

## ***It Is Wrong, Always, Everywhere, And For Anyone, To Believe Anything Upon Insufficient Evidence***

In W. K. Clifford's influential essay, *The Ethics of Belief*, he defends the claim that *it is wrong, always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence*. In this paper I will examine the arguments he gives for this claim in order to show that they are flawed.

### **Two Wrong Ways To Arrive At Beliefs**

In the first section of his essay, Clifford tells two stories to illustrate two wrong ways to arrive at beliefs. The first is the example of the ship owner, who is sending an emigrant ship out to sea. He doubts that the ship is sea worthy, but instead of having it investigated, which would have been expensive and time-consuming, he stifles his doubts and sends the ship out to sea. Clifford calls the ship owner guilty of the sinking of the ship, because "he had no right to believe on such evidence as was put before him. He had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts."<sup>1</sup> The error of the ship owner was arriving at a belief by stifling his doubts.

The second story takes place on an island, in which people are falsely accused of a crime because of the passions and prejudices of the accusers, who did not take the time to investigate the evidence, even though "the evidence of their innocence was such as the agitators might easily have obtained, if they had attempted a fair inquiry."<sup>2</sup> The error of

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<sup>1</sup> W. K. Clifford *The Ethics of Belief*, 551.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 552.

the accusers was that “their sincere convictions, instead of being honestly earned by patient inquiring, were stolen by listening to the voice of prejudice and passion.”<sup>3</sup>

In both cases, Clifford maintains that if the beliefs had in fact been true, that would in no way have diminished the guilt of the accusers or the ship owner, for “the question of right and wrong has to do with the origin of [their] belief, not the matter of it, not what it was, but how [they] got it, not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether [they] had a right to believe on such evidence as was before [them].”<sup>4</sup>

### **Not The Belief, But The Action?**

In the second section of his essay, Clifford examines the idea that guilt is not found in holding a certain belief, but in performing the action that follows it. Clifford, although he allows that this is true insofar as if a person has an unjustified or uncontrollable belief, she must still control her actions, argues that this is false.

Clifford writes that once a belief is held, it causes bias, influences actions, and alters thought patterns. He writes:

No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may some day explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character forever.<sup>5</sup>

### **Beliefs Not Private But Public**

In the last section of his essay, Clifford argues that it is wrong to hold unjustified beliefs because beliefs are not an individual, private matter, but a matter that affects

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid..

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 551.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 552.

society in its entirety. He argues that beliefs are woven into the very structure of society, that “our lives are guided by that general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for society’s purposes.”<sup>6</sup> Further, he maintains that it is the duty of every citizen to question their beliefs, that no one is exempt from this all important duty: “No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe.”<sup>7</sup>

He writes that it is true that this duty is a hard one, for holding beliefs and believing oneself to have knowledge gives a sense of security and power. However, he argues, having justified beliefs gives an even better feeling of security and power. “This sense of power is the highest and best of pleasures when the belief on which it is founded is a true belief, and has been fairly earned by investigation.”<sup>8</sup>

Finally, Clifford argues that believing something upon insufficient evidence is like stealing from society, because “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.”<sup>9</sup> The individual must not think herself as alone, but as part of a society.

If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.<sup>10</sup>

## **Evaluation Of Clifford’s Argument**

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 553.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 554.

In his first section, Clifford attempts to show that it is wrong to believe anything upon insufficient evidence by way of examples. He does not, however, offer much in the way of argument for why it is wrong. He reserves this for the second and third sections. I will, however, examine the examples to see if they support his argument.

At first glance, the examples seem like valid examples to support his claims. After closer inspection, however, there is a fatal flaw in both examples.

Clifford is attempting to establish a general principle in this essay about justification for belief. It seems clear that beliefs can include judgments about empirical facts such as the seaworthiness of a ship, about the guilt or innocence of an accused person. However, they can also include beliefs about more abstract facts such whether a moral decision is right or wrong, about what path I should choose for my life, about whether God exists, and about other matters of that sort.

The examples offered by Clifford seem only to apply to empirical matters. In both cases, it is clear that finding out the truth is a relatively simple matter. Clifford's ship owner, although it would have been relatively expensive and time-consuming, has a certain way of determining if his ship is seaworthy, that is, he can have people look at it and examine it. In that way, the ship owner could have his belief that the ship was seaworthy justified. It is also this way in the island example, and in fact, Clifford writes: "the evidence of their innocence was such as the agitators might easily have obtained, if they had attempted a fair inquiry."<sup>11</sup>

It is hardly the case that the evidence required to answer the more abstract questions I have discussed above is as easily obtained. It is one matter for Clifford to

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 552.

argue that beliefs that can be fairly easily and empirically investigated and resolved must be justified, but it is quite another to argue that all beliefs, even those which are not as easily demonstrated, must be justified. How can a moral belief, or a theological belief, or a belief concerning what is the best course of action in a given situation, be so easily investigated?<sup>12</sup> It seems that Clifford is unfairly attempting to show that his general principle regarding the justification of all beliefs is true by using examples that can only apply to empirical beliefs, which are relatively easily justified. For this reason, I reject Clifford's use of the two examples in this essay.

Clifford's second section is somewhat more convincing, in that it does indeed seem to be the case that all beliefs are in some way significant. On Clifford's system, therefore, it follows that all beliefs must be questioned, because they are all significant. However, this seems to me to be impossible.

Perhaps one of the most famous instances of this type of thinking is Descartes' system of methodic doubt, in which he questions and doubts every one of his beliefs in order to find a certain foundation for knowledge. At first glance, it seems that Descartes is doing everything right, in that he doubts everything he could possibly doubt in order to question all of his beliefs. However, at closer inspection, it can be seen that he is not indeed doubting everything. At no point in his methodic doubt, for example, does he doubt the effectiveness of the actual mechanism of doubting itself.

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<sup>12</sup> With regards to moral decisions, Michael Daley has objected that "to the utilitarian, I think these can be very easily investigated and tested". I respond that in order for a utilitarian to choose a right or wrong course of action, she needs to know what its consequences will be (this seems crucial to the definition of utilitarianism). However, how could she make such a decision without evidence to back up her thoughts about the future? How could she possibly have 'sufficient evidence' to justify a belief about the future, in order to make a decision? For this reason, even from a utilitarian point of view, it seems impossible to have sufficient evidence to make a moral decision.

In order to question beliefs, a person needs at least some beliefs, such as the knowledge that she is questioning her beliefs, and that the mechanism of questioning her beliefs is effective to achieve her goal. There will always be presuppositions influencing even the most sincere questioner. Thus, it seems impossible to actually question every belief, in which case, according to Clifford, a person's entire belief structure will be tainted, since no real belief is insignificant.<sup>13</sup>

Clifford's third section is the most compelling, where he argues that if one person holds unjustified beliefs, it will impact the whole of society. However, I would argue that it is difficult to find 'sufficient evidence' for beliefs of an abstract nature.<sup>14</sup> If this is the case, it seems that there is an important question to be asked. From a practical point of view, is it worse for society to hold some unsubstantiated beliefs, and thus be slightly more credulous, or is it worse for society to hold no beliefs regarding morals, important life decisions, and religious matters? It is not obvious that some credulity makes a society a lot worse off than absolute skepticism regarding all questions of an abstract nature.

I have not covered all of Clifford's arguments for his principle, since presumably he has more reasons than these to support his case. What I do maintain, however, is that the reasons he has offered here are unconvincing, and for this reason, I reject his claim.

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<sup>13</sup> W. K. Clifford *The Ethics of Belief*, 552.

<sup>14</sup> At this point it would be interesting to discover what Clifford meant by 'sufficient evidence'. However, since his essay is quite obviously a polemic against religious belief, it seems fairly clear that Clifford did not believe that religious beliefs could be supported by sufficient evidence. Thus, it is hard to see how beliefs about other abstract matters could be justified, since they seem to be at least as difficult to justify as beliefs of a religious nature. In this case, my argument stands.