

THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

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Timothy J. Madigan. *W. K. Clifford and "The Ethics of Belief"*. Newcastle, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009. Pp. [x], 202. ISBN 1-84718-503-7. £29.99; US\$44.99 (hb).

The mathematician William Kingdon Clifford (1845–1879) is generally remembered as a potentially great man whose life was cut short before his genius was fully realized. During his lifetime Clifford was well known in London as a public intellectual and noted authority on science. He was also an iconoclast, a leader in the application of Darwinian principles to areas beyond biology, and a proponent of non-Euclidean geometry. Unlike other agnostics, Clifford did not mourn the loss of his religious belief, nor did he worry that a secularized society would bring about general social decay. While other scientific naturalists worried that a collapse of religion would destroy morality and lead to social disintegration, Clifford willingly ceded the universal truths religion offered, embracing the uncertainty that scientific knowledge actually entailed. He even dared to call himself an atheist. However, Clifford's death at age 34 curtailed the trace of his thought. What remains is consigned to his scant private notebooks and collected works. Perhaps it was the brevity of his life that has led to his neglect within the history of science; no comprehensive appraisal of his mathematical work has been written.

Clifford's best-known non-mathematical statement is that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence." This was the statement he defended in his lecture "The Ethics of Belief", which he delivered to London's Metaphysical Society in 1876. The Metaphysical Society, founded in 1869 to promote discussion between religious believers and scientific rationalists, ceased operation in 1880 after members could not find enough common ground to begin debate. The rationalist position Clifford argues in "The Ethics of Belief" stands on the far side of the spectrum within this discourse. Clifford's immoderate stance, along with his use of biblical rhetoric to argue a secularist position, was calculated to provoke conservative intellectuals and institutions.¹ When his essay appeared in the January 1877 issue

¹ A. W. Brown, *The Metaphysical Society* (New York: Octagon, 1973), pp. 180–1.

of *Contemporary Review*, it proved antagonistic enough that it led in part to the dismissal of James Knowles as editor.

Timothy Madigan's book *W. K. Clifford and "The Ethics of Belief"* provides an introduction to and analysis of Clifford's ethical philosophy. His goal is to outline the historical context from which Clifford's most famous essay arose, and to analyze the merits and demerits of its argument through the viewpoints of critics and freethinkers from the nineteenth century to the present. Madigan gives a brief history of the Victorian crisis of faith, Clifford's mathematical work, and the biographical details of his life. He presents the argument Clifford makes within "The Ethics of Belief", and outlines the critical response from his contemporaries, including founding members of the Metaphysical Society William George Ward and Richard H. Hutton, poet Matthew Arnold, physiologist George John Romanes, and American psychologist and philosopher William James. Madigan also discusses the positions argued by other rationalists in the 1870s, 1880s and later (Leslie Stephen, Karl Pearson, Friedrich Nietzsche, Charles Peirce and Bertrand Russell) and by modern philosophers who have contributed to the rationalist/religionist debate (C. S. Lewis, J. L. Mackie, Michael Martin, Peter van Inwagen, Susan Haack, Anthony Quinton, and Lorraine Code). In Chapter 6 Madigan presents his own defence of Clifford's ethics of belief.

While early sections of the book provide a helpful summary of previously published work, I found Madigan's discussion of Clifford's writings on psychology and theory of mind particularly valuable (pp. 58–65). Madigan notes positively that Clifford's contribution helped steer the early development of psychology away from spiritualism and towards science, but admits that Clifford's theory of mind was somewhat of a muddle and that his contribution to the field was transitional rather than lasting. However, Madigan explains that Clifford's idea of the social instinct, a concept he explored in his writings on psychology, was at the core of his moral and ethical philosophy. For Clifford the pursuit of knowledge was at heart a social issue, one in which every man fulfills his duty to the larger community by evaluating the evidence. This distinguished his perspective from other rationalists who regarded the common man as being incapable of analyzing his own beliefs. Clifford thought every man could and should evaluate evidence for himself. Madigan—I think correctly—suggests that Clifford's enthusiasm for Darwinian principles may explain his emphasis on the individual's relationship to the collective within his ethics (pp. 117–19). For Clifford, every man must sustain the shared body of knowledge to ensure humanity's progress. This perspective underlined his assertion "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."

In his analysis of Clifford's collected philosophical and popular writings, Madigan's description of him as apologist for science is particularly cogent (pp. 65–71). Although Clifford embraced uncertainty in the fundamental principles of knowledge, this contingency did not discourage his belief that the uninhibited

practice of science would lead to overall social progress. He believed that science was the best method for accessing objective, value-free truth. Madigan writes,

... concern for the betterment of the human condition was ever-most in [Clifford's] mind.... For him, the duty to tell the truth, and correlate beliefs to evidence, was an obligation that all must adhere to, and the method which best enabled humans to achieve this was the scientific one.... Science would be the means through which human progress would be best accomplished. (P. 70)

Clifford's essay "The Ethics of Belief" is often remembered as a counterpoint to William James' 1897 paper, "The Will to Believe", in which James presents his defence of religious faith. Comparing Clifford and James, Madigan finds that the two men are not as opposed in their views as is sometimes assumed. Both Clifford and James shared many concerns, including commitments to intellectual honesty, empiricism and the scientific outlook. However, James did not identify as a scientific thinker, and he disliked the arrogant and pugnacious manner in which scientific thinkers—like Clifford—presented their argument. Madigan notes that although "the orthodoxies both men rallied against were different ... the desire to promote freedom of thought and conscience was the same" (p. 105).

Madigan continually and succinctly presents the views and analysis of other authors who have written about Clifford or who have contributed to the Clifford/James debate. However, each author is treated briefly, and Madigan's own argument is at times broken up by this style of presentation. Nevertheless, the book presents a thorough survey of the field, including a summary of the various philosophical stances within it. I found Madigan's approach to his material useful in this respect.

As a historian of science, I took issue with certain sections and sources of the biographical material presented in Chapter 2. The introductions to Clifford's *Lectures and Essays* and *Mathematical Papers* frequently descend into superlative testimonials. They are memoirs written by friends of Clifford, and a historian should not adopt such documents uncritically. Monty Chisholm's book *Such Silver Currents* is probably the best secondary source on Clifford's life, but this source is also less objective than Madigan seems to consider it. Should *W. K. Clifford and "The Ethics of Belief"* go into a second printing, I would advise the publisher to ensure that small but frequent errors in the footnotes are corrected.

Madigan, a noted humanist who has previously written about Clifford's freethought, has produced a close examination and a sympathetic defence of Clifford's rationalist position. Readers who have an interest in Russell, religion, metaphysics or the history of freethought will find this book a valuable read. For those who know little about Clifford beyond his authorship of "The Ethics of Belief", this book is a well-researched introduction to the man's philosophy and the historical context from which it arose.
