

IN DEFENSE OF MORAL EVIDENTIALISM

Sharon RYAN

ABSTRACT: This paper is a defense of moral evidentialism, the view that we have a moral obligation to form the doxastic attitude that is best supported by our evidence. I will argue that two popular arguments against moral evidentialism are weak. I will also argue that our commitments to the moral evaluation of actions require us to take doxastic obligations seriously.

KEYWORDS: W.K. Clifford, ethics of belief, doxastic obligations, evidentialism, moral evidentialism

What people understand, or have the capacity to understand, is morally significant. Cognitive states and capabilities explain, in part, why we hold most adult human beings morally responsible for their actions. Human babies, in contrast, are not morally responsible agents because their cognitive abilities are still too undeveloped. Moral responsibility also seems to turn, in part, upon what we believe, know, or are expected to know about the consequences of what we are doing. If I know that my behavior is likely to cause an innocent person to suffer terribly and I do it anyway, I am much worse than someone who performs the same action, but with good reason to think that nobody will suffer. Knowingly causing unnecessary suffering is especially bad.¹ This all seems uncontroversial. But does it make sense to say that our beliefs themselves are open to moral appraisal? More specifically, do we have *moral obligations* about the doxastic attitudes we form? I will spend this paper defending moral evidentialism, the view that we have a moral obligation to form the doxastic attitude that is best supported by our evidence. I will argue that two popular arguments against moral evidentialism are weak. I will also argue that our commitments to the moral evaluation of actions require us to take doxastic obligations seriously.

Clifford's Radical Evidentialist Principle

If this sounds like an exhumation of W. K. Clifford, to some extent, it is! I think Clifford's view has been unfairly dismissed, and I will take some time to try to restore a fresh interest in his position. In his 1877 essay, "The Ethics of Belief," Clifford defended the view that we have a moral obligation to never believe

¹ For example, think about how our moral evaluation of Takata (the airbag maker) changed as it became apparent that the company knew their airbags were defective.

Sharon Ryan

anything on insufficient evidence. According to Clifford, "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence."² I will not be attempting a historical exegesis of Clifford here. Instead, I will focus on his general idea that we have moral obligations that pertain to our doxastic attitudes. I will begin this discussion by distinguishing a view I will call Clifford's Principle, thereby acknowledging that it has similarities to Clifford's thinking on the subject, and argue that a plausible interpretation of it offers important instruction and guidance for living a good life and cultivating wisdom.

Clifford supported his principle with a story of a shipowner who had concerns about the safety of his ship. After a thorough examination of the ship, a well-known and reliable safety inspector documented serious safety violations. The inspector recommended that the ship undergo extensive repairs before sailing. Because those repairs would be costly, the shipowner ignored the inspector's report, convinced himself that the ship could make one more journey, and confidently sent the ship off on what he had hoped to be another lucrative cruise. Unfortunately, the safety inspector was correct in his diagnosis, and the ship was not able to make one more voyage. It sunk to the bottom of the ocean, killing all of the passengers and crew on board. The shipowner is legally and morally responsible for the death of the passengers. Everyone grants that lesson from the story. The controversial lesson of the story is Clifford's insistence that the ship owner is also morally guilty for holding the belief that the ship was seaworthy. Clifford claims that whether or not the ship sunk, he was guilty for believing as he did. I will begin the discussion of whether Clifford is correct with the following statement of his view.

(CP1) It is always morally wrong to believe any proposition p on insufficient evidence.

For the purposes of this paper, I think we can gloss over what makes a body of evidence sufficiently strong to justify the attitude of belief. It might, however, be worth distinguishing this thesis from another, more informative thesis. CP1 only tells us when it is wrong to form a belief. Perhaps a more instructive thesis that tells us which of the three possible doxastic attitudes is morally right or wrong would be even more interesting to think about. Consider CP2, a variation of CP1:

(CP2) S *morally ought* to have doxastic attitude D (belief, disbelief, suspension of judgment) toward p at t iff having D fits S 's evidence at t .

² William K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1999), 77. Originally published in 1877.

CP2 tells us that whenever a doxastic attitude is epistemically justified, we have a moral obligation to hold that attitude. I believe Clifford would be satisfied with CP2 as an accurate representation of his view.

There are other ways one might spell out evidentialist positions on the ethics of belief. One such way is:

(CP3) *S epistemically ought* to have doxastic attitude *D* toward *p* iff believing *p* fits the evidence *S* has toward *p*.

CP3 is basically the well-known and widely discussed evidentialist thesis defended by Richard Feldman and Earl Conee.³ In their decades of work devoted to defending evidentialism, Feldman and Conee are describing purely *epistemic* obligations.⁴ That is, obligations about what it takes to believe rationally or justifiably (in the sense of a necessary condition for knowledge). Feldman and Conee are *not* claiming that we have a *moral* obligation to have epistemically justified beliefs. Thus, they would not endorse CP2. Although I think Clifford would find CP3 attractive, it fails to capture Clifford's signature, moral stance.

Another possible way of characterizing an evidentialist view about doxastic obligations is:

(CP4) *S prudentially ought* to have doxastic attitude *D* toward *p* iff believing *p* fits the evidence *S* has at *t*.

CP4, like CP3, does not claim that we are morally required to believe what our evidence supports. However, according to CP4, believing in accord with our evidence is what is practically obligatory. This is because believing in accordance with our evidence leads to practical advantages. Perhaps those who believe in accord with their evidence are more likely to find food and shelter than those who rely on wishful thinking or astrology. I am dubious that we have practical *obligations*. There are, for sure, practical costs and benefits of actions, and those costs and benefits can have some impact on the moral status of our actions. And, some actions are more practically advantageous than others, but I am not sure that there is a purely practical sense of 'obligation.'

³ For their early articulation and defense of evidentialism, see Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, "Evidentialism," *Philosophical Studies* 48, 1 (1985): 15-34. See their *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford University Press, 2004) for a more recent and more developed discussion of evidentialism.

⁴ CP3 is actually a bit different from Feldman and Conee's view in that they use the term 'justified' rather than 'ought.' Feldman's work on the ethics of belief indicates that he is willing make use of the concept of an epistemic obligation in terms of believing what one's evidence supports. Nothing in this paper depends upon CP3 being the actual thesis Feldman and Conee endorse.

Sharon Ryan

Another possibility is to combine all of the alleged types of obligation noted and claim that believing what one's evidence supports is what is obligatory in all three ways. That is what (CP5) says:

(CP5) S morally, epistemically, and prudentially ought to have doxastic attitude D toward p iff believing p fits the evidence S has toward p .

And finally:

(CP6) S ought, all things considered, to have doxastic D toward p iff believing p fits the evidence S has toward p .

I am deeply perplexed by the idea that there is any real obligation captured by the notion of an all things considered obligation that is anything more than what is captured by CP4 or CP5. But that is what CP6 is claiming. Susan Haack⁵ and Richard Feldman⁶ have each provided interesting discussions of various senses of obligation at work in the ethics of belief literature. Here, I simply note a few ways of working out some evidentialist positions. Because I am not convinced that there are any epistemic obligations that are not subspecies of moral obligations; I do not think we have practical obligations, although I do acknowledge the idea of something being practically advantageous; and I do not really understand what an 'all things considered' obligation is, I will not be defending any of those ideas. Since I think CP2 is more interesting than CP1; extremely plausible on its face; strongly Cliffordian in spirit; less mind-boggling than CP3-CP6; and controversial enough for this paper, it is the version of Clifford's view I will focus upon. I am not insisting that this is the most accurate interpretation of Clifford's view. My interest in this paper is merely to try to articulate and defend what I take to be a promising position in the ethics of belief. From here on out, when I make reference to Clifford's Principle (CP), I have CP2 in mind. CP entails the view that we have moral obligations about what we believe. It also entails an evidentialist thesis specifying that those moral obligations are determined, exclusively, by our evidence.

Objection #1 to Clifford: The Inflexibility Problem

These days, CP is not taken seriously. Two lines of objection have been taken to show that Clifford's view is mistaken. One line of argument challenges Clifford's idea that doxastic obligations are determined by, and only by, our evidence. The

⁵ See Susan Haack, "The Ethics of Belief Reconsidered," in *The Philosophy of Roderick M. Chisholm*, ed. Lewis E. Hahn (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1997), 129-144.

⁶ See Richard Feldman, "Epistemic Obligations," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 235-255.

second line of argument challenges the idea that we have obligations, of any kind at all, about what we believe. According to the second objection, doxastic attitudes lack a feature that is necessary for a genuine moral obligation. I will address both sorts of challenge. I will argue that both challenges are much weaker than they have seemed to many people, and that's a good thing, since holding people responsible for their behavior depends, in part, on holding people responsible for what they believe.

I'll call the first challenge 'The Inflexibility Problem.' The Inflexibility Problem is the criticism that CP is too rigid in that it focuses exclusively on evidence in determining our doxastic obligations. The Inflexibility Problem is not an attempt to show that we do not have doxastic obligations. As I understand the Inflexibility Problem, it alleges that many of us find ourselves in situations where it is acceptable to have a doxastic attitude that is not supported by our evidence. In "The Will to Believe," William James, though quite sympathetic to evidentialism, rejected CP because it judges religious beliefs that are not supported by one's evidence to be immoral. James argued that in cases where belief is live, forced, and momentous, it is morally permissible to believe, even if we know that we lack sufficient evidence.⁷

In his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* essay, "The Ethics of Belief," Andrew Chignell presents a non-theological case.

Suppose that you would like to retain a good relationship with your daughter, and you are aware that this requires believing the best of her whenever possible. You have some moderate but not compelling evidence for the proposition that she is using drugs in the house when you are away (in response to your queries, she claims that she has recently taken up meditation, and that the funny smell when you come home is just incense). Still, if your relationship will be seriously damaged by coming to view your daughter as a habitual drug-user, then you seem to violate a prudential norm if you believe that she is. In other words, it is prudent, given your ends to withhold belief about the source of the aroma altogether, or to believe, if possible, that she is burning incense in your absence. On the other hand, if you regard the occasional use of recreational drugs as harmless fun that expresses a healthy contempt for authority, then it might be prudent for you – confronted with the telltale odor – to form the belief that your daughter has indeed taken up the habit in question.⁸

⁷ William James, "The Will to Believe," in his *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner, 1949), 88-109. Originally published in 1896.

⁸ Andrew Chignell, "The Ethics of Belief," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL =<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/ethics-belief/>, 5.

Sharon Ryan

In Chignell's case, CP does not seem to accommodate our intuition that a parent's relationship to his or her child is more valuable, morally and prudentially, and ought to be given preference over believing what the evidence supports.

Another widely discussed example involves a woman discovering evidence that her husband is cheating on her. She finds lipstick on his collar, a piece of paper with another woman's phone number on it in his pocket, and the like. In this case, to preserve the marriage, it is allegedly morally and prudentially best for her to believe her husband is not cheating on her despite the evidence to the contrary.⁹ Again, CP is too rigid.

Another example involves a patient who is diagnosed with cancer. Most similarly diagnosed patients, suppose, regardless of their beliefs about their likelihood of survival, die of the disease within eight weeks. However, it has been shown that those who believe they will not die have a slightly better survival rate than those who believe what the evidence supports. Again, Clifford's recommendation is to believe what your evidence supports – always and everywhere. So, despite such an important, though unlikely, possible benefit, Clifford's principle commands that the cancer patient believe she will likely die.

Another case involves the value of confidence. When the Pirates' centerfielder, Andrew McCutchen (one of the best hitters in the major leagues), comes up to bat, should he believe he is going to get a hit, despite the realization that the odds are approximately 3-1 against him? Certainly! But, again, Clifford won't budge. "It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence."¹⁰

Another popular example involves the moral demands of friendship. Suppose your friend, who claims to be innocent, is accused of a terrible crime and the evidence presented against her is very strong. If so, at this point in the investigation, the belief that your friend is guilty is epistemically justified for you. Despite that, it seems that you have a moral obligation, as a loyal friend, to trust your friend, and believe in her innocence, despite the evidence, until there is no possible room for doubt. And, even then, one might argue, one should believe in the innocence of one's friend. Again, CP cannot tolerate ignoring what the evidence supports.

Finally, what if believing against your evidence is the only way to save innocent lives? Wouldn't it be morally obligatory to violate Clifford's principle? Imagine that I am visiting a huge art museum and a very untalented, violent, and insecure artist (with a 100% reliable lie detector) asks me if I believe his work,

⁹ John Heil, "Believing What One Ought," *Journal of Philosophy* 80 (1983): 752-85.

¹⁰ Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," 77.

which I am currently viewing, is brilliant. Suppose, based on all of my overwhelming visual evidence and superb aesthetic sensitivity, I believe his work is awful - not brilliant at all! What should I do? If I tell him I don't think his work is brilliant, he will blow up the art gallery and kill all of the people and destroy many incredible works of art. If I lie, he will detect the lie and he will blow up the museum anyway. Morally, it seems that despite my evidence, I must actually believe his work is brilliant. What does CP say about this? Well, it seems that CP demands that I believe his work is awful since that's what my evidence supports. Believing against your evidence is always morally wrong - no matter what the consequences.

Thus, Clifford's radical evidentialism has been abandoned because it seems too strict. It seems that there are occasions when purely epistemic considerations should not determine what one ought to believe.

Problems with the Inflexibility Problem: A Defense of Moral Evidentialism

Although all of the examples described are interesting, I don't think any of these examples show that we do not have a moral obligation to have epistemically justified beliefs.

James' example is unconvincing for several reasons. James' characterization of theistic belief as forced is a mistake. Therefore, on James' own criteria, this is not a situation in which one would be permitted to believe without sufficient evidence. One does not have to either believe God exists or believe God does not exist. One can always suspend judgment. And, if that is what one's evidence supports, that is what Clifford judges we ought to do. Moreover, it is implausible that for most people, the question of whether God exists is a question for which the evidence is, or seems to the inquirer to be, balanced or neutral. Many people think that the question of God's existence can be decided by reason and it is not one of the outlier cases that James allows to be decided by passion. The fact that theistic belief is so monumental for so many people, and the fact that it has been used to justify all sorts of morally significant behavior and policy, makes it all the more important to be extremely careful when forming one's beliefs. Moreover, it is not at all clear that *believing* in God delivers practical, intellectual, and moral payoffs that outweigh the practical, intellectual, and moral costs. Attitudes other than belief, given all that Clifford warns us about the costs of evidentially unsupported belief, would be preferable. Any benefits thought to come from belief can likely be obtained effectively by *hoping or wanting it to be true* (or perhaps even having faith if faith is understood as a psychological and emotional stance distinct from belief) that God exists and engaging in spiritual practices. Finally, a

Sharon Ryan

defender of moral evidentialism should respond by noting the obvious. Sometimes doing what's morally right is not practically, intellectually, or emotionally satisfying. Sometimes, morality demands sacrifice, and James has not shown that the payoffs of theistic belief yield the result that believing with insufficient evidence is *morally* permissible. At best, James has a challenge for CP4, CP5, or CP6. But this is certainly not a clear-cut and convincing objection to Clifford's view as articulated in CP2.

Chignell's example is a bit complicated, and it is probably intended to be an objection to a view such as CP4, CP5, or CP6. In that case, it is irrelevant to our concerns here and the criticisms I mention are unfair to Chignell's actual point. (Again, remember that when discussing Clifford's Principle in this paper, I am focusing on CP2.) Despite Chignell's actual intention, I think his example is interesting to consider as a potential objection to CP2, and I will take it as such here. What is especially attractive about Chignell's example is that it appears to be an ordinary example that actual people encounter in life quite frequently. If successful, it shows that Clifford is way off-track since moral demands often pull us away from having epistemically justified beliefs.

To be a genuine counterexample to CP, it must be understood as an example in which the parent morally ought to, for the sake of the relationship, believe the kid is not smoking pot in the house, but Clifford's principle demands that the parent believe she is smoking pot in the house (or depending on the evidence, that the parent should suspend judgment). It is not clear to me what the evidence supports in this example, so it is not clear to me what doxastic attitude Clifford's principle demands. Let's just stipulate that the evidence supports believing the kid is smoking pot in the house. Clifford's response, on this interpretation of the facts of the case, should be to question the empirical assumption that what is morally best for the relationship is for the parent to believe what the kid says and ignore the other relevant evidence. Doing so may be the easiest way to deal with the issue, but that does not mean that is the morally best approach. Intuitively, it seems that the best relationships are not built on lies, deception, and repression of the truth, but are built on dealing honestly and fairly with whatever version of reality is supported by the evidence. So, if interpreted as an objection to CP, and one that is representative of a type of situation that we encounter frequently, we should reject, or at least doubt, the idea that the parent must choose between CP and doing what is best for the relationship. Following CP, having a healthy respect for the evidence, and living with kindness, openness, and love sounds like the morally best way to deal with the situation. Clifford should argue that this is a case in which following CP's recommendation is what will lead to the strongest and

most loving relationship. And, even if it actually would somehow be morally best for the relationship to be mixed up with this lie, that does not show that it is morally best, overall, to believe against one's evidence. It might be morally best, overall, to focus on the long-term consequences for everyone involved and all that unravels as a result of the lie. That is, perhaps considering all of the morally relevant facts, risking the relationship is what is morally best. Of course, we could simply stipulate that, somehow or other, believing she is not smoking pot has enormous moral value that outweighs all the other morally valuable factors. I will consider a different case, later, that does a better job at making such a case. For now, I merely want to note that this example is not an ordinary, simple, clear-cut counterexample to moral evidentialism.

The case of the cheating husband is not convincing either. To begin, if all it is supposed to show is that it may be imprudent to do the morally right thing, that's consistent with CP (again understood at CP2). To refute CP, this should be a case where one is epistemically justified in believing p (my husband is cheating on me), but she is *morally obligated* to disbelieve p (or suspend judgment on p .) But, it is very difficult to work out the details so that the case is convincing. If the marriage is worth preserving, and it is not obvious from the sparse details that it is, normally the best way of salvaging a worthwhile relationship is to accept the facts and deal with them in an open and honest way. How is a relationship based on lies and deception better than one based on openness and honesty? Again, I do not think that Clifford should concede that there is, in fact, a genuine conflict here. Doing what's morally best for a relationship is consistent with, and in fact ordinarily requires, following one's evidence. Furthermore, even if it could somehow or other be shown that the relationship cannot endure the truth, and yet the relationship is of great moral value, this does not show that it is morally best to preserve the relationship rather than accept the truth. Perhaps the other woman's life (the one whose lipstick is on the husband's collar) would benefit from the truth being known. Or, perhaps accepting the truth would lead to better outcomes for everyone else impacted by the truth. So, this example is not a clear and convincing refutation of Clifford's Principle.

The cancer case is better, but not convincing if it is intended to be a realistic problem that should make us dubious of Clifford's basic idea. If this is to be a realistic scenario, the cancer patient should remain hopeful and positive, but that's possible without going to the extreme of actually believing, against her evidence, that she is going to live. On any realistic telling of the case, she should believe there's some small possibility that she will survive and she should do her very best to remain positive, do whatever she can to get as healthy as possible, and not give

Sharon Ryan

up on the fight. However, she should believe that it is very likely that she will die, and she should prepare herself and her loved ones for that likely scenario, while using a belief about the possibility of healing, and other positive and rational beliefs, to motivate her. Of course, she should not *dwell on* the negative belief that she has a high probability of dying, and that's not what Clifford recommends. He's not claiming, and nobody who is attracted to CP should claim that we have a moral obligation to dwell upon negative and depressing beliefs. All CP entails is that the cancer patient has a moral obligation to believe that it is likely that she will die within eight weeks. That's not cold, inflexible, irrational, or immoral. And, it is totally consistent with hoping, praying, feeling optimistic, or whatever, for a positive future.

The case of confidence is no better as an objection to moral evidentialism. If the example shows that some epistemically justified beliefs do not contribute to confidence, that's not a problem for Clifford's principle. Andrew McCutchen should be confident. After all, given his batting average and athletic prowess, he's got a better chance than almost anyone else of getting a hit. Believing he is a great baseball player and believing that he has a better chance than almost anyone of getting a hit are morally acceptable beliefs on Clifford's view. He is a great baseball player, and he has every reason to believe so and to feel confident. However, being rationally self-confident does not license him to believe he will get a hit. Believing he will get a hit would be irrationally arrogant even if it is helpful to his batting performance. If he's smart, and he follows the dictates of CP, he won't dwell on the rational belief that he is unlikely to get a hit. Actually, he probably shouldn't dwell on any beliefs at all when he's on the field and in the batter's box. He should spend all of his mental energy focusing on the ball!

The friendship case is tricky, but ultimately unconvincing. Sometimes, what we learn about our long-standing friends provides us with extremely good evidence about their moral character. Depending on how this example goes, the evidence we have about a friend's moral character can provide a powerful defeater to what would otherwise appear to be clear evidence of our friend's guilt. Without more details about what the evidence actually supports in this situation, it is unclear what CP yields as the morally justified doxastic attitude to hold. Assuming that the totality of the evidence, including all you know about your friend's character, really supports believing she is guilty, then I think that's what you morally ought to believe. That by no means rules out helping her find a good lawyer, making her a cake, visiting her in prison, and engaging in other forms of friendly support. It is difficult to imagine that a 'friendship' laced with deception

has greater moral value than a friendship built on honesty and acceptance. Accepting the facts, it seems to me, would allow you to be the best possible friend.

So far, I'm suggesting that the moral value of believing against one's evidence is actually much lower than these examples suggest. The awful art case is the most difficult case for Clifford since there is enormous moral value in believing against one's evidence. However, the cost is that this type of case is very unusual. Normally, our justified beliefs, all by themselves, do not have morally awful consequences. Normally, we can separate our beliefs from our behavior. (For example, you should believe your young child is not an especially gifted ballet dancer if she is not an especially gifted ballet dancer. But you should probably not share that belief with her. Don't berate her 3rd grade dance performance. Despite the belief, you should remain supportive, encouraging, and loving toward her in every way.) Even if the awful art case is a counterexample, and I will argue that it is not a counterexample to a particular understanding of CP, it is one that shows that the precise letter of the law, rather than spirit of the law in Clifford's thinking, is flawed. As this case is set up, what's best from a moral point of view, is to believe the artist's work is brilliant. There are several ways to respond to this example. I'll discuss two possible responses to the awful art case. But before I do, I want to stress that even in this situation, there is an important evidentialist insight that should be noted. It is precisely because the evidence tells you that it is morally best to believe against your evidence that obligates you to do so. You are not following a whim, the Ouija board, rumors, or taking a wild guess. Evidence is still absolutely critical in determining what is morally right to believe.

A moral evidentialist should treat the awful art case, and other similar examples, as a straightforward case of conflicting moral obligations. On the one hand, I have a moral obligation to have epistemically justified beliefs, thereby believing the artwork is not brilliant. I also have another moral obligation, namely the obligation to save innocent people and many great works of art. These obligations conflict with one another. In this case, the moral obligation to save the innocent people is stronger than my other moral obligation to believe what my evidence supports. Conflicts between moral obligations are commonplace. Occasionally, for example, I have an obligation to attend a late faculty meeting. Every day, I also have an obligation to come home from work and take my dog out for an enjoyable stroll. On days of late faculty meetings, I have conflicting obligations. The fact that an occasional late meeting is more 'important' does not get me off the hook with my obligation to my dog. In fact, I make arrangements to meet my obligation with the help of a friend who will feed and walk my dog. A similar point could, and should, be made in cases where our doxastic obligations

Sharon Ryan

conflict with, and are outweighed by, other moral obligations. To make this point clearer, consider two ways of thinking about CP2:¹¹

(CP2pf) S has a *prima facie* moral obligation to have doxastic attitude D toward proposition *p* at time *t* iff having D fits S's evidence at *t*.

(CP2a) S has an absolute moral obligation to have doxastic attitude D toward proposition *p* at time *t* iff having D fits S's evidence at *t*.

The awful art objection is only a problem for CP2a. It is not a problem for CP2pf. Whether Clifford would endorse CP2a but reject CP2pf is not clear to me. Again, I'm trying to articulate and defend moral evidentialism in its most plausible form. Whether or not the most plausible form is actually Clifford's is not my concern. CP2pf is a defensible form of moral evidentialism that shares the spirit, if not every detail, of Clifford's views on the ethics of belief. It is also worth pointing out that all of the other alleged counterexamples, if they are actually aimed at moral evidentialism, could be addressed in this way as well, and without having to depend on any of the other criticisms I note.

I think CP2pf, a plausible version of moral evidentialism, survives the inflexibility problem. We should think of doxastic obligations as *prima facie* moral obligations. If you want to live well, you should still make a general habit of having epistemically justified beliefs. Believing what your evidence supports normally has morally good consequences and it demonstrates an honest and virtuous character. Thus, it remains true that you have a moral obligation to believe in accordance with your evidence unless you run into one of these highly unusual situations in which you have strong evidence showing that it would be morally wrong to do so. Working out the details of how to weigh out the moral strengths of our various obligations is beyond the scope of this paper. Let me just note that the weighing is a moral weighing, not a practical or 'all things considered' decision.¹²

A second response, and one that I do not endorse, is to deny that I have a moral obligation to believe the artwork is brilliant. It seems that I could not possibly, if I were in such circumstances, get myself to believe the artwork is brilliant. I'd be able to say I believe it is brilliant, but it is difficult to imagine that I could just, by a mere act of the will, actually believe what I know to be false. The moral motivation won't work. I'm going to be stuck with my belief that the

¹¹ I am grateful to an anonymous referee for helpful suggestions on how to make this point clearer.

¹² I'm thinking here of a view along the lines of W. D. Ross's ethical theory (W.D. Ross, *The Right and the Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1930).

artwork is awful. If that's psychologically true, and if 'ought' implies 'can,' then it is not true that I have a moral obligation to believe the artwork is brilliant. This alternative protects both CP2pf and CP2a. Unfortunately, it also opens a can of worms for Clifford and for anyone else who thinks we have doxastic obligations of any kind. That's because it seems that all of the doxastic attitudes we have, at any given moment, are not under our voluntary control. As I mentioned, I favor the solution that acknowledges that we can sometimes have, and often have, conflicting moral obligations.¹³ That is, I believe moral evidentialism should be understood as a view that acknowledges that our doxastic obligations are *prima facie* moral obligations. Thus, I think moral evidentialism survives the Inflexibility Problem without having to go into this thorny territory. Nevertheless, we will head there shortly as we take up a second line of objection to CP. However, I want to stress that the Inflexibility Problem can be satisfactorily addressed without going there.

Before moving on to the second line of objection against CP, I hope to have at least shown that the Inflexibility Problem is not as clean and simple as it might initially seem. I believe I have shown more. I believe I have shown that the Inflexibility Problem is solved and that moral evidentialism is a serious, interesting, and strong position in the ethics of belief.

Objection #2: The Involuntarism Problem

Many philosophers reject the idea that we have doxastic obligations, not because they reject evidentialism, but because they believe doxastic attitudes are involuntary responses, not actions that are under our direct, voluntary control. Holding a person responsible for her beliefs, according to these philosophers, makes about as much sense as holding someone responsible for a twitchy eye, the natural color of their hair, or their blood type. We are reminded that 'ought' implies 'can,' and since we cannot control our beliefs, we cannot have any obligations to believe (or disbelieve or suspend judgment.)

The following argument, presented by William Alston¹⁴ and endorsed by many others, is taken by many to be a decisive refutation of the claim that we have obligations, of any sort, about the doxastic attitudes we form. It has also been

¹³ But I do not think we often have moral obligations that conflict with the doxastic obligation to believe what our evidence supports. I think such conflicts are extremely rare. I believe our doxastic obligation to believe what our evidence supports remains undefeated in most circumstances.

¹⁴ William Alston, "Concepts of Epistemic Justification," in his *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 81-114.

Sharon Ryan

used to argue against deontological conceptions of epistemic justification and internalist conceptions of justification, but we will limit our focus to the question of whether Alston's argument undermines the claim that we have doxastic obligations.

The Involuntarism Argument

- (1) If we have doxastic obligations, then we have voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes.
- (2) We don't have voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes.
-
- (3) We do not have doxastic obligations.

Again, I will continue to focus on moral obligations as opposed to purely epistemic, prudential, or other obligations. The Involuntarism Argument, if successful, shows that sentences of the following form are not true:

S ought to believe (or disbelieve or suspend judgment on) *p*.

If the Involuntarism Argument is sound, then it is false that Clifford's shipowner violated a moral obligation when he believed his ship was seaworthy. It is also false that you violate any moral obligation if you refuse to believe ISIS uses brutal tactics after watching a video of them putting a captured Jordanian pilot in a cage and burning him alive. And it is false that you violate any moral obligation if you believe that your neighbor is an awful human being when you have not a shred of evidence to support that belief. If Alston's argument is correct, we have no moral obligations when it comes to forming beliefs.

Alston's argument seems problematic because it does seem true that there are certain claims that we ought to believe, some we should suspend judgment on, and some that we ought to disbelieve. What we believe is central to who we are and what we do. Beliefs are, as Pamela Hieronymi puts it, "a central example of the sort of thing for which we are most fundamentally responsible."¹⁵ We ought, if we are wise, to have a healthy dose of epistemic humility. We ought not be epistemically arrogant. Many people think forgiveness, at least sometimes, ought to be given. But if forgiveness involves beliefs and emotions, and if we regard beliefs and emotions as involuntary in a sense that excludes obligation, it seems that we can never have an obligation to forgive (or not forgive). Moreover, consider the wrongs of racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, etc. An important part of why racist behavior is so bad is because we think the beliefs that

¹⁵ Pamela Hieronymi, "Responsibility for Believing," *Synthese* 161 (2008): 357.

lead to the behavior are reprehensible. If we did not think racists could be held responsible for what they believe, then I think we would be much less harsh on racists. If a racist never acts on his or her beliefs, we still think something's very wrong. It is important to acknowledge that Alston's conclusion reaches far beyond a narrow debate among a group of professional epistemologists. Whether doxastic attitudes can be the objects of obligation is enormously important.

Doxastic voluntarists argue against premise 2 of Alston's argument, attempting to show that we do have control over whether we believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment on *p*.¹⁶ Appealing to a compatibilist view about belief formation, I, myself, argued against premise 2 in an earlier paper.¹⁷ I am no longer sure what I think about premise 2 of Alston's argument. For the purposes of this paper, I am willing to accept that there is a sense in which we do not have direct voluntary control over our doxastic attitudes. What I will argue for here is that the sense in which it seems that we cannot control our beliefs is irrelevant to the 'ought' implies 'can' principle, and that this lack of control is consistent with having doxastic obligations. In the remainder of this paper, I will argue against premise 1 of the Involuntarism Argument.

Premise 1 is apparently supported by the famous, and allegedly obviously true, 'ought' implies 'can' principle. I don't find the 'ought' implies 'can' principle to be obvious. In "Doxastic Compatibilism and the Ethics of Belief," I argued that it (described in four different versions) is false.¹⁸ At this point in my thinking about these issues, I am convinced that the principle is thoroughly ambiguous. Moreover, on its most charitable readings, it is irrelevant to questions about doxastic obligations and therefore does not provide a rationale for Alston's first premise.

Let me begin by noting what I find compelling about one idea that might be what people have in mind when they cite the 'ought' implies 'can' principle. There are some situations where it makes sense to think that doing A is not obligatory because there is a lack of agency or something is impossible for an agent to do. When I think of such cases, I imagine that perhaps we are making use of something that might count as the 'ought' implies 'can' principle. Here is one such

¹⁶ Matthias Steup, for example, has defended Doxastic Voluntarism in numerous articles including "Doxastic Voluntarism and Epistemic Deontology," *Acta Analytica* 15, 1 (2000): 25-56, "Doxastic Freedom," *Synthese* 161, 3 (2008): 375-392, "Belief Voluntariness, and Intentionality," *Dialectica* 65, (2011): 537-599, and "Belief Control and Intentionality," *Synthese* 188, 2 (2012): 145-163.

¹⁷ Sharon Ryan, "Doxastic Compatibilism and the Ethics of Belief," *Philosophical Studies* 114 (2003): 47-73.

¹⁸ Ryan, "Doxastic Compatibilism."

Sharon Ryan

case. Imagine that your friend is seriously injured when a heavy object crashes onto her windshield as she is driving down the road. If someone threw a garbage can off a bridge and it hit her car, it makes sense to hold the hurler responsible. But what if the cause of the broken windshield was a boulder that came loose from a mountainside after a lot of rain? In that case nobody is responsible. No obligation has been violated. Boulders don't have obligations because they are not moral agents. They don't have the ability to plan, respond, or engage in any kind of conscious behavior. It just doesn't make sense to think that the boulder did something morally wrong or failed an obligation. If this is the point of the 'ought' implies 'can' principle, then the principle seems true to me.

But what, exactly, is the principle? And how does it bear on questions about doxastic obligations? Here is one attempt to state the idea:

A: Only moral agents have moral obligations.

Since boulders do not qualify as moral agents, boulders do not have moral obligations and they cannot be held responsible for the effects they have on the world. If A is true, boulders are not morally responsible for breaking windshields. But this doesn't help us to resolve our questions about whether we have moral obligations about what we believe. A does not show that I am not responsible for the beliefs I form. Unlike the boulder, I am a moral agent and A does not get me off the hook for anything I do, including what I believe. So this one very reasonable formulation of 'ought' implies 'can' is totally irrelevant to questions about doxastic obligations.

Let's try another formulation. Perhaps the idea is that in order to be held responsible for an action, it must be at least logically or physically possible for the agent to perform the action. Let's call this B:

B: If S is morally responsible for doing A, then it must be possible for S to do A.

Suppose, for some reason, being born with blue eyes is undesirable. There is nothing I can do about the fact that I was born with blue eyes. So, holding me responsible for the natural color of my eyes is ridiculous. The natural color of my eyes is caused by factors I cannot control. Thus, any claim such as "Sharon morally ought to have been born with non-blue eyes" is ridiculously false. Or suppose I am hanging out in a park with my dog with no particular purpose other than to take a walk and enjoy the fresh air. Imagine that there is a fund-raiser for a great humanitarian cause going on and I get in line to participate. When I reach the head of the line, the organizers inform me that participants must jump over the moon in order to contribute to the cause. I walk away disappointed. I can't have any obligation to jump over the moon. I just plain can't do that. I never have been

able to do so, and I never will be able to do so. But, how does this help show that we don't have doxastic obligations? If the requirements for the fund-raiser were changed so that I had to believe $2+2=4$, I could and I would. This formulation of the principle does not show that we don't have doxastic obligations. Human beings can and do have beliefs – plenty of them.

Going back to the example in the introduction of this paper, I claimed that human babies should not be held morally responsible for their actions. In order to be responsible, a person must be capable of understanding the moral impact of their actions. Human babies lack such comprehension. Thus, they are not responsible even if they do something with terrible consequences. (Rolling over on a pet hamster and injuring it, for example.) If this idea is an 'ought' implies 'can' principle, then I accept it. Perhaps it is:

C: If S is morally responsible for his or her actions, S must understand the moral significance of his or her actions.

But, just like B, C is irrelevant to questions about doxastic obligations, as long as we restrict those obligations to believers who are competent enough to understand the moral significance of their behavior. A, B, and C seem like true principles to me. If that is what people mean when they chant "'Ought' implies 'can!'" then I can appreciate why they find it so compelling. But A, B, and C have no application to questions about doxastic obligations for mentally competent adult human beings.

There are other principles that seem relevant to Alston's argument, and they are discussed in the ethics of belief literature, but they are much less plausible. And, they take us away from any ideas that obviously connect to 'ought' implies 'can.' So far away, in fact, that I will consider them without even trying to make the case that they are 'ought' implies 'can' principles. Here's one idea one might appeal to in backing up premise (1):

D: If S is responsible for doing A, then S must do A intentionally.

D requires not only that the responsible agent be able to do A, but that she do A, and do so intentionally. One might use something such as D to argue against doxastic obligations. Although human beings can and do believe things, there is some reason to think that the formation of a belief is not intentional.¹⁹ When I pay attention to what I am doing and notice that I am typing a sentence, the belief

¹⁹ Some philosophers argue that belief formation is intentional or deliberate. Although I will not take up any of those arguments in this paper, I wish to acknowledge that there are such arguments and they are worthy of serious consideration. I am assuming, just for the sake of the argument, that belief formation is not intentional, voluntary, or deliberate.

Sharon Ryan

that I am typing a sentence just shows up. I don't cause myself to believe $2+2=4$ and I don't cause myself to believe Barack Obama is President. When my cat, Diego, awakens me by knocking things off my dresser, the belief that "Diego is up to no good again" is forced upon me by my perceptual experience. I don't intentionally decide to form the belief and then believe. My beliefs are formed without any intention of mine playing the right kind of causal role. So far, so good, but D is false. We hold people responsible for unintentional actions all the time. A driver who is distracted by texting and unintentionally runs over a cyclist is morally responsible for running over the cyclist. Suppose the driver didn't even see the cyclist and had no idea what happened when she felt the bump and heard the thud. Nevertheless, she ought not to have hit the cyclist. And, she's morally responsible for doing so.

One might try to salvage D, or something similar to D, by pointing to the many actions the driver did do intentionally that help explain why we hold her responsible for running over the cyclist. Perhaps she intentionally decided to start texting. That decision led to the unfortunate consequence. Thus, we can hold her responsible for running over the cyclist because she was texting intentionally. But we could say the same thing about belief formation (assuming for the sake of the argument that belief formation is not intentional.) When I wind up with a doxastic attitude, it is not caused by magic. I never find myself with a belief and think, "Wow, where did that come from?" My coming to believe x (according to those who claim that forming beliefs is involuntary) is caused by many psychological processes such as deciding to think about particular questions, reading, concentrating, observing, weighing my evidence, listening to the world around me, checking my sources, and so forth. These actions are typically intentional. So, even if we accept D, and discount the texter as a serious problem for D, we can make the same claims about doxastic attitudes that we make about the texter. Dustin Olson has developed a view of epistemic agency along these lines. While rejecting doxastic voluntarism, Olson argues that it is our ability to develop and refine our belief-forming methods and practices that provides us with a way of making sense of epistemic responsibility. According to Olson,

We can be held responsible for our beliefs because there are things we can do that can affect them – *a fortiori* we do have the right kind of control to allow for epistemic duties.²⁰

²⁰ Dustin Olson, "A Case for Epistemic Agency," *Logos & Episteme. An International Journal of Epistemology* VI, 4 (2015): 449-474.

If D is what is at work in the Involuntarism Argument, and I think that it or something very much like it is, the argument fails. D seems false to me, and the only way to salvage it opens a door that salvages doxastic attitudes that are not formed intentionally.

But perhaps I am still missing the point. Perhaps the reason we want to hold the texter responsible for hitting the cyclist is because although she hit the cyclist unintentionally, hitting a cyclist (or driving carefully or recklessly) is the sort of action that can be done intentionally. So, maybe the idea is that in order for A to be open for moral evaluation, A has to be the sort of action that can ever be an intentional action. Driving carefully is such an action, but the argument alleges, forming a belief is not. Forming a belief is never, we can suppose, an intentional action. Thus, consider:

E: If S has a moral obligation to do A, then A must be the kind of action that can be done intentionally.

Assuming, for the sake of the argument, that we can never form beliefs intentionally, E would generate the result Alston wants. Although E is relevant, it is false. There are a lot of things for which we can be held responsible that we can't do, or control, intentionally. We are responsible for having healthy cholesterol levels (if we want to be healthy and stay healthy enough to take care of children we are responsible for bringing into the world). We don't intentionally and directly control our cholesterol numbers, but we are responsible for keeping them within a good range. If we don't, there can be horrible moral consequences. Of course, we can do something to affect those numbers. We can decide to eat certain foods and avoid eating others, we can exercise, and if all else fails, we can take medication. But, it is the causal effects of those decisions that control our cholesterol levels. Intentional acts of will can't do the work. Try as you may, merely wanting or deciding to lower the numbers will be ineffective. But, again, a similar point can be made about our beliefs.²¹ They can have serious moral consequences, and there is a lot that we can do in our epistemic practice that will have an effect on what and how we believe. Again, the ability to control, at will or intentionally, is not necessary for fair moral attributions.

Perhaps I have been trying too hard to come up with a rationale for premise 1. Maybe premise 1 does not have much of a rationale. Perhaps Alston and other advocates think it does not need any further support because is just plain obvious. Perhaps defenders of the Involuntarism Argument think it is self-evidently true that we must have immediate, voluntary control over any action that is subject to

²¹ See Dustin Olson's "A Case for Epistemic Agency" for a developed defense of this idea.

Sharon Ryan

moral appraisal. There is a certain kind of control that we do seem to lack over our doxastic attitudes and I am willing to call that voluntary control. I can't form a belief just because I feel like it. Interestingly this isn't always the case with ordinary actions. For example, right now, if I want to get up from my desk and walk around and think for a while, I can just do it. In contrast, if I want to believe that I am skiing in Norway right now (as I am fully aware that I am writing a philosophy paper in Morgantown, West Virginia), I can't just do it. I can *imagine* skiing in Norway right now, but I can't actually believe it. I just don't have that kind of control over my beliefs. I believe George Washington was the first President of the United States. If a friend asks me to disbelieve that claim, I can't. If I could save a million lives by believing that Thomas Jefferson was the first President of the United States, I'm going to be letting a million or more people down. I can't just do it. I'm, as Richard Feldman puts it, 'at the mercy of my evidence.' But how is that supposed to show that we do not have doxastic obligations?

We are responsible for other actions that are not under this sort of immediate voluntary control. Imagine that Johnny's school play starts in 10 minutes and Johnny's dad is coming. Johnny's dad has a lot of responsibilities. One of them is to be sober at the play. But Johnny's dad is drunk as a skunk. He can't now be sober at the play. He can't right now decide to be sober at the play and execute that decision for a million dollar pay out. He can't do it if he realizes it would be best for his relationship with his son. He might want to be sober, but he can't, just by willing it, be sober for the play. He doesn't have that kind of control. Nevertheless, he still ought to be sober at his son's play. Again, we can trace his obligation to be sober at the play back to other things he could and did control. He decided to drink and just started drinking. But, again, the same is true of beliefs. I can decide to pay attention to all of my evidence, I can decide to take counterevidence into account, I can decide to take courses that improve my reasoning skills, I can decide to buy books and read them, etc. And, with respect to Johnny's dad, we look forward to the consequences, to see that they are serious and morally important. The same can be said of beliefs. Remind yourself of Clifford's shipowner or the effects of racist beliefs.

Even if we lack control at the final step in belief formation, there is a lot leading up to the final step, and following that final step, that we do control. If we can hold people responsible for actions under such circumstances, why can't we hold people responsible for their beliefs?

Suppose I decide to jump off a diving board into a pool. Once I am up in the air, I realize that I am wearing my friend's \$1,000 (non-water proof) watch that

was a gift from her now deceased mother. I don't want to ruin her watch. I didn't mean to ruin her watch. At this point, I can't make an effective decision to keep the watch safe - not for all the money in the world, not for the sake of the friendship, not for anything. I'm at the mercy of gravity, and I'm responsible for ruining my friend's watch. Why am I responsible? I should have taken a second to reflect on what I was wearing before I jumped. I was careless. Plus, I am ruining, for no good reason, a prize possession of my friend's. The causes were under my control and the consequences are morally bad.

My point is that we do hold people responsible for doing things they do not have immediate voluntary control over. In many ordinary situations, we hold people responsible for being sober at their kid's play, having healthy cholesterol levels, not ruining their friend's watch, even when those achievements cannot be obtained by a mere act of the will. Even if beliefs are not under our direct control, even if the particular doxastic attitude formed is involuntary or unintentional, there are excellent reasons to hold us responsible that are perfectly analogous to our responsibility for many morally significant actions. Furthermore, because of the enormous moral importance the effects of our beliefs can have, and the enormous effect our epistemic practices have on our beliefs, it seems appropriate to hold us responsible for what we believe, even if, at the exact moment of belief formation, we are at the mercy of our interpretation of the information we have in front of us.

I believe the analogy between beliefs and morally obligatory, yet involuntary and unintentional, actions is strong. Thus, I think we should treat them similarly. If we are willing to grant that Johnny's dad ought to be sober at the play and that the texter ought not have hit the cyclist, we ought to accept that I ought to believe ISIS is brutal and Clifford's shipbuilder should not have believed his ship was seaworthy. I accept all of the above. However, there is one more convincing reason to reject the Involuntarism Argument and it does not depend on treating beliefs and actions analogously. Philippe Chuard and Nicholas Southwood challenge premise 1 by noting that we make normative judgments about other attitudes that are as involuntary as are beliefs.²² For example, under the right set of circumstances, it makes sense to say, "S ought not be angry at me." The circumstances might be that I did not do what S thinks I have done and I have proven to S that I did not do it. After seeing the situation in this new light, S ought not be angry. And the 'ought' is a straightforward moral ought. Why not say

²² Philippe Chuard and Nicholas Southwood, "Epistemic Norms without Voluntary Control," *Nous* 3, 4 (2009): 599-632.

Sharon Ryan

similar things about beliefs? If we do, we have another good reason to deny premise 1.

The Involuntarism Argument is weak. Even granting, for the sake of the argument, that beliefs are involuntary, this argument does not show that we do not have doxastic obligations.

Doxastic Obligations, Moral Responsibility, and Wisdom

At this point, I believe I have successfully defended a version of moral evidentialism from two serious and widely accepted arguments. In closing, I'd like to suggest that we need doxastic obligations both to provide an adequate explanation for the degree to which we hold people morally responsible for reprehensible behavior and to understand what it takes to be wise.

Consider, for example, the moral judgments we make about people who are willing to blow up buildings with lots of innocent people inside. Consider how we feel about practicing racists, sexists, and other haters. It is not just their actions that are so disturbing, but the crazy ideas behind those actions. If we do not hold people responsible for what they believe, and for and how they arrive at their beliefs, then I think we are too harsh in our moral judgments of behavior that results from those beliefs. If we are unable to hold a sexist person responsible for his or her sexist beliefs, then it is difficult to hold such people responsible, to any significant degree, for their sexist behavior. It seems harsh to blame a person for his or her actions if she is not responsible for the beliefs that lead to those actions. After all, there is some virtue in acting in consistency with your beliefs. When we consider actual cases of psychologically normal people doing morally bad things, most of them suffer from having unjustified beliefs. Most psychologically normal people don't set out to do something they regard as morally wrong. Most psychologically normal people act on the basis of what they believe to be right. It is there, when people are thinking about (or not thinking about) what they ought to do, that a lot of effort should be demanded.

Doxastic obligations are also an important aspect of wisdom. Wise people ought to, among other things, believe in accordance with their evidence. Wise people ought to have appropriate emotional responses. Beliefs and our emotions are not under our immediate voluntary control, and yet they are, perhaps more than anything else we do as human beings, of enormous moral importance. If what I have argued for in this paper is correct, the most compelling arguments

against doxastic obligations fail and we have good reason to believe that we do have doxastic obligations.²³

²³ I would like to thank two anonymous referees and the participants at the November 2014 Cornell Workshop on the Ethics of Belief for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.