Fides et Ratio

The Ethics of Belief

A Little Story

- ‘A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not 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 at 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 times 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 benevolent 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, *RR*, 151)

‘What shall we say of him?’

- ‘Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those families. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because he had no right to believe on 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 inasmuch as he had knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind, he must be held responsible for it.’

—Clifford (1877, *RR*, 51-152)

Some Observations

- We are not calling the ship owner a hypocrite.
  - We are allowing that he was perfectly sincere.
- We are, however, finding him blameworthy.
  - He ignored the relevant evidence (he ‘stifled’ it).
  - Indeed, he ‘knowingly and willingly worked himself into that frame of mind.’
    - For this, he must be held responsible.

One Long Sin

- ‘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 men 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…’—Clifford (1877)

Clifford's Principle

- (CP): 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence.'

How *Wrong*?

- This might mean:
  - that it is *immoral* to do so.
  - that it is *imprudent* to do so.
  - that it is *epistemically irresponsible* to do so.
- Perhaps, though, these may be connected thus:
  1. We have an epistemic duty to believe only that for which we have adequate evidence.
  2. We have both a moral and a prudential duty to discharge our epistemic duties.
  3. So, we have both a moral and a prudential duty to believe only that for which we have adequate evidence.
  - This, at any rate, seems to be what is animating Clifford's story.

A Seeming Purport

- It is wrong everywhere and always to believe anything *solely* on the basis of faith.
- CP holds, then, of *any* religious belief which is not grounded in evidence.
- There is no evidence for religious belief; all religious belief is ultimately faith-based.
- So, it is wrong everywhere and always to have religious belief.

Against Faith-based Belief

- A little argument against faith:

    1. (CP) It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.

    2. We have insufficient evidence to believe in God (however construed, as the God of the Christians, Zeus, Yaweh, Allah, what have you. . .).

    3. So, it is wrong, everywhere and for anyone to believe in God (however construed, as the God of the Christians, Zeus, Yaweh, Allah, what have you. . .).

Fideism

- Fideism: we can legitimately hold to/accept/believe certain propositions on the basis of faith, without having any evidence whatsoever in favour of them.
- Some (non-exhaustive) degrees of fideism:
  - Mad dog fideism: I can/should believe proposition *p* precisely because it seems absurd and incredible. (Tertullian? *Credo quia asburdum est.*)
  - Strong fideism: For any given proposition *p*, I can/should believe *p*, even though (i) I lack evidence for *p* and (ii) *p* seems incredible in its own terms.
  - Moderate fideism: For some proposition *p*, I can/should believe *p*, even though I lack evidence for *p*, so long as *p*: (i) seems credible in its own terms, and (ii) *p* coheres with other things I believe on the basis of adequate evidence.
  - Weak fideism: For some proposition *p*, I can/should believe *p*, though I lack evidence for *p*, as long as *p*: (i) seems credible in its own terms, and (ii) *p* derives from a reliable or trustworthy source.
    - N.b. Possibly 'weak fideism' is so weak that it is not appropriately called 'fideism'.

Against Strong Fideism (SF)

1. If SF, for any random *p*, possibly I can/should believe *p*.
2. It would be a grotesque abnegation of our rational faculties and also morally pernicious were we to believe certain propositions.
3. We should avoid being morally pernicious and should refrain from abnegating our rational faculties.
4. So, we must refrain from endorsing SF.

- One might grant this conclusion and try to extend this argument thus:

    1. One has grounds for religious belief only if SF.
    2. Not-SF.
    3. So, one never has grounds for religious belief.

A Supporter and a Dissenter

- We must remain vigilant against ‘a resurgence of fideism, which fails to recognize the importance of rational knowledge and philosophical discourse for the understanding of faith, indeed for the very possibility of belief in God.’ —John-Paul II, *Fides et Ratio* (1998, §55)

The Real Problem?

- If we relinquish evidence-based groundings for our beliefs, then we relinquish rational control altogether.
  - If we give up rational control, all bets are off: one might come to believe *just anything*—no matter how foolish, outlandish, or pernicious.
    - Surely, it can be neither right, nor prudent, nor humanly responsible to believe *just anything*.
      - When, however, we put controls on the admissible range of our beliefs, we are back in the game of assessment—and assessment seems to bring evidential grounding squarely back into play.

With Evidence and Argument

- First, what is the evidence for CP itself?
    - Regulative principles will require more sophisticated forms of evidence, including inductive evidence.
- Second, do I not (quite reasonably) believe a fair bit upon the authority of others?
    - I defer to others when and only when I, on the basis of evidence, believe that they are in a better position to believe the propositions they commend on the basis of evidence (currently) unavailable to me.
- Third, there is no proof for many, many perfectly reasonable things we believe (there are no invisible gremlins in the room, the universe did not begin five minutes ago. . .)
    - Evidence for *p* is not (or is only very rarely) *proof* for *p*: in fact, we refrain from believing these outlandish claims precisely because we endorse CP.

Could a miracle provide evidence?

- What, in general, counts as evidence?
  - We have divided all knowledge into the *a priori* and the *a posteriori*.
  - Presumably, knowledge based upon a miracle would need to be *a posteriori*.
- What if we witnessed something miraculous?
  - Would that not be very good evidence of the existence of something preternatural?
- When, if we've never had the pleasure, should we credit accounts of miracles offered by others, if ever?

Recall: *A Priori / A Posteriori*

- The Character of this Distinction
    - This is an epistemological distinction.
- The Distinction
    - One has *a priori* knowledge that p *iff* one knows p by reason or conceptual resources alone (that is, the extra-mental world makes no contribution to the justification of p).
    - *A posteriori* knowledge is knowledge that is not *a priori*.
        - N.b. this is a point about justification, not genesis.

Chains of Justification

- Suppose we justify *p* by appeal to *q* and *r*.
  - For instance, suppose we justify our belief (*p*) *that the lights are on* by appeal to our belief (*q*) *that we see they are on,* and then we justify our belief (*q*) by appealing to our belief (*r*) *that sense perception is generally reliable*.
- Then one might ask: on what basis to we believe *r*) What is our justification for that belief?
  - Pretty plainly the sceptic can always pose the question, 'Yes, but why do you suppose you're justified in believing *that*?
- So, a question: can chains of justification reach an end? Must they reach an end?
- Some possibilities:
  - Yes, they can: they eventually reach some foundation which is self-justifying, and so needs no further justification.
  - No, they cannot: they never reach a foundation, but are justified in some circular manner.
  - No, they cannot: eventually we reach some unjustified belief which is simply accepted as an article of faith.