

Belief, Evidence and the Possibility of Religion

Mathematician and philosopher William K. Clifford's reflections on the theory of evolution turned the former Trinity College Catholic student into an agnostic with an extreme stance against faith. In his essay "The Ethics of Belief", Clifford explains that it is morally wrong to believe anything without sufficient evidence. He stresses the ethical importance and duty of formulating beliefs correctly, despite the individual's eventual choice of action. His primary example of the ship owner and sinking ship exhibits Clifford's idea that the results of any action are not the basis to whether the action was wrong, but rather the preceding beliefs. Clifford asserts, "The question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of his belief, not the matter of it...not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him"¹. This position sides with the method of attaining a belief above its potential validity. Additionally, Clifford explains that no matter the genuinity of a belief, inquiry must trump mere conviction. Outlined in his example of island inhabitants and the agitators, he explains that despite the agitators sincerest beliefs, "they had no right to believe on such evidence as was before them"². Belief cannot exist as a motivator for action if it was not justly validated.

Clifford stresses this link between belief and action, explaining that "Nor is that truly a belief at all which has not some influence upon the actions of him who holds it."³. An important result of this philosophy is that our beliefs, correct or incorrect, are not private. They permeate the rest of society and provide a basis for future actions and generations to come. Clifford views this conclusion as an overwhelming sense of responsibility and power to mankind to justly found our truths by thorough investigation. Anything less would be a deception, "stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind"⁴. Clifford fears that society should lose their exercise of testing and inquiring into beliefs.

Clifford's assertion that people must form beliefs with sufficient evidence is an important and beneficial argument. Believing something based on nothing of value or substance is foolish and can only

¹ William Clifford, *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999), 272.

² Clifford, 272.

³ Clifford, 274.

⁴ Clifford, 275.

inevitably lead to misguided actions and truths. However, Clifford seems to ignore something crucial that significantly affects his argument: absolute truth. Clifford's argues that beliefs should be sufficiently proven. His call for evidence justifies the fact that if evidence is required, than certain things must be right and certain things must be wrong. If they weren't, there would be no need for evidence. This remains consistent until Clifford seems to disconnect evidence from actual truth. As he states in his essay, "This sense of power is the highest and best of pleasures when the belief on which it is founded is true belief, and has been fairly earned by investigation"⁵. The phrase "earned by investigation" implies that we can earn truth, as if it is justified by our investigation. If there is an absolute truth, than it is justified by nothing but itself. The truth of something is more important than its method of verification. Evidence is a mere reflection of reality. What is more important, the meaning of life, or a list of reasons for how the meaning of life is true? The meaning of life would exist without the list, but not vice versa. Clifford may be correct in asserting the importance of having ample evidence to back up one's claims, but his lack of acknowledgement that truth itself trumps any evidence of truth exposes weaknesses in his argument.

Clifford may concede with my insistence of truth itself existing outside of any evidence to prove it. Despite his beliefs against religion, he may agree that there could be an absolute truth. However, Clifford would argue that these elements are besides the point, and do not weaken his argument because his argument does not directly address them. Clifford's intentions behind his assertion for the need for evidence, are hopes for society to avoid the injustice and inevitable dangers of belief without legitimacy. As evidenced by history, it is easy and quite common for man to base beliefs on personal convictions, feelings, and other unsubstantial notions of reality. Even if an individual were to guess correctly on a truth, their reasons could be so far off or nonexistent that the truth becomes tainted because of it. For example, if there was a God and an individual just supposed there was one because he hadn't the desire to examine any alternative option, it would be a great offense to that God. The individual did not genuinely believe in the God because of the God's actual legitimacy (the correct reason), but because the individual had decided it so because of laziness and lack of

⁵ Clifford, 275.

intelligent reasoning (an incorrect reason). His resulting decision is correct, but his means of getting there are incorrect. Clifford would argue that herein lies the injustice. He is not denying that the truth is true outside of investigation, but that it is terrible to arrive at a conclusion incorrectly. Perhaps you take a math exam and arrive at the correct answer by chance without the correct manner of calculation. Although you are correct, it is disadvantageous for you to not have correctly arrived at that answer.

Assuming that Clifford is not denying the unconditional existence of truth, I would have to agree with his response. Should I arrive at a conclusion incorrectly, I would feel unsatisfied with that conclusion until I had found it again in a correct fashion. Believing that something is true without substantial evidence certainly does not make that something any less true, but rather invalidates your own acceptance of that truth. It is a terrible example to others when your correct beliefs are founded on incorrect support. Clifford says, "It may matter little to me, in my cloud-castle of sweet illusions and darling lies; but it matters much to Man that I have made my neighbors ready to deceive"⁶. Truth may trump evidence of truth, but how else can we seek out truth if not through evidence? Perhaps if Clifford remains inaccurate of anything, it is his denial of religion. Clifford's idea of evidence is a humanistic one - something created based on perceptions and observations from the human race which, in comparison to the vastness of our universe, seems largely insignificant. How can he weigh something so beyond the restrictions of the human mind (religion) with his humanistic ideas of evidence? His strategy imitates someone attempting to use a thermometer to measure the circumference of a circle. Before he can deny those exercising religious reasoning, he must reevaluate his limited definition of evidence to fit investigations beyond mere human perception.

Bibliography

Clifford, William. *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*, New York: Prometheus Books, 1999.

⁶ Clifford, 276.