The Ethics of the Ethics of Belief

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Abstract

For all of the progress in informatics, there remains a related, fundamental, and age-old topic: the ethics of belief. Belief often has moral consequences, especially if one acts on that belief. Whether we can choose what to believe is a matter of long-standing controversy. Together these observations offer a chance to explore the ethics of belief and its implications for informatics. This paper suggests a way to engage in this exploration, starting with a pair of seminal essays: W. K. Clifford’s “The ethics of belief” and William James’s “The will to believe.” Three areas of philosophy inform a complete exploration of this sort: logic, epistemology, and ethics. This paper develops the ethics component, which relies primarily on virtue theory.

Keywords: Belief, Ethics, Moral, Evidence, Decision-making.

Introduction

A commercial airliner’s crew, bound for Reagan National Airport fails to respond to ground control 15 minutes outside of DC. The airliner could be heading for the U. S. Capitol or the airport. Ground control notifies the U. S. Capitol Police command center, which notifies the appropriate liaison, Major Cortez. Major Cortez requests a F-15s to investigate. One F-15 pilot reports that the airliner’s windows are fogged over, so he cannot tell whether anyone is in the cockpit. Major Cortez requests and receives confirmation that no name on the passenger list is suspicious. On Major Cortez’s orders the F-15s fire warning flares in front of the airliner, but to no avail. Major Cortez must decide whether the F-15s should shoot down the airliner. It has 150 passengers and several crew members any or all of whom may be dead. Because it is Sunday, the Capitol is fairly empty and thus easy to evacuate. There are, however, many people on the Capitol campus.

Major Cortez faces two immediate moral problems: what to do and how to decide what to do. It would be irresponsible, for example, to decide by flipping a coin. He should be able to defend his decision by demonstrating that his premises support his decision well. But if he constructs his argument only after the fact, then he has acted as capriciously as if he flipped the coin. In other words, he has a moral responsibility to construct a good argument for his decision before making it. Since this is no time to study the means for making such a decision, Major Cortez should already be able to make it.

This ability requires understanding the interplay among ethics, logic, and epistemology, which allows identifying and applying rules and techniques for morally proper gathering, analysis, and evaluation of intelligence data. To foster this ability, cases such as the above, along with, for example, the more general problem of global terrorism and the concomitant allegations of intelligence failures, raise moral questions about handling intelligence data. How much evidence should someone consider before drawing a conclusion? How should someone draw a conclusion from sufficient evidence? How much of this conclusion is volitional and how much is forced by the data? Should an analyst who makes a decision based on sound logical principles be held morally accountable for undesirable consequences of that decision?

Ethically, what should concern the analyst most?: Satisfying consequences? Obeying rules? Fulfilling a duty? Some combination of these three?

Logically, the gathering, analysis, and evaluation of evidence are inductive processes that could commit any of three fallacies if done poorly. First is the Fallacy of Forgetful Induction—drawing an illogical conclusion because of failure to consider relevant details. Second is the Fallacy of Hasty Induction—jumping to a conclusion based on insufficient evidence. Third is the Fallacy of Slothful Induction—refusing to accept the conclusion that overwhelming evidence suggests.

To avoid such fallacies is properly to apply logical rules of induction—rules that govern inductive generalization and analogy, numerical probability, hypotheses about causes, and explanatory hypotheses. To apply these rules properly is to understand the nature of evidence and its relationship to good belief. This understanding reflects a link between logic and epistemology.

Epistemologically, fundamental questions include the following. Can we have knowledge? If not, why not? If so, does it come from sense experience, reason, or both? What is the difference between belief and knowledge? Is knowledge justified true belief or is knowledge, in its demand for certainty, beyond the scope of belief, which settles for probability? If the former, when is a belief justified? What is evidence? Is it hard empirical data? Mental interpretation of those data? Should an analyst ever rely on intuition or apparent revelation?

This paper summarizes the ethical elements of a Master’s-level course, The Ethics of Belief, which I have taught for the U. S. Secret Service Executive Development Program and Johns Hopkins University’s Intelligence Analysis program. This course has no philosophy pre-requisite, yet it must get to the philosophical point quickly by identifying basic theories and demonstrating their usefulness in dealing with moral problems in intelligence gathering, analysis, and evaluation.

The course begins by setting up the problem of the ethics of belief. What does the phrase mean and what are reasonable parameters within which to discuss the problem? Then comes a discussion of ethics, including the basic theories along with their strengths and weakness. Next is an examination of logic, with an emphasis on induction and evidence. Finally the class evaluates and seeks to apply epistemological theories. This paper examines the ethical elements of the course.
The Ethics of Belief

A pair of essays grounds and frames the course: “The Ethics of Belief” by W. K. Clifford [1] and “The Will to Believe” by William James [2]. Clifford’s position is “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (p. 518). James offers a contrary position: “we have a right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will” (p.525).

While Clifford and James disagree on this point, they stand on the same side of a larger disagreement: volitionalism vs. non-volitionalism. Volitionalism holds that belief is a matter of free will. The non-volitionist holds that belief happens to us rather than being something we choose, and therefore Clifford and James are both wrong.

Non-volitionalism has two forms: strong and weak. The strong form holds that it is impossible to choose what to believe; the weak form holds that it is possible, but ill-advised to choose what to believe rather than letting the evidence choose for you.

John Locke [3] defends the weak version, “anti-enthusiasm.” Locke posits three possible grounds for believing a proposition: reason, revelation, and enthusiasm (the mere will to believe). To search for truth, he says, is to love it. To love truth is not to “accept any propositions with greater assurance than the proofs it is built upon warrant” (p. 510). To accept something enthusiastically is to accept it with greater assurance than its proofs warrant. So, to love truth is to avoid enthusiasm as a ground for assent. To accept a claim of revelation without rational assessment of the claim is to accept a proposition with greater assurance than the proof warrants. Therefore, reason should be the primary ground for assent.

Locke’s position resembles Clifford’s position. But for Locke, while we may choose whether to give ourselves over to reason, once we do, we no longer have a choice of belief but must obey the dictates of reason. For Clifford, every belief is a matter of choice in the face of evidence specific to that choice. At the same time, says Clifford, one ought to bring reason to bear. Locke’s weak volitionalist poses little challenge to Clifford and James since Locke is conceding the possibility of choice and thus granting a volitionalist assumption.

Louis Pojman [4] defends strong non-volitionalism, which is a greater challenge to Clifford and James. For Pojman, volitionalism has four forms, depending on whether it is direct or indirect, descriptive or prescriptive. Direct volitionalism holds that “some or all of our beliefs are basic acts of will.” Indirect volitionalism holds that “some beliefs arise indirectly from basic acts, acts of will, and intentions.” Clifford and James allow for both direct and indirect volitionalism. Descriptive volitionalism “merely describes the process of coming to believe through” willing. Prescriptive volitionalism “offers direction for engaging in this process well and avoiding engaging in it poorly.” While Clifford and James engage in descriptive volitionalism at times, they also propose prescriptive volitionalism.

Pojman rejects direct, descriptive volitionalism on two counts: phenomenologically and logically. “Phenomenological” refers to the world as one experiences it. As this relates to belief, “acquiring a belief is a happening in which the world forces itself on the subject” (p. 539). This is not something the subject does or chooses. Therefore, acquiring a belief is not something a subject does or chooses.

Logically, Pojman argues, beliefs are about the way the world is, not merely on what we will the world to be. The distinction between action, which is volitional, and acquiring a belief rests on probability— we tend to embrace a belief to the degree it is probably true. Therefore, volitionalism is logically possible but odd. And therefore, volitionalism is logically incoherent or conceptually confused.

Indirect, descriptive volitionalism suffers from the same illogic, says Pojman, so he rejects that form as well.

If descriptive volitionalism fails, then direct, prescriptive and indirect, prescriptive volitionalism fail since we cannot justify beliefs by willing, if we cannot acquire beliefs that way at all. Therefore, says Pojman, volitionalism fails in all its forms.

Since this paper builds on the volitionalism of Clifford and James, we might oppose Pojman on his own phenomenological and logical terms. Concerning the phenomenological, perhaps one can choose how and when to let the world “force itself” upon the beholder. It seems, for example, that Maj. Cortez is free to choose which elements of the airliner crisis he will consider. As for the logical, Pojman’s premise that we have a duty to consider the evidence begs the question why such a duty exists and whether such a duty negates volitionalism. But to push these points further would require an essay devoted fully to Pojman’s argument.

We may dispense with non-volitionalism on three counts. First, morality implies rights and responsibilities: morally good behavior means exercising a right or fulfilling an obligation and morally bad behavior means failing to fulfill an obligation or doing something that one had no right to do. Maj. Cortez has a moral responsibility to respond with a dismissive “D” to every fact. To act otherwise is to fail to fulfill an obligation and morally bad behavior means failing to fulfill an obligation or doing something that one had no right to do. Maj. Cortez is responsible for that. Third, it can be reasonable to say that a person had no right to believe what he claims to believe, or that a person believed precisely what he should have believed. For example it would be morally irresponsible for Major Cortez to respond with a dismissive “Don’t worry about it, I have no reason to believe the jet poses a threat to the Capitol.” And it would be unfair to hold Cortez morally responsible for this decision if he had not acted from free will. Further discussion of this point requires a protracted debate about free will and determinism, which is unnecessary here. We proceed with the stipulation that how and what one believes may have moral import and that this implies the ability to choose how and what one believes.

Consider Clifford’s and James’s complete arguments. Clifford’s version of volitionalism is evidentialism: the view that one should choose a belief solely on sound evidence. This evidence must accord with the “uniformity of nature”—it must be scientifically sound. His argument goes like this:

(i) Even if indirectly, our actions are due to prior beliefs
(ii) Right actions imply right beliefs; wrong actions imply wrong beliefs.
(iii) When we believe for bad reasons, we hurt ourselves and society.
(iv) Therefore, “it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” ([1] p. 518).

For Clifford, Maj. Cortez must not decide whether to shoot down the airliner until he has sufficient evidence for his decision. That there may not be enough time to gather such evidence hints at a problem with Clifford’s theory.

James was a pragmatist. According to pragmatism, a sentence is true if there is positive practical value to believing
it; a sentence is false, if it is harmful to believe it; and if there is no practical value, positive or negative, to believing it, then it is neither true nor false. In this spirit, James offers the following argument.

(i) Knowing truth is more important than avoiding error.
(ii) Knowing truth requires choosing between competing hypotheses.
(iii) We must risk being dupes.
(iv) Therefore, “we have a right to believe at our own risk any hypothesis that is live enough to tempt our will” ([2] p. 525).

Obviously, Maj. Cortez’s decision will have practical consequences, so in James’ terms, he may, if not must, make a decision even if there is insufficient evidence in Clifford’s sense.

Having laid the foundation for a discussion about the ethics of belief, we turn next to what we mean by ethics.

THE ETHICS OF BELIEF

Maj. Cortez has to decide whether to shoot down the airliner. Every moral decision consists of two parts: the decision and the reasons for it. In logical terms, these are the conclusion and the premises, which together form an argument. An argument is good when the premises support the conclusion, that is, when the premises are true, relevant to the conclusion, and less doubtful than the conclusion. The three most common sorts of premise that appear in a moral decision reflect three particular theories: consequentialism, regularitarianism, or deontology.

Consequentialism holds that an act is morally good if its consequences are good, that is, “the end justifies the means.” An advantage of this theory is that one has only to evaluate the objective evidence to pass moral judgment; one does not, for example, have to know the agent’s intentions. But the consequences may not tell the whole story: if all I know is that someone’s act resulted in someone else’s death, how can I decide whether that act was morally good or bad? Was the act intentional murder? Self defense? An accident?

Another challenge to consequentialism is the question, Good for whom? Two consequentialist theories, egoism and utilitarianism, offer conflicting answers.

Egoism argues that an act is morally good if it is good “for me.” Some may dismiss this as too selfish to be morally useful, but many thoughtful egoists distinguish between self-ish, which takes no account of others’ interests, and self-interested, which recognizes the benefit to oneself of taking others’ interests into account. For example, an enlightened egoist will recognize the value of being a good citizen and having friends, versus facing the state’s enmity and people’s antagonism. Moreover, one sort of egoism, which Thomas Hobbes [5] defended, argues that egoism isn’t a choice: if you are a human being, you are an egoist whose primary motivation is survival, followed by a desire for comfort and ease. A straightforward rebuttal to Hobbes is any example of self sacrifice, such as the proverbial soldier who throws himself on a live hand grenade, thus saving his comrades. If it is logically possible to sacrifice one’s interests for the good of another, or to obey a rule or fulfill a duty, then Hobbes is wrong in claiming that humans are necessarily egoists. American philosopher and egoist Ayn Rand [6] agrees that one need not be an egoist, but she argues that if everyone minded his own business, the world would be a better place. This is rational or ethical egoism, the view that while one need not be an egoist, one should be. An obvious rebuttal is any example of self sacrifice that is morally good, such as the forfeiting of one’s life to save the lives of others. Note that in offering these rebuttals we are not saying that self interest is always wrong; we are saying that morality includes more than self interest. Indeed, Maj. Cortez’s moral responsibility extends to the airline passengers and to people connected to the Capitol.

Utilitarians agree that morality involves more than self interest. For them it is a matter of achieving the greatest good for the greatest number of stakeholders. This, arguably, is the official ethics of the United States: it underlies democracy, capitalism, and the better part of arguments for or against particular public policies. But it has its shortcomings. First, what about the “tyranny of the majority”? Is it always fair for a majority of stakeholders to benefit at the expense of the minority? A stark example of this is Fyodor Dostoevsky’s [7] question whether it would be morally appropriate to torture and kill a baby if doing so would make everyone else in the world happy. At first blush this appears to be a terrific bargain from a utilitarian point of view: one person suffers so that everyone else benefits. But there remains something morally objectionable about treating a baby this way, regardless of who benefits. More significant in our own time is the question whether torture is morally acceptable if it has utilitarian results. For opponents of torture, there are times when a desirable end does not justify the means.

Another challenge to utilitarianism is what it regards as the good. John Stuart Mill [8], a famous proponent of utilitarianism, says that good means pleasure and the absence of pain. Indeed, most utilitarians hold this view. Thus, a challenge to utilitarianism is a challenge to its hedonism. We may, for example, praise someone for doing her duty, whether or not anyone received pleasure from it. Mill is not referring only to physical pleasure: humans are also capable of emotional pleasure, spiritual pleasure, and intellectual pleasure, thus “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied. And if the fool, or the pig, is of a different opinion, it is because they only know their side of the question. The other party to the comparison knows both sides” (p. 14). In other words, Mill is not saying simply “If it feels good, do it!” One must weigh the pleasures and pains more carefully than that before determining the moral worth of the act. Nevertheless, there appear to be times when consequences are irrelevant to a good moral decision.

The shortcomings of consequentialism invite a brief discussion of three moral controversies that matter to the study of ethics: relativism v. absolutism, subjectivism v. objectivism, and determinism v. free will. Consequentialists tend to be relativists in holding that an act is morally good relative to a particular culture or time. The absolutist, on the contrary, insists that at least some moral values are absolute—that some things are always morally good or always morally bad. [9] While the absolutist may offer the example of rape or child abuse as a clear case of absolute moral evil, the relativist might counter that the terms “rape” and “abuse” are relative, since what constitutes rape in one culture or time may constitute an acceptable act in another culture or time. Perhaps the best quick response the absolutist has is to note the paradoxical view of the relativist in holding that there are no absolutes. If this is true, then it is false, since it is an absolute, and if it is false it is false. Many learned relativists have responded to such criticisms, but it is enough for our purposes to acknowledge the debate.

Consequentialists tend to be subjectivist in holding that the moral value of something is in the mind of the person passing judgment, not in the object of that judgment, similar to...
the adage “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder.” To be sure, we cannot taste, see, touch, smell, or hear moral value, so it appears to be a mental concept or mental construct. The objectivist, holding that moral value belongs to the object being judged, might argue that if the subjectivist is correct, then morality is a matter of personal taste and, therefore, moral debate is as meaningless as arguing about whether carrots taste good. While the course notes this debate, it proceeds as if moral debate can be meaningful and thus it assumes the objectivity of moral value.

Some consequentialists are determinists: they hold that every human act has an antecedent other than free will. Proponents of free will, on the other hand, hold that sometimes humans act in ways in which they were free to act otherwise. [10] For this course’s purposes, we note that if determinism is correct, then there is no point in ascribing moral praise or blame to anyone. It is clear that consequentialism will not suffice for all moral decisions. Sometimes consequences are the most significant factor in the moral worth of an act; sometimes they are not. Cortez’s decision will have consequences for many people, but it is impossible to determine all of those consequences in advance of his decision. What’s more, consequentialism alone will not help us determine when to look elsewhere for a moral premise. Both regularianism and deontology offer alternatives.

Regularianism holds that an act is morally good if it obeys a rule and morally bad if it violates a rule. Rules come in many forms, such as divine commands, criminal and civil laws, social norms, and professional codes of ethics. That rule-based ethics is not always helpful in moral decision making is clear from these considerations. Sometimes the rule commands a morally bad act, as did many laws in Nazi Germany. Sometimes a set of rules contain contradictory commands: Maj. Cortez may face such a dilemma: “Save the innocent passengers!” and “Save the Capitol!” Sometimes a generally good rule doesn’t fit a particular circumstance, such as the rule that no one should shoot down an airliner full of innocent people. And sometimes there is no rule that applies to the situation that requires a moral decision. What rule, for example, applies in Maj. Cortez’s case?

In many cases one should obey the rules, but regularianism does not offer all one needs for making a good moral decision.

Deontology is the view that an act is morally good if it obeys a rule and morally bad if it violates a rule. Rules come in many forms, such as divine commands, criminal and civil laws, social norms, and professional codes of ethics. That rule-based ethics is not always helpful in moral decision making is clear from these considerations. Sometimes the rule commands a morally bad act, as did many laws in Nazi Germany. Sometimes a set of rules contain contradictory commands: Maj. Cortez may face such a dilemma: “Save the innocent passengers!” and “Save the Capitol!” Sometimes a generally good rule doesn’t fit a particular circumstance, such as the rule that no one should shoot down an airliner full of innocent people. And sometimes there is no rule that applies to the situation that requires a moral decision. What rule, for example, applies in Maj. Cortez’s case?

Virtue theory, which Aristotle [13] defended forcefully and which this paper adopts as its primary approach to ethics. For Aristotle, ethics is primarily about the agent’s character, not the act’s consequences, or a rule or duty that governs the act. Good moral character is virtue and bad moral character is vice. Virtue, says Aristotle, is the ability habitually to know the good and to do the good. The good, for him, is a species of the perfect: the better something is the closer it is to being perfect. Something is perfect when there is neither too little of it nor too much of it. Thus, the good is the mean between the extremes of deficiency and excess. Virtue, then, is a matter of habitually finding and hitting the mean between extremes.

To make this theory more practical, Aristotle notes the four cardinal or basic virtues, on which all other virtues hinge. Courage is the means between cowardice and foolhardiness. Justice is the mean between giving someone less than he deserves and giving someone more than he deserves. Temperance is the mean between using too little of an available resource and using too much of an available resource. And prudence or practical wisdom is the means between acting on insufficient knowledge and failing to act in spite of sufficient knowledge to justify an act. These are always virtues, while any other candidate for a virtue, such as honesty or patience, may or may not be virtuous depending on whether they are at once courageous, just, temperate, and prudent. Honesty, for example, is not a virtue if it is a cowardly strategy, such as telling a Gestapo agent where to find a Jewish child in order to avoid being arrested. Patience, for example, is not always a virtue in the emergency room.

Virtue theory offers a way to choose among the three basic theories when looking to apply one to a moral decision. Sometimes consequences matter, sometimes not. The same holds with rules and duties. Aristotle suggests that one avoid excessive or deficient concern for consequences, rules, or duties by deciding when such concern is deficient or excessive relative to other alternatives and by testing the alternative one chooses according to how courageous, just, temperate, and prudent that choice is over the others. Thus, in our opening
example a utilitarian might argue for saving the plane because of the number of passengers on board, versus the smaller number of people in the Capitol. Another might argue for saving the building according to the rule that one ought to protect sacred symbols, regardless of who dies. And another might argue for saving the plane on the principle that killing them would violate a duty. Duty is not too useful here, since there is a conflict of duties (to protect the passengers and to protect the capitol). In terms of prudence, one could argue that there is insufficient knowledge to justify shooting down the plane. Therefore, one could argue that shooting down the plane would be an intemperate use of fire power. One could also argue that killing the passengers deliberately would be unjust, since they have done nothing to deserve that.

Aristotle’s view offers a sophisticated response to the debate between the absolutists and the relativists. The principle that one ought always to choose the mean between extremes is an absolute principle, and the cardinal virtues are always morally good. But the mean is relative to the particular circumstance, as in the use of deadly force. Deadly force is justified when it is neither an excessive nor deficient response to the situation. While shooting down the plane might be proper in our example, the same force would be unjustified in others situations. Thus, in a sense, both relativists and absolutists are right.

Aristotle’s theory gives us a way to define integrity. This is a ubiquitous word these days, but when we seek a definition of it, we usually get only examples. Thus, a person of integrity will generally be honest, will do only that which he would feel good about having reported in the newspaper, will be able to look at himself in the mirror, and so forth. But this could just as easily describe a sociopath—that is, someone with no moral conscience. A traditional definition of integrity endures: one has integrity to the extent one has integrated the four cardinal virtues in one’s life. Thus, to have integrity is habitually to act courageously, justly, temperately, and prudently: qualities we hope for in Maj. Cortez.

Our topic is ethics of belief. Clifford and James argue the extent to which one ought to suspend judgment until one has sufficient evidence to make a sound judgment. Clifford says that we must suspend judgment until we have adequate evidence. James says that we have a right to draw conclusions even in the absence of evidence. Clifford says that virtue theory says that we should choose the option that is the least deficient and the least excessive; that is, we should be able to defend our choice as the most courageous, just, temperate, and prudent among the options. If our opening case description offers adequate information, then it would be better not to shoot down the plane, as this choice appears to be the more temperate, prudent, just, and—arguably—courageous. Clifford might balk, since we are in effect “rolling the dice,” but as James could argue, there is no time to gather further evidence and lives are at stake.

References