

# YOU OUGHT TO GROUND MORALITY IN REASON

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Timothy J. Madigan. *W. K. Clifford and "The Ethics of Belief"*.  
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In this book Timothy Madigan, a philosophy professor at St John Fisher College, critically sets out the philosophical views of W. K. Clifford, who is frequently cited for his historical influence but little studied in his own right. The book's first part is historical. There Madigan sketches Clifford's views and the controversy they engendered, and situates them in the intellectual ferment of Victorian England as part of the wider discussion of whether Darwin's theory of evolution had undermined the rational basis of religious belief. The second part of the book is more critical and philosophical. Madigan sets out more carefully Clifford's key philosophical positions, and then discusses the objections to them raised first by contemporaries and then by twentieth century critics. Madigan concludes with a positive chapter suggesting how Clifford's central theses might be plausibly reconstructed in modern "virtue ethics."

Clifford's work and influence centers on his 1876 essay "The Ethics of Belief." His main thesis, which Madigan calls *evidentialism*, is in part ethical, in part epistemic: *If S does not possess sufficient evidence for believing P, then it is not morally permissible for S to believe P*. Equivalently, *if S does not possess sufficient evidence for believing P, then S has a moral obligation not to believe P*. At his time and now the thesis is controversial because given the lack of scientific justification for religious belief, it entails agnosticism. The view is perhaps best known because it is a focus of criticism in William James' "The Will to Believe." Madigan's historical survey of Clifford's role in the debate, which occupies the early chapters, is informative, but I will restrict my remarks in this review to the critical later chapters.

Clifford was not a philosopher and does not argue systematically, nor does he situate his ethical positions within a more extended ethical theory. In "The Ethics of Belief" and subsequent essays his main defense of "evidentialism" takes two forms: a deontological claim that evidentialism as it stands is a (more or less plausible) statement of moral duty, and a consequentialist observation that its widespread rejection would entail a credulity that negatively affects social well being.

Contemporary criticisms by defenders of orthodox religion like William George Ward take two main forms. First there are plausible counter-examples to evidentialism, especially to a strong form in which evidence is interpreted as requiring certainty. Ward quite reasonably points out that an honest and upright country laborer who cannot be held morally culpable for believing without evidence that his local cricket team is better than its rival. Second, many of Clifford's critics subscribed to versions of moral intuitionism that holds moral judgments are not claims to empirical knowledge but rather reports of some inner moral faculty or emotion, and therefore that it is a category mistake to require empirical evidence for moral claims.

Perhaps the most interesting objections historically are those of William James. James lays down three requirements for the moral acceptability of any belief that lacks evidence: the issue must be an open question; the agent must be forced to take a stand on whether the belief is either true or false; and the issue must be important. The condition that James imposes to which Clifford would object as inappropriate to the moral situation is its positing of the restriction on freedom represented by the necessity to choose. Clifford clearly assumes that belief formation is a free act, that is it voluntary. His rationale is simply an acceptance of the standard assumption that *ought* implies *can*. James, the psychologist, is no doubt on sounder ground than Clifford. It is certainly the case that many of our beliefs are not voluntary but arise by nature from inner psychological mechanisms other than rational inquiry. Curiously, however, today the triggering conditions of whether we are forced to choose between belief and non-belief are more likely to conform more to Clifford's assumption of voluntary rationality than James' assumption of a background imposing a need to choose because unlike the nineteenth century and earlier today we are rarely fine ourselves in situations in which we are obliged to declare our religious convictions.

Madigan begins his discussion of modern criticisms with a criticism of his own, the observation that Clifford, perhaps because he is not a trained philosopher, is guilty of serious imprecision inasmuch as he does not define his key terms, *belief* and *evidence*. Modern critics of Clifford have been generally unsympathetic to his brand of intuitionism, and tend to accept as persuasive the counter-examples of the nineteenth century critics. Madigan points out that Clifford himself probably held a weak version of the evidentialism and would have granted that merely probable evidence could ground morally acceptable belief. Nevertheless, examples like Ward's still tell against even the weakened version. Some moderns like Alvin Plantinga have argued that there is a sense of rational acceptability that includes unjustified religious belief. More plausible

(to this reader) are critics like Loren Code and Susan Haack who point out that Clifford appears to have confused moral and epistemic duty. A kind of “instrumental duty” attaches to any means or necessary condition directed to an end. To make nails hold, you ought to pound them in at an angle; to prove a theorem, you ought to apply the rules of logic correctly; to obtain knowledge – justified true belief – you ought to justify your claim. But these are means-to-end, not moral *oughts*. The challenge for the evidentialist is to explain what the linkage between the two widely different concepts of “obligation.”

In his final chapter Madigan suggests a way to re-construe evidentialism so as to avoid the counter-examples and ground the thesis in moral theory. His idea is to raise the status of the critical thinker to that of moral paradigm in virtue ethics. To be fully moral individuals – his idea goes – we should cultivate as one virtue among others the stance of a rational critic. Virtue ethics, in the rather minimal version Madigan sketches, is characterized by its rejection of simple moral rules and by the thesis that virtues, not actions are properly the object of moral obligation. These obligatory virtues, as he understands them, may be listed and learned by experience, but cannot be easily defined or detailed. To this reader, Madigan’s proposed reinterpretation of Clifford has the strengths and weaknesses of virtue ethics itself. Virtue ethics is rather strikingly incongruous with Clifford’s own intellectual sympathies. Though not an ethical theorist, Clifford’s moral thesis are more in harmony with traditional utilitarianism or Kantianism. Because these are theories that unlike virtue ethics exhibit some of the properties of theories in science, they are also more in harmony with Clifford’s commitment to science as the proper mode of rational inquiry. Because virtue ethics rejects the ordinary constituents of a scientific theory – principles, definitions, derivations of theorems – it understands ethics to be more a metaethical description of existing norms rather than a body of principles of how to act on a particular occasions. It is, for example, utterly unclear how or why any body of ethical virtues would entail precisely Clifford’s evidentialist thesis, which (as set out at the start of this review) takes the form of a rather clear rule or principle, rather unlike the rather vague accounts usually accorded the traditional virtues. Would every “critical thinker” automatically accept the formulation of evidentialist principle? Doesn’t the postulated vagueness of “virtue” mitigate against this sort of precision?

To this reader, a more promising proposal would be to situate Clifford’s evidentialism in the sort of contextualist epistemology favored by writers like Stewart Cohen, Keith DeRose and David Lewis. If, as seems highly plausible, the standards of evidence for knowledge claims vary with context, so too would the moral culpability attached to belief because these too, by hypothesis, would

be contingent on the relevant contextually sensitive requirements of evidence. By custom nobody really expects any sort of serious argument in defense of your belief in the virtues of your favorite sports team – the relevant contextual standards for evidence are virtually nil. It follows that there is no culpability in believing whatever you want about the team because doing so involves no violation of evidentiary standards relevant to ethical claims. If your motivation in going to church is to find a venue suitable for parading your Sunday clothes, the epistemic context is trivial because the evidential requirements for religious convictions are minimal. You are not, for example, obliged or expected by others to subject the “creed” you recite during the service to serious intellectual scrutiny. You may, however, have other motivation in your religious practice, for example to purge the countryside of the Albigeois because they believe falsely, in your opinion, that evil is real, etc. If, for example, you are about to burn the citizens of Béziers because they hold these beliefs, then the epistemic context appropriate to serious metaphysics applies, and these are magnified by the serious consequences of your views. In such a context the evidentiary standards are high indeed, and you better have damn good arguments supporting your beliefs. It is in contexts like these that Clifford’s moral requirement of a high rational standard is plausible indeed.

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