

The Publicity of Belief, Epistemic Wrongs and Moral Wrongs

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It is a commonplace belief that many beliefs, e.g. religious convictions, are a purely private matter, and this is meant in some way to serve as a defense against certain forms of criticism. In this paper it is argued that this thesis is false, and that belief is really often a public matter. This argument, the publicity of belief argument, depends on one of the most compelling and central thesis of Peircean pragmatism. This crucial thesis is that bona fide belief cannot be separated from action. It is then also suggested that we should accept a form of W. K. Clifford's evidentialism. When these theses are jointly accepted in conjunction with the basic principle of ethics that it is prima facie wrong to act in such a way that may subject others to serious but unnecessary and avoidable harm, it follows that many beliefs are morally wrong.

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Introduction

It is a commonplace belief that one's religious convictions, as well as many other beliefs, are a purely private matter, and this is meant in some way to serve as a defense against certain forms of criticism.¹ In this paper it is argued that this thesis is false, and that belief is really often a public matter. This argument, the publicity of belief argument (PBA), depends on one of the most compelling and central thesis of Peircean pragmatism that is derived from the work of Alexander Bain. This crucial thesis is that bona fide belief cannot be conceptually separated from action. In other words, bona fide beliefs are those upon which one is prepared to act. It will then be suggested that if we are to be rational, then we should accept an eminently plausible

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epistemological principle championed most famously by W.K. Clifford. This principle or maxim (CM) is that it is always wrong to believe anything on the basis of insufficient evidence.²

Accepting Clifford's maxim in light of the recognition of the poverty of objective non-ambiguous evidence for religious belief implies that religious belief is epistemically irresponsible as Clifford himself suggested. This thesis will be referred to as the epistemic irresponsibility of religious belief (EIRB). When the PBA and the EIRB are jointly accepted in conjunction with the basic principle of ethics that it is *prima facie* wrong to act in such a way that may subject others to serious but unnecessary and avoidable harm, it follows that religious belief is in many cases *morally* wrong and this will often be true because those beliefs fail to satisfy CM.³ As an additional and desirable consequence of the views developed here the dispute concerning the interpretation of the type of normativity at work in Clifford's (1877) can be effectively resolved. The paper concludes by noting some perhaps unwelcome and unpopular consequences that this argument has for the idea of religious freedom and the more general notion of the freedom to believe given the epistemological imperatives that rational beings ought to accept.

1. The Publicity of Belief Argument

C.S. Peirce is the most well-known defender of the view that the concepts of belief and action are such that they cannot be logically separated. Peirce holds that there is a logical, conceptual or analytic dependence between the two concepts. Peirce's view is essentially that *S* has a belief that *p*, if and only if, *S* is disposed to act on the basis of *p*.⁴ So for Peirce beliefs are dispositions to act and this account of belief is presented as an analytic or conceptual truth. It is presented as a matter of the explication of the meaning of the term "belief". So *S*'s having a bona fide belief logically requires that *S* have a disposition to act in some specified manner based on the content of that belief.⁵ From this Peircean analysis of belief it follows that it is not logically possible to have a belief without the appropriate corresponding disposition to act.

This is an important and deeply interesting concept of belief that Peirce effectively used to rebut skeptical challenges to the possibility of knowledge like that proposed by Descartes in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*.⁶ Peirce argued that such varieties of methodological skepticism were nothing more than "paper" doubts as they were not accompanied by the required dispositions to act. In other words, one cannot really believe in the possibility of an omnipotent evil deceiver and so one cannot really have a doubt that there is a hand before them on this basis. Doubts of this sort ought not to concern us for they are merely chimerical worries based on confusion about the very meaning of the concept of belief. Regardless of the adequacy of Peirce's response to the skeptic, this analysis of belief has many more interesting consequences not the least of which is that bona fide belief *cannot be wholly a private matter*.

The argument for this conclusion, PBA, can be rendered simply as follows:

- P1: S has a belief that p , if and only if, S is disposed to act on the basis of p .
 P2: S has the disposition to act on the basis of p , if and only if, other things equal, under certain specifiable conditions S will act on the basis of p .
 Therefore, S has a belief that p if and only if, other things equal, under certain specifiable conditions S will act on the basis of p .

P1 is the Peircean analysis of belief referred to above. P2 is simply a plausible rendering of the concept of a disposition to act,⁷ and so we arrive at the conclusion that belief and action are logically connected. This shows that bona fide beliefs will apparently be accompanied by actions. Hence, such beliefs are *not* merely private matters. The conclusion of this argument will be referred to as the pragmatic account of belief, or simply PRAG.

1.1 A Closer Look at Belief and Action

In spite of whatever prima facie plausibility PRAG has, more must be said about the connection between belief and action referred to in PBA and about the concept of a disposition to act if we are to arrive at a fair account of the conclusion to be defended in what follows. Peirce tells us of this sense of belief that, "...it may be discovered by observation of external facts and by inference from the sensation of conviction which usually accompanies it" (1868, 22). So Peirce implies that bona fide belief will always be detectable because it will be accompanied by a corresponding observable action, but consider the following theoretical possibility. Joe, who is ex hypothesi a devout exhibitionist, believes that everyone wants to see him naked, and so by P1 of PBA has the corresponding disposition to expose himself to others. In accord with P2 then, other things equal, Joe will expose himself to others under certain specifiable conditions (i.e., when he is wearing his raincoat, when people are about, when it is not the case that he is outdoors in sub-zero temperatures, etc., etc.). Suppose that all of this is true of Joe, but that in point of fact *every* time Joe intends to do so some causal conditions occur such that Joe is prevented from exposing himself. This is a theoretical possibility and so it appears that one might have a bona fide belief and the corresponding disposition to act on that belief but without ever actually acting that way.⁸ Moreover, pace Peirce there would then be no external facts observable to us that would be sufficient to make the relevant belief attribution with respect to Joe in this case and we do not have access to *his* feeling of conviction. So, at least strictly speaking, it is not true that bona fide belief will always be accompanied by action.

This possibility is, nevertheless, prima facie compatible with PRAG. Such cases are what are often referred to as deviant cases that involve systematically unactualized dispositions. They are the result of pervasive and abnormal causal interference either from external sources or from internally conflicting dispositions that prevent the actualization of a disposition to act that some entity has in virtue of its constitution. To be sure such cases are logically possible, but they are to say the least *exceedingly rare*. That is why they are deviant. In fact, the only obvious kind of evidence one could have for attributing to Joe the belief that everyone wants to see him naked in such a situation is his personal report that he does in fact have the belief.⁹

Ignoring the issue of the transparency of belief states to believers we are then faced with a problem. In such cases Joe's situation will be indistinguishable in the relevant respects from someone, John, who falsely claims to have the same belief and who also does not expose himself when the same sorts of interposing causal blockers are present, but the reason he does not do so is that he does not have the same belief. So even if we tolerate the theoretical possibility of unactualized dispositions these sorts of situations are such that we would have no good evidence to believe that such a belief is actually held by the individual in question and this is because we could not rule out that we are dealing with a John-type case. The natural but overstated conclusion drawn by Peirce and other pragmatists is that belief and action are conceptually or logically inseparable and that external evidence sufficient for belief attribution will thus be present. What they should have said is that the only known and reasonably reliable indicator of the beliefs of others is actual action, and *under normal circumstances* bona fide belief and action are causally inseparable.¹⁰ This is the case because a belief's causal efficacy is nothing over and above that of the disposition the agent possesses in virtue of his fundamental constitution. But dispositions are defeasible, either by the influence of external causes or by conflict between the various dispositions possessed by an entity.¹¹

Peirce's verificationism and logical behaviorism aside, it is thus true that in normal circumstances having a bona fide belief implies that given suitable conditions the believer in question *will* act on the content of that belief and this is how we should interpret PRAG. PRAG so interpreted does not then involve the relation of logical or conceptual necessity holding between belief and action, but rather a relation of defeasible causal (or nomic) necessitation between belief and action and this is true in virtue of the fact that beliefs are nothing more than dispositions. As a result, while beliefs and actions are logically distinct they are not nomologically distinct. Having established this point let us turn our attention to relationship between belief so construed and evidence.

2. Evidentialism, Differentiability and the Epistemic Irresponsibility of Religious Belief

One might think that it is virtually platitudinous to suggest that the concept of rational belief ought to be identified with the concept of belief sufficiently supported by one's evidence, where one's evidence takes the form of belief states internal to the believer and which are distinct from the belief in question. However, there has been significant debate in contemporary epistemology about whether this sort of epistemological internalism is really the proper analysis of rational belief.¹² Externalists have argued that this account is wrongheaded and that, for example, rational belief ought to be identified with the concept of belief caused in the right way, where the typical analysis of caused in the right way involves the belief having been caused by a reliable belief forming mechanism. A reliable belief forming mechanism then is one that tends to produce true beliefs. In any case, in spite of the internalism/externalism distinction it seems that both camps are in their own idiosyncratic ways sympathetic to W. K. Clifford's maxim:

(CM) It is always (epistemically) wrong to believe anything on the basis of insufficient evidence.¹³

For the sake of the argument presented in this paper it will be presumed that some form of evidentialism is acceptable whereby the bona fides of a belief is a function of the evidence for that belief, and that evidential states of an epistemic agent are internal states of epistemic agents.¹⁴

However, this is neither a mere presumption nor is it question-begging as ceding this sort of evidentialism commits one to the acceptance of Moorean contradictions of the form: I believe that p , but I do not have sufficient evidence that p .¹⁵ Moreover, such contradictions cannot be eliminated by shifting to probabilistic concepts of justification that permit degrees of belief. This is because of the following sort of reason. Suppose that S believes that p and that S 's degree of belief that p exceeds the probability that p has relative to S 's evidence e . If S 's evidence supports his belief that p to degree d , then by the probability calculus S 's evidence supports $\neg p$ to degree $1-d$. If S , nevertheless, believes p to a degree that exceeds d on the basis of evidence e , then S 's beliefs will necessarily violate the probability calculus and so are probabilistically incoherent.¹⁶ This is because S 's degrees of belief relative to $(p \vee \neg p)$ must then exceed 1. For example, take the case where S believes p to degree 0.7 but where $P(p|e) = 0.5$. In this case it follows then that $P(\neg p|e) = 0.5$. So if S believes p to degree 0.7, then S 's assignments of probability relative to $(p \vee \neg p)$ will equal 1.2. This is probabilistically incoherent. One might suppose that this could be avoided by claiming that when S adopts the degree of belief 0.7 relative to p , S reduces his degree of belief relative to $\neg p$ appropriately, but that cannot be probabilistically rational if the shift in belief is not based on conditionalizing on the evidence.¹⁷ If the update is based on evidence and maintains the probabilistic coherence of S 's beliefs, then the belief will ipso facto satisfy our conception of evidentialism. If it does not, then it will lead to incoherence.

The traditional alternative strategy concerning this issue is to accept some version of rationalism and to accept that at least some beliefs are not justified evidentially. In effect this would be to accept that some beliefs are justified, but that they are not justified in virtue of their relation to distinct evidential states (understood either internally or externally). Such privileged beliefs were supposed to be justified not only a priori, but also independent of any evidence whatsoever. It is not regrettable that such views have fallen on hard times, as they are clearly difficult to take seriously. What about a belief could possibly make it likely to be true independent of other beliefs? The notion is virtually absurd when one adopts the modern probabilistic model of degrees of justification (as referred to above) where the probability of a belief is conditional on the evidence for that belief. With the exception of utterly subjective (and hence irrational and arbitrary) prior probabilities, by Bayes' theorem the posterior probability of every statement representing a belief is always a function of other statements representing other beliefs. Moreover, the probability of a belief conditional on itself is just the prior probability of that belief. From this it follows that the probability of a belief cannot change without the introduction of further evidence. So this rationalist stance faces the following deeply serious problem. Unless the beliefs in question (i.e., core religious beliefs) are logical truths the posterior probabilities of such beliefs can never change.

This is because the only probabilistically coherent way for the prior probability of a belief to change is by conditionalizing on the evidence. As the sorts of belief we are concerned with (e.g., the belief in divine creation, the existence of supernatural entities, etc.) are not plausibly taken to be logical truths, then the rationalist approach is doomed to fail from an evidential perspective because it will never amount to more than the capricious assignment of subjective prior probabilities.¹⁸

There are of course various technical problems with probabilistic epistemologies, but these are rather minor annoyances and the general epistemic lesson is fairly clear. We should clearly understand that rational belief is evidential belief pace the traditional rationalists. As such, to either believe a statement without evidence or more than the evidence warrants is irrational. To do so is to violate a core imperative of epistemology. To do so is to violate an epistemic norm and so commit an epistemic wrong. Nevertheless, it is no mistake that religiously minded philosophers in the early modern era adopted such rationalist strategies, but in doing so they in effect ceded evidentialism and opened themselves to the charge of irrationality or capriciousness about the most basic beliefs they endorsed, especially about belief in core religious principles.

There is a second and equally important core epistemological principle deeply tied to evidentialism and the Peircean pragmatic tradition from which Clifford derived his maxim. This principle concerns the notion that evidential support or confirmation is a differential concept, and it is in many respects just a special case of CM. This principle asserts that to say that one theory, T_1 , is confirmed by the evidence only makes sense when understood in reference to the set of theories (T_2, \dots, T_n) with which T_1 competes. If two or more theories are equi-probable on evidence e , then none is confirmed relative to those others. This maxim, the differentiability of confirmation (DC), can be stated as follows.¹⁹ For any two theories T_i, T_j , and evidence e , (DC) T_i is more acceptable than T_j , if and only if, there exists some e such that $P(T_i|e) > P(T_j|e)$.

To accept a theory when there is an equi-probable competitor or where there is a competitor with a greater probability is a violation of an epistemic norm, and to do so is to commit an epistemic wrong.²⁰ A slightly more modern strategy adopted by religiously minded philosophers has been to give up rationalism and to argue that the empirical evidence favors core religious beliefs over non-religious beliefs about the same domains, and this sort of argument typically takes the form of an inference to the best explanation where the best explanation is alleged to be that which is the most likely. While this strategy is slightly more acceptable than the a priorist tactic, it is not sufficient to warrant the kinds of core moral beliefs adopted by religious philosophers. In all cases there will be, as a matter of pure logic and underdetermination, non-religious explanations that are empirically equivalent to the religious explanations. So religious beliefs that are supposed to be justified in this way are not really justified as they violate DC. Moreover, in most cases the evidence for the non-religious explanation will be superior as it coheres with well supported naturalistic background beliefs without positing the additional factors required by the religious theory. Such a theory is ipso facto less likely to be true than its naturalistic competitor.²¹

Finally, typical versions of evidentialism are versions of empiricism, the view that all evidence is sensory in nature. If we reject rationalism and the view that belief is a matter of mere capriciousness (as we should), then what else could be evidence ultimately except observational evidence? From these principles it follows that it is epistemically wrong always, everywhere and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient empirical evidence, and this can occur in at least two closely related ways: (1) *S* believes that *p* and has insufficient empirical evidence for *p*, or (2) *S* believes that *p* on the basis of empirical evidence *e*, but *e* is equally good empirical evidence for *q* where *q* competes with *p*. As already been suggested, religious beliefs typically fail to satisfy (1) and/or (2), but this epistemological point is neither new nor terribly interesting.

3. The Epistemic Irresponsibility of Religious Belief and the Principle of Non-malefeasance

Absent any serious defense of rationalism of the sort noted in the previous section we are then faced with the epistemological fact that substantive non-sociological religious beliefs violate CM, very often because they violate DC. Again, this is not a new observation by any means and the pedigree of this charge goes back at least to Hume's critique in his *Enquiry*. Most importantly, the core beliefs of religious theories clearly violate this principle. Such beliefs include but are not limited to belief in a divine being, the belief in divine creation, the belief in the existence of miracles,²² etc. These arguments will neither be rehearsed nor commented on here, as the main concern of this paper is rather different. It will be taken for granted for the sake of the argument that these sorts of religious beliefs do in fact violate either one or both of the epistemic imperatives noted above.

In spite of such relatively obvious epistemological failures, a popular response has been to argue that religious belief is a purely private matter (especially in the United States) and thus that such believers are not such that they should be subject to moral sanction. In fact, this moral entitlement is given legal protection in the first, fifth and fourteenth US constitutional amendments as interpreted by the US Supreme Court. Given what we have seen in section 2, this response seems to then amount to a sort of assertion of an entitlement to irrationality based on the implicit idea that such irrationally held beliefs pose no threat to others. However, given the analysis of belief offered in section 1 this is false and many people who do hold religious beliefs on this basis do so in violation of a core moral principle because their beliefs do pose a clear and tangible threat to others that is unnecessary and avoidable.

3.1 *The Principle of Non-Malefeasance and the Freedom to Believe*

It is a virtually undisputed ethical claim that one ought not to subject others to unnecessary and avoidable harm. This principle seems equally well at home in deontological, consequentialist and aretaic theories, and it is simply the principle of non-malefeasance (PNM). In its simplest form we might put this principle as follows:

(PNM) *Prima facie*, one should never subject another to unnecessary and avoidable harm.

The PNM is best understood as a principle of risk management in the following sense. Where h is an effect harmful to others, prima facie one should not a if a is unnecessary, $P(h|a) > P(h)$ and there is a b , $b \neq a$, $P(h|a) > P(h|b)$. The PNM is intended to cover cases both of malicious active harm and harm that derives from negligence, and we must be careful to be aware of the latter sort of harm here. So, subjecting others to unnecessary and avoidable harm by willful act, willful omission, or by subjecting others to foreseeable harm that is avoidable and unnecessary due to negligence are all serious moral wrongs.

This principle is interestingly related to Mill's notorious principle of harm. Mill famously expressed this principle in *On Liberty* as follows:

...the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He cannot be rightfully compelled to do or forebear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right...The only part of conduct of any one, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. (Mill 1859, 263)

Mill's overt claim is that we ought to be free from sanction about personal matters in so far as they do not subject others to harm in violation of the PNM. Moreover, Mill is explicit in his attribution of the *freedom to believe* on the basis of the principle of harm. In other words we should be at liberty to believe what we want without sanction unless we act in such a way that subjects others to harm in violation of the PNM. As such, Mill appears to be subscribing to a theory of the connection of belief and action that assumes a relatively sharp conceptual distinction between the two. He seems to hold that many beliefs will not result in actions and so will not result in actions that pose potential but unnecessary and avoidable harm to others. This should be no surprise as Mill's views on such issues are heavily influenced by the philosophers of the early modern era who subscribed to the doctrine that mind and body are contingently related, and for the most part who also subscribed to doxastic voluntarism, the view that belief is a matter of choice. However, given the Peircean analysis of belief presented in section 1, the EIRB, and the PNM we are faced with the following consequence that Mill fails to appreciate. At least some *beliefs* are immoral.²³

One way to look at this argument in light of the principle of harm is simply to note that a more sophisticated Peircean analysis of belief implies that belief is not a private matter given the causal connection between bona fide belief and action, and that the principle of harm thus condemns as morally sanctionable all beliefs which normally produce actions that, in violation of the PNM, subject others to unnecessary and avoidable harm. To claim that bona fide beliefs are purely personal matters is just false, and we ought, in particular, to be entitled to morally sanction those who negligently hold beliefs in violation of their epistemic duties when their doing so normally results in actions that cause unnecessary and avoidable harm to others.

4. The Moral Wrongness of Certain Beliefs

The argument for the ultimate conclusion to be defended here should now be clear.

- A1: (CM) It is always (epistemically) wrong to believe anything on the basis of insufficient empirical evidence.
 A2: Religious beliefs are not based on sufficient empirical evidence.
 Therefore, it is always (epistemically) wrong to have religious beliefs.

Let us suppose then that *S* holds a religious belief *a*, and that *a* is such that it subjects some others to risk. We can then reason as follows in accord with PRAG and where B2 is an instance of the conclusion of the argument just given.

- B2: *S*'s belief that *a* is epistemically wrong in violation of CM and/or DC.
 B3: (PRAG) *S* has a belief that *p*, if and only if, other things equal, under certain specifiable conditions *S* will act on the basis of *p*.
 Therefore, *S* will act on *a* even though *S* is epistemically wrong in believing that *a*.

In other words, *S*'s belief that *a* is a case of epistemic negligence. Nevertheless, if *S* has a bona fide belief that *a* in this case, then *S* will normally and predictably act on *a*. It then seems reasonable to suppose that we ought to adopt the view that, due to the strong causal relation between belief and action expressed in PRAG, *S*'s belief is itself morally wrong. It would seem to be unreasonable to attribute moral properties to acts but not beliefs when acts and beliefs are not ordinarily separable in virtue of their being linked via the equivalence of beliefs and dispositions. This is because, in many cases, *especially those that involve violation of epistemic duties*, the belief itself raises the probability that others will be harmed. *S*'s failure to adopt appropriate habits of belief formation and maintenance can then result in the imposition of an unnecessary and avoidable threat to others.²⁴ It is then reasonable to accept that the moral status of *S*'s belief that *a* should be the same as that of *S*'s acting on *a*. If *S*'s acting on *a* is wrong because it subjects any other to unnecessary and avoidable harm, as it will normally result in action harmful or risky to others, then *S*'s belief is morally wrong for the same sort of reason.²⁵

This is more easily appreciated when we employ the formal notion of the principle of harm introduced earlier. Where *h* is an effect harmful to others, *Bel(p)* is the belief that *p*, and *Bel(a)* is a belief that normally results in actions that bring about *h*, prima facie one should not *Bel(a)* if *Bel(a)* is unnecessary, $P(h|Bel(a)) > P(h)$ and there is a *Bel(b)*, $b \neq a$, such that $P(h|Bel(a)) > P(h|Bel(b))$. Insofar as beliefs are dispositions to act, they can, in virtue of their dispositional nature, increase the probability of harm to others, *even if the belief is never actually manifested as an action*. For example, living in a society characterized by the general belief that theft is permissible, increases the chance that you will be robbed even if you are never actually robbed. As such, the moral significance of belief is secured in virtue of its dispositionality and thus, in virtue of the sorts of risk it can subject others to independent of actual action. Let us refer to this principle as the belief-risk principle (BRP). What BRP tells us is that beliefs that increase the probability of harm can be morally wrong even if they are not accompanied by actual actions. To be sure the degree to which they are wrong may be, perhaps, less severe than that of the actual performance of an act, but they are nevertheless both

wrong in virtue of the risk they may subject others to. The upshot is that the qualitative moral character of beliefs that are dispositionally connected to acts that are needlessly harmful to others and of actual acts of that type is the same.

Now consider the following argument, where *a* is again a belief that typically results in harm to others and which violates CM and/or DC:

C1: *S* believes *a*, *S*'s belief that *a* is unnecessary, and acting on *a* normally causes unnecessary and avoidable harm to others.

C2: (BRP) The moral status of *S*'s act and *S*'s belief are qualitatively identical, though not necessarily identical in degree of severity.

C3: (PNM) Prima facie, one should never subject another to unnecessary and avoidable harm.

Therefore, *S* should not believe that *a*.

This argument essentially implicates many religious beliefs as moral wrongs because they *do* normally subject others to unnecessary and avoidable harm by manifesting themselves as actions in accord with PRAG, and there are almost always alternative non-religious competitor beliefs open to us that do not.²⁶ As a result, such beliefs fail to be intellectually necessary. The violation of the epistemic norm CM in such cases where there are less harmful alternative beliefs supported by the evidence indicts such beliefs as morally wrong *and no appeal to the privacy of beliefs can change that*. For example, given this view some of the beliefs that are held by many fundamentalist religious extremists who advocate terrorism seem to be clear examples of moral wrongs even if they have not actually acted on those beliefs, whatever we say about the entitlement to belief. Those who preach violence against abortionists, similarly, appear as if they may be committing moral wrongs merely in virtue of their beliefs, whatever we say about the entitlement to belief. Finally, it seems abundantly clear that those who vote in terms of their religious beliefs also are likely often to be worthy of moral sanction as their beliefs are epistemically negligent and as such beliefs manifest themselves as matters of public policy they often inevitably subject others to unnecessary and avoidable harm, whatever we say about the entitlement to belief. Of course, many specific religious beliefs may not in and of themselves involve dispositions to act that normally harm others unnecessarily, but many such beliefs do subject others to such risks and this will often be the case because they are cases of epistemic negligence where there is an alternative belief that is less likely to cause harm to others and which satisfies CM and DC.²⁷ No appeal to the privacy of such beliefs can then be seriously used to defend a moral entitlement to hold such beliefs. The epistemic failure to obey CM and DC when there are less dangerous alternatives open to us makes the agent *morally responsible* for the imposition of a threat on others by adopting such a belief. As a result, we are in a very substantial sense morally responsible for our beliefs and we can make substantial moral judgments about others' beliefs as well.

4.1 *Resolving the Issue of Clifford's Ship Owner*

A both valuable and desirable consequence of the analysis that has been offered here is that the dispute concerning how to interpret Clifford's maxim and the application of

that maxim to the two crucial cases presented in 1877 can be resolved. Clifford (1877) begins with the following famous introduction:

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant ship. He knew that she was old, and nor over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and climes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms that it was idle to suppose she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better time elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolently wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales. (Clifford 1877, 9–10)

After introducing this case Clifford boldly states that we should say that the ship owner's behavior was wrong, and he says that this would still be the case even if the ship had sailed but not sank (1877, 10). That this is so is in part because the ship owner committed an epistemic wrong. He believed that the ship was seaworthy when he had insufficient evidence to do so. However, from Clifford's claims it also seems clear that his comments are intended to carry the force of morality. Despite Clifford's ambiguity on this matter, given the dispositional and causal analysis of belief and action from section 1 and the rendering of the principle of non-maleficance from section 4, we can conclude that the ship owner's epistemic failure also constitutes a moral failure and it does so in both cases, the case where the ship sinks and where it does not. They are both moral wrongs simply because that the ship owner's epistemic failure subjects the passengers to an unnecessary and avoidable risk and this risk is imposed on the passengers independent of the actual sinking of the ship.

5. Conclusion

What are the morals of this story for our understanding of the ethics of belief? They are as follows: (1) the popular perception that beliefs are private matter is just false; (2) holding a belief can itself constitute a moral wrong; (3) holding beliefs that violate epistemic norms often has the result that the belief is morally wrong because it subjects others to harm in a manner that violates core moral principles; and (4) beliefs can be moral wrongs even when not manifested as actions. So we ought to be deeply concerned with the epistemic and moral status of both our own beliefs and the beliefs of others as bona fide beliefs involve dispositions to act and so often affect others in morally unacceptable ways. To be sure, this is not likely to be a popular conclusion, but it is the correct one.

Notes

- [1] While this paper will focus on the general case of some religious beliefs the results are by no means limited to this specific domain.
- [2] Clifford (1877).
- [3] Here we can vindicate Clifford by eliminating the ambiguity concerning the nature of the evaluative terms in Clifford's (1877) conclusion as discussed in Steup (2001). What can be shown is that epistemic wrongs often coincide with moral wrongs, although ethical wrongs are neither implied by nor identical to epistemic wrongs alone. It is also worth noting that the same argument can be run against the concept of religious *acceptance*, where acceptance does not involve belief but only the adoption of a proposition as a guide for action. See Cohen (1997) on belief and acceptance and note that this renders the issue of doxastic voluntarism in this context somewhat irrelevant.
- [4] See Peirce (1906).
- [5] See Peirce (1878, 129 ff), and see Ryle (1949) for the most thoroughly worked out account of this view.
- [6] Peirce (1878).
- [7] For a thorough and illuminating discussion of dispositions that builds on the work of C. B. Martin see Heil (2003).
- [8] Putnam's (1963) superspartan and superactor cases should spring to mind here.
- [9] Perhaps one could, as in the case of other more basic dispositions, infer that such a disposition is present from detailed observation of the micro-constitution of Joe, but we do not currently know how to do so.
- [10] Notice that this is perfectly compatible with the idea that there are degrees of belief. Such degrees of belief can be understood to track the strength of the causal connection.
- [11] The source of the problem here is the illicit and tacit assumption of verificationism. When that is rejected the causal (as opposed to logical) interpretation of beliefs as dispositional is not especially problematic and Putnam's superspartan and superactor cases are no longer problematic. They simply involve defeated dispositions.
- [12] See, for example, Plantinga (1983), Adler (1999) and Conee and Feldman (2004).
- [13] See Clifford (1877, 40) for his rendering. Clifford's maxim is, of course, antedated by the Humean and Lockean statements of this principle.
- [14] This is basically in agreement with the conception of evidentialism offered in Conee and Feldman (2004).
- [15] See Adler (1999) and Clark (2002).
- [16] See van Fraassen (1989, 159–160).
- [17] On conditionalizing and incoherence see Teller (1973). Another possibility is that one might suppose that pragmatic reasons might raise *S*'s degree of belief that *p* and lower his degree of belief that $\neg p$, but Zemach (1997) has shown that it is not possible to maintain this view because practical reasons *cannot* increase the probability of a belief.
- [18] It is worth reiterating Zemach's (1997) result here in order to block the expected response. That result is that practical reasons cannot raise the probability of a belief.
- [19] See Erwin and Siegel (1989).
- [20] Shaffer and Oakley (2005) addresses a real case of this sort in the context of contemporary psychology.
- [21] There is another way that religious beliefs have been defended that is worth mentioning. Pargetter (1990), Plantinga (1981, 1983, 2000) and Alston (1983, 1990) have all made appeals to direct religious perception and this approach is criticized in Shaffer 2004. The basic idea of that criticism is based on the recognition that perceptual contents must be individuated either widely or narrowly. When the appeal to direct perception is treated from the narrow content individuation perspective the appeal to religious experience reduces to a form of the inferential approach to justification and hence fails for the reasons given here. When the appeal to

- perceptual content individuation is treated from the wide perspective the defenders of the appeal to religious perception beg the question against the atheist.
- [22] Concerning the problem of miracles and whether such reports always violate epistemic principles, see Earman (2000).
- [23] Again it is important to emphasize that this argument will also work against the weaker notion of acceptance.
- [24] The issue of doxastic voluntarism will not be addressed here in any greater detail. It is worth noting again that perhaps what is at issue here is the notion of acceptance rather than belief, where acceptance is merely the voluntary adoption of a proposition as the basis for action. But this would only strengthen the point about the epistemic inadequacy of religious belief and would not impact on the issue that such acceptance imposes an unnecessary and avoidable risk on others. It seems plausible to suppose that James (1897), for example, was confusing the two notions in the context of his discussion of religious belief. See Cohen (1992) on the distinction between belief and acceptance.
- [25] This is neither to say that moral evaluations apply to all causal antecedents of a given event nor that they always apply to causal antecedents of events. The principle need and should only apply in the case of intentional actions and only to the proximate causes of an action. These are, admittedly, vague notions, but the principle is, nevertheless, sound.
- [26] This strategy of argument, of course, also implicates many non-religious beliefs like racism, etc., and it does not necessarily implicate every religious belief.
- [27] It is worth noting that if holism about belief systems is true (i.e., the view that belief systems are logically interconnected systems) and BRP is true, then in virtue of the fact that even one religious belief in such a system subjects others to serious, unnecessary and avoidable harm, it would seem to follow that the whole religious belief system is implicated as morally wrong in virtue of its logical connection to dispositions to act that do subject others to harm. One need not, of course, accept holism of this sort, but if it is true then things are likely to be morally dire for those who do willingly subscribe to such belief systems.

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