

The ethics of belief

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Argumentative Essay on “ The Ethics of Belief” PHIL 2641 Online – Section 001 February 13, 2008 William K. Clifford sets out to show in “ The Ethics of Belief” that “ it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence...” In this paper, I will show that his argument lacks key definitions needed in order to found his inference upon and that it begs the question as to what qualifies as “ insufficient” evidence. Furthermore, I will show that the primary issue is not the belief but the results of the belief that is important and that all judgment and interpretation should be based upon said results.

Clifford introduces his argument by using the example of a shipbuilder who allows his ship to be used on a transoceanic voyage despite its age and the supposed need for repair. The vessel sinks and Clifford asserts that the ship owner is guilty of the death of the passengers because his belief in the ship’s seaworthiness was unsupported and ill-founded. However, there are several problems with his conclusion. First, Clifford ignores the ship owner’s reliance on the vessel’s past sailing history as being sufficient evidence as to its stable condition.

The fact that the vessel had made many a voyage without incident can be viewed as sufficient proof of its ability to set sail safely. This begs the question, “ How can one determine what constitutes sufficient evidence? ” The ship owner by relying on the history of the ship alone could have met his obligation. A second problem with Clifford’s argument is that he likely oversimplified the cause of the ship’s sinking. Perhaps the ship sank because there was a collision with another ship. Perhaps it sank because it struck an iceberg in the water.

It may have sunk because of human error. In all of these scenarios no amount of fortification of the ship's structure would have Argumentative Essay on " The Ethics of Belief" Page 2 of 3 prevented the demise of the voyage. Any one or combination of these causes could have been responsible for the ship's fate, yet the ship's age and need for repair is identified as the sole cause of the ship's sinkage. Finally, Clifford fails to address the source of the ship owner's doubt and therefore leaves a multitude of unanswered questions.

If the question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of belief and whether or not one has the right to believe in the first place, then would the ship owner have been culpable had the doubts about the ship's condition not been introduced? Is a person required to investigate EVERY doubt or question that is raised by another, which directly or indirectly impacts their belief? What if the source of doubt is unreliable? Without properly addressing these questions it is difficult to determine what the ship owner's (or anyone else's) responsibility was in the first place.

This, I assert, is the fundamental problem with Clifford's argument. To implicitly assume that one is guilty for simply believing without " sufficient" evidence can not be easily determined because the standards and thus the determination for " right" and " wrong" are too vague. The solution follows immediately. Since a person can have a different belief at any given point in time and there is no metric by which to determine the sufficiency of evidence upon which they are based, it is not the belief that is to be judged,

but rather the action and the positive or negative impact upon society that results from it.

Clifford's primary concern was how beliefs impact humanity, and the impact can only be determined by assessing actions, not beliefs. Argumentative Essay on "The Ethics of Belief" Page 3 of 3 We can now see that Clifford's uncogent argument is the result of a lack of clarity as to how one could determine whether or not given evidence was sufficient and the vagueness surrounding the definitions of "right" and "wrong". In its amended form, however, the argument is valid and can serve as a useful tool to determine and measure the overall impact beliefs have on society.

My central argument is an inductive argument. Here are the premises and the conclusion: Premise 1: Premise 2: Conclusion: There are no clear metrics to measure the sufficiency of evidence from which a person's beliefs are derived. Actions and their impacts on society are definite and measurable. Therefore, people should probably be judged based upon their actions and not their beliefs. My argument is cogent because my premises are true and it is improbable that my conclusion is false. Furthermore, no evidence which would have rendered a different conclusion has been ignored.