William K. Clifford
'The Ethics of Belief'
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1. 'It is wrong always, everywhere,...for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.'

What matters is whether the person has a right to believe on the basis of evidence.

So the truth or falsity of the belief is irrelevant: 'When an action is once done, it is right or wrong for ever; no accidental failure of its good or evil fruits can possibly alter that....The question of right or wrong has to do with the origin of his belief, not the matter of it; not what it was, but how he got it; not whether it turned out to be true or false, but whether he had a right to believe on such evidence as was before him.'

We cannot hold a belief without its affecting us:

It is not 'truly a belief at all which has not some influence upon the actions of him who holds it.'

We cannot hold beliefs [except perhaps in a very trivial sense] without acting on them.

We cannot hold beliefs without their affecting us: It makes us credulous, preparing ‘us to receive more of its like. It ‘confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts,...Every time we let ourselves believe for unworthy reasons, we weaken our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judicially and fairly weighing evidence.'

We cannot investigate it fairly: 'No man holding a strong belief on one side of a question, or even wishing to hold a belief on one side, can investigate it with such fairness and completeness as if he were really in doubt and unbiased; so that the existence of a belief not founded on fair inquiry unfits a man for the performance of this necessary duty.'

We cannot hold a belief without warrant without its affecting others:

When we act on such a belief, we will affect others — and may harm them on the basis of an unwarranted belief.
Such a belief erodes our common intellectual property. ‘Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought,…fashioned and perfected from age to age, [are] an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handled on to the next one…An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live.’

Everyone has a duty not to believe on insufficient evidence. ‘Every rustic who delivers in the village alehouse his slow, infrequent sentences, may help to kill or keep alive the fatal superstitions which clog his race….No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe.’

2. ‘When is it permissible to act on the testimony of others and on insufficient evidence?’

‘…we must have reasonable grounds for trusting his veracity, that he is really trying to speak the truth so far as he knows it; his knowledge, that he has had opportunities of knowing the truth about this matter; and his judgment, that he has made proper use of those opportunities in coming to the conclusion which he affirms.’

But we can only know what we could verify.

It matters who is testifying:

A professional is trained ‘to encourage veracity and the honest pursuit of truth, and to produce a dislike of hasty conclusions and slovenly investigation…’ through a method and process ‘I can be made to understand…as makes it conceivable to me that..I might verify the statement.’

‘A question rightly asked is already half answered,…; we may add that the method of solution is the other half of the answer,…’. E.g., Ohm discovered his law by asking a question: what holds between the strength of a current and the strength of a battery? These are ‘quantities to be measured and compared….The second half is the method of investigation; how to measure these quantities, what instruments are required for the experiment, and how are they to be used?…The student who begins to learn about electricity is not asked to believe in Ohm’s law: he is made to understand the question, he is placed before the apparatus, and he is taught to verify it. He learns to do things, not to think he knows things; to use instruments and to ask questions, not to accept a traditional statement.’

It does not matter how many are testifying:
‘the aggregate testimony of our neighbours is subject to the same conditions as the testimony of any one of them….Every man who has accepted the statement from somebody else, without himself testing and verifying it, is out of court; his word is worth nothing at all.’

‘…the sacred tradition of humanity,…consists, not in propositions or statements which are to be accepted and believed on the authority of the tradition, but in questions rightly asked, in conceptions which enable us to ask further questions, and in methods of answering questions…. An atmosphere of beliefs and conceptions has been formed by the labours and struggles of our forefathers,…It is around and about us and within us; we cannot think except in the forms and processes of thought which it supplies.’

3. When may we believe what ‘goes beyond our experience’?

‘[E]very belief, even the simplest and most fundamental, goes beyond experience…The question is…”How far and in what manner may we add to our experience in forming our beliefs?”

‘We may go beyond experience by assuming that what we do not know is like what we do know; or, in other words, we may add to our experience on the assumption of a uniformity in nature.’

‘No evidence,…can justify us in believing the truth of a statement which is contrary to, or outside of, the uniformity of nature.’