

On Clifford's Argument

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Intro Philosophy, paper 1

[This is a model of what the 3–5 page argument-extraction papers should look like. Note: the paragraph discussed in the model paper is not one of the selections on which you can do your paper; you must do your paper on either the Mackie or the Clark selection, as described in the assignment instructions.)]

In his article “The Ethics of Belief”, W. K. Clifford argues that it is wrong to believe in God if one does not have evidence that God exists.¹ As he puts it near the end of his article, “...it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.” (p. 155) Although Clifford says many things in support of this conclusion, my paper will only discuss what Clifford says in the paragraph starting on p. 153 with the words “In the two supposed cases...”.

In the first part of his paper (before the paragraph on which I'll focus), Clifford presents two examples in which a person believes something without having sufficient evidence. In each example, bad things happen as a result. In one example (pp. 151–152) a shipowner sends out a ship that he unwarrantedly believes to be seaworthy, and the ship sinks; in the other example (p. 152) some men publish accusations that they unwarrantedly believe to be true, and the accusations turn out to be unfounded. Then, in the paragraph that we will be discussing, Clifford argues for the conclusion that it is wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. His argument can be formulated as follows:

1. When our beliefs have a significant impact on other people, it is wrong to believe on insufficient evidence
2. Our beliefs always have a significant impact on other people
3. Therefore, it is always wrong to believe on insufficient evidence

¹W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”, in Joel Feinberg and Russ Shafer-Landau, eds., *Reason and Responsibility: Readings in Some Basic Problems of Philosophy*, 16th edition (Cengage, 2017), pp. 151–155. All subsequent page references will be to this printing.

In what follows I will explain why Clifford believes the premises, and then I will critically evaluate the argument.

Let's begin with the first premise, which says that in cases where our beliefs significantly affect others, it is wrong to believe on the basis of insufficient evidence. As I understand him, Clifford's reason for believing this premise has to do with the social function of belief. Belief, he says, "prompts the decisions of our will", is "ours not for ourselves, but for humanity", and "helps to bind men together, and to strengthen and direct their common action" (p. 153). By this he means that people rely on what other people believe when they make decisions. For example, the passengers on the doomed ship relied on the shipowner's belief that the ship was safe. If we don't have good evidence for our beliefs, this can harm the people who are relying on us; and when our beliefs have significant impact, this harm can be significant. The shipowner didn't have sufficient evidence for his belief that the ship was safe (he knew, for instance, that the ship was old and had needed repairs in the past), and as a result, the ship's passengers died. Causing this kind of harm is wrong; so, Clifford thinks, it's wrong to believe without sufficient evidence in such cases.

Next let's discuss the second premise, which says that our beliefs always have a significant impact on other people. Clifford says just one thing in support of this premise: "...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..." (p. 153). Here he seems to be saying that even if a belief seems to be "trivial" (perhaps because it's a belief on a topic that appears not to matter much), and even if the believer seems to be "obscure" (perhaps because the believer has few friends and has little influence over other people), that belief still has some effect on others.

Next I will evaluate the argument. The argument is logically valid, and so if the premises are true, the conclusion must be true as well. But I do not think that either premise is true.

Clifford's case for the second premise is particularly weak. He does not give a reason for thinking that all beliefs—even trivial beliefs by obscure people—are bound to affect others; he

just asserts this. And it seems wrong. Although our beliefs sometimes affect others, sometimes they don't. I now have the belief that I have exactly six cents in my pocket. Surely this will have no significant impact on humanity. Unlike the question of whether the shipowner's ship was seaworthy, the question of how much money is in my pocket is irrelevant to the lives of others.

To be sure, one could dream up circumstances in which it *would* matter how much money I had in my pocket. Suppose I tell you that I have six cents in my pocket. Then, a little later, while you are riding in a crowded elevator, a crazy person announces that he will kill everyone in the elevator unless someone can tell him how much money Ted Sider has in his pocket. You pipe up and say: "I know how much: six cents!" Unfortunately, when I told you that I had six cents in my pocket, I was not basing this belief on adequate evidence. In fact, my only reason for believing this was that I dimly recalled putting six cents in my pocket sometime in the past year. And in fact my belief was wrong: I actually have seven cents in my pocket. Alas, the crazy person knows that I have seven rather than six cents in my pocket, and kills everyone in the elevator. So: there do exist *some* possible circumstances in which my belief about the money in my pocket could significantly affect other people. But such bizarre circumstances rarely or ever occur, and in the vast majority of more ordinary circumstances, such "trivial" beliefs have no significant impact whatsoever on other people. For there normally are no crazy people lurking around, waiting to kill people who rely on the beliefs that we form without sufficient evidence.

Another reason to doubt premise 2 is that sometimes we keep our beliefs to ourselves. If I have a silly, unjustified belief about myself—say, that I am the world's most handsome man—but never tell anyone, then perhaps this belief doesn't affect anyone else. Now, Clifford might object that even if I don't tell anyone else about it, my silly belief might still cause me to act in ways that affect others—it might make me vain, for example. But I don't see why my silly belief would *have* to have such consequences. I could be very careful to not let it affect how I act.

Premise 1 can also be questioned. As we saw, Clifford's reason for premise 1 is that having insufficient evidence harms people who rely on us. I grant that insufficient evidence sometimes harms; but it doesn't *always* harm; and sometimes it even benefits. Many people believe better

things about their loved ones—such as their boyfriends or girlfriends or children or spouses—than their evidence really warrants. “Love is blind”, as they say. And this is sometimes a good thing. Believing good things about a child can boost the child’s confidence; believing good things about a boyfriend, girlfriend, or spouse can improve a relationship, even if the good things aren’t fully justified. To be sure, there are limits: over-praising children and turning a completely blind eye to a partner’s shortcomings are bad. The point is merely that these unjustified positive beliefs *sometimes* have good effects. When they do, the beliefs obviously significantly impact others (in a good way), but that doesn’t make them wrong. So premise 1 is false.

In conclusion, I have argued that Clifford’s argument fails to establish that believing without sufficient evidence is always wrong. This is not to say that his conclusion is incorrect. Maybe some other argument could establish it. But Clifford’s argument does not.