PHI 1100: Ethics & Critical Thinking

Sessions 12 & 13
March 5th & 10th, 2020

Normative Epistemology:
"Ethics of Belief", Verifying/Revising Beliefs
Last week we considered how being familiar with intellectual character virtues can give you a general target to aim at in your intellectual conduct:

- but some complications concern the **attainability** of these ideals, whether they can have **downsides**, or whether the vices can actually be good in some instances, etc.

- This **virtue epistemological** approach to characterizing good/bad reasoning also **assumes that people have enough control over their beliefs to be held responsible for their intellectual character**.
A lot of the intellectual virtues discussed last week have to do with having evidence to support our beliefs.

• ...but not just any evidence, and also a sufficient amount of it.

This week is all about evidence:

– **Is it ever acceptable to believe something with insufficient evidence?**

– **How should we change our beliefs in light of new evidence?**
  • Are we naturally resistant to changing our views?
  • How do we know when it’s acceptable to stop seeking new evidence and be confident in our existing knowledge?

– **What types of evidence do we use, and what are their weaknesses?**
  • This week we’ll focus on empirical evidence = information obtained via our senses
    – including scientific evidence = empirical evidence obtained through the (hypothetico-deductive) scientific method
  • (Next week we will focus on testimonial evidence.)
Is it ever acceptable to believe something with insufficient evidence?

– This question is the subject of a debate on “the ethics of belief” between W.K. Clifford (1845-79) & William James (1842 – 1910):

» Clifford defends what is called the “requirement of total evidence” (RTE) = when forming or reconsidering our beliefs, we ought to consider all pieces of relevant evidence at our disposal, instead of just a portion of the evidence:

• …and strongly rejects the idea that anyone may believe anything on the basis of faith, rather than evidence.

» James, in contrast, argues that it is unavoidable – and thereby must be considered acceptable – that people hold beliefs based upon faith rather than evidence.

Instead of requiring that beliefs can only be justified if the believer has considered all available evidence,

• James argues that beliefs can be justified by the consequences of holding them, rather than whether they are based on evidence or not.
Is it ever acceptable to believe something with insufficient evidence?

- Clifford gives a (hypothetical) example of a shipowner who talked himself into “a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy”,
  - despite evidence that the ship was old & in need of expensive repairs.
    - The ship sinks (leaving no survivors), & the shipowner collects insurance $.

Clifford asserts that the shipowner “had no right to believe on [the basis of] such evidence as was before him.

- He had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts.
  - And although in the end he may have felt so sure about it that he could not think otherwise,
    » yet [since] he had knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind,
    ➢ he must be held responsible for it.” (1)

In fact, Clifford thinks the shipowner should be held accountable for believing without proper evidence even if doing so had no negative consequences (even if the ship didn’t sink & all the passengers survived)!
Clifford urges that we ought to censure (blame, shame, condemn) anyone who believes something they “had no right to believe on [the basis of] such evidence as was before him”.

– On his view, the appropriateness of a belief should be judged on the belief’s etiology (origin; how it was formed or acquired),
  • …not on the consequences of holding such a belief.

– If someone took all possible evidence into account while developing their belief, they are justified in holding it;
  » if they failed to seek out evidence, or ignored/suppressed evidence they should have considered, they are at fault for for believing without justification.

This is a deontological (rule-based) approach to judging the rightness/wrongness of someone’s beliefs,
  » because it applies a strict rule that “It is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence”
Clifford spells out the implications of his rule that “It is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence”:

- He thinks people are obligated to try to verify their beliefs before acting upon them:
  - “…even when a man’s belief is so fixed that he cannot think otherwise,
    - he still has a choice in regard to the action suggested by it,
    - and so [he] cannot escape the duty of investigating on the ground of the strength of his convictions” (2)

He notes potential problems with holding people to this standard:

1. “No man holding a strong belief on one side of a question . . . can investigate it with such fairness and completeness as if he were really in doubt and unbiased;
   - the existence of a belief not founded on fair inquiry unfits a man for the performance of this necessary duty.” (3)
   - I.e., someone who has already formed a false belief is not in a good position to verify their belief
     - (which would require evaluating the evidence impartially, which someone can only do if they aren’t already committed to a particular view)
…someone who has already formed a false belief is not in a good position to verify their belief

- Even if they do try to put their belief to the test, they are much more likely to hold onto their current belief than to reject it in favor of a new view.

William James spoke at length of the same phenomenon:

- “The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new experience that puts them to a strain. . . .
  - He saves as much of [his previous mass of opinions] as he can, for in this matter of belief we are all extreme conservatives.
  - So he tries to change first this opinion, and then that (for they resist change very variously), until at last some new idea comes up which he can graft upon the ancient stock with a minimum of disturbance of the latter...
  - [He preserves his] older stock of truths with a minimum of modification, stretching them just enough to make them admit the novelty, . . . in ways as familiar as the case leaves possible.” (Pragmatism, 2-3)

- “Loyalty to [our existing beliefs] is the first principle [of responding to new evidence] – in most cases it is the only principle:
  - . . . by far the most usual way of handling phenomena so novel that they would make for a serious rearrangement of our preconceptions is to ignore them altogether, or to abuse those who bear witness for them.” (3)
James notes that, in addition to resisting changes to our beliefs,
- we especially resist adopting any new beliefs
  that are inconsistent or in conflict with any of our existing beliefs.
  
  - (descriptive justificatory) **coherentism** = we strive for a belief system
    that is coherent (forms a unified, non-contradictory whole),
    and avoid hold beliefs that conflict with each other

  “…the greatest enemy of any one of our [possible beliefs]
  may be the rest of our truths [i.e., most deeply-held beliefs].
  
  - [Beliefs] have once for all this desperate instinct of self-preservation
    and of desire to extinguish whatever contradicts them.
  
  - **My belief in the Absolute** [a higher power] . . .
    must run the gauntlet of all my other beliefs.
    - Grant that it may be true in giving me a moral holiday.
    - Nevertheless, as I conceive it, . . . it clashes with other truths of mine
      whose benefits I hate to give up on its account.
      - It happens to be associated with a kind of logic
        of which I am the enemy, I find that it entangles me in
        metaphysical paradoxes that are unacceptable, etc., etc.
    - . . . as I have enough trouble . . . already without adding the trouble of carrying
      these intellectual inconsistencies, I personally just give up the Absolute.” (4)
Clifford thinks **people are obligated to try to verify their beliefs before acting upon them**

... **potential problems with holding people to this standard:**

- In addition to the interference of *confirmation bias* with our ability to impartially evaluate our own existing beliefs,

2. **people often adopt beliefs that will support actions they have already committed themselves to performing**

   - (instead of the other way around: deciding how to act on the basis of deeply-, permanently-held beliefs)

   - “He who truly believes [something] which prompts him to an action has looked upon the action to lust after it, he has committed [to the action] already in his heart.” (3)

Psychologists sometimes describe this as a consequence of **cognitive dissonance** *(video: bit.ly/2TkNsVA):*

» We feel discomfort when our beliefs are inconsistent with our actions: so, in order to resolve this tension,

   - we may adjust our beliefs in order to bring them into alignment with our observed behavior.
Clifford thinks people are obligated to try to verify their beliefs before acting upon them

... potential problems with holding people to this standard:

3. Moreover, people’s beliefs are interconnected & interdependent, so it’s difficult to abandon a single belief without having to tear down a whole structure of related beliefs to which the one belief belongs.

» Our set of beliefs is “so organized & compacted together that no part of it can be isolated from the rest” (Clifford 3)

René Descartes (1596-1690) made this point in his “Meditations on First Philosophy”:

» He sought to re-evaluate all of his beliefs, so that he’d only hold onto the ones he could be absolutely certain were true & properly justified;
  • but he found that he couldn’t verify his beliefs by assessing them one by one,
    • because every time he’d consider one belief (A),
    • the rest of his beliefs (B-Z) would give him reasons to hold onto A instead of giving it up.
Descartes used the metaphor of a building ("edifice") to describe the way his beliefs are structured,
• where certain deep-seated, fundamental beliefs provide a foundation or basis for other beliefs,
  • just like a house or a skyscraper is built up piece by piece from a foundation.

In order to make sure that he wouldn’t hold onto even a single belief that wasn’t adequately justified by the evidence available to him,

• Descartes decided to “demolish [all of his beliefs] completely and start again right from the foundations”:

  In other words, he had to abandon the entire collection of his former beliefs,
  • in order to make sure that he did not continue to believe something merely because it cohered with any of his other beliefs.
The comic from *The Oatmeal* illustrates (literally!) how our beliefs fit together, & how our brain exerts effort to keep this structure intact:

Your brain loves consistency. It builds a worldview like we build a house.

It has a foundation and a frame and windows and doors and it knows exactly how everything fits together.

If new piece is introduced and it doesn’t fit, the whole house falls apart.

Your brain protects you by rejecting that piece.

It then builds a fence and a moat and refuses to let in any visitors.
Despite acknowledging some potential problems with this rule, Clifford doubles-down on the standard that

**People are obligated to try to verify their beliefs before acting upon them**

...on the grounds that our beliefs are not private, personal matters:

- Instead, all of our beliefs influence our actions in the world, which inevitably affects other people’s lives.
  - “…no belief held by one man, however seemingly trivial the belief, and however obscure the believer, is ever actually insignificant or without its effect on the fate of mankind” (3)

Clifford describes belief as *sacred*, and declares that

» “[belief] is desecrated when given to unproved & unquestioned statements,

  - for the solace and private pleasure of the believer;
  - to add a tinsel splendor to the plain straight road of our life and display a bright mirage beyond it;
  - or even to drown the common sorrows of our kind by a self-deception which allows them not only to cast down, but also to degrade us.” (ibid.)
Clifford compares tolerance of unjustified beliefs to willingness to allow a terrible disease to spread throughout one’s society and insists that we have a responsibility to practice good epistemic “hygiene”, in order to protect other people from false beliefs:

“It is not only the leader of men, statesmen, philosopher, or poet, that owes this bounden duty [to only hold justified beliefs] to mankind.

- Every rustic who delivers in the village alehouse his slow, infrequent sentences, may help to kill or keep alive the fatal superstitions which clog his race.
- Every hard-worked wife of an artisan may transmit to her children beliefs which shall knit society together, or rend it in pieces.
- No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can [allow a person to] escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe.” (4)

“Our duty to mankind...is to guard ourselves from [false] beliefs as from pestilence, which may shortly master our own body and then spread to the rest of the town.

- What would be thought of one who, for the sake of a sweet fruit, should deliberately run the risk of bringing a plague upon his family and his neighbors?
- …We all suffer severely enough from the maintenance & support of false beliefs and the fatally wrong actions which they lead to,
  – the evil born when one such belief is entertained is great & wide.” (ibid.)
“To sum up: it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

• If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards,
  – keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind,
  – purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of [people] that call into question or discuss it,
  – and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it
    • —the life of that man is one long sin against mankind.” (5)

Clearly, then, Clifford thinks we ought to be completely intolerant of any unsupported beliefs, even those that seem to have no obvious negative consequences
  » (e.g. beliefs people maintain just for fun, like telling kids about Santa or the Tooth Fairy, reading your horoscope, not walking under ladders due to superstition…)
Clifford’s view implies that we must not close our minds to additional evidence:

- **the “requirement of total evidence”** = when forming or reconsidering our beliefs, we ought to consider all pieces of relevant evidence at our disposal, instead of just a portion of the evidence.

- **Saul Kripke counters that we can be justified in being dogmatic** (closed-minded, obstinate, unwilling to change our views) about at least some of our beliefs:
  - If you really know something (e.g., that the Earth is spherical), seeking out additional evidence does us no good:  
    - Additional evidence that agrees with your view won’t do anything to change your mind,  
      » (and it could potential be harmful to us, if encountering more affirmation evidence unduly increases our confidence that we could not possibly be wrong)  
    - Evidence that contradicts your view (e.g., flat Earth propaganda) can only hurt you by pulling you away from your true belief.
Saul Kripke counters that we can be justified in being **dogmatic** (closed-minded, obstinate, unwilling to change our views) about at least some of our beliefs.

Ernest Sosa describes the ambiguity involved in determining when you have all the evidence you need & **don’t need to continue your inquiry**, – spelling out a *paradox* involved in knowing when you really do know:

- He identifies **two factors relevant to deciding when to close our minds:**
  - “First, **how high are the stakes?**”
    - The more influence a belief has upon your life, the more important it is to get it right
      -- which implies that you should gather maximal evidence,
    - but it also gives you reason to close your mind to protect your belief if you think you already know the truth.
  - “Second, **how certain are we [about our beliefs], and how properly certain?**”
    - If you’re very certain about your belief, that suggests that you don’t need to gather more evidence,
    - But if you’re very certain about a false belief, then you really ought to consider more evidence so you can learn the truth!
Clifford considers an objection that obeying the requirement of total evidence would mean that we could never commit to any beliefs at all.

- (because no belief could ever be fully justified according to this standard).

- “Are we then to become universal skeptics, doubting everything,
  • afraid always to put one foot before the other until we have personally tested the firmness of the road?

- Are we to deprive ourselves of the help & guidance of that vast body of knowledge which is daily growing upon the world,
  • because neither we nor any other one person can possibly test [one percent] of it by immediate experiment or observation,
  • and because [our belief] would not be completely proved [unless] we did?

- Shall we steal and tell lies because we have had no personal experience wide enough to justify the belief that it is wrong to do so?”

The objection Clifford is discussing here is known as the problem of induction = the worry that we can never be justified in holding a large number of our fundamental beliefs, which are based upon generalization or prediction from limited prior evidence.
We tend to draw generalizations about how things work in our world from observed regularities or patterns:

- e.g., every time you see a swan, it has white feathers, so you believe the generalization that “all swans are white”, and on the basis of this generalization you are likely to predict that “the next swan I see will be white”

**induction** = the reasoning process by which we form beliefs about unobserved phenomena on the basis of past observations,

- including *generalization* (drawing conclusions about a whole group on the basis of observations of some group members)
- and *prediction* (drawing conclusions about the future on the basis of observations of the past)

A *lot* of our day-to-day reasoning is inductive:

- Though inductive conclusions aren’t guaranteed to be true (because they’re based only on limited evidence from one’s own past experiences), they’re nevertheless helpful for allowing us to make informed choices about how to act (e.g., “I should take an aspirin to relieve my headache, since aspirin has been effective in providing pain relief in the past.”)
**problem of induction** = the worry that we can never be justified in holding a large number of our fundamental beliefs, which are based upon generalization or prediction from limited prior evidence

- Think about the generalization that “all swans are white”, and prediction that “the next swan I see will be white”
  - On the one hand, these are perfectly reasonable beliefs.

However, you have not seen every single swan!

» So, by the **requirement of total evidence** (we ought to consider all pieces of relevant evidence, instead of just a portion of the evidence), you ought not to believe that “all swans are white” until you have checked every single swan
  - …but you’re never going to do that, (because then you’d spend a whole lifetime just searching for swans, in order to verify this one belief).

- So, the problem of induction is basically that we ought not to fully trust beliefs based upon induction – even though we do so constantly.
problem of induction = the worry that we can never be justified in holding a large number of our fundamental beliefs, which are based upon generalization or prediction from limited prior evidence

David Hume famously argued that
- we are not truly justified in holding any beliefs about what will happen in the future: not even “the sun will rise tomorrow”.
  - We have evidence (from our previous personal experience) that the sun has risen every previous day,
    » and we tend to conclude from this evidence that the sun rises every day,
  - but this conclusion is not justified, because it takes for granted that the future will resemble the past,
    »...but we have no good reason to believe that the future will resemble the past:
      » this is merely an assumption.
Hume argued that many of our most basic beliefs are unjustified,
- because they rest upon unjustified assumptions
  - regarding the regularity of our universe (beyond what we can confirm from observable experience),
  - & the continuity/consistency between our past and our future.
- According to Hume,
  - **every time we draw a generalization** ("All X are Y") without checking every X to make sure it’s Y,
  - **or we predict the future** ("X will be Y, since X has always been Y in the past")
  - **we are making a inductive **"leap of inference"**: i.e., jumping to a conclusion that is not absolutely guaranteed to be true based on the evidence we have.

  » **E.g., no matter how many times we have seen something the same way** (thousands of white swans), it remains possible that the truth is different from what we’ve been able to observe (some swans are black).
…Let’s circle back to Clifford, who was considering an objection that obeying the requirement of total evidence would mean that we could never commit to any beliefs at all

He admits that tons of our beliefs rest upon inductive leaps of inference, as Hume emphasized:

– “A little reflection will show us that every belief, even the simplest and most fundamental, goes beyond experience when regarded as a guide to our actions.

  • A burnt child dreads the fire, because it believes that the fire will burn it today just as it did yesterday;
    – but this belief goes beyond experience, and assumes that the unknown fire of today is like the known fire of yesterday.

  • Even the belief that the child was burnt yesterday goes beyond present experience, which contains only the memory of a burning, and not the burning itself;
    – it assumes, therefore, that this memory is trustworthy, although we know that a memory may often be mistaken.” (8)

» In short, plenty of our everyday beliefs aren’t technically based upon sufficient evidence.
Clifford considers an objection that obeying the requirement of total evidence would mean that we could never commit to any beliefs at all.

- Clifford basically admits that there are cases in which the requirement of total evidence does not apply:
  - “…if [belief] is to be used as a guide to action, as a hint of what the future is to be,
    - it must assume something about that future, namely, that it will be consistent with [the past]; which is going beyond experience.” (8)

Even though beliefs based on induction aren’t completely justified,
- they’re acceptable if they’re based on enough evidence,
  - …which distinguishes them from absolutely unacceptable beliefs based entirely on “acts of faith”.

(Hume would probably counter that all induction is basically an act of faith,
- and Clifford’s just drawing this distinction so he claim that “we have no reason to fear [that] a habit of conscientious inquiry should paralyze the actions of our daily life” (7))
William James thinks Clifford’s standard that 
• “it is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence” 
is wrong, for many reasons:

1. Clifford assumes **doxastic voluntarism** = the view that people can voluntarily choose what to believe & what not to believe
   
   James counters that
   
   • “As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing, we hardly know how or why.
   
   – “…our non-intellectual nature does influence our convictions.
   
   – … pure insight and logic, whatever they might do ideally, are not the only things that really do produce our creeds.”

» James is suggesting that what we believe 
is not entirely under our control 
(at least, not to the extent that Clifford takes for granted in holding us accountable for the content of our beliefs);

• Mysterious factors like people’s individual preferences & personality seem to drive different people towards different convictions, despite being exposed to the same set of evidence.
William James thinks Clifford is wrong, for many reasons:

2. James agrees that many people believe with insufficient evidence, (and not just by using induction for practical purposes):
   – but he argues that doing so is not “reprehensible and pathological” (as in Clifford’s view), but rather “a normal element of making up our minds”.

   • E.g., we may have two opposing beliefs available to us, each supported with the same amount of evidence:
   – According to James, we are fully justified in letting our emotions steer us toward one option rather than another instead of suspending our judgment.

   » “Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions,
     • whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds;

   » for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision – just like deciding yes or no – and is attended with the same risk of losing the truth.” (4)
James agrees that many people believe with insufficient evidence, but he argues that doing so is “a normal element of making up our minds”.

James describes the vast majority of our intellectual commitments as the result of following an arational preference (i.e., one not based upon reasoning):

• Though people typically insist that their views reflect careful reasoning about an issue,
  – they tend to just find themselves attracted to certain beliefs, and then find ways to justify their attraction afterwards.

  » (This is a lot like the intuitionist explanation of how we decide what’s right/wrong.)

Because it’s inevitable that some of our beliefs have no rational basis (but instead stem from a preference),

• James thinks it’s excessive to hold people accountable for backing up every one of our beliefs with evidence.
3. James thinks **we are sometimes forced to make a choice between two beliefs (or belief systems) in order to decide what to do.**

   - If believing A vs. believing B won’t make a difference when it comes to the actions we are willing to pursue, then it may be best to refrain from committing to either belief:
     - **If you have no practical reasons to choose** one over the other, then, James suggests, you ought to only pick a side **when the evidence is overwhelmingly clear.**

   - But **often, taking action affirms one belief & rejects another:**
     - we can’t not act at all, so **we have to choose one of these beliefs even if we don’t have sufficient evidence for either one.**
       - E.g., **if you have to choose between two job offers (X & Y),** your choice inevitably signifies that you believe one offer is better than the other,
         - but because you don’t know how things will definitely turn out for you if you take either offer,
           - your choice isn’t based on evidence that choosing X will lead to better outcomes than choosing Y (or vice versa).
James thinks that **the appropriateness of a belief should be judged by the consequences of holding it:**

- If no one is hurt as a consequence of the belief, and the belief provides some sort of benefit to a person’s life, » a person is justified in regarding this belief as true.

**According to James’ instrumental theory of truth,**

» a belief can be considered true as long as it is **useful** for the believer to act upon it:
  - i.e., believing it has positive effects in helping the believer navigate through life, solve problems, and achieve their goals,
  - ...and the acting on the basis of the belief does not have negative consequences (like leading to poor decisions, failure, or danger)

**By this standard, plenty of beliefs people hold without evidence** (like that crystals give off healing energy, or that good people go to heaven after they die) **are quite acceptable for people to believe as long as holding these beliefs helps more than it hurts.**
James says, “There are two ways of looking at our duty in the matter of [belief]:

- **We must know the truth; and we must avoid error**
  - these are our first and great commandments as would-be knowers;
  - but they are not two ways of stating an identical commandment, they are two separable laws.
    - . . . by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life.

- **We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the avoidance of error as secondary;**

- **or we may . . . treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance.**
  - **Clifford . . . exhorts us to the latter course.**
    Believe nothing, he tells us, keep your mind in suspense forever, rather than by closing it on insufficient evidence incur the awful risk of believing lies.

  - **[I] think that the risk of being in error is a very small matter when compared with the blessings of real knowledge,**
    and [I’m] ready to be duped many times in [my] investigation rather than postpone indefinitely the chance of guessing true. . . .

  - We must remember that **these feelings of our duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional [emotional] life.**
    - . . . he who says, ‘Better go without belief forever than believe a lie!’ merely shows his own preponderant private horror of becoming a dupe.” (6)