



ON THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

Contending against strict Evidentialism

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Introduction

In 1877, the English philosopher and mathematician William Clifford put forth his landmark essay *The Ethics of Belief*, which ultimately concluded that “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (Clifford, 1877, pg. 76). The author suggested that every person has a moral obligation to continuously reexamine their beliefs; His argument had two premises:

1. It is morally wrong to hold beliefs on the basis of insufficient evidence when our beliefs significantly affect others.
2. Our beliefs always have a significant impact on other people.

When taken together, the two premises conclude that it is always wrong for anyone to believe anything without sufficient evidence. This is Clifford’s variety of a strict evidentialism, a principle that claims individuals are only justified in their beliefs proportional to the evidence they have. Under this theory of evidentialism, intellect is what determines beliefs, rather than one’s passionate or volitional nature.

Clifford’s argument is valid because his conclusion logically follows the premises. However, I believe the soundness of his argument should be called into question. A sound argument must be valid and have true premises. In this paper I refute the soundness of Clifford’s argument through my own argument against his first premise, and highlight William James’ argument that over-belief, which is belief beyond the evidence, is justified in certain circumstances. I illustrate two alternative moral responsibility frameworks with three examples, showcasing situations in which evidentialism may be wrong. Finally, this paper will discuss a few cases in which it would be reasonable to believe more than what the evidence suggests.

Clifford's Argument

Through a story, Clifford illustrates the relationship between moral responsibility and personal beliefs. He wrote of a man with a weathered ship, who consciously suppressed his contention about the seaworthiness and structural integrity of his ship. Ultimately, convinced that since the ship had performed well in the past, and if there were to be strenuous circumstances, then providence would protect. Clifford argues the shipowner, regardless of the outcome, is morally responsible for all lives on board. His reasoning was that because the shipowner's in holding his belief, he "had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him" (Clifford, 1877, pg. 70). Extreme circumstances such as the story of the shipowner led Clifford to the conclusion that it is wrong to believe without due evidence. In essence, the ethicality of beliefs is solely dependent on their formation, not on the real world impact. In the ethics of belief, Clifford went so far as to highlight his opinion that the outcome is irrelevant to the belief's ethicality. Clifford suggests individuals ought to continuously test and audit their beliefs, else, their life is akin to one long sin against mankind. (Frontuto, 2013, pg. 33) explained that Clifford's argument has the potential to devolve into subjectivism, and that there is little actual evidence to support the argument's premises.

I found Clifford's argument to be unreasonably uncompromising and offensive in delivery. Clifford's stance on the matter gives off the impression that he would have little issue with a plane going through a dangerous route, so long as the pilot had information to understand the expected outcome and risks, and did not reject information. That is, it appears that the English philosopher took issue with insufficient evidence and the dismissal of evidence, rather than with systematic risk.

Belief and Morality

I propose two alternative frameworks connecting belief and moral responsibility. First, it is important to define morality, which Gert (2020) defined as “certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group”. William James in his essay “The Will to Believe” (James, 1898, pg. 394), wrote it is acceptable to believe beyond the evidence only if a matter is a genuine option, which means it is *live*, *forced*, and *momentous*. *Live* means there is an active decision to be made, *forced* meaning you must choose and suspending judgment is not an option, and finally, *momentous* is defined as having non-trivial impact on your life or the world as a whole. Alternatively, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy’s article on The Epistemic Condition for Moral Responsibility (Rudy-Hiller, 2018) suggests a system requiring the following conditions:

1. Awareness of Action: One must be consciously aware of what they are doing, similar to the legal notion of *mens rea* (guilty mind).
2. Awareness of Moral significance: There must be awareness of the moral significance of the action.
3. Awareness of Consequences: There must be an intended outcome, similar to the legal notion of *consideration*.
4. Awareness of Alternatives: There must be an alternative known and viable action, demonstrating no coercion took place.

Arguing against Clifford’s Argument

I refute the truth value of Clifford’s first premise by arguing three specific cases:

- (1) Morally right – Saving a life at relatively little cost to yourself.
- (2) Dangerous – The situation does not permit waiting to achieve sufficient evidence.
- (3) Impossible – There is no ground truth or certainty.

Suppose there is an influx of carbon monoxide gas in your condo building, and you presume there may be someone in need of urgent help. You are equipped with a gas mask, which means there is minimal danger to yourself. You are faced with an active decision: either you help others, or you do not. There is the possibility of saving a life (James, 1898, pg. 394). From a utility theory perspective, the improbable risk of harm to oneself is outweighed by the potential of saving a life. In this case it is morally justified, perhaps obligatory, to check if there is someone in need of help. For a second example, suppose you are a fighter pilot engaged in air-to-air combat. Decision making for speed is crucial for survival. It is only possible to acquire sufficient evidence of the opponent's actions once they have begun, which forces you to be reactive. Once again, this case is live, forced, and momentous. Although there is insufficient evidence to make any particular move, it is vital to be preemptive. Finally, consider the stock market: it is often hypothesized that all movements are random, and as such, there is no sufficient evidence for a particular short term movement. The closest thing to certainty under this hypothesis is an estimation via probabilistic models, which present a range of potential outcomes. I argue that there is at most only partial *awareness of consequences*, due to the ground truth being indeterminate. Long term investing can be probabilistically demonstrated to be more beneficial than the average savings account, which would lose money due to inflation. The stock market is a distribution mechanism which enables net-benefit, and it should not be considered morally wrong to partake. For the sake of mobility and practicality, we should not restrict ourselves to actions in which we have sufficient evidence in knowing their outcome.

Belief beyond Evidence

I find it beneficial to hold unfounded beliefs such as stereotypes, as they make the world more computationally tractable by coming to a judgment based on little evidence and a mental model. Additionally, there are situations in which you must commit to a decision in order to gain more

information. For example, “calling” a small bet in *Texas hold 'em* poker in order to reveal the forth card. It is clear that Clifford would suggest one should be agnostic when faced with a lack of evidence. Conversely, James permits unfounded belief in situations when faced with a genuine option, which is analogous to a choice that is of significant meaningfulness to us. James concluded that genuine options can not be ceased on intellectual grounds (James, 1898, pg 395). For example, when questioning the existence of God, James claimed he does not have evidence clearly favouring or against it.

Actions have varying granularity, such as boolean, multiple options, and continuous. In relation to evidentialism, boolean actions such as giving a pass on an inspection do not grant granularity to match action to level of belief. It is not clear where Clifford would apply his decision threshold to denote sufficient evidence, let alone skeptical arguments reducing certainty. This leads to the question of how a person ought to assign this cut off value with respect to a holistic analysis of the situation. For example, in civil engineering, it is commonly said the infrastructure must be capable of withstanding several times the expected load in order to compensate for both common and rare externalities. Furthermore, it is important to highlight that humans have at least some notion of idealism in the form of a cognitized notion of reality, as manifests in basic constructions and mental attitudes, such as optimism and pessimism. Lastly, people have a wide span of appetites for risk and tolerance for loss. From this I conclude it is subjective to choose which level of evidence is sufficient to make a decision.

In stark contrast to Clifford, Thomas Reid wrote some beliefs are formed by natural features of the human constitution for which there is an “innocent until proven guilty” status (Nichols, 2021). Contrary to evidentialism, this class of innate human nature produced beliefs can not be proven by reason nor empirical observation. Natural beliefs are not only justified in the absence of any evidence, but they require contrary evidence to be disproved. Clifford would respond that beliefs that were

instilled in our childhood—which we continue to hold without exploring the validity of, all serve as examples where sufficient evidence is lacking. An empiricist would raise issues, as they contend that they can know the truth but they cannot infallibly know when (James, 1898, pg. 295). In contrast, absolutists argue that a person can both know that truth and confirm that they know said truth (James, 1898, pg 295). Suppose a basic Epistemic modal logic with operator K , where Kp means you know proposition p . Consider the following the statements:

(1) Kp

(2) KKp

Both an evidentialist and absolutist agree with (1), though the evidentialist reject (2). James contends that we are naturally absolutists: we have second order knowledge when a belief is grounded in objective evidence, such as “ $1+1=2$ ”. Therefore, an evidentialist will never know that they have sufficient evidence, so they can not satisfy Clifford’s criterion.

Conclusion

Clifford claimed that belief must be based on sufficient evidence, else it is amoral. I believe the argument lacks sufficient justification of its first premise and have challenged it. Even when a belief is significantly impacting others, it should not be considered wrong to believe on the basis of insufficient evidence, as in the case of a genuine option which may be morally right to believe in. Furthermore, I believe that it is reasonable to believe beyond what the evidence suggests, in cases of mere mental convenience, natural beliefs, and for empiricists—whom do not believe in the reliability of second order knowledge.

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