
Point/Counterpoint

In Defense of Skepticism

In the Summer 1990 FREE INQUIRY, Marvin Kohl published an article entitled "Skepticism and Happiness," in which he criticized the work of W. K. Clifford. First, Brian Zamulinski comments on Kohl's article, then Marvin Kohl responds.

Brian Zamulinski

Marvin Kohl's rejection of the absolutist skepticism of W. K. Clifford was so cavalier that it left me aghast. He ignores Clifford's arguments and simply announces that we have insufficient evidence for believing.

Kohl makes much of the research by Taylor and Brown that purportedly shows that some illusions promote mental health. Clifford was quite aware that over-believing could make some believers happy. However, even if morality were only a matter of maximizing happiness and it did not matter how the happiness was achieved, even if "... happiness is an over-riding good," as Kohl phrased the possibility, Clifford could link, as he did, over-belief with the subsequent subversion of our ability to weigh evidence accurately. Having established that link, he could argue that over-belief probably causes more unhappiness than happiness by making it more likely that we would believe other harmful beliefs in addition to the psychologically beneficial ones.

However, Clifford would not have accepted the assumption that happiness is the paramount good. He would have argued that the happiness of the believers no more justifies over-belief than the happiness of slave-owners justifies slavery, that happiness achieved through over-belief is inherently debasing. He would put moral integrity before

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happiness.

Turning from defense to offense, it is possible to undermine Kohl's case for the necessity of believing some falsehoods if we are to be psychologically healthy. First, empirical research can prove only a correlation between belief and health. Even if there is a very strong positive correlation, it does not follow that there are no substitutes for belief that are as beneficial as belief purportedly is. Second, what a person actually believes is not always accurately reflected by his statements of belief.

A person who believes that he or she is sexually attractive may become arrogant and complacent and, hence, less attractive and less successful sexually. In

contrast to the believer, the skeptic, the person who desires to be sexually attractive but neither believes or disbelieves in his or her sexual attractiveness, is likely to take steps that will make him or her sexually attractive and most likely to become sexually successful.

What the foregoing shows is that, ironically, it could very well be that purported demonstrations of the deficiencies of skepticism actually show that belief is bad. The fact is that Cliffordian skepticism is not a philosophical push-over, and it is a shame that humanists like Kohl are as willing as the faith-mongers to assume that it is. It could be the most powerful weapon in the humanist arsenal. ●

Humanism and the Justification of Belief

Marvin Kohl

My article "Skepticism and Happiness" evaluated a form of agnosticism shared by many humanists. According to this theory, truthfulness

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demands that we only believe something to be true when the claim is supported by reliable evidence. It also demands as imperatively that we should doubt what is doubtful as that we should disbelieve what is false. The essential (but not only) difficulty with this approach to belief is that even if truthfulness demands that we be skeptics, it does not follow that

FREE INQUIRY

a mixed mode of happiness demands the same thing. In other words, much turns on what end is being targeted—that it makes a difference whether the end-in-view is merely truth, the subjective happiness of individuals, or a combination of the subjective and objective conditions that make for the happiness and well-being of the greatest number. I suggested that to truly care for humanity is to be actively concerned about protecting and increasing the latter kind of excellence. That a fuller or more humane humanism cannot casually dismiss the claim that one theory is better than another if there is reliable evidence to show that, if everyone were to abide by its rules, it would lead to the best possible consequences in terms of happiness and well-being, all considered. Nor can an open-minded humanist say, as some appear to do, that by merely undertaking this kind of inquiry one becomes a faith-monger. Such an approach is abusive and reductionistic (the strategy typically being that of reducing the position to a biased reading of William James on faith). More important, it is contrary to the spirit of free inquiry. Like Plato's prisoners chained in a cave, the extreme evidentialist seems to be unable to separate the shadows from the sun and is unable to differentiate the shadows cast by others and those cast by himself. To this evidentialist to talk about happiness and well-being in a nonsubjective way is quite absurd, a bad joke, the latest card trick dealt out of mystical double talk. Yet he often chooses to talk about "the ideal of moral integrity," apparently failing to see that this may be a shadow for the ideal of epistemological integrity, for the claim that evidentialist purity is a sufficient and overriding good.

But where is the evidence for this belief? Where is the evidence to show that the arch-evidentialism of W. K. Clifford—the belief that it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence—is true or more reasonable to believe than less extreme forms of evidentialism? And of all the examples to select, how does disbelieving both *P* and Not-*P*, where *P* is "I am sexually attractive" compare to disbelieving "I am a worthy person, worthy of my own love

and the loves of others," "I am in control of my life," or "The future will be great because I will help make it so"?

I welcome Brian Zamulinski's analysis of "not believing a proposition." I also think he is correct in saying that a fuller analysis of Clifford's position would be an invaluable addition to the literature. Perhaps Zamulinski or others can explain why Clifford's claim—that the question of the right or wrong of a belief solely has to do with its origin—is a warranted one.

Let me briefly reply to some other points. I pass in respectful silence over his request that I should have written a paper that addressed issues closer to his own epistemological heart, except to point out that if agnostic skepticism is more reasonable than Clifford's, and if I have shown that my rudimentary theory is more reasonable than the first, then I have shown that my theory is more reasonable than Clifford's. I think that Zamulinski's attempt to reduce my position on happiness to a subjectivism is a clever dodge, but a dodge nonetheless. If he is not being disingenuous when he says that he has never encountered a successful attack on Clifford's view, then I suggest reading Stephen Nathanson's "Nonevidential Reasons for Belief: A Jamesian View" (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 1982, pp. 572-580), Peter Hare's "Towards an Ethics of Belief," [*XVIIe Congrès mondial de philosophie* (1988), pp. 428-432], and Hare's "Problems and Prospects in the Ethics of Belief" (Presidential Address to the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, March 3, 1990, Buffalo, New York). The latter contains a persuasive defense of what we may call "overbelief," as well as an excellent summary of the recent literature.

Let us now turn to the heart of the matter. What provoked Zamulinski's response was my interpretation of Russell's dismissal of Clifford's position. I wrote that "Russell seems to have understood that if it is wrong, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence and if, as the facts reveal, we have insufficient evidence for believing this, then agnostic skeptics must reject their own meta-belief." I then added that the apparent

paradox is, if Cliffordian evidentialism "is true, then intellectual integrity requires that it be cast aside." The suggestion that Clifford's position is self-refuting Zamulinski correctly reads as a dismissal, be it cavalier or not. Suffice it here to say that if Clifford is claiming that no statement (including principles) is worthy of belief unless all the possible evidence points to the truth of the statement, then the "self-refuting" charge is plausible, if not telling. And I leave it to the intelligent reader to decide which of us has an unquestioning belief in something for which he has not, and perhaps cannot, provide full evidence.

A final word about the bellicose rhetoric and special pleading concerning the writings of William James. Suppose we admit that on some occasions James played rather loose with the notion of disbelief. Suppose we also admit that much, though not all of his energies, were directed toward a justification of religious faith. Nonetheless, much of value remains. First, James suggests that believing that *p* is often necessary in order to make *p* more probable or true. Or more generally: We need to recognize facts and possibilities. That there are some areas of belief in which possibilities, not finished facts, are the realities with which we have actively to deal. James reminds us that the heart of the issue is courage. It is not courage as the mere absence of fear. Rather it is the courage to nurture a frail good, to bring into existence a new one, and to believe that the possibility for doing so exists. Still more interesting, and perhaps equally valuable, James understood that the best beliefs are those which make the world a significantly better place. Now we may differ as to what constitutes that end. But I venture to suggest that what is needed is a combination of knowledge, vision, and intelligent active hope. I say "intelligent active hope" because the combination of inert concern with blind (or false) aspiration is a deadly fillip. Without vision we are apt to grow stale and thin mentally. Without knowledge, the world of our hopes cannot be built. But without hope and other supportive beliefs, we lack part of the means necessary for successfully building the better life. ●