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Tony Frontuto  
*College of DuPage*

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A Critique of William K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief"

by Tony Frontuto

(Philosophy 1100)

In 1877, an Oxford mathematician and philosopher by the name of William K. Clifford authored an essay entitled, "The Ethics of Belief," in which he famously argued that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (139). His contention, that we have a moral obligation to examine our beliefs and find sufficient cause for holding them to be true, is supported by the story of a ship owner who, despite knowing his ship is old and not well built at the start, sends it to sea on an emigrant voyage. The ship owner stifles doubts that his ship is unseaworthy, even though it has been suggested to him that it is not. His ship has made many voyages and weathered many storms; it had always come home in the past, and so he believes, on faith alone, that it will do so again. When the ship sinks, killing everyone aboard, Clifford holds the ship owner as responsible for those deaths. He charges that the ship owner's sincere belief in the soundness of his ship is no defense, "because [the ship owner] had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him" (Clifford 135).

Clifford further contends that, even if the ship owner had believed correctly, and that his ship had made the voyage safely, that his decision to send it to sea in the first place would still have been immoral, seeing as how it was grounded in a flawed epistemological judgment. Clifford states that "the question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of [the ship owner's] belief, not the matter of it; not what it was, but how he got it; not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him" (136). Clifford therefore takes the position that it is unethical to accept as true any belief which has not been objectively verified, and in doing so he directly contradicts his own epistemological and moral arguments. The central tenet of Clifford's philosophy, "that it is wrong always, everywhere, and for everyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (139), is itself reducible to mere belief, and as such it cannot be objectively verified. Thus, it remains at the level of the subjective, which means, in epistemological terms, his position holds the potential to devolve into subjectivism. Clifford provides no evidence to support the truth of his position, yet he expects us to believe it, and beyond, to structure our entire existence around it.

Clifford's essay is intended to be an epistemological and moral rejection of subjectivism, a philosophical concept which holds that knowledge, and therefore truth, is limited to self-experience. Subjectivism supposes that truth can be found within oneself, through one's own experiences, such as when a religious person sincerely believes to have discovered a divine truth through prayer, meditation, reasoning, or some other means internal to oneself. Clifford instead argues in favor of objectivism, a philosophical concept which holds that truth can be gained only through objective verification, such as a mathematical proof. Clifford argues strongly in favor of objectivist ethics, going so far as to say that anything less is immoral, and yet he grounds his entire argument in favor of those ethics upon a subjective claim.

How, then, can we trust it? How can Clifford expect us to lead our lives in adherence to his precepts? Would we not be immoral to accept his beliefs as true, given that Clifford has not provided us with any necessary or sufficient proof of their verity? Is Clifford himself not acting immorally by claiming the truth of his positions when they are not objectively verifiable? Clifford's failure to reconcile these contradictions causes his entire argument to come unraveled, because if we are to follow the ethical standards that Clifford demands of us, then we must immediately reject their

foundation. If we did not, according to Clifford's own philosophy, we would be acting immorally, just like the ship owner in his story.

William K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" ultimately fails to convince the astute reader of the verity of its claims that subjectivist ethics (those based upon the idea that truth is limited to self-experience) are immoral. While it advocates strongly in favor of objectivist ethics (those based upon the idea that truth can only be learned through objective verification), the fact that the very basis of the argument is rooted in a subjective claim – that it is wrong for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence – causes the argument to at once become completely unraveled. We cannot therefore embrace Clifford's position without immediately throwing out his premise, lest we become immoral by not doing so.

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#### Works Cited

Clifford, William K. "The Ethics of Belief." *Philosophy: The Quest for Truth*. Ed. Louis Pojman and Lewis Vaughn. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 134-138. Print.