belief upon the warrant of his authority, unless there are reasonable grounds for supposing that he knew the truth of what he was saying. And there can be no grounds for supposing that a man knows that which we, without ceasing to be men, could not be supposed to verify’.
(196)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- ‘If a chemist tells me, who am no chemist, that a certain substance can be made by putting together other substances in certain proportions and subjecting them to a known process, I am quite justified in believing this upon his authority.... And I have reasonable ground for supposing that he knows the truth of what he is saying, for although I am no chemist, I can be made to understand so much of the methods and processes of the science as makes it conceivable to me that, without ceasing to be man, I might verify the statement. ...But if my chemist tells me that an atom of oxygen has existed unaltered in weight and rate of vibration throughout all time, I have no right to believe this on his authority, for it is a thing which he cannot know without ceasing to be man.’ (196-8)



Clifford and the ethics of belief

- The last question: can we believe what goes beyond our experience?
 - Every belief that guides our action goes beyond our experience.
 - The right question: to what extent can we go beyond our experience?
 - We can legitimately go beyond our experience only if our guiding principle is the uniformity of nature.



Clifford's examples

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Clifford's examples

- 'Again, an Arctic explorer may tell us that in a given latitude and longitude he has experienced such and such a degree of cold, that the sea was of such a depth, and the ice of such a character. We should be quite right to believe him, in the absence of any stain upon his veracity. It is conceivable that we might, without ceasing to be men, go there and verify his statement.... But if an old whaler tells us that the ice is three hundred feet thick all the way up to the Pole, we shall not be justified in believing him. For although the statement may be capable of verification by man, it is certainly not capable of verification by *him*, with any means and appliances which he has possessed.' (198-9)