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Discussion: The Ethics Of Belief

# Introduction

In this paper, "The Ethics of Belief” is discussed and analyzed critically to understand its relevance with the other theories of ethics. The theory discusses the structure and nature of the norms and the authoritative sources of intuition and inquisitive nature associated with the ethics of belief. The person who’s thought-process is synchronized with these principles, exhibits tendencies that are translated by either his belief system or by inner satisfaction. The scholars of ethics, philosophy, and normative sciences study such behaviors and determine its impact on a person and mental and psychological importance. William K. Clifford presented research and findings of this form of ethics by highlighting the importance of ‘duty of inquiry’ before taking action. He put forward a skeptic viewpoint regarding the actions taken by faith prior to confirmation from intuitive and logical sources. He gives the example of a boat owner and compares his mindset by considering alternate hypothetical outcomes of his actions. The thesis studies such actions governed by ethics of belief according to findings of William K. Clifford and compare it with other theories of ethics, including consequentialism and deontology. We will try to find whether ‘ethics of belief’ is more in line with deontology or with consequentialism by taking an overview of all these concepts to make a careful and critical judgment.

# The Ethics of Belief

The Ethics of Belief is characterized by determining the norms that are responsible for governing the habits of belief relinquishment, belief formation, and belief maintenance. The simple idea is forming or developing a belief about matters of premium and important nature without obtaining enough evidence. Also, to believe in the authenticity of anything to a degree of firmness that is not relatable with the strength of evidence. “The “ethics of belief” refers to a cluster of questions at the intersection of epistemology, ethics, philosophy of mind, and psychology(Chignell)." To understand the discussion, one may ask questions like, is it rationally or morally wrong to construct a belief without adequate evidence? Is it always right to believe in the presence of evidence and to abandon belief without any proof? Is it always necessary and obligatory to find all the possible epistemic evidence to believe? And what if the evidence to believe in certain concepts or phenomena are irrational, immoral, and imprudent?

The answers to these questions are based on structure and the nature of the norms involved and on the sources of their authenticity and authority. Also, it is needed to determine whether the belief system is adopted under some compulsion or controlled process, or it is wholly a voluntary process. There are a variety of views among scholars of normative sciences regarding the norms of belief. Some of them give this concept a room if the evidence is very scars but one must use the deductive argument in making the decision. On the other hand, some scientists of normative sciences do not appreciate the need for ‘ethics of belief’ in any case and exert stress on the epistemic norms.

# Clifford’s viewpoint

Clifford wrote an extensive essay on this topic and gave a skeptic overview of the concept of doing actions without proper evidence. The essay is comprised of a principle that is based on a story. The story is about the owner of a ship who allowed his vessel to sail in deep waters for the voyage across Atlantic. He had some reservations and concerns in mind about the soundness of the boat, but he did not pay much heed to those thoughts. Probably because it would result in expenses in maintenance and also would delay the voyage. By putting all concerns aside, sold tickets, bade farewell to the passengers, and collected the insurance money. He did so by believing in the strong conviction that the boat is safe and would complete voyage without any disaster. Unfortunately, the ship sank in deep waters, leaving the owner in great regret. Clifford argues that the owner had no right to believe in his conviction no matter how strong it was. In fact, this psychological satisfaction is only associated with himself and cannot account for the trust and satisfaction of passengers. He also possessed no right to base his action on such belief because he did not earn it by honest efforts in the shape of patient investigation. He rather acted upon his conviction by just merely stifling his concerns. So he states his principle as “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence (Clifford)."

It is reported Clifford himself survived a shipwreck once so he can easily relate such situations with behavioral aspects of philosophy. He also argues that if the outcomes were entirely different and the vessel could make her way smoothly across the Atlantic, it would not have changed the fact that the owner made a big mistake. He would be considered blameworthy and guilty in exactly the same way for believing in something without proper evidence that may result in loss of lives. The author believes that the duty of inquiry before each iteration of a process is necessary. It is not acceptable to remove doubt by just irrationally stifling it rather; it should be answered and tackled on the basis of an already made inquiry else it should be declared that the inquiry is incomplete.

# Relation with ethical theories

We will now compare Clifford's proposed narrative with major theories of ethics, including consequentialism and deontology, and to determine which theory is more in line with his viewpoints. Consequentialism belongs to the type of normative ethics in which consequences of a certain act are the ultimate base for judgment about right or wrong. The theory is rooted in the concept of greater benefit for a greater number of people. If any outcome of an action is fruitful and beneficial for the majority, it should be considered as ethical and acceptable. If outcomes of a case are harmful for a fraction of the target and at the same time beneficial for a major section of the population, this ethical theory will second it and will allow harm to the minority.

Deontology is one famous theory of ethics, derived from Greek words *deon* and *logos, deon* for duty and *logos* for study. The theory belongs to the type of normative theories in which choices of action are determined as forbidden, required, and determined. In deontology, ethical requirements and choices are already determined and have nor relation with variation or diversity in situations. Once a rule is defined and considered ethical and acceptable, it is acceptable for all the cases and vice versa. In deontology, predefined rules and moral values may not allow harm to a smaller portion of the audience and may allow for the majority.

The narrative proposed by Clifford about the ‘Ethics of belief’ is more related and in line with deontology than consequentialism. To justify the claim, we will compare the story of boat owners with both the theories one by one.

* Consequentialism suggests that if the boat is able to complete its voyage across the Atlantic without any disaster, the results are good and the action is justified. Clifford, on the other hand, still blames the owner of the ship for not grounding his action on the basis of adequate evidence.
* According to deontology, the choices and moral grounds are already determined, so the defaulter is accused of not breaking the law even if consequences are good. Clifford also believes that the owner must have catered to the doubts and is guilty of not observing already existing ethical rules.

That already existing principle is defined in other words as “It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to ignore evidence that is relevant to his beliefs, or to dismiss relevant evidence in a facile way (Inwagevann)."

# Conclusion

In the normative study of behaviors, one may come across the scenario where he relies on the belief system based on assumptions. These assumptions may be rational, irrational, or may be dependent on a person's choice of ease and satisfaction. The other option is to enquire and strive to come out of the comfort zone and look for evidence. This is the best approach as described and exclusively explained by William K. Clifford. One must not trust merely on future experiences and abstain from stifling away doubts and concerns under the blanket of faith just for personal satisfaction and longing for ease. Also, the outcomes and consequences of an action cannot be considered authoritative license to include that act into moral premises rather basic principles must be abided. The skeptical analysis of Clifford is more relatable and coherent with the ethical theory of deontology rather than consequentialism, which relies on results and consequences of any act. The narrative does not suggest that we should become a universal skeptic and start doubting everything to a level that we are afraid to personally check the firmness of the road before stepping ahead for each step. Instead, we must strive to base our actions on logic, rational argument, and strong evidence by using our intuitive faculty and ever-increasing knowledge as much as we can.

# **Work Cited**

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