Religious Studies (2012) **48**, 357–376 © Cambridge University Press 2012
doi:10.1017/S003441251100028X

'The ethics of belief' and belief about ethics: William Kingdon Clifford at the Metaphysical Society

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Abstract: As a member of the Victorian-era Metaphysical Society, W. K. Clifford contributed to debate about the prospects for morality in the absence of religion. Clifford thought its chances good. He presented a paper offering a 'scientific' approach to moral theory. In my discussion, I explore his proposal, using it to gain interpretative leverage on a paper he delivered before the Society only a year later, 'The ethics of belief'. I set aside the quarrel with religion so prominent in this influential essay and discount its evidentialist epistemology, the better to reveal it for what it is: a powerful exercise in moral suasion.

Many of those attracted to William Kingdon Clifford's influential essay, 'The ethics of belief', have appropriated or contested its supposed lessons for their own ends, as is the way in philosophy.[1] Some have ventured to endorse, others to expose, the evidentialist epistemology they discover therein.[2] Many have embraced and many resisted the anti-religious thrust of Clifford's argument.[3] Few, however, have teased out and examined the more properly ethical dimension of this epistemic-ethical manifesto.[4] Fewer still have attended to what Clifford actually says about ethics in the course of his essay. To fail to attend if not to these remarks in particular at least to his thinking about ethics more generally is to fail to engage the position he himself advances, or so I shall argue below.

The relative neglect of Clifford's thinking about ethics may be explained no doubt in various ways. His passing remarks on this topic in 'The ethics of belief' are somewhat cryptic and will strike many as woefully naive. Yet one factor contributing to this widespread neglect is a general lack of acquaintance with or even awareness of Clifford's wider body of work. One way to address this deficiency at least in some small measure and to redress the imbalance in

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appropriations of 'The ethics of belief' is to pair this well-known essay with one Clifford delivered some thirteen months earlier and at the same venue, the Victorian-era Metaphysical Society. Not only does his earlier essay, 'On the scientific basis of morals', set out the moral theory informing his insistence on 'the duty of inquiry', it provides interpretative leverage on his much-quoted maxim – Clifford's principle, as it has come to be known – 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence'.[5] To locate these two papers in the context of their delivery, moreover, serves to illuminate Clifford's larger aims.

In the discussion that follows, I provide an account of Clifford's approach to ethics as set out in the essay just mentioned, and I offer a reading of the 'The ethics of belief' informed by the moral theory he advances therein. On the basis of this account and this reading, and at the close of discussion, I identify aspects of his argument that seem to me to transcend his distinctive intellectual and cultural context and to speak to contemporary concerns – as is the way in philosophy. I begin, however, with brief observations about the Metaphysical Society designed to shed light on Clifford's interests and projects.

Religion, ethics, and science at the Metaphysical Society

The Metaphysical Society was founded in 1869 by a handful of individuals aiming to bring together prominent representatives of varying points of view in order to discuss and debate 'after the manner and with the freedom of an ordinary scientific society' questions pertaining to morality and theology occasioned by recent developments in science and by the spectre of metaphysical materialism. The founders' initial proposal was to extend invitations only to those predisposed to combat materialism and to promote theology. This plan, however, all but immediately gave way to one considerably more daring: scientific wolves were to be invited into the theological fold.[6] Owing to this change of orientation, the membership was even more diverse than originally intended and certainly no less distinguished. While it numbered among its ranks theologians of various persuasions (albeit all Christian of one sort or another), it also included scientists representing different disciplines, intuitionist and empiricist philosophers, statesmen, lawyers, and men of letters.[7]

Clifford was elected to the Society in 1874 at the unprecedented age of 29. He was a reputedly brilliant and remarkably original mathematician, and it was his interest in and advocacy of science that probably recommended him for election. Not only did he add to the roster of like-minded enthusiasts, he held decided views on controversies that engaged the Society. A lapsed Anglican and unyielding proponent of metaphysical naturalism, Clifford loved debate.[8] He shared with colleagues on both sides of the theological divide a keen interest in the intellectual viability of religious belief and the tenability of morality in the absence of religion.

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Indeed, two of the three papers he presented at the Society, those we consider below, addressed precisely these concerns.

Clifford had little doubt about the intellectual credentials of religious belief: it was, he maintained with others of his day, untenable. Yet what distinguished his position from the run of the mill was his claim that religious belief fails not simply on intellectual but also on moral grounds. The case he presented to colleagues at the Society took no notice of the substance of belief, it is important to recognize.[9] He argued instead that even to believe as religious believers all too typically are encouraged to do – in the absence of sufficient evidence, in deference to authority, and through refusal to doubt – is morally blameworthy.[10] In the context of widespread concern about the tenability of morality in the absence of religion, this argument was stunning.

In order to make his case, Clifford undertook two tasks. The more immediate was to explain just how and why the epistemic transgressions he laid at the doorstep of the religious were not only intellectually but also morally charged. This was his project in 'The ethics of belief'. Yet the success of this undertaking required the completion of a preliminary task, as Clifford well understood. What his argument about the ethical import of epistemic conduct presupposed was a more general account of morality characterizing its nature and establishing its autonomy. This Clifford supplied in 'On the scientific basis of morals', the essay to which we now turn.[11]

Human nature and a science of morality

Clifford's discussion in 'On the scientific basis of morals' is wide-ranging and bold – the modesty of his own assessment of his achievement notwithstanding.[12] He aims not only to put moral enquiry on a scientific footing, as his title indicates, but to propose an alternative to 'theories which are presently in vogue', as he explains in his introductory remarks. Taking his inspiration from 'some remarks of Mr. Darwin's [sic]' in the recently published *Descent of Man*, he purports to shed light on 'the present moral condition of man' via an account of the origin and function of 'the moral sense' or 'conscience' (106). His largely descriptive while admittedly speculative account of the development of moral consciousness in our species sets the stage for his closing admonitions as to the moral course we had best chart if we are to flourish in the future.

The sense in which Clifford's approach is scientific, the way in which it parts company with prevailing theories, and the moral compass it provides will emerge over the course of our exposition. We begin, however, as Clifford himself does, by attending to the distinctive features of human experience alleged to be fundamental to morality – 'facts' of human consciousness, as he would have it, commonly known as 'the moral sense' and well characterized as 'the moral appetite'. The former he describes as the distinctive 'pleasure or displeasure which

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is felt by the human mind in contemplating certain courses of action whereby they are felt to be *right* or *wrong*' (106, Clifford's emphasis). The latter he characterizes as 'a special desire to do the right things and to avoid the wrong ones' (106). 'Morals or ethic' on his usage refers, as he explains, to 'the doctrine' of these special feelings and desires (106). The task he sets himself is not to define these terms or the feelings to which they refer – they no more need definition than does 'the sense of taste' or the pleasures and displeasures associated with it (107) – but through an account of their origins to identify their proper function.

In pursuit of this aim, Clifford begins with an account of the moral experience and moral judgements of the individual. As for moral judgements, they achieve expression in maxims of the form, '"Do this particular thing because it is right" or "Avoid this particular thing because it is wrong" ' (107). While the form of such imperatives is categorical, their content is a function of the moral psychology of whoever makes them, he maintains. Differently put, it is filled in by an individual's feeling as to what is right or wrong and derives ultimately from his or her 'character' (107). The possibility of rampant moral subjectivism suggested by this account Clifford registers and holds at bay. 'Persons belonging to the same race at a given time', he observes, tend generally to agree in the 'ethical code' to which they subscribe (107). Yet this very observation all but implies the likelihood of moral relativism on a larger scale, as Clifford does not hesitate to acknowledge. There are 'considerable variations' he observes among moral codes across 'different races and times' (107). Yet it is precisely this reality, coupled with a recognition that moral codes may be 'modified by habit and education', that gives rise to a question Clifford poses on our behalf, 'What *ought* I feel to be right?' (107, Clifford's emphasis). Thus, while in the 'first instance' the question of right or wrong can only be answered in terms of what pleases one's own 'moral sense', it may further be addressed by appeal to prevailing mores (107). Neither of these essentially descriptive approaches to the question of right or wrong, however, comes to terms with, let alone settles, the normative question that lies at the heart of Clifford's concern.

In taking up the question of the moral normativity, Clifford again begins with the individual. The question, 'What *ought* I to feel to be right?', he glosses as the question, 'How shall I order my moral desires so as to be able to satisfy them most completely and continuously?' (107). Yet his solution to this challenging problem takes no account of the individual as such and is even more indifferent to the prevailing mores of the society to which he or she happens to belong. Rather, it takes as its point of reference 'the human organism' (108). The answer to the normative question is to be framed, Clifford proposes, in terms of the 'function' of the 'moral sense' as 'a property of the human organism' (108). What this function is must be discovered through 'the study of the conditions under which the moral sense was produced and is preserved' (107), a study that promises huge dividends. The principles it aims to identify Clifford characterizes as 'maxims of abstract or

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absolute right' (108). While they are not to be thought 'absolutely universal' – they are not, this is to say, 'eternal and immutable' – they are, nevertheless, 'independent of the individual' and are to be treated as 'practically universal for the present condition of the human species' (108).

The point of entry into this crucial investigation is the human psyche. Within the resources of consciousness Clifford discovers two distinct but related notions that serve differently to orient desires and to motivate conduct. The first, that of the 'individual self', enables one to forego immediate pleasure or to endure present pain in anticipation of the satisfaction of remote desires centring on oneself; by means of this concept, such anticipation itself becomes both immediate and pleasurable (110). The second is that of 'the tribal self'. When this notion is predominant in his or her consciousness, the individual is motivated to renounce self-interested pleasure in whatever shape or form in deference to the interests of the group (111). It is only the latter of these two notions that contributes to and furthers the moral life, on Clifford's account. 'There are no "self-regarding virtues" ', he maintains (121). Indeed, it is the 'tribal self' and not the 'individual self' that gives voice to the 'moral sense' otherwise known as 'conscience' (120).

Having drawn the connection between the 'tribal self' and the 'moral sense', Clifford sets about to identify the conditions under which this aspect of the individual psyche 'was produced and is preserved' (107). In accounting for its origin, he invites his audience to contemplate 'the simpler races of mankind' (111), an exercise designed to reveal what is fundamental to the mental make-up of our essentially social species. Members of allegedly primitive and appropriately simple societies – of 'tribes' in his lexicon – differ in two ways from individuals belonging to more developed and complex societies, he maintains. First, because the satisfaction of immediate desires looms large in their lives, 'the conception of self is less used and less developed' (111). Second, and far more important to his account of morality, the conception of self that is employed is 'less definite and more wide' than in members of more advanced societies – so much so that the notion of tribe is 'naturally included in the conception of self' in the consciousness of tribal members (111). Indeed, the notion of the 'tribal self' perhaps pre-dates that of the 'individual self' in the minds of members of simple societies from which the complex have presumably developed, or so Clifford ventures to suggest (111).

However this may be, the notion of the 'tribal self' has over 'the process of time' become 'fixed as a specific character in the constitution of social man', Clifford maintains (112). In explaining how this has transpired he introduces Darwinian themes. 'The tribe, *qua* tribe, has to exist', he writes, 'and it can only exist by aid of such an organic artifice as the conception of the tribal self in the minds of its members' (111). A tribe in this context is to be understood as 'a group of that size which in the circumstances considered is selected for survival or destruction *as a group*' (112). Those thus favoured will have managed not only to inculcate in their members a strong sense of tribal identity. Even more, the concept of the

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'tribal self' in those belonging to such groups 'is the most powerful and most habitually predominant as a motive over immediate desires' (111). While first 'implanted' in individuals 'by the need of the tribe as a tribe', the notion of 'the tribal self' has been sustained in social man, Clifford maintains, through a process of 'hereditary transmission' (112).[13]

The groundwork thus laid, Clifford sets about not only to bridge the divide between the simple societies he conceives as early and the more complex that have developed over the course of time, but more importantly to characterize the corresponding transformation in the notion of the tribal self. The first task he dispatches quickly with a sweeping reference to 'the settlement of countries, and the aggregation of tribes into nations' (112). In concert with and as a result of these changes, the notion of tribal self becomes 'wider and more abstract' (112). And while in the 'highest natures' it expands to encompass humanity in its entirety, the group to which the relevant motives and desires typically have reference is considerably more circumscribed. The tribal self is 'incarnate' in the individual in the guise of family or city, for example. What Clifford proposes to explain at this stage of his analysis, however, whatever the range of the tribal self, is how the tendency to prefer the interests of the group over those centring on the individual self – the 'quality or disposition' he designates 'by its old name Piety' – is to be inculcated in members of whatever social group (112).

He first approaches this explanatory task through routine sociological and psychological observations. Processes of social approbation and disapprobation strengthen individuals' inclination to favour tribal needs over immediate pleasures or self-interested goals; social ostracization or worse eliminates the uncooperative. More important than such external pressures, however, are internalized expressions of like and dislike the individual directs toward his or her own conduct and even character. When an individual's point of reference for what she does or who he is centres on the interests of the group, the conscience – the voice of the tribal self – has been awakened. Such 'self judgement in the name of the tribe' – the deliverance of the moral sense or conscience – is not the result of rational deliberation or based on personal experience, Clifford would have us understand. Indeed, 'conscience gives no reasons', he maintains (119). It is instead 'purely intuitive', even instinctual, a feature of the development of humanity as a social species (119).

None of this is to suggest that experience has made no contribution to the content of human morality in the past, however, nor that rational deliberation offers no guidance for the future. Quite the contrary: societies may be healthy or diseased, Clifford observes (112). Those that are healthy – that have fared well in the 'struggle to exist' – will have rightly understood 'the need of the tribe as a tribe' (112) – that which pertains to its flourishing. Only experience can determine what acts and what kinds of person contribute in actual fact to a tribe's well-being. Yet 'the social craft or art of living together', the aim of which is not merely to insure

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order but 'to improv[e] men's character', is not learned through any conscious process or by individual members of a society. It is rather 'learned by the tribe' via a process of natural selection and is effected by means of 'complex social arrangements' that pre-date the contrivance of 'any conscious mind' (115–116).

Once the implications of the preceding analysis have been grasped, however – once it is understood that '[e]thic is a matter of the tribe or community' (121) – rational deliberation may be assigned a role. Not only does it become plain that the 'sole allegiance' of the conscience is to the community, the signal importance of guiding conscience along its appointed path becomes evident (121). Society has means at its disposal to educate the moral sense, as we have seen: the mechanisms of approbation and disapprobation. The history of human societies, moreover, the diseased no less than the healthy, offers evidence as to the sort of individuals whose conduct serves or detracts from the social good. Thus while 'the moral sense is intuitive', Clifford writes at the close of his essay, 'it must in the future be directed by our conscious discovery of the tribal purpose which it serves' (123).

The science of morality and moral theory

Clifford characterizes his account of morality as 'scientific'. Yet this is not owing to its appeal to Darwinian themes, as one might suppose, for science does not consist of a body of knowledge, biological or otherwise, on his view.[14] Rather, it is best conceived as a method of acquiring knowledge (from experience on the assumption of the uniformity of nature), and of using the knowledge so acquired (as a guide to action). Science is a 'craft' (109). Even its most abstract propositions are to be understood as convenient 'shorthand expressions' subsuming a host of 'practical directions' of the form 'if you want so-and-so, do so-and-so' (109).[15] If morality is found to have a scientific basis, then, its maxims must be shown to be hypothetical directives derived from experience on the assumption of the uniformity of nature.

At the outset of his account of morality, Clifford proposes to satisfy precisely these requirements. At the essay's close, he explains just how he has achieved his goal. First and foremost, he has exhibited the sense in which ethical maxims are indeed hypothetical directives. Any such maxim properly analysed may be preceded by the formula, 'if you want to live together in this complicated way, then . . .' (119). While it is true that ethical maxims are categorical in form – 'Do this because it is right' – this misleading appearance is to be explained in two ways. On the one hand, the reason underlying such imperatives is lost to view: conscience is intuitive and gives no reasons, as we have seen. On the other, any refusal on the part of an individual to comply with morality's commands lacks merit from a moral point of view and is therefore unequivocally rejected. It is not only those among whom one lives who register this response. One's own conscience, the

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inescapable voice of the tribal self, condemns out of hand any such refusal or transgression (120).

As for experience, that which informs moral maxims is as we have seen that of the tribe as tribe. Groups that have survived in the struggle for existence have learned from experience what is and is not conducive to their flourishing. Yet those of us in the present day who have achieved a proper understanding of morality's purpose will find in the history of human societies a rich body of evidence on which to draw. Societies may be diseased as well as healthy, as noted above. The former just as much as if not more than the latter offer valuable lessons for those who would educate conscience in the present and guide the course of society into the future. We may thus supplement tribal experience with experience more self-consciously considered and with evidence more deliberately acquired.

Finally, the integrity of such investigation depends on the assumption of the uniformity of nature. The content of this presupposition in this context differs of course from any relevant to the physical sciences, as Clifford would have us appreciate. Even in the latter sciences, 'what this uniformity precisely is' is something we come gradually and better to grasp as 'we grow in the knowledge of it from generation to generation', he observes.[16] What it is important to appreciate for present purposes, however, is that just as in the sciences more generally, so the assumption here bears on science's raison d'être: to guide human action. In the case of moral enquiry and endeavour, the most powerful way to achieve this aim is by 'influencing character', Clifford maintains (120). Thus what the science of morality assumes is 'the efficacy of certain means of influencing character' (120). The 'uniformities' presupposed by those who participate in this effort, whether consciously or not, are 'observed uniformities between motive and action, between character and motive, between social influence and change of character' (120). Only on the assumption of such uniformities – assumptions about the psychological constitution of humans as a social species – does it make sense to engage in 'moral reprobation' and to assign 'moral responsibility' (120).

At the culmination of his essay, Clifford makes explicit how his approach to morality 'differ[s] somewhat in principle from the theories which are presently in vogue' (106). He takes issue, as we have just seen, with theories that take ethical maxims at face value, construing them as categorical imperatives rather than as hypothetical directives. He rejects as well utilitarian theories according to which 'the end of Ethic' is 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number', insisting that the well-being of the community, not the happiness of individual members, is morality's proper concern (121). Finally, he distances himself from any celebration of 'Altruism'. The individuals Clifford most admires – whose character he would have all emulate – are concerned not with 'the doing of good to others as others', but rather with 'service of the community' (122). Indeed, those of greatest value to

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society – those who owing to their character act most reliably in the interest of the group – 'lose' in such service 'the consciousness that [they] are anything different from the community' (122). And thus by a remarkable irony he does not note, Clifford holds up as the very model of a moral individual one whose consciousness resembles that of the simple ancestor from whom she descends: whereas the notion of tribe is 'naturally included in conceptions of self' in members of primitive societies, the identification of self with community is the mark of moral achievement in the more advanced societies that have developed over time.[17]

Yet perhaps this result should not be thought ironic after all, for in the context of his wider debate with members of the Metaphysical Society and given the larger concerns of his day, Clifford's fundamental aim is not merely to put morality on a scientific footing, but to advance a naturalistic account of the moral life, one that both accounts for the content of ethical maxims and explains the tenacity of conscience. This he does not simply by focusing moral concerns on social life, but by rooting morality in the very nature of humans as a social species. In undertaking this project, it is any religious account of morality – rather than the philosophical theories 'presently in vogue' – he might be thought more pointedly to oppose.

Moral theory and 'The ethics of belief'

In the final pages of 'On the scientific basis of morals', Clifford offers his one and only example of the practical implications of his approach. The importance of the 'the duty of private judgment, of searching after truth, the sacredness of belief which ought not to be used on unproved statements', he writes, all 'follow only on showing the enormous importance to society of a true knowledge of things' (121). The link between this essay and that he delivered little more than a year later is at this point quite direct.

In turning to discussion of 'The ethics of belief', it will serve some purpose to consider once again the venue at which Clifford presented it, the Victorian-era Metaphysical Society, for the four papers preceding his set the stage for the argument he advanced. All four presenters had investigated from varying points of view evidence relating to miracles or testimony pertaining to the supernatural.[18] By all accounts, the preceding debate, which ranged over a five-month period, had been characteristically decorous yet no less contentious. While skilful debaters lined up on either side of the theological divide, there can be little doubt how matters were settled in Clifford's own mind. Thus when he took the stage, all that remained to establish was not that the case for the supernatural is evidentially deficient, but that those who persist in belief in this epistemic circumstance are morally culpable.

In making this case, Clifford formulated the maxim for which he is best known, 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient

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evidence' (186). And he prescribed in no uncertain terms 'the duty of inquiry', at one point formulated as 'the duty of questioning all that we believe' (183). Both aspects of his ethic, the negative and the positive, were well-tailored to his anti-religious polemic. The prohibition formulated in the maxim targeted religious belief for reasons just suggested.[19] As for the duty, Clifford seemed to imply that religious believers, at least of the Christian variety, by disposition resist if they do not on principle renounce its requirements. Clifford's rhetoric is rich with religious allusions and his critique of religious belief more nuanced and multifaceted than can be established here.

The epistemological dimension of Clifford's epistemic-ethical manifesto is also complex, much more so than the maxim by which he himself summarizes it or even the duty he prescribes suggests. Central to his argument, however, is the claim that belief is a public good, not a private matter. This is in part because of the bearing of belief on conduct: belief implies action. 'Nor is that truly a belief at all', Clifford maintains, 'which has not some influence upon the actions of him who holds it' (181). Any that does not issue immediately in action is nevertheless 'stored up for the guidance of the future' (181). It is not conduct in general, however, but epistemic conduct in particular that focuses his concern, nor is it individual beliefs as such, but rather the contribution of each to an entire epistemic system that he would have us consider. Our beliefs, he maintains, constitute 'an aggregate . . . which is so organized and compacted together that no part of it can be isolated from the rest' (181). No belief for this reason, however seemingly insignificant, really is so: 'every new addition' to the system 'modifies the structure of the whole'; it 'prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others' (181). No such system is to be treated as person-relative, his argument continues – as properly tuned to the distinctive orientation or legitimately shaped by the peculiar preferences of the individual who operates by its lights, any appearance to the contrary notwithstanding. Not only is 'no one man's belief . . . a private matter which concerns him alone', but more to the point, '[o]ur lives are guided by the general conception of the course of things which has been created by society for social purposes' (183). In developing this crucial claim, Clifford writes, '[o]ur words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age' (183).

These last observations prepare Clifford's call to epistemic duty. Just as we have inherited our 'conception of the course of things' from our predecessors, he maintains, it belongs to us to pass it on to our successors. Yet our responsibility with respect to this aggregate of belief – this 'precious deposit' bequeathed to us as 'a sacred trust' – is not to preserve and transmit it in the form we have received it, but rather to pass it on 'enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork' (182). In so doing, 'we help to create the world in which prosperity will live' (182). To participate in this ongoing epistemic project, to respond to the

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demands of this vital task, Clifford characterizes as 'an awful privilege' as well as 'an awful responsibility' (182).

However weighty this obligation or daunting this privilege, none of us can in good conscience shirk it. All bear responsibility for the cultivation of belief, Clifford maintains – 'not only the leader of men, statesman, philosopher, or poet' (183) – for no matter how humble our social station or modest our intellectual ability or achievement, we all have influence for good or ill on those with whom we have commerce. What we believe we inevitably transmit to others – to our children most obviously, but also to our associates. While true belief serves both to empower us and 'to bind [us] together', false belief may 'spread' like 'a pestilence', wreaking havoc far and wide (183–184).

These last remarks about the dangers to society of false belief and the promise of true are profitably viewed in light of Clifford's more general account of morality. What this theory in this instance recommends is that we recast the much-quoted maxim for which he is famous the better to appreciate its moral force. His categorical pronouncement, 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence', may profitably be reformulated as a hypothetical directive. 'If you want to live together in this complicated way', it should read, 'then believe always and only on sufficient evidence.'

Of much greater concern to Clifford in the context of an ethics of belief, however, as perhaps this reformulation of his maxim begins to suggest, is not simply what but rather how we believe, and ultimately what we threaten to become, both as individuals and as a society, should we renege on our epistemic responsibilities. Each time we neglect 'the duty to inquire', Clifford warns, each time we decline to engage in 'free and fearless questioning', or mindlessly believe simply what we are told, or 'stifl[e] doubt' in order to believe what suits us, 'we weaken our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judicially and fairly weighing the evidence' (185). In so doing, not only do we suffer a diminution of these abilities, we cultivate in ourselves the 'habit of believing for unworthy reasons' (185). If and when this tendency takes hold we become, in a word, credulous. Should this habit become endemic and this condition widespread, two grave consequences would follow. A society so affected would 'lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them' and would therefore forfeit the advantages unfettered investigation confers on civilization (185). It would 'sink back into savagery' (186). But more important still from a moral point of view, credulous individuals careless in what they believe encourage carelessness in others as to what they are told. 'Men speak the truth to one another', Clifford observes, 'when each reveres the truth in his own mind and in the other's mind' (186). When individuals believe by contrast simply what they want to believe because they want to believe it, they produce in others with whom they have commerce a readiness to deceive (186). Thus when credulity is widespread and such communication routine, lying and deception come to infect interpersonal relations. In this way and

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for this reason, the epistemic vice of credulity results in a morally degenerate society.

The only rescue from this slippery slope, on Clifford's view, is for everyone diligently to honour the duty to inquire. And while he famously sums up his position by stating, 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything on insufficient evidence' (186), this sweeping prohibition to some extent masks his true concern. He might rather have declared that we all have an inalienable responsibility both to test and to form all of our beliefs through a process of due deliberation, for how each of us believes as much as what any one of us believes has profound implications for human flourishing – for the well-being of our kind.

Ethics in 'The ethics of belief'

Having viewed 'The ethics of belief' in the light of Clifford's approach to ethics more generally, what are we now to make of his epistemic-ethical proposal and how are we to evaluate it? The measure of its adequacy is not to be found in the domain of epistemology proper, I submit. Nor does it much matter whether he portrays religious belief or believers aright. Rather, the tests of his epistemic-ethical manifesto belong to ethics itself. These tests are twofold. The first Clifford himself conducts in the course of his essay: he examines moral belief and moral practice against the epistemic requirements he lays down. Should morality itself violate the standards he proposes, difficulties in his ethic of belief would surely be exposed. The second test proves harder to devise, for it requires an assessment not simply of his prediction about the slide into moral degeneracy of epistemically irresponsible societies, a prediction that is as empirical as it is normative, but of the attractions of his thinking about morality itself.

In response to an anticipated challenge from those likely to balk at the sceptical implications of his epistemic requirements, Clifford conducts the first of these two tests. Scepticism is not implied by his programme, he insists, nor would its implementation result in the stultification of human life. Indeed, those who have practised the discipline he promotes

> have found that certain great principles, and these most fitted to the guidance of life have stood out more and more clearly in proportion to the care and honesty with which they were tested, and have acquired in this way a practical certainty. (188)

As for moral beliefs in particular, they in fact flourish when subjected to thoroughgoing investigation. Those who would promote the moral life need not recoil from 'the duty to inquire'. Quite the contrary.

Clifford develops this line of argument by sketching an account of ethical enquiry. Beginning with the notion of a moral tradition, he cautions that no such

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tradition properly consists of 'statements or propositions' (201), nor should any 'mere code of regulations' be 'rightly called morality at all' (203). Rather, when 'truly built up of the common experience of mankind', the 'social heirloom' worthy of transmission consists first and foremost of moral conceptions and only secondarily of rules for their implementation. Because the latter are specific to time and place, they clearly may and certainly should be subjected to questioning and discussion, the aim being to determine the fit between actions prescribed in present circumstances and moral conceptions handed down. In testing rules informing conduct against moral conceptions 'of right in general, of justice, of truth, of beneficence, and the like', moreover, not only do rules undergo revision and improvement, the relevant conception itself 'grows in breadth and depth' (202).

Not only does moral practice rightly conducted thus fully satisfy the duty of enquiry, moral conceptions are amenable to the evidentialist requirement and should be tested by it. No matter how crucial the conceptions we inherit to the interrogation of moral practice, we ought not uncritically to subscribe to them. Rather, we have a duty to verify them, or so Clifford insists. This we may and should do by appeal to 'immediate personal experience', for the 'intellectual conceptions' that constitute one part of the 'social heirloom' bequeathed to us 'answer to certain definite instincts which are certainly within us' (201). Thus the duty here prescribed is to be discharged through moral introspection. '[W]hen a man retires within himself', Clifford writes, 'and there finds something, wider and more lasting than his solitary personality' giving voice to his desire 'to do right', 'to do good to man', not only can he 'verify by direct observation that one instinct is founded upon and agrees fully with the other', he has 'a duty so to verify this and all similar statements' (201). Such instincts are not themselves immune to scrutiny and improvement, however, any impression to the contrary notwithstanding. Just as moral rules are adjusted and refined through the pursuit of moral enquiry, so should our instincts be both 'strengthened' and 'purified' (202).

This second step in his sketch of moral enquiry is consonant with if not wholly dependent on the account of morality Clifford sets out in 'On the scientific basis of morals', as present readers will readily appreciate. What the introspective individual discovers within is his or her 'tribal self'; the voice with which it speaks is that of the moral sense or conscience; its pronouncements are, in the language of the earlier essay, 'intuitive', in the language of the latter, instinctual. Clearly, Clifford's account of moral theory informs his characterization of moral enquiry as just set out. Let us return to this earlier and more extended account of morality in order ultimately to assess the extent to which it succeeds in underwriting his ethics of belief. One last brief detour through the terrain of the Metaphysical Society will set us on our path.

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Beyond the Victorian debate

One prominent theme in debate at the Metaphysical Society – as in Victorian society more generally – was that of the relation of morality to religion, as noted above. Many who contributed to discussion of this theme harboured grave doubts that morality could survive in the absence of religion.[20] Clifford thought otherwise. In placing morality on a naturalistic basis – in tracing its origins in human society and exposing its root in the human psyche – he aimed to demonstrate that the principles of morality 'most fitted to the guidance of life . . . can take care of themselves'.[21] They need not be 'propped up by "acts of faith," the clamour of paid advocates, or the suppression of contrary evidence', he wrote pointedly, taking champions of religious morality very much to task.[22] Yet his journey into the human past was entirely speculative, and the argument by which he posited the 'tribal self' as an 'organic artifice' – even when the latter notion is cast in terms of the moral sense or conscience – will strike even the sympathetic among us as problematic at best. Clifford's appeal to Darwinian explanation at the level of social groups rather than individuals is entirely unorthodox. His proposal that changes wrought in individuals by social processes are heritable is, if not implausible, then at least sketchy in the extreme.[23] In light of these misgivings, it seems fair to ask, are these elements in his account of morality essential to it? Might they be viewed instead – and more charitably – as Clifford's own version of morality props? The question is not whether Clifford himself so thought, but whether we ourselves might do so.[24]

If we pursue this line of interpretation as I propose to do, we cannot but ask what remains of Clifford's account of morality once its speculative and metaphysical props are removed. The short answer is a good deal. For if we find ourselves willing to endorse his claim that humanity is a social species, to entertain his proposition that morality's function is to promote social flourishing, and to adopt his view of moral maxims as hypothetical directives governing communal life, we will have subscribed to all that is needed, if not to flesh out a comprehensive moral theory, at least to test and perhaps to underwrite his ethics of belief. This ethics makes two claims on us, as we have seen above: we are to forego unevidenced belief and we are to conform to the duty to inquire.[25] Each directive must be independently assessed. By way of conclusion, we take up these tasks.

In formulating his now famous maxim, 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence', Clifford purports to summarize his ethical-epistemic argument. The adequacy of this summation is doubtful, as suggested above, inasmuch as his prohibition fails to capture the more positive requirement of his epistemic ethic.[26] The question now before us, however, is whether, and if so why, we should endorse this aspect of his programme on moral grounds. Any answer will require that Clifford's seemingly

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categorical pronouncement be recast in hypothetical form: 'If you want to live together in this complicated way', it should be understood to urge, 'then treat it as wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything on insufficient evidence'. One of the arguments Clifford uses to advance this directive, we will recall, is that anyone who violates the prohibition on unevidenced belief in any instance whatsoever puts truth at risk and thus society in harm's way. How are we in our day to assess Clifford's principle and this claim?

Present readers are likely to judge Clifford's maxim extravagant even when recast in hypothetical form and his argument implausible. Given the complexity and sophistication of contemporary knowledge, important domains of which are undoubtedly vital to the well-being of our kind, it is all but preposterous to hold as Clifford does that each and every one of us has not only a stake in but a responsibility for if not the acquisition of knowledge at least the transmission of belief. It is for good reason that we routinely defer to qualified experts in their respective fields and it is of course fitting that we hold specialists to account when errors of judgement indicative of epistemic carelessness or transgression emerge. The areas of our own influence, let alone responsibility, are by contrast considerably circumscribed. More often than not, we assume the role of spectators on rather than participants in the consequential debates of our day and leave it to those qualified to do so to disseminate gains in knowledge once achieved. Yet this posture is perhaps precisely in line with Clifford's prohibition, suggesting as it does admirable intellectual curiosity coupled with appropriate epistemic restraint. Should we find ourselves on occasion persuaded by arguments on a given side, however, should we be tempted to adjudicate a debate despite limited understanding of relevant considerations and on the basis of insufficient evidence, the likelihood that our view will carry weight with others – that our own inexpert, poorly evidenced, and potentially false belief will spread like a pestilence throughout society – may seem on first consideration remote. As for the more humdrum beliefs to which we cavalierly subscribe, beliefs that on the terms of Clifford's maxim we are to discipline no less rigorously than those more clearly consequential, it is difficult to concede Clifford's estimate of their importance.

Yet this perspective offered from the vantage point of the individual – from one's own vantage point perhaps – provides an incomplete picture, a mere sketch in black and white, of the intellectual environment in which we find ourselves. Traditional political institutions and recent technological advances offer forums for action and mechanisms for influence for the epistemically circumspect and uncircumspect alike. The opinions of members of the wider public on matters great and small are solicited relentlessly day and night. At the click of a mouse or the reach of a cell phone we may answer the call to register our views. In this climate of activity – one hesitates to say thought – Clifford's disciplinary maxim begins to seem attractive; our beliefs are all too often not only hastily formed but distressingly infectious.

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This said, the promotion of Clifford's principle may appear from another angle of vision potentially harmful, and in two ways. First, the maxim holds out the temptation, in the interest of moral propriety no less, to bend evidence to our will. If we are told not only that a belief we hold is ill-founded but that we therefore transgress on moral grounds in subscribing to it, we may well find ourselves assuming a defensive posture and making more of any evidence we might muster than otherwise we would. Second, it provides a stick with which we are as likely to beat those with whom we disagree as to discipline ourselves. While the first danger represents an abuse of the maxim, to be sure, the second does not. Yet both threaten to undermine the very purpose an ethics of belief, on the terms of Clifford's approach to ethics, is designed to serve: the promotion of social flourishing. The first threatens to compromise the pursuit of truth, the second to sour social relations.

The more positive dimension of Clifford's epistemic-ethical programme, however, his insistence on 'the duty of inquiry', cannot be so easily corrupted. The argument relevant to it, moreover, warning against the deterioration of communication and the degradation of character in an intellectually irresponsible society, is far more likely to resonate with contemporary readers than is his thinking about the pursuit of truth, for his worries on this score strike close to home. This is in part because the cultural world in which we find ourselves, on whichever side of the Atlantic, is much less monolithic than that of Victorian England and thus presumably more contentious. Our differences in outlook, if not inevitably divisive, nevertheless run deep. The problem is not so much that we view the communal life we share from differing perspectives, however, but that what passes for debate over issues of general concern is anything but searching. The strident tone of public discourse is continually remarked. Wilful misrepresentations all too frequently infect what we say; inclination sets parameters for what we are willing to hear. Might our habits of careless credulity and our readiness to embrace belief simply because it suits us help to explain the disappointing quality of our intellectual commerce? It would be rash to reject such analyses out of hand. A bracing regiment of epistemic discipline might offer a remedy to the social ills in Clifford's ominous prognostication; rampant credulity that encourages dishonesty might be, if not eradicated, then nevertheless held at bay. Clifford's insistence on enquiry as a duty has in present social circumstances considerable appeal.

At the conclusion of our study how might we assess the merit of Clifford's ethics of belief? We have registered discontent with the metaphysical underpinnings of his moral theory, and we have questioned the benefit to be gained from the promulgation of the maxim for which he is famous. Yet we have found Clifford's promotion of the duty of enquiry attractive and his warning about the neglect of this duty salutary. Clifford's ethics of belief, moreover, does what ethics on his account is supposed to do: it aims to 'modify' practice, to 'educate' conscience,

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and ultimately to shape character. It answers, not the question, 'What do I feel to be right?' but the quite different question, 'What *ought* I to feel to be right?' Appropriately reformulated, the latter question becomes, '*How* ought I to believe?' While this question may be answered as Clifford himself does by appeal to the evidential requirement, it may be answered more profitably, and yet again as he does, in terms of the duty to inquire.

On final analysis, Clifford's 'The ethics of belief' is best viewed as an exercise in moral suasion. As such, it succeeds. Some of its claims are extravagant, to be sure. Its impassioned rhetoric is occasionally over the top. Not all of its argument is convincing. Yet in overall effect, the essay hits its mark. If it is perhaps too much to judge its message 'practically universal', its directive is nevertheless most pertinent for 'the present condition of the human species'.[27]

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Notes

1. Clifford (1879), 177–211. All subsequent internal citations of this essay refer to this volume.
2. For a thoroughgoing and provocative defence of evidentialism according to which an analysis of the concept of belief reveals the basic ethics of belief simply to be evidentialism see Adler (2002). Adler proposes an 'intrinsic ethics of belief' that goes beyond the traditional view he attributes to Hume,

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Locke, and Clifford. For an argument that problematizes what is termed Clifford's 'ethical evidentialism' see van Inwagen (2009), 15–35.

3. For what is undoubtedly the most influential example of such resistance, see James (1979). James's essay continues to inspire debate over the implications for religious belief of Clifford's essay and has generated a vast literature of its own.
4. There are recent, notable exceptions to this rule. The following are well worth investigating: Haack (1997); Wood (2002); Kitcher (2004). For a near classic treatment, see Harvey (1969).
5. Clifford (1879), 186.
6. For an account of the founding of the Society, see Brown (1947), 20–22. The quotation is from James Knowles, who encouraged Charles Pritchard and Alfred Tennyson to join him in his endeavour. While Knowles initially aimed to invite only those favourably disposed towards theology, he was persuaded by Dean Stanley and James Martineau – two of those first approached – to broaden the outreach. Stanley feared that to establish the Society along the lines Knowles envisioned might serve only to reinforce opposition between science and religion. Martineau 'refused to join a society of believers to fight unbelievers' (*ibid.*, 21). Knowles was easily persuaded to invite both champions of science and critics of religion into the fold.
7. William Irvine in a brief and engaging account of the Society's origins, proceedings, evolution, and eventual decline writes:

   > Its membership of forty names reads like a muster role of Victorian celebrity. Gladstone, Tennyson, Manning, Ward, Ruskin, Bagehot, Lubbock, Tyndall, and Huxley were only among the most famous . . . The Metaphysicians were held together, partly, at least, by the gravitational force of the sheer mass of their combined and diversified fame. (Irvine (1955), 251–258)

   The membership of forty includes original members as well as those elected over the course of the Society's eleven-year history. For a full account of all the members characterizing their intellectual orientations, see Brown (1947). Far fewer attended the monthly meetings than the membership list at any point in time might suggest, it is worth noting.
8. In his biographical 'Introduction' to the collection of Clifford's essays he co-edited with Leslie Stephen, Pollock characterizes not merely the stimulation Clifford derived from the monthly meetings but the delight he took in the Society's debates:

   > When he came home from the monthly meetings of the Metaphysical Society (attending which was one of his greatest pleasures, and most reluctantly given up when going abroad after sunset was forbidden to him), he would repeat the discussion almost at length, giving not only the matter but the manner of what had been said by every speaker, and now and then making his report extremely comic by a touch of plausible fiction. (Clifford (1879), 18)

   In this passage, Pollock attests to a feature of Clifford's personality – his 'inexhaustible store of merriment' unrestrained by 'conventional gravity' – likely to be lost on readers of 'The ethics of belief'. The prohibition on night-time excursions was owing to the tuberculosis that took Clifford's life at the age of 34.
9. Clifford offers a critique of the substance of Christian belief elsewhere, to be sure. He objects on moral grounds to 'three doctrines that find acceptance among our countrymen at the present day: the doctrines of original sin, of a vicarious sacrifice, and of eternal punishment'. See 'The ethics of religion' (Clifford (1879), 223–224).
10. This sort of encouragement is prevalent in Christianity, but perhaps not in other religious traditions. Yet Clifford's named examples of religious traditions in his essay are Islam and Buddhism, never Christianity. The fact that the religious traditions he names are stand-ins for the one he does not is anything but subtle, however.
11. Reprinted in Clifford (1879), 106–123. All internal citations of this essay refer to this volume. Clifford read 'On the scientific basis of morals' at the Metaphysical Society on 9 March 1875 and published this essay in slightly expanded form *Contemporary Review* in September. See Brown (1947), 328. Clifford read 'The Ethics of Belief' at the Society on 11 April 1876 and published it January 1877, again in expanded form and also in *Contemporary Review*.
12. In his introduction to the published version of his essay, Clifford explains that 'all that is attempted here is to show roughly what account is to be given' by a method 'bearing an analogy to the method that

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has been successful in all other practical questions . . . of some of the fundamental conceptions – right and wrong, conscience, responsibility – and to indicate the nature of the standard which must guide their application' (Clifford (1879), 106).

13. The notion of the 'tribal self', Clifford emphasizes, is an aspect not of the 'common consciousness' of society but of the individual psyche. It is a feature of one's 'mental constitution' corresponding 'on the phenomenal side' to certain 'cerebral structures'. Differently put, it is an 'organic artifice', just as are beliefs more generally on his analysis. For each of these claims, see Clifford (1879), 112, 108, and 111.
14. It is worth noting in this context that while Clifford states in his introduction that 'some remarks of Mr. Darwin's [sic]' have suggested to him 'a method of dealing with ethical problems bearing a close analogy to the methods which have been successful in all other practical questions', and while he references *Descent of Man*, part I, ch. 3, he does not otherwise indicate what these remarks are.
15. Clifford's understanding of the scientific method is not to be taken as representative of the views of his contemporaries. Indeed, as Frank Miller Turner points out, 'Various studies of the last twenty-five years have revealed one crucial fact about Victorian science – namely that there was little agreement among scientists themselves as to what exactly constituted the method of science' (Turner (1974), 19–20).
16. This observation is offered and illustrated by means of two examples in part III of 'The ethics of belief'. Indeed, this final section of the essay is dedicated to a discussion of precisely this assumption. Clifford's first example attends to the use of the spectroscope in validating inferences about 'the existence of hydrogen in the sun'. Both the use of the spectroscope and the behaviour of hydrogen in the terrestrial sphere must be understood before any inference pertaining to the sun can be validated, of course. Crucial to the reasoning of those with the requisite knowledge, however, is the assumption of the uniformity of nature having specific content. The inference in this case presupposes that 'the matter of the sun' is like the 'matter of the earth'. More specifically, it assumes that this similar matter is in each case 'made up of a number of distinct substances; and that each of these, when very hot, has a distinct rate of vibration, by which it might be recognized and singled out from the rest'. Clifford's more general point is that accepting the reliability of the spectroscope method in differing contexts 'has enriched us with new processes of investigation'. In this it satisfies, we may observe, science's *raison d'être*: to guide human conduct. His second, quite different example pertains to history. On the basis of manuscripts that have come down to us, we infer the truth of events their authors report. We assume in this instance 'a uniformity in the characters of men'. More specifically, we observe 'that men do not, as a rule, forge books and histories without a special motive' and we 'assume that men in the past were like men in the present'. Unless we have reason to suspect such a motive, therefore, we treat our authors as honourable and infer that their reports are honest. The assumption informing such an inference, Clifford remarks, is 'more precarious and less exact than are inferences in many other sciences' precisely because our knowledge of the uniformity in the characters of men is 'far less complete and exact' than is our knowledge of uniformity in sciences such as physics. It is evident from this second example that Clifford's appeal to the assumption of uniformity is wide-ranging. For his discussion see Clifford (1879), 206–209.

    The topic of the uniformity of nature was of interest in the Metaphysical Society and beyond. Leslie Stephen presented a paper, for example, titled 'The uniformity of nature', in March 1879. As did Clifford, he recognized that the principle could not be demonstrated as true but maintained that the only alternative to it would be 'a negation of all thought'. Quoted in Brown (1947), 136.
17. See p. 5 above.
18. The first paper in the series was James Fitzjames Stephen's 'Remarks on the proof of miracles'; the second was W. B. Carpenter's 'On the fallacies of testimony in relation to the supernatural'; third was T. H. Huxley's 'The evidence of the miracle of the Resurrection'; fourth was Shadworth Hodgson's 'The presuppositions of miracles'. Discussion initiated by Huxley's paper spilled over into the next monthly meeting, an unprecedented departure from standard procedure, never to be repeated. For a convenient summary of argumentation in Stephen's, Carpenter's, and Huxley's papers, see Livingston (2006), 122–125.
19. Indeed, Clifford has religious belief in sight when asserting: 'there can be no grounds for supposing that a man knows that which we, without ceasing to be men, could not be supposed to verify' (Clifford (1879), 196).
20. For a sample of views on this topic held by members of the Metaphysical Society, see Goodwin (ed.) (1951), 131–138. Goodman's anthology of extracts from articles appearing in *The Nineteenth Century*

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includes selections from 'A modern symposium' on the relation of morality to religion appearing in April 1877, the year of the journal's inception. Goodman selects from essays by Lord Selborne, James Martineau, Frederick Harrison, the Very Rev. R. W. Church, and Clifford. To this list of contributors should be added George Douglas Campbell (8th Duke of Argyll), Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, R. H. Hutton, T. H. Huxley, and W. G. Ward. See Brown (1947), 38. The founder of the Metaphysical Society, James Knowles, was also the founding editor of *The Nineteenth Century*, a fact which fully explains this particular cast of characters.

For an engaging and insightful overview of nineteenth-century perspectives on the relation between morality and religion, see Chadwick (1975), 229–249. In summarizing the debate in *The Nineteenth Century* 'Modern symposium', Chadwick observes that the participants generally agreed that were there to be a loss of religion 'the standards of society' if not of individuals 'would fade'. Only Clifford thought otherwise, he notes (*ibid*., 230–231).

21. Clifford (1879), 188.
22. *Ibid*., 188–189.
23. For an analysis of Clifford's appropriation of Darwin's theory, comparing it to other nineteenth-century appropriations, see Mandelbaum (1917), 193–236. Mandelbaum notes that Clifford differed from others in applying 'Darwinian principles . . . not to individuals primarily, but directly to societies' (*ibid*., 228). In comparing Clifford's approach to that of Darwin himself, Mandelbaum further notes that while Clifford emphasized:

> the role of natural selection and social well-being in the development of moral standards, just as Darwin's theory had done, Clifford's account of morality was fundamentally different. He did not seek its roots in the utility of a number of different forms of individual action, such as instinctive tendencies to love and sympathy, or dispositional traits such as courage and self-control, nor in mental capacities such as foresight: morality rested for him on group solidarity, on the dominance of the tribal self. (*ibid*., 229)

24. See page 6 above and n. 13 for some indication of Clifford's commitment to his view of human nature.
25. See pp. 9–10 above.
26. See p. 12 above.
27. The language, previously quoted, belongs to Clifford of course. See Clifford (1879), 108.

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