

Ethics of belief case study example

[Experience](#), [Belief](#)



Introduction

Moral culpability can be defined as the degree or level of wrongfulness based on moral standards rather than the formulated legal standards. In his book *The Ethics of Belief*, William Clifford tries to illustrate this concept by giving an analogy to a ship owner and his ship. In the analogy, the ship owner manages to convince himself that his ship is seaworthy and can be sent to sea. He does this without verification and the result is that the vessel sinks and many people lose their lives but he goes ahead to collect his insurance settlement.

The ship-owner can be noted as being guilty of a wrong act. However, he is also morally culpable for believing as he did. The ship-owner committed a wrong act by believing that his vessel was sea worthy and could be sent to sea when in actual sense it cannot, his belief had legal or moral justification. In essence, his unjustified belief had an effect on many people and that he was wrong to act on them (Clifford 1999). Clifford in this analogy therefore concludes that beliefs that are based on inconclusive evidence are culpably wrong no matter how trivial they may seem.

In the second analogy on this issue, Clifford talks about a group of agitators who make levy false and uninvestigated accusations about a religious group of people who they think are indoctrinating their children by illegal and unfair means although the accusers themselves believe that the charges are true. The accusers were culpably wrong for believing that their charges are justified even when the evidence before them was not sufficient for them to acquire the right to believe that their accusation were indeed justified. The case is not morally different from the example of the ship-owner because in

both cases, unjustified and wrong beliefs had a major effect on many people. The common factor that emanates from this case is that those beliefs were morally culpable.

Clifford uses variants (for example, the setting and the individuals involved) in the two examples to try and put his point through that the moral duty to justify and question beliefs applies and extends to all human beings irrespective of their location, society or their position within that society.

Clifford is therefore to a certain degree correct in concluding that our moral evaluation of the ship-owner and the agitators because in both cases, it is relatively easy to deduce that the actions of the two were not justified under global societal norms (Clifford 1999).

Clifford then gives a counter argument by giving an alternative explanation of why the ship owner and the agitators are morally culpable. He states that they are not guilty because of their beliefs, but because of their decisions to act on and accept on those beliefs. This alternative explanation therefore maintains that both parties are guilty for not taking time to gather conclusive evidence to back their beliefs (Clifford 1999). This argument is quite satisfactory because normally in any society, even though one might truly believe in certain propositions without a shadow of doubt, it is still a moral duty for one to fully investigate the beliefs before acting on them.

Clifford overall extends the principle that it is not proper to have beliefs that have no sufficient proof or backup and this applies to all believers. This is because the beliefs are the ones that generally shape our actions and it is therefore improper to act based on these unjustified beliefs. This extends to all believers and people since every one of them has the capability to

promulgate or stifle propositions that are poorly supported . These unjustified beliefs can lead any believer to commit actions that are culpably wrong.

References

Clifford, W. K. (1877 [1999]), The ethics of belief, in T. Madigan, ed, The ethics of belief and other essays, Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 70–96.