

## INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

**The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted.** Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.

# UMI

A Bell & Howell Information Company  
300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor MI 48106-1346 USA  
313/761-4700 800/521-0600



**Epistemic and Moral Obligation Regarding Believing**

by

**Colin Russell Mathers**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment**

**of the**

**Requirements for the Degree**

**Doctor of Philosophy**

**Supervised by**

**Professor Richard Feldman**

**Department of Philosophy  
The College  
Arts and Sciences**

**University of Rochester  
Rochester, New York**

**1998**

**UMI Number: 9827904**

---

**UMI Microform 9827904**  
**Copyright 1998, by UMI Company. All rights reserved.**

**This microform edition is protected against unauthorized  
copying under Title 17, United States Code.**

---

**UMI**  
**300 North Zeeb Road**  
**Ann Arbor, MI 48103**

## **Curriculum Vitae**

Colin Russell Mathers was born in Bloomington, Indiana on April 7, 1971. He attended DePauw University from 1989 to 1993, and was made a member of Phi Beta Kappa in 1993. He graduated summa cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1993. He came to the University of Rochester in the fall of 1993 and began graduate studies in philosophy. He was awarded a teaching assistantship throughout his graduate studies. He pursued research in ethics and epistemology and received the Master of Arts degree in 1997.

## Abstract

In this dissertation I discuss moral and epistemic obligations regarding belief. I employ a distinction between objective and subjective duty to resolve three problems concerning such obligations. It is one's objective duty to do what he really ought to do; by contrast, it is one's subjective duty to do what she would be blameworthy for failing to do and not do what she would be blameworthy for doing. I argue that we should take the Jamesian proposal that one ought to believe truths and avoid falsehoods as a proposal of objective epistemic obligation; and I argue that we should take Clifford's proposal that one ought not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence as a proposal of subjective epistemic obligation. Furthermore, I suggest a resolution to a paradox of misleading evidence by arguing that in some circumstances it is one's objective epistemic duty to disregard evidence against what he knows but that it is one's subjective epistemic duty not to disregard evidence against what he knows. Finally, I defend the presumption that every believing without sufficient evidence has a poor moral status-making quality that is not derivative of the status of certain instances. I find that attempts to show that every believing without sufficient evidence has a wrong-making quality come up short. Thus, I find no reason to think that we have even a *prima facie* objective moral duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence. My defense of the presumption appeals to (i) the fact that one may believe a proposition without sufficient evidence only when she does not engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding that proposition and (ii) the fact that

one has failed to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false is always a reason (that may be overridden) to morally blame her. And the defense of (ii) appeals to (iii) the fact that one does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as a result of her failure to engage in epistemic deliberation regarding a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false is always a reason to morally blame her. Thus, it seems that we have a *prima facie* subjective moral duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	.....	<b>1</b>
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>The Paradox of Misleading Evidence.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>Voluntarism and Obligations Regarding Belief.....</b>	<b>28</b>
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>Epistemic Obligations Regarding Belief.....</b>	<b>56</b>
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>Moral Obligations Regarding Belief.....</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Lying and Believing Without Sufficient Evidence....</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>A Defense of the Moral Presumption Against Believing Without Sufficient Evidence.....</b>	<b>127</b>
<b>Conclusion</b>	.....	<b>147</b>
<b>Bibliography</b>	.....	<b>149</b>



The general topic of this dissertation is moral and epistemic obligations regarding belief. Our epistemic obligations are our obligations as epistemic agents; and we are epistemic agents insofar as we are capable of believing truths, having epistemically justified beliefs, and obtaining knowledge. People say things like, “You should believe what the man says; he is a reliable source of information.” If someone were to ask why she should believe what the man says, the likely answer would be, not that it is the morally right thing to do or that it is in her best interest to do so, but that she is likely to form a true belief or an epistemically justified belief or even obtain knowledge by doing so. People also say things like, “You shouldn’t believe everything that you read in the paper.” If someone were to ask why he should not believe everything that he reads in the paper, the likely answer would be, not that he would violate a moral duty by doing so or that he would thwart his pursuit of his long-term interests, but that he would be duped into believing a lot of falsehoods or epistemically unjustified beliefs by doing so. The fact that people say things such as these seems to imply that we have epistemic obligations.

The best case for the claim that we have moral obligations regarding belief comes from examples like W. K. Clifford’s ship owner example. Clifford tells us of a ship owner who stifles doubts about the soundness of his vessel and believes against his evidence that she is seaworthy. The ship goes down mid-sea and it seems quite clear that the ship owner is morally blameworthy for sending the passengers to an early death. It would be unfair to blame the ship owner for sending the passengers to an early death if he believed, through no moral fault of his own, that his ship was

seaworthy. So, it follows from the fact that the ship owner is morally blameworthy for sending the passengers to an early death that he is morally blameworthy for believing that his ship was seaworthy. Since one may be properly blamed for doing something only if he has fallen short of his duty, the ship owner must have violated some moral obligation by believing that his ship was seaworthy. So, it seems that we have moral obligations not to believe things.

Of central importance to my dissertation is a distinction between subjective duty and objective duty.<sup>[1]</sup> Consider the following situation: a doctor must decide whether or not to attempt a risky surgical procedure on an unconscious patient. She consults the patient's family, her colleagues at the hospital, and up-to-date medical ethics journals. After carefully weighing all of the relevant considerations she comes to believe that she morally should go ahead with the procedure and does so. It seems that in this situation the doctor is not at fault for believing that she morally should perform surgery. And it seems that, since the doctor does what she non-culpably believes she morally ought to do, we cannot morally blame her for doing what she does. Furthermore, it seems that, as we cannot morally blame her for doing what she does, she fulfills her moral duty by doing what she does.

However, we can imagine that several days after the surgery the doctor comes across a previously overlooked consideration in a medical ethics article that makes her doubt that by performing the surgery she did what moral duty required. It would be mistaken to think that, since she did what she non-culpably believed she morally ought to do and is, thus, morally blameless, she did what moral duty required of her. One

cannot rule out the relevance of overlooked considerations to the issue of whether or not she did as moral duty required on the grounds that she formed a non-culpable belief on the issue without giving weight to those considerations. One may, through no fault of his own, overlook a relevant consideration. One's moral duty is determined by all of the relevant moral considerations; but one does his moral duty whenever he does what he non-culpably believes is his moral duty to do. Since one may, through no fault of his own, overlook a consideration, there seems to be a conflict.

The resolution to the conflict comes from distinguishing subjective and objective duties. It is one's objective duty to do what he really ought to do. And what one really ought to do is determined by all of the relevant considerations. One does the right thing if and only if she does her objective duty. By contrast, it is one's subjective duty to do what she would be blameworthy for failing to do and not to do what she would be blameworthy for doing.

I employ the distinction between subjective and objective duty to reconcile the two leading proposals about the nature of our epistemic obligations. One leading proposal dates back at least to William James; on one Jamesian view it is one's epistemic obligation for every proposition that he considers to believe it if and only if it is true. The other leading proposal dates back at least to Clifford; on Clifford's view it is one's epistemic obligation not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence for its truth. Sometimes one does not have sufficient evidence for a true proposition that he considers. In such instances the two proposals require incompatible conduct; the Jamesian proposal requires one to believe the unsupported truth and Clifford's

proposal requires one not to believe it. Could someone be subject to both obligations at the same time? I think so.

We may take the Jamesian proposal as a proposal of objective epistemic obligation; on that view it is one's objective epistemic duty to believe true and only true propositions that she considers. On this view no matter what evidence one possesses he really epistemically ought to believe true and only true propositions that he considers. In addition, we may take Clifford's proposal as a proposal of subjective epistemic obligation; on that view it is one's subjective epistemic duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence for its truth. Regardless of whether a proposition is true or false, one is blameworthy, on this view, for believing it whenever his evidence for its truth is insufficient. I argue that, if the Jamesian proposal as a proposal of objective epistemic obligation is correct, then given the traditional account of what constitutes sufficient evidence Clifford's proposal as a proposal of subjective epistemic obligation is too strict. I discuss examples that seem to indicate that if one really epistemically ought to believe propositions that he considers if and only if they are true, then given the traditional account of what constitutes sufficient evidence sometimes the fact that one believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is no reason whatsoever to epistemically blame her.

I also employ the distinction between subjective and objective duty to resolve the paradox of misleading evidence. Roughly, the paradox seems to arise because both of the following propositions seem to be true: (a) one should disregard evidence against what one knows to be true, but (b) one should not disregard evidence of any

sort. I take it that to disregard evidence is to ignore, or turn one's attention away from, that evidence. I suggest that, whenever disregarding evidence against what one knows to be true allows her to continue believing and hence knowing that truth, the fact that disregarding evidence has that consequence is a reason to think that she really epistemically ought to disregard such evidence, i. e., she has an *prima facie* objective epistemic duty to disregard such evidence. But I also suggest that, since the fact that one's doxastic attitude toward a proposition is a result of his disregarding evidence is a reason to epistemically blame him, the fact that one disregards evidence of any sort is itself a reason to epistemically blame him, i. e., one has a *prima facie* subjective epistemic obligation not to disregard evidence of any sort.

Finally, I employ the distinction between subjective and objective duty to defend the moral presumption against believing without sufficient evidence. In light of my investigations of Clifford's proposal I abandon the traditional understanding of sufficient evidence in favor of a much looser one. I point out that among those who have given the issue some thought there is a presumption that every believing without sufficient evidence has a poor moral status-making quality that is not (merely) derivative of the poor moral status-making quality of certain instances. One promising way to defend the presumption that every believing without sufficient evidence has a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality is to identify some wrong-making quality common to every believing without sufficient evidence. I examine several proposals of such a quality. Since believing without sufficient evidence may be likened to a sort of lying to oneself, many of the proposals I examine are derived from

proposals of a wrong-making feature common to every lie. However, I do not find a satisfactory proposal of a wrong-making feature common to every believing without sufficient evidence. All of the proposals are consequential; each proposal names a bad consequence of every believing without sufficient evidence. However, whenever one believes without sufficient evidence in his last moment of life, he does not bring about any proposed consequence that really is bad. Thus, none of these proposals adequately defends the presumption that every believing without sufficient evidence has a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality.

I do not attempt to offer a new proposal of a wrong-making feature common to all believings without sufficient evidence. I do not attempt to show that there is even a *prima facie* objective moral obligation not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence. Instead, I attempt to defend the presumption that every believing without sufficient evidence has a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality by offering good reason to think that the fact that one believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is a reason (that may be overridden) to morally blame him. I argue that the fact that one does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as a result of her failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false is a reason to morally blame her. And I argue that the fact that one fails to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false is itself a reason to morally blame her. But, I argue, it is only by failing to engage in proper epistemic deliberation over a candidate for belief that we allow ourselves to

believe it without sufficient evidence. Since every believing without sufficient evidence is the product of a failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation, it follows that there is a reason to morally blame an agent whenever he believes a proposition without sufficient evidence. Thus, it seems that we have a *prima facie* subjective moral duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence.

[1] I use “obligation” and “duty” interchangeably. There may be contexts in which it is useful to distinguish obligations from duties; but I do not think that the present context is one of those.



An alleged paradox concerning misleading evidence goes as follows:

“If I know that  $h$  is true, I know that any evidence against  $h$  is evidence against something that is true; so I know that such evidence is misleading. But I should disregard evidence that I know is misleading. So, once I know that  $h$  is true, I am in a position to disregard any future evidence that seems to tell against  $h$ .” This is paradoxical, because I am never in a position simply to disregard any future evidence even though I do know a great many different things.<sup>[1]</sup>

Just what is the alleged paradox? The passage suggests that it is one’s epistemic duty to disregard apparent evidence that she knows is misleading; but the passage also suggests that it is one’s epistemic duty not to disregard *any* future evidence. A paradox seems to arise because we seem bound by two apparently incompatible epistemic duties: (i) a duty to disregard future evidence against a proposition that one knows, and (ii) a duty not to disregard future evidence against a proposition that one knows.<sup>[2]</sup> (i) follows from the duty to disregard evidence that she knows is misleading; (ii) follows from the duty not to disregard *any* future evidence. Let us pursue a solution to the apparent paradox that accounts for its force.

The idea of disregarding evidence in this passage is unclear. To disregard evidence may be to ignore, or turn one’s attention away from, evidence or to treat evidence as though it does not matter. One may disregard evidence simply by ignoring it; and one may ignore evidence simply by turning his attention away from the evidence and toward something else. I may ignore my memory of eating eggs for breakfast just by thinking about something else. By contrast, one may disregard evidence by treating it as though it

does not matter. Perhaps there are conditions under which I may treat my memory of eating eggs for breakfast as though it does not defeat my warrant for believing that I skipped breakfast (late in the morning my stomach is growling and I recall having a dream whose setting was the breakfast table.) I believe that both understandings of the idea of disregarding evidence play a role in one or another proposed solution to the paradox that we will examine in this chapter.

It is also worth clarifying the idea of misleading evidence. We are told that evidence against something that is true is misleading. But in virtue of what quality is such evidence misleading? One answer is that evidence against something that is true misleads insofar as it discourages us from believing something that is true. If it is true that it is not snowing but I am the victim of an elaborate prank involving equipment stolen from a ski resort and through my window I see snowflakes fall, then my visual experience is evidence that discourages me from believing a truth: namely, that it is not snowing. Another answer is that such evidence misleads insofar as it detracts from one's warrant for believing something that is true. If I am a victim of such a prank, then my visual experiences also detract from any warrant that I have for the true proposition that it is not snowing. I believe that both answers play a role in one or another proposed solution to the paradox that we will examine in this chapter.<sup>[3]</sup>

## I. Evidence Against What One Knows

First, let us evaluate the suggestion that it is one's epistemic duty to disregard evidence that she knows is misleading. And let us start by reconstructing the line of reasoning that points to such a duty:

- (1) S knows that [p and, if p, then evidence against p is misleading.]
- (2) If S knows that [p and, if p, then evidence against p is misleading,] then, if S believes that evidence against p is misleading, then S knows that evidence against p is misleading.
- (3) S believes that evidence against p is misleading.
- (4) S knows that ([evidence against p is misleading and e is evidence against p] and [if (evidence against p is misleading and e is evidence against p,) then e is misleading.])
- (5) If S knows that ([evidence against p is misleading and e is evidence against p] and [if (evidence against p is misleading and e is evidence against p,) then e is misleading.]) then, if S believes that e is misleading, then S knows that e is misleading.
- (6) S believes that e is misleading.
- (7) S knows that e is misleading.
- (8) If S knows that evidence is misleading, then S has an epistemic duty to disregard that evidence.
- (9) So, S has an epistemic duty to disregard e.

This argument is valid and let us take (1) as true by hypothesis. (2) is an instance of a weak closure principle, which holds that, if a person, S, knows that [p and, if p, then q,]

then, if S believes that q, then S knows that q. Let us also take (3) as true by hypothesis. That S knows that evidence against p is misleading (the first conjunct mentioned in (4)) is established by (1), (2) and (3) and let us grant that S knows that e is evidence against p and the conditional by hypothesis. Let us grant (4) on the grounds that S knows each conjunct. (5) is also an instance of the weak closure principle. (6) is true by hypothesis. (7) follows from (4), (5) and (6) by modus ponens. It is (8) that I want to closely examine.

Is it reasonable to think that the antecedent of (8) implies its consequent? I think that we can facilitate thought on the matter by thinking about the following case: Smith is on a weight loss program and it is a requirement of this program that he must keep a food journal. In this journal Smith records what he eats and when he eats it. One afternoon he treats himself to an orange; and as he is scribbling in his journal he comes to believe that he is eating an orange at three o'clock. Jones walks by and suggests that Smith is eating a tangerine not an orange. Now let us suppose that before Jones walks by Smith knows that he is eating an orange at three o'clock. The fruit stand owner told Smith that he had selected an orange; and Smith's visual, olfactory, and gustatory experiences corroborate the fruit stand owner's testimony. Furthermore, let us suppose that Smith knows that Jones's testimony is evidence against a truth. Finally, let us add that by attending to Jones's testimony Smith will lose confidence in and cease to believe the proposition that he is eating an orange at three o'clock. What is Smith's epistemic duty regarding this evidence?

I think that it is an important feature of this case that at one point Smith *knows* that he is eating an orange at three o'clock. Not only is it reasonable for Smith to believe that he is eating an orange at three o'clock; it is *true* that Smith is eating an orange at three o'clock. He has got it right. One Jamesian account of epistemic duty holds that it is one's objective epistemic duty, for every proposition that she considers, to believe it if and only if it is true. Thus, if that Jamesian account is correct, there is some sense in which, regardless of the status of his evidence, if Smith considers the proposition that he is eating an orange at three o'clock, then it is his duty to believe that he is eating an orange at three o'clock. Furthermore, by disregarding evidence to the contrary Smith can enable himself to continue to so believe. On the one hand, if Smith attends to Jones's testimony, he will come to see the proposition as unlikely to be true and, thus, will cease to believe it. On the other hand, if Smith turns his attention away from, or disregards, evidence against what he knows, he will avoid losing confidence in what he knows. Thus, by disregarding evidence against what he knows Smith can enable himself to fulfill his objective epistemic duty for every proposition that he considers to believe it if and only if it is true. Thus, we may say that Smith has an enabling duty to disregard Jones's testimony.<sup>[4]</sup> There is good reason to accept the following proposal of a *prima facie* objective epistemic duty: (i') disregard evidence against what one knows, whenever attending to and deliberating over that evidence would cause him to lose confidence in and cease to believe those propositions.

## II. Evidence Against What is Reasonable to Believe

Some would claim that it is not an important feature of the case that Smith has got it right. They would hold that it is reasonable for Smith to believe that Jones's testimony is misleading and it is one's epistemic duty to disregard evidence that is reasonable for him to believe is misleading. Let us reconstruct the reasoning that points to such a duty:

(1') It is reasonable for S to believe that [p and, if p, then evidence against p is misleading.]

(2') If it is reasonable for S to believe that [p and, if p, then evidence against p is misleading,] then it is reasonable for S to believe that evidence against p is misleading.

(3') It is reasonable for S to believe that ([evidence against p is misleading and e is evidence against p] and [if (evidence against p is misleading and e is evidence against p), then e is misleading.])

(4') If it is reasonable for S to believe that ([evidence against p is misleading and e is evidence against p] and [if (evidence against p is misleading and e is evidence against p), then e is misleading,]) then it is reasonable for S to believe that e is misleading.

(5') It is reasonable for S to believe that e is misleading.

(6') If it is reasonable for S to believe that evidence is misleading, then S has an epistemic duty to disregard that evidence.

(7') So, S has an epistemic duty to disregard e.

This argument, like its parallel argument, is valid and let us initially grant that (1') is true by hypothesis. (2') is supported by a closure principle regarding what is reasonable to

believe: if it is reasonable for a person, S, to believe that [p and, if p, then q,] then it is reasonable for S to believe that q. That it is reasonable for S to believe that evidence against p is misleading (the first conjunct mentioned in (3')) is established by (1') and (2') and let us initially grant that it is reasonable for S to believe that e is evidence against p and the conditional by hypothesis. Let us grant (3') on the grounds that it is reasonable for S to believe each conjunct. (4') is supported by the same closure principle that supports (2'). (5') follows from (3') and (4') by modus ponens.

Let us modify our case in the following way: let us leave it open whether or not Smith is right in believing that he is eating an orange at three o'clock. Let us call a defender of the reasoning that points to a duty to disregard evidence that is reasonable for one to believe is misleading a dogmatist. A dogmatist may point out the logical relations that obtain among components of Smith's noetic structure. Consider the following propositions:

- (h) I am eating an orange at three o'clock.
- (e) I take there to be an orange.
- (f) Jones says that I am eating not an orange but a tangerine.
- (g) Jones's testimony is misleading.

The dogmatist may maintain that, although e tends to make h evident, e&f does not tend to make h evident. Thus, following Chisholm the dogmatist may say that f defeats the tendency of e to make h evident.<sup>[5]</sup> Furthermore, although e&f does not tend to make h evident, e&f&g tends to make h evident. Thus, the dogmatist may say that g defeats f as a defeater of the tendency of e to make h evident. He may say that g restores the tendency

of  $e$  to make  $h$  evident. Thus, since Jones's testimony is a defeated defeater, it is Smith's epistemic duty to treat as though it does not matter, or as though it does not defeat his warrant for believing  $h$ .

Against the dogmatist an opponent may argue that in the case we are considering that what is supposed to make  $g$  evident for Smith is  $h \& f$ . However, the opponent may add, when  $f$  is made evident for Smith,  $e \& f$  does not tend to make  $h$  evident for Smith, that is,  $f$  defeats the tendency of  $e$  to make  $h$  evident for Smith. Thus, when  $f$  is made evident for Smith,  $h$  is no longer evident for Smith. Thus,  $h \& f$  never tend to make  $g$  evident for Smith. And, if  $g$  is not evident for Smith, then the dogmatist does not seem to have any reason to allege that Smith has an epistemic duty to disregard Jones's testimony. If the dogmatist's opponent is correct, then there is no paradox because, if he is correct, then there seems no force behind the claim that it is one's epistemic duty to disregard evidence on the grounds that it is reasonable for her to believe that the evidence is misleading.

The dogmatist may insist that at the very moment  $f$  is made evident for Smith  $h \& f$  tend to make  $g$  evident for Smith. And thus, he continues,  $g$  does defeat  $f$  as a defeater of the tendency of  $e$  to make  $h$  evident for Smith. And it follows that it is Smith's epistemic duty to disregard  $f$ , or treat  $f$  as though it does not matter, or as though it does not defeat his warrant for believing  $h$ .

But the opponent may reply that at the very moment  $f$  is made evident for Smith  $e \& f$  does not tend to make  $h$  evident for Smith, or  $f$  defeats the tendency of  $e$  to make  $h$  evident for Smith. And thus, she continues,  $f \& h$  never tend to make  $g$  evident for Smith.



And thus Smith would be blameworthy for disregarding  $f$ , or treating  $f$  as though it does not matter or as though it does not defeat his warrant for believing  $h$ . So, the opponent of the dogmatist would reject (3') on the grounds that, when it becomes reasonable for someone to believe that something is evidence against a proposition, it is no longer reasonable for her to believe that evidence against that proposition is misleading.

Intuition dictates that the reasonableness of Smith's belief that he is eating oranges at three o'clock is defeated by Jones's testimony. Thus, intuition sides with the dogmatist's opponent. It is intuitive that  $f \& h$  never tend to make  $g$  evident for Smith because, when  $f$  is made evident for Smith,  $h$  is no longer evident for Smith.

But can we offer more than a conflict with intuition as our grounds for rejecting the dogmatist's reasoning? I think that we can. One may attempt to do so by appealing to principles of good reasoning. To show the error of the dogmatist's reasoning his opponent may appeal to the following principle: if what makes  $j$  evident for a person,  $S$ , is  $m$ , then  $S$  cannot use  $j$  as a restorer of the tendency of  $k$  to make  $m$  evident for  $S$ .<sup>[6]</sup> Let us call this principle the anti-dogmatist principle. The dogmatist violates this principle; what makes  $h$  evident for him is  $e$  and he uses  $h$  to restore the tendency of that which initially made  $e$  evident for him to do so. And if this is a correct principle of good reasoning, the dogmatist is mistaken to claim that it is Smith's epistemic duty to disregard  $f$  as a defeater of the tendency of  $e$  to make  $h$  evident for Smith.

But is there any way to show that the principle is a correct principle of good reasoning? I think that there is. One can show that a principle is a correct principle of

good reasoning by showing that it is reasonable to believe that following the principle would promote one's fulfillment of her duty, for every proposition that she considers, to believe it if and only if it is true better than not doing so would. Is it reasonable to believe that adhering to the anti-dogmatist principle will promote our fulfillment of our objective epistemic duty? I think so. There seems to be no good reason to think that, whenever one acquires evidence for as well as evidence against a proposition, the order in which the evidence is acquired indicates the truth or falsehood of the proposition. Recall the following propositions associated with our case:

- (h) I am eating an orange at three o'clock.
- (e) I take there to be an orange.
- (f) Jones says that I am eating not an orange but a tangerine.
- (g) Jones's testimony is misleading.

and add to that list

- (i) My taking there to be an orange is misleading.

e is made evident for Smith before f is; and it is in virtue of that fact that e tends to make h evident for Smith and, on the dogmatist's reasoning, that g defeats f as a defeater of the tendency of e to make h evident for Smith. By contrast, if f were made evident for Smith before e were, f would tend to make not-h evident for Smith and, on the dogmatist's reasoning, i would defeat e as a defeater of the tendency of f to make not-h evident for S. Thus, the dogmatist's reasoning allows the order in which one acquires evidence for and evidence against a proposition to affect whether or not it is reasonable to believe that proposition at times after both evidence for and evidence against are acquired. But there

seems to be no good reason to believe that the order in which evidence for and evidence against a proposition are acquired indicates the truth or falsehood of the proposition. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that violating the anti-dogmatist principle will only hinder one's fulfillment of her objective epistemic duty, for every proposition that he considers, to believe it if and only if it is true. Treating the order in which evidence is acquired as an indicator of truth or falsehood, when it is not, is no better than treating Tarot cards as an indicator of the truth or falsehood of a proposition about the future. In both cases we bring in factors that we have no reason to believe lead us to believe propositions we consider if and only if they are true. Our best chance, from our perspective, at fulfilling this duty is to give weight only to those considerations that it is reasonable to believe are indicative of the truth or falsehood of the proposition under consideration. Thus, the reasoning represented by (1') through (7') does not seem to support the position that we have any duty to disregard evidence.

### III. The Status of the Paradox

Let us now assess the status of the paradox. If it is an important feature of our case that Smith *knows* that he is eating an orange at three o'clock, or that he has got it right, then the paradox seems to arise because we seem to be bound by two apparently incompatible epistemic duties: (i') a duty to disregard future evidence against a proposition that one knows, whenever not doing so will result in her losing confidence in and ceasing to believe that proposition, and (ii) a duty not to disregard future evidence

against a proposition that one knows. I believe that we are bound by both duties but also that they are not incompatible. It is one's (prima facie) objective epistemic duty to disregard future evidence against a proposition that he knows whenever attending to and deliberating over that evidence will cause him to lose confidence in and cease to believe a truth. That is, the fact that attending to some piece of evidence will cause one to lose confidence in and cease to believe a truth is a reason to think that he really epistemically ought to disregard that evidence. Nevertheless, it remains one's (prima facie) subjective epistemic duty not to disregard future evidence against a proposition that she knows. That is, the fact that one disregards evidence is a reason to epistemically blame her. Since our total evidence is our best indication of the truth or falsehood of propositions we consider, by focusing our attention upon such evidence we make our beliefs better conform to what our indications point to and, as best as we can tell, conform to the truth. Thus, by appealing to the distinction between objective and subjective epistemic duties, we resolve one version of the apparent paradox regarding misleading evidence.

If it is correct to hold that it is not an important feature of our case that Smith has got it right, then the paradox seems to arise because we initially seem bound by each of the following duties: (iii) the duty to disregard future evidence against what one reasonably believes, and (iv) the duty not to disregard future evidence against what one reasonably believes. (iii) seems to be supported by the dogmatist's reasoning, which shows that, once one reasonably believes a proposition, she may regard any evidence against the proposition as defeated *as* a defeater of the tendency of her evidence for that proposition to make the proposition evident for her. However, since there is no good reason to

believe that the order in which one acquires evidence for and evidence against a proposition indicates the truth or falsehood of the proposition, the dogmatist's reasoning is flawed. Thus, the dogmatist's reasoning does not support the proposed subjective epistemic duty to disregard future evidence against what one reasonably believes. Thus, a second version of the paradox is resolved by stripping away the initial plausibility of one of the incompatible epistemic duties.

#### IV. The Paradox: Another Approach

I think that there is yet another way to account for the initial appearance of paradox regarding misleading evidence. We have seen that the reasoning that the dogmatist appeals to to show that evidence against what is reasonable for him to believe is defeated as a defeater of his prior evidence and, thus, may be disregarded violates a correct principle of good reasoning. Recall again these propositions:

- (h) I am eating an orange at three o'clock.
- (e) I take there to be an orange.
- (f) Jones says that I am eating not an orange but a tangerine.
- (g) Jones's testimony is misleading.

In one sense of "reasonable belief" it is not reasonable for Smith to believe that g defeats f as a defeater of the tendency of e to make h evident for Smith. It is not reasonable for him to so believe because, as soon as f is made evident for Smith, e&f does not tend to make h evident for Smith and, thus, g is never made evident for Smith. Thus,

if we take “reasonable belief” in that sense, some might say that in some sense of “duty” Smith has a duty not to disregard *f* as a defeater of the tendency of *e* to make *h* evident.

However, it is plausible to suppose that Smith could, through no fault of his own, fail to see that *e*&*f* does not tend to make *h* evident for him, infer *g* on the basis of *h* and *f* and count *g* as a defeater of *f* as a defeater of the tendency of *e* to make *h* evident for himself. In that case it would seem that in some sense of the term “reasonable belief” it would be reasonable for Smith to believe that Jones’s testimony is a defeated defeater. Furthermore, in that case it seems that Smith would be blameworthy for not disregarding Jones’s testimony as a defeater.<sup>[7]</sup> In that case it seems that Smith has an subjective duty to disregard Jones’s testimony.

Thus, corresponding to two senses of “reasonable belief” there appear to be two senses of “duty.” In one sense of “reasonable belief” it is reasonable for one to believe whatever she has good reasons to believe. Corresponding to this sense there appears to be a sense of “duty” such that one has a duty to disregard evidence as defeated if one has good reasons to count the evidence as defeated and a duty not to disregard evidence as defeated if one has no such reasons. By contrast, on a weaker sense of “reasonable belief” it is reasonable to believe whatever one non-culpably believes that he has good reasons to believe. Corresponding to this sense there is a sense of “duty” such that it is one’s duty to disregard evidence as defeated if one non-culpably believes that he has good reasons to count it as defeated and a duty not to disregard the evidence as defeated if she non-culpably believes that she has no such reasons.

Thus, we are drawn in by the paradox because, although we acknowledge that correct principles of good reasoning seem to dictate that it is our duty not to disregard evidence whenever we have no good reasons to count it as defeated, we realize that one may non-culpably believe that he has good reasons to believe that his evidence is defeated, when it is not, and, thus, acquire a duty to disregard that evidence as misleading. However, as there appear to be two senses of “duty” involved and it is consistent to commit oneself to view that one’s duty in one sense of “duty” may conflict with his duty in another sense of “duty,” there is no paradox after all.

[1] This formulation of the paradox is from Gilbert Harman's *Thought*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973. p. 148. Harman attributes the formulation to Saul Kripke.

[2] (i) and (ii) require incompatible conduct. But, in addition, (i) and (ii) appear to be such that one could not be bound by both at the same time. If it is one's epistemic duty to disregard future evidence against a proposition that she knows, then not to disregard such evidence is epistemically forbidden. And, if it is one's epistemic duty not to disregard future evidence against a proposition that she knows, then to not to disregard such evidence is epistemically obligatory. But it seems that an act cannot be both epistemically obligatory and epistemically forbidden for someone at the same time; and, thus, it seems that one cannot be bound by both (i) and (ii) at the same time. When I say of some epistemic duties that they are incompatible I mean, not that they require incompatible conduct, but that one could not be bound by both at the same time. It seems that sometimes one may be bound by both of two duties that taken together require incompatible conduct. One may have a familial duty to believe what his often unreliable father tells him and at the same time an epistemic duty not to believe what his father tells him.

[3] Note that misleading evidence is misleading evidence concerning a proposition. If Smith hears Jones's misleading testimony about the outcome of an election, then the testimony is misleading evidence concerning a proposition about who won or by how much but not misleading evidence concerning a proposition about what Jones said.

[4] It has been pointed out to me that on this Jamesian account of epistemic duty, if Smith considers the proposition that Jones suggested that Smith is eating a tangerine not an



orange, then he is obligated to believe it (since it is true that Jones made the suggestion.)

It is likely that Smith believes that proposition and that he does so automatically without giving it much thought. It is likely that Smith believes that proposition without even attending to it. While driving I may devote my attention to what I will have for lunch; and, if I see brake lights on the car before me, without diverting any attention away from thoughts of sushi I may come to believe that the car before me is slowing down.

Likewise, without taking any attention off other things on his mind Smith may come to believe that Jones suggested that Smith is eating a tangerine not an orange. Thus, it seems that believing a proposition is compatible with having one's attention turned away from it. Even if one must attend to a proposition to believe it, I do not think that a conflict of duty arises. If Smith is faithful to his duty to disregard, or turn his attention away from, Jones's testimony, he will not even consider the proposition that Jones suggested that Smith is eating a tangerine not an orange; and, if Smith does not consider that proposition, then he is not (on the Jamesian principle, anyway) obligated to believe it. I believe that Smith's duty to disregard Jones's testimony is an *objective* epistemic duty. It is unlikely that Smith would realize that he is subject to that duty; and, so, it is unlikely that, if he violates that duty, he is thereby blameworthy. Furthermore, I think that Smith's duty to disregard Jones's testimony is only a *prima facie* duty. The fact that disregarding the testimony allows him to continue to believe a truth is a reason (that may be overridden) for him to disregard the testimony. Perhaps there are there are more significant reasons for him to attend to the testimony. Perhaps the fact that attending to the testimony allows him

to believe some other truths is a reason to attend to the testimony that outweighs his reason to disregard the testimony.

[5] Chisholm introduces this way of putting things in *Theory of Knowledge*. Third Ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989. p. 52-4.

[6] I am indebted to Earl Conee for this formulation of the anti-dogmatist principle.

[7] It has been suggested to me that the view I describe seems to justify obtuseness. In response let me stress that we must imagine that Smith is in no way at fault for failing to see that e&f do not tend to make h evident for him. Perhaps he is the victim of a serious cognitive malfunction. It is only in cases in which one is completely faultless for failing to see that evidence against what one has reasonably believed undermines the reasonableness of that belief that one may infer, or would not be at fault for inferring, that the evidence is misleading and has a (subjective) duty to disregard it.

The most widely discussed sort of epistemic duty consists of duties to believe and duties not to believe. One reason to deny that we have any such duties is that doxastic voluntarism, the view that believing is voluntary or under our control, seems false. Richard Feldman offers what he calls the ‘Voluntarism Argument:’

1. Doxastic voluntarism is false.
2. If doxastic voluntarism is false, then no one has epistemic obligations.
3. Therefore, no one has epistemic obligations.<sup>[1]</sup>

He remarks,

The Voluntarism Argument has considerable plausibility. There is a long tradition that makes only voluntary or controllable actions the subject of obligations, so (2) seems true. And it does seem that we can’t control our beliefs. In the ordinary course of events, one finds oneself with some beliefs and rather little one can do about them. If revelations about your favorite politician cause you to believe that he is dishonest, then you might wish that you didn’t have this belief. Although you may be able to put the matter out of your mind, you can’t, at will, change your belief about the topic. Similarly, all the perceptual beliefs that you have just seem to come over you. When I go outside on a typical winter day in Rochester, the belief that it is cold and gray outside just comes over me. In general, there is rather little we can do about our beliefs. They seem not to be matters under our control. So, (1) seems to be correct as well.<sup>[2]</sup>

Limiting the subject of obligations to voluntary actions has more than just tradition behind it. It would be unfair to blame someone for doing or failing to do something over which he lacks sufficient control. If one is forced to gaze upon an obscene object, he is not blameworthy for having an obscene visual experience.

Sensory experiences force themselves upon those whose sensory organs are properly tuned into their environment. And if one is not blameworthy for doing or failing to do something over which he lacks sufficient control, it seems mistaken to hold that it was his duty or obligation to do or refrain from doing that something. Feldman suggests that believing is more like having a visual experience than conjuring up an image in so far as the former is forced upon us in a way that the latter is not.

## I. Basic Control

Bernard Williams argues that we cannot come to believe something just by willing to believe it.<sup>[3]</sup> Although most of us can wiggle our left index finger just by willing to do so, we cannot, Williams maintains, come to believe that, say, today is Friday merely by willing to believe it. Williams argues, not only that we cannot come to believe something merely by willing to believe it, but also that it is a necessary truth that we have no such ability. He argues,

One reason is connected with the characteristic of beliefs that they aim at the truth. If I could acquire a belief at will, I could acquire it whether it was true or not; moreover I would know that I could acquire it whether it was true or

not. If in full consciousness I could will to acquire a 'belief' irrespective of its truth, it is unclear that before the event I could seriously think of it as a belief, i. e. as something purporting to represent reality. At the very least, there must be a restriction on what is the case after the event; since I could not then, in full consciousness, regard this as a belief of mine, i. e. something I take to be true, and also know that I acquired it at will.<sup>[4]</sup>

It is interesting to note that it does not follow from this line of reasoning that it is a necessary truth that one cannot come to believe something just by willing to believe it; what follows is merely the more modest claim that one could never have good reason to think that he acquired a belief just by willing to believe it. Nevertheless, Williams's remarks bring to light an important point: to believe a proposition is to take that proposition as purporting to represent reality. Thus, it seems that, by attending to one's relevant evidence, one improves his chances that his doxastic attitude toward a proposition that is neither clearly true nor clearly false for him lines up with its truth or falsehood.

William Alston examines what he calls 'the basic control thesis,' "the thesis that one can take up at will whatever propositional attitude one chooses."<sup>[5]</sup> We seem to have basic control over the positions of our limbs; that is, we can move our limbs just by willing to do so. I can raise my left arm just by willing to do so; and I need not will any more basic act to bring about such bodily motion. Alston argues that it is a fact about our nature that we cannot adopt at will whatever propositional attitude we please. He reasons:

My argument for this, if it can be called that, simply consists in asking you to consider whether you have any such powers. Can you, at this moment, start to believe that the United States is still a colony of Great Britain, just by deciding to do so? If you find it too incredible that you should be sufficiently motivated to try to believe this, suppose that someone offers you \$500,000,000 to believe it, and you are much more interested in the money than in believing the truth.... Can you switch propositional attitudes toward that proposition just by deciding to do so? It seems clear to me that I have no such power.<sup>[6]</sup>

Alston's example illustrates that we lack basic control over whether or not we believe obviously false statements.<sup>[7]</sup> He points out that, likewise, we do not have basic control over obviously true statements. Our perceptual experiences give rise to numerous beliefs that seem obviously true to us. As I look out my window I see branches of a tree blowing in the wind. My perceptual belief that branches of a tree are blowing in the wind is one over which I lack basic control; if I do not have the power to choose between believing that branches of a tree are blowing and not believing it, it is not the case that I believe *at will*.

Alston also discusses cases in which one confronts propositions that are neither obviously true nor obviously false for her. One sort of such cases concerns theoretical matters, such as those of religion, philosophy, and high level science. After investigating various criteria of right action, one may be unable to determine a clear winner among the competitors. Often the result of such investigation is that the inquirer embraces one criteria to the exclusion of all others. Another sort of such

cases concerns practical situations in which one must act regardless of how much confidence she has in certain matters of fact. I should reseed the lawn today if and only if the next few days are warm and the nights are cool. It is not at all clear that the weather will cooperate; but I must either reseed today or not. To ignore the matter would amount to acting on the assumption that the weather will not cooperate. I am better off making a judgment about the matter.

Alston offers the following suggestion:

although in these cases the supporting considerations are seen less than conclusive, here too the belief follows automatically, without intervention of the will, from the way things seem at the moment to the subject. In the cases of (subjective) certainty belief is determined by that sense of certainty, or, alternatively, by what leads to it, the sensory experience or whatever; in the cases of (subjective) uncertainty belief is still determined by what plays an analogous role, the sense that one alternative is more likely than the others, or by what leads to that.<sup>[8]</sup>

I agree that in these cases belief comes automatically without an act of will. But I do not agree that in every such case it is what seems likely to be true that determines belief. Although there are undoubtedly cases in which things go as Alston says they do, it seems that there are other cases in which non-epistemic factors play a role in determining belief. People presented with the same evidence may arrive at different beliefs. Members of a jury may hear the same testimony yet arrive at different conclusions regarding the innocence of the defendant. It may be the case that every

member is such that it seems to him that the defendant is innocent and he believes she is innocent or it seems to him that the defendant is guilty and he believes that she is guilty. However, it seems consistent with our nature that the testimony during the trial has made it seem to some members of the jury that the defendant is innocent but that some members have ignored this evidence, allow their prejudices to direct their doxastic state, and come to believe that the defendant is guilty. Although prejudice might have its effect by tainting a juror's perception of truth, it seems (psychologically) possible that prejudice has its effect by distracting one from what seems to him to be true.

A desire that something is true may never induce a belief that it is true. However, it seems plausible to suppose that a desire *to believe* that something is true may induce a belief that it is true. An undecided juror may have a disposition to stand firm on the principle that he will not go along with the decision of the other jurors unless he believes that their decision is correct. Yet he may also have a strong inclination to see to it that the jury is not hung. In this case the undecided juror may find that his doxastic attitude is guided, not by what seems to him to be true (his attention is averted from epistemic considerations,) but rather by his desire to cooperate.

There may be cases in which a proposition and its negation each seem equally likely to be true. Let us imagine that a juror finds that the evidence presented by the prosecution and the evidence presented by the defense is counterbalanced. Regarding such cases, Alston argues,



Here, like Buridan's ass, I am confronted with (subjectively) perfectly equivalent alternatives. If it were a choice between actions, such as that confronting the ass, I need not perish through indecision. I could arbitrarily make a choice, as we often do in a cafeteria line when two alternative salads look equally tempting.... But doxastic choice is another matter. How *could* I simply choose to believe one rather than the other when they seem exactly on a par with respect to truth...? To do so would be to choose a belief in the face of the lack of any significant inclination to suppose it to be true. It seems clear to me that this is not within our power.<sup>[9]</sup>

I agree that in cases in which a proposition and its negation have the same subjective probability one cannot just choose to believe one over the other. But yet I think that one can be inclined to believe one over the other and that often times this inclination is what directs belief. After hearing the equally convincing cases, a juror may set that information aside and allow himself to be persuaded by his feelings of outrage over the defendant's smug attitude toward the suffering of the victim and the victim's friends and family to believe that the defendant is guilty even though he does not take the defendant's attitude as evidence that he is guilty. Feelings and mood as well as desires may affect one's doxastic attitude. Even though I think that Alston is mistaken to claim that belief is always determined by what seems true, it remains dubious that one can acquire a belief merely by willing to have it.

## II. Immediate, non-basic control

So, that it is not our nature to adopt doxastic attitudes just by willing them is some reason to reject doxastic voluntarism. However, Feldman mentions one plausible reason for accepting the doctrine. He explains,

...although we can't "directly" control our beliefs (in some sense of 'direct'), we can indirectly control them. There are things we can do to alter the ways in which we form beliefs and the kind of information which we receive. I can, for example, study logic and probability theory with the aim of reducing the number of mistaken inferences I draw. I might read the publications of some political or religious groups with the aim of eventually coming to accept the general set of beliefs they support. These and any number of other voluntary actions will affect my beliefs, and I may perform the actions for that very purpose. Hence, I do have some sort of indirect control over my beliefs. And this indirect control over beliefs makes some sort of doxastic voluntarism true.<sup>[10]</sup>

Although we do not have basic control over our beliefs, we do have some non-basic control over them. Paradigm examples of moral obligation arise in cases in which one is obligated to do something over which she does not have basic control, but can bring about with one uninterrupted intention. A moral obligation to call medical attention to an automobile accident victim is an obligation to do something over which one does not have basic control; unless one has telekinetic powers or is a

medic himself, one cannot call medical attention just by willing to do so. One must will more basic acts, like dialing a phone and talking, to call medical attention. Alston labels the control we have over states of affairs that cannot be willed just like that but can be brought about with one uninterrupted intention “immediate control.” He suggests that “since one is not ordinarily capable of keeping an intention in an active state for more than a relatively short period of time, the sorts of actions over which one has immediate control must be capable of execution within a short time after their inception.”<sup>(11)</sup> If we can bring about a belief with one uninterrupted intention to do so, that is, if we have immediate control over a belief, then our control over our belief may constitute grounds to accept doxastic voluntarism.

Alston denies that we have such immediate control over most of our beliefs:

When I look out my window and see rain falling, water dripping off the leaves of trees, and cars passing by, I no more have immediate control over whether I accept those propositions than I have basic control. I form the belief that rain is falling willy-nilly. There is no way I can inhibit this belief. At least there is no way I can do so *on the spot*, in carrying out an uninterrupted intention to do so. How would I do so? What button would I push? I could try asserting the contrary in a confident tone of voice. I could rehearse some skeptical arguments. I could invoke the Vedantic doctrine of *maya*. I could grit my teeth and command myself to withhold the proposition. But unless I am a very unusual person, none of these will have the least effect. It seems clear to me

that nothing any normal human being can do during the uninterrupted operation of an intention to reject the proposition that it is raining (in the above situation) will have any chance at all to succeed. And the same can be said for inferential beliefs in which it is quite clear to one that the conclusion is correct.<sup>[12]</sup>

Whenever it is clear to us what is the case, Alston maintains, we cannot inhibit the belief that follows automatically.

However, there is a substantial number of cases in which it is not altogether clear which among conflicting propositions is true. Again, Alston believes that the sense that one proposition is more likely than its rivals to be true compels belief. But one may investigate matters (further) when an issue is not entirely clear; and such an investigation may produce a belief that is different from the one that came before. One might reason that, since we have immediate control over whether or not we investigate matters and how we do so, we have immediate control over the beliefs that result from our investigations. Alston criticizes this line of reasoning for ignoring

...the difference between doing A in order to bring about E, for some definite E, and doing A so that some effect within a certain range will ensue. In order that the “looking for more evidence” phenomenon would show that we have immediate voluntary control over propositional attitudes in basically the way we do over the positions of doors and light switches, it would have to be the case that the search for evidence was undertaken with the intention of taking up a certain particular attitude toward a proposition. For only in that case

would the outcome show that we have exercised voluntary control over *what* propositional attitude we take up.<sup>[13]</sup>

Often, by seeking further evidence one fulfills an intention to bring about some belief or other about an issue but not any particular belief. However, it seems that one may investigate an issue to fulfill an intention to adopt a particular belief. It may seem to one that a proposition is more likely than its negation to be true. One may act on a strong desire to believe the negation by engaging in an investigation of the matter. He may engage in such an investigation to fulfill an intention to believe the negation. An atheist might find himself compelled by his evidence to reject the theistic doctrine that an all-good, all-powerful, and all-knowing being exists; the abundance of evil in the world may make it appear to him that there is no such being. Moved by feelings of helplessness and meaninglessness he may read apologetic essays on the existence-of-God debate to adopt the cheerful theistic world view including the belief that God exists. Just as one may fulfill an uninterrupted intention to call medical attention to an accident victim by dialing a telephone and speaking into the receiver, one may carry out an uninterrupted intention to adopt a particular doxastic attitude by investigating an issue. Since one has at least as much control over whether or not she investigates an issue as whether or not she dials a phone and speaks into the receiver, it seems that in some instances we have significant control over whether we adopt a particular doxastic attitude. Furthermore, how one goes about investigating an issue will have an impact on whether he will adopt a particular doxastic attitude. By reading essays that defend the existence of God and ignoring essays that criticize the theistic

doctrine rather than conducting a more balanced investigation the atheist makes it more likely that he will adopt the belief that God exists. One may fulfill an uninterrupted intention to call medical attention to an accident victim and intend to do so by dialing a telephone and speaking in the receiver in a certain way; likewise, one can fulfill an uninterrupted intention to adopt a particular doxastic attitude and intend to do so by conducting an investigation in a certain effective manner. Since one has as much control over how she conducts an investigation as how she dials a telephone and speaks into the receiver, we have a case for the claim that we have sufficient control over some of our beliefs.

Perhaps such investigations are rarely carried out with one uninterrupted intention and, thus, rarely amount to exercises of immediate control over beliefs. Nevertheless, I think that there are other, frequently employed ways in which we exercise such control. Rationalization is a paradigm way of exercising immediate control over one's beliefs. Typically, one engages in rationalization when a conflict between conscience and inclination obtains. One's uncensored conscience may command restraint, while inclination begs for indulgence. This conflict is often symbolized by an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other. Usually a character who is exposed to both influences chooses evil only after he turns a deaf ear to the angel and allows the devil to convince him that he is doing the right thing. One may turn a deaf ear to her conscience and allow herself to be persuaded by spurious reasoning for the conclusion that following her inclination is the right thing to do. In the sixteenth century one who was troubled by his conscience needed to do no more

than consult a book by his favorite casuist to bring it about that he believed that he had done or was about to do the right thing. Even today one can employ casuistry to bring about, in one uninterrupted intention, a particular belief about the permissibility of some act.

Perhaps even rationalization is not all that common. Nonetheless, I think that there is a significant class of beliefs that are often subject to immediate control. Beliefs that are spurred by the testimony of others are often the products of our cursory evaluations. We may evaluate a candidate for belief introduced by testimony by evaluating the expertise, the sincerity, and the conscientiousness of the source of that testimony. With respect to a specific assertion we may consider whether or not the person making the assertion is an expert in the area under which the assertion falls, whether or not the person was sincere about asserting what she believed, and whether or not she made an effort to apply her expertise to the proposition asserted. One may exercise immediate control over a discomforting candidate for belief that is offered by testimony by attending to grounds for denying the expertise, the sincerity, or the conscientiousness of the source. For example, when a child of divorced parents hears his mother put down his father, he may attend to his mother's hatred of his father as a ground to doubt the sincerity of her charges. Also, one may exercise immediate control over an enticing candidate for belief that is presented by testimony by focusing on grounds for accepting the expertise, the sincerity, and the conscientiousness of the source. For example, a newspaper publisher could focus upon a reporter's good track record, strait face, and work ethic when presented with an outlandish story. Since a

good deal of our beliefs are the product of the testimony of others and since such beliefs are subject to cursory evaluations, it seems that a good deal of our beliefs are subject to our immediate control.

### III. Long-range control

Alston admits that there are cases in which one sets out to get himself to believe some particular proposition. Such cases include those that involve “selective exposure to evidence, selective attention to supporting considerations, seeking the company of believers and avoiding non believers, self-suggestion, and more bizarre methods like hypnotism.”<sup>[14]</sup> Alston maintains that such methods require substantial periods of time and, thus, the control we have over some of our beliefs via those methods is not immediate but rather what he calls “long-range.” According to Alston long-range control

is the capacity to bring about a state of affairs, C, by doing something (usually a number of different things) repeatedly over a considerable period of time, interrupted by activity directed to other goals. One has this sort of control, to a greater or lesser degree, over many things: one’s weight, cholesterol concentration, blood pressure, and disposition; the actions of one’s spouse or one’s department. One can with some hope of success, set out on a long-range project to reduce one’s weight, improve one’s disposition, or get one’s spouse to be more friendly to the neighbors.<sup>[15]</sup>



One may appeal to our long-range control over some of our beliefs as grounds for rejecting (1) of the Voluntarism Argument: Doxastic voluntarism is false.

However, unless we have the kind of voluntary control over a belief that grounds applying deontological terms to beliefs, the argument still stands. Alston argues that

people could properly be held responsible for their attitudes toward propositions in a certain range only if those who set out to intentionally produce a certain attitude toward such a proposition, and made sufficient efforts, were frequently successful. For only if we are generally successful in bringing about a goal, *G*, when we try hard enough to do so, do we have effective control over whether *G* obtains. And if I don't have effective control over *G*, I can hardly be held to blame for its nonoccurrence.<sup>[16]</sup>

Alston doubts that we have reliable long-range control over any of our beliefs. He argues,

*Sometimes* people succeed in getting themselves to believe (disbelieve) something. But I doubt that the success rate is very substantial.... In thinking about this, let's first set aside cases in which the attempt succeeds because the subject happens onto conclusive evidence that would have produced belief anyway without deliberate effort on his part to produce belief. These are irrelevant because the intention to believe that *p* played no effective role. Thus we are considering cases in which the subject is swimming against either a preponderance of contrary evidence or a lack of evidence either way. *S* is

fighting very strong tendencies to believe when and only when something seems true to one.<sup>[17]</sup>

To evaluate whether or not we have long-range control over our beliefs we need not consider cases in which one merely “happens onto” evidence that induces belief.

However, it seems to me a case in which one deliberately seeks out evidence on one side of the issue but not the other and is moved by the evidence to adopt an intended belief is one in which one exhibits long-range control over that belief. Consider a case in which one exhibits long-range control over another person’s belief. Feeling overburdened and under-appreciated a husband may present only his side of the story and, thereby, convince his friend that his wife has been making unreasonable demands of him. Of course, it is what seems to be true to the husband’s friend that induces his belief that the wife has been making unreasonable demands. However, it is the husband’s actions that effectively determine what seems true to his friend. Might not these same feelings motivate the husband to carry out courses of action that allow him to come to believe and sustain the belief that his wife has been making unreasonable demands of him? I believe that they might. The husband may refuse to discuss matters with his wife, fail to consider her perspective, and, generally, avert his attention away from any evidence that her demands are reasonable after all.

Again, although I believe that Alston is correct to maintain that we have a strong tendency to believe whatever seems true to us, I do not think that we have an overwhelming tendency to believe something only if it seems true to us. By averting our attention from what seems true to us we may allow our mood and desires to have

an impact on what we believe. But even if Aston is correct to draw a close link between what seems to be true to us and what we believe, it does not follow that we cannot exercise long-range control over certain beliefs. In cases in which it is not clear what is true we may have considerable control over what seems true to us. By selectively attending to evidence or creating powerful associations between emotions and candidates for belief we may bring it about that a proposition seems true to us. I believe that Alston underestimates the our chances of successfully exercising long-range control over certain beliefs. It is plausible to suppose that those who make sufficient efforts at making a proposition that initially seems far from clearly true and far from clearly false to them subsequently seem true to them are met with more than moderate success. Consequently, it is plausible to suppose that those who put forth sufficient effort to bring themselves to believe such propositions are more than moderately successful. Thus, it seems that we have long-range control over a significant number of our doxastic attitudes.

Suppose, on the other hand, that Alston is correct to claim that the success rate is less than substantial. What would follow? It would merely follow that epistemic obligations would not be applicable *generally* regarding propositions that are neither clearly true nor clearly false. But it would not follow that nobody had epistemic obligations regarding any propositions. Even if people generally cannot control their anger, those of us who can may be obligated to refrain from expressing their rage destructively. Likewise, people who are generally successful at bringing about beliefs via long-range control may be responsible for those beliefs, even if the rest of us

remain immune from blame. Thus, on the one hand, if doxastic voluntarism is taken as the view that people generally have voluntary control over some beliefs, we should reject (2) of the Voluntarism Argument: If doxastic voluntarism is false, then no one has epistemic obligations. Even if people generally do not have voluntary control over some of their beliefs, people who do may have epistemic obligations regarding some of their beliefs. On the other hand, if doxastic voluntarism is taken as the view that some people have voluntary control over some of their beliefs, then we should reject (1): Doxastic voluntarism is false.

#### IV. The Revised Voluntarism Argument

Feldman argues that an appeal to indirect control of beliefs leaves a significant problem concerning epistemic obligations intact. He explains, “we are willing to say of people that they should or should not believe things even in cases in which they do not have the ability to undertake courses of action that might affect their beliefs in the relevant way.”<sup>(12)</sup> He asserts that since our intuitive judgments do not limit cases of epistemic obligations to cases in which we have indirect control over our propositional attitude, an equally damaging version of the Voluntarism Argument can be constructed. He continues,

Examples of the sorts of cases I have in mind are ones in which seemingly unchangeable psychological factors determine one’s beliefs. I just can’t help believing that I see tables and chairs now. Moreover, it is unlikely that I could

embark upon any course of action, even the study of skepticism, which would lead me to believe otherwise in similar situations. Despite my inability to avoid this belief, this is exactly what I should believe in my current situation.

Similarly, as a result of some psychological factors one may be unable to do anything about some of one's beliefs about oneself and one's family. For example, some people never believe that they are successful or talented, no matter what their accomplishments. Such people should have better opinions of themselves, but there may be nothing they can do to change their negative attitude.<sup>[19]</sup>

Let us construct a revision of the Voluntarism Argument:

1. We have no control over doxastic attitudes that are determined by  
unchangeable psychological factors.
2. If we have no control over doxastic attitudes that are determined by  
unchangeable psychological factors, then we have no epistemic obligations  
regarding those doxastic attitudes.
3. We have no epistemic obligations regarding doxastic attitudes that are  
determined by unchangeable psychological factors.

There is an important sense in which this version is not an equally damaging version of the Voluntarism Argument. The original version, if sound, establishes that there are *no* epistemic obligations; by contrast, this version, if sound, merely shows that there are no epistemic duties regarding a certain (perhaps overwhelmingly large) class of doxastic attitudes. The conclusion of the revised version of the Voluntarism

Argument may conflict with our pre-theoretical intuitions, but it is far from clear that such a conflict must be resolved in favor of those intuitions. Consider the widespread intuition that one ought to save a child drowning in a pond if she is capable of doing so. Suppose scientists were to discover that our reaction to cries for help is a reflex, much like our reaction to carefully placed strike below a bended knee. If reflexes are involuntary, then we would lack control over our lifesaving conduct. Under such circumstances it is far from clear that we should abandon the restriction that only controllable actions may be the subject of obligations rather than abandon our pre-theoretical intuition that one ought to save a drowning child.<sup>[20]</sup> Likewise, it is far from clear that we should abandon that restriction rather than abandon the intuition that we ought to believe a proposition even in circumstances in which psychological factors determine our doxastic attitude.

One reason that philosophers hesitate to abandon intuitions regarding what we ought to believe is that they subscribe to a deontological conception of epistemic justification. Usually, having epistemic justification makes the difference between knowing and merely having true belief.<sup>[21]</sup> And those who subscribe to a deontological conception of epistemic justification take such justification to be a matter of epistemic duty. Alston suggests, “when we consider the justification of *actions*, something on which we have a firmer grip than the justification of beliefs, it is clear that to be justified in having *done* something is for that action not to be in violation of any relevant rules, regulations, laws, obligations, duties, or counsels, the ones that govern actions of that sort.”<sup>[22]</sup> He adds, “The most natural way of construing the justification

of beliefs is in parallel fashion. To say that *S* is justified in believing that *p* at time *t* is to say that the relevant rules or principles do not forbid *S*'s believing that *p* at *t*.<sup>[23]</sup>

To be epistemically justified is to be in conformity with epistemic principles; epistemic principles assess belief in light of (perhaps among other goals) the goal of believing a proposition that one considers if and only if it is true. For example, a strong candidate for an epistemic principle is a principle that permits a perceptual belief whenever it is based on the appropriate sort of perceptual experience and the positive epistemic status that that experience provides is not overridden by other considerations.

Usually, whenever one's perceptual belief that *p* meets the conditions set forth by the principle, he knows that *p*. Since the contents of our perceptual beliefs are paradigm examples of that which we know but are such that we lack control over them, one who subscribes to a deontological conception of epistemic justification may be tempted to reject the view that the subject of obligation is limited to actions over which we have control.

Feldman takes such a line.<sup>[24]</sup> Feldman responds to the Voluntarism Argument by rejecting (2): If doxastic voluntarism is false, then there are no epistemic obligations. He does so on the grounds that, although there are obligations, such as moral and prudential obligations, that obtain only when one has control over the required behavior, one can have an obligation concerning involuntary behavior. He gives two examples.

In the beginning of the semester instructors usually tell their students what the course requirements are, or what the students are obligated to do as students in that

course. If it turns out that later in the semester that a student is unable to complete his work, he does not wriggle out of his obligation. One may have an academic obligation to complete her work for a course even if she is unable to do so. Also, if an irresistible compulsion causes one to write essays for a course, it does not follow that she is not required to do so. One may have an academic obligation to write an essay even if she cannot *not* write it.

When one takes out a mortgage on a house, she incurs a financial obligation to repay the loan. If one later finds himself unemployed and unable to repay the loan, he does not evade his obligation to repay the loan (even if he manages to evade his creditors.) One may have a financial obligation even if she is incapable of fulfilling it. Also, if one is employed by his creditor and his mortgage payment is deducted from his paycheck, it does not follow that she is not required to repay her loan. One may have a financial obligation to do something that she cannot help but do.

Feldman believes that it is plausible to hold that, likewise, one can have an epistemic obligation to believe a proposition even if he cannot believe it or cannot help but believe it. He also believes that examples support his view: "Normally, while observing the world one forms a lot of perceptual beliefs that are in the relevant sense unavoidable. Yet, many of those beliefs are ones that one should have."<sup>[25]</sup>

Feldman anticipates the objection that academic and financial obligations are not cases of simple obligation, but rather are cases of conditional obligation. We may say that, *given* that a student wants to pass a course, he ought to write the essay. We may also say that, *given* that one wants to keep her house, she ought to pay her



mortgage. An opponent may insist that it does not follow from the conditional obligations and the fact that the student does want to pass the course and that the debtor does want to keep his house, that the student ought to do the work or that the debtor ought to pay the mortgage. Thus, an opponent may deny that Feldman presents cases of obligations that cannot be fulfilled.

Feldman responds,

If financial and academic obligations are best understood as conditional obligations, and one can have conditional obligations that one cannot fulfill (or cannot avoid fulfilling), then, I think, epistemic obligations can be best understood as conditional obligations that one might be unable to fulfill. If epistemic obligations are best interpreted as conditional obligations, then perhaps they are conditional upon the desire to be epistemically excellent: to say that you epistemically ought to believe  $p$  is to say that given that you want to achieve epistemic excellence, you ought to believe  $p$ .<sup>[26]</sup>

Nevertheless, epistemic obligation seems to resemble moral obligation in an important respect; just as there is a sense of “moral obligation” according to which one is invariably blameworthy for falling short of his moral obligation, there is a sense of “epistemic obligation” according to which one is consistently blameworthy for missing the mark with respect to epistemic obligation.<sup>[27]</sup> Note that, by contrast, there is no sense of “academic obligation” according to which, when one fails to fulfill his academic obligation, he must be worthy of censure; perhaps sometimes there is no good reason for one to want to pass a course. A student who cares about passing a

course only insofar as it is a means to securing employment may become self-employed before finishing the course. If there is no good reason for her to want to pass a course, then there may be no grounds for faulting her for failing to pass. Likewise, there is no sense of “financial obligation” according to which one who fails to fulfill a financial obligation must be at fault. A man who has committed to making periodic mortgage payments only on the condition that he wants to keep his house may become a Catholic priest and disavow all worldly possessions. If there is no good reason for him to want to own a house, then one may be mistaken to blame him for failing to continue to make mortgage payments.

It seems that many of our beliefs are automatic and in no way under our basic, immediate, or long-range control. Yet it is quite natural to say of those beliefs that they are the ones we ought to have. One may accommodate these facts by rejecting the principle that an obligation to believe (not believe) a proposition presupposes control over one’s doxastic attitude toward that proposition. Yet the further fact that we are apt to blame people for violations of epistemic obligations as we do for violations of moral obligations cannot be so easily accommodated. Being the appropriate target of blame presupposes a significant degree of control over that for which one is blameworthy. Thus, if many of our beliefs are automatic and beyond even our long-range control, then those beliefs seem not to be the subjects of epistemic obligations. We may have to abandon many pre-theoretical intuitions about epistemic duties; but I think that it is plausible to suppose that it will turn out that many pre-theoretical intuitions about moral obligation will have to be abandoned as

well. Many supposed acts of heroism may turn out to be reflexes over which we have no control. A fireman may find himself driven by compulsion to dash into a burning building in an attempt to rescue survivors without any significant control over whether or not he does so. Cases of epistemic and moral obligation have to be restricted to cases in which one has significant control over his belief or action; and such a restriction may have surprising results.

It may remain appropriate to evaluate those who do not have the perceptual beliefs that we expect them to have in other ways. We say of people that they *fail* a hearing test, although in many cases we do not hold them at fault for having poor hearing. Perhaps those who do not have the perceptual beliefs that we expect them to fail in much the same way. Their failure is due to a poor functioning of some cognitive process, for which they may not be at fault. And when we say that one ought to believe that there is a large table right before her eyes, we may mean no more than that, if she does not suffer any cognitive impairment, she will believe that there is a large table right before her eyes.

## V. Epistemic Deliberation and Voluntarism

Regardless of how attributions of epistemic duties to believe and not believe to oneself and others fair in light of considerations of doxastic voluntarism, such considerations pose no threat to the claim that we have an epistemic duty to engage in epistemic deliberation.<sup>[28]</sup> So, if we have an epistemic duty to engage in epistemic

deliberation, then from considerations of doxastic voluntarism one cannot conclude that no one has epistemic obligations. We have significant control over whether and how we engage in epistemic deliberation. I have significant control over whether I engage in epistemic deliberation regarding the proposition that it will rain today; I can stop and think about it or I can head right out the door without looking for my umbrella. Furthermore, I have significant control over *how* I engage in such deliberation; I can hastily call to mind indications that it will not rain or I can carefully call to mind and properly weigh all relevant considerations on both sides of the issue.

## VI. Conclusions

In this chapter I concede that we never come to have a belief just by willing to have it. However, I argue that many of our beliefs are subject to our immediate control and even more are subject to our long-range control. Our control over these beliefs is sufficient to ground deontological claims about them; more specifically, such control is sufficient to ground attributions of duties to believe and duties not to believe. Many beliefs that we lack control over are beliefs that our pre-theoretical intuitions label as ones that we ought to have. I suggest that we should consider abandoning those intuitions rather than abandoning the restriction of our attributions of epistemic duties to doxastic states over which we have significant control. Finally, I point out that considerations of doxastic voluntarism do not pose a threat to the claim that we have an epistemic obligation to engage in epistemic deliberation.

[1] This argument appears in “Epistemic Obligations.” *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2 *Epistemology*, 1988. ed. James Tomberlin. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview Publishing Co., 1988. p. 237.

[2] p. 237-8.

[3] Bernard Williams. *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972. p. 148.

[4] p. 148.

[5] This examination appears in “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification.” *Epistemic Justification*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1989. p. 122-7.

[6] p. 122.

[7] Notice that one might be able to believe that the United States is still a colony of Great Britain by concentrating on the proposition and a story that makes it seem true; but such efforts go beyond believing the proposition *just* by willing to believe it.

[8] p. 125.

[9] p. 126.

[10] p. 238.

[11] p. 134.

[12] p. 129.

[13] p. 130-1.

[14] p. 134.

[15] p. 134.

[16] p. 134-5.

[17] p. 135.

[18] p. 239.

[19] p. 239.

[20] Again, there is a long tradition that makes only voluntary or controllable actions the subject of obligation. On that tradition, if a person, S, has an obligation to perform some act, A, then S is able to do A and S is able not to do A. In addition, our patterns of blame attribution support limiting the subject of obligation to controllable actions.

We blame only those who violated their duty; and we blame only those who had substantial control over the action that triggers our blame.

[21] There may be cases in which one has an epistemically justified, true belief that does not constitute knowledge, as Edmund Gettier pointed out. If one forms the belief that it is twelve o'clock while glancing at a stopped clock that is only correct at noon and midnight, then her belief is epistemically justified and true but does not constitute knowledge. Such cases, if not merely hypothetical, are at best unusual.

[22] p. 115.

[23] p. 116.

[24] See p. 239-243.

[25] p. 242.

[26] p. 243.

[27] The relevant senses of "obligation" are the subjective senses. One's subjective (moral, epistemic) obligation is to do whatever she nonculpably believes that she

(morally, epistemically) ought to do. One is blameworthy for failing to do whatever he nonculpably believes he (morally, epistemically) ought to do.

[28] I will make this claim in the last chapter.

What are our duties regarding believing? This question may be ambiguous in the following way: it may be asking for epistemic duties or it may be asking for moral duties.<sup>[1]</sup>

It may be epistemically obligatory for one to believe a certain proposition, but merely morally permissible or even morally forbidden for her to believe that proposition.

Conversely, it may be morally obligatory for one to believe a proposition, but only epistemically permissible or yet epistemically forbidden for him to believe it. Perhaps we are morally required to trust close family members until conclusive evidence reveals them as untrue. If we are so required, it may be epistemically obligatory for one who has substantial, yet inconclusive, evidence that his spouse is unfaithful to believe that his spouse is unfaithful but morally forbidden for him to believe it. Likewise, if we are morally required to trust close family members, it may be epistemically forbidden for one who has no evidence at all regarding whether or not her father loves her to believe that her father loves her but morally obligatory for her to believe it.

Two classic essays concerning our duties regarding believing are W. K. Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" and William James's "The Will to Believe."<sup>[2]</sup> The tones of these essays suggest that Clifford and James concern themselves primarily with our moral duties regarding believing. Regardless, I think it is interesting to see how considerations put forth by Clifford and James can be used to argue for positions concerning our *epistemic* duties regarding believing. In this chapter I will evaluate proposals offered by Clifford and James as proposals of our epistemic duties regarding believing. I will evaluate the Jamesian proposal that it is one's epistemic duty, for every proposition he considers, to believe it if and only if it is true and Clifford's proposal that it is our epistemic duty not to



believe a proposition without sufficient evidence. I will argue that, if James's proposal as a proposal of epistemic duty is correct, then given the traditional account of what constitutes sufficient evidence Clifford's proposal as a proposal of epistemic duty is too strict. If we have a fundamental epistemic duty to pursue truth and avoid falsehood, we need not be bound by an epistemic duty not to believe in the absence of sufficient evidence.

### I. Epistemic Obligation: Two Proposals

Clifford proposes that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."<sup>[3]</sup> He asserts that, "if [a] belief has been accepted on insufficient evidence, the pleasure [that is founded on the belief] is a stolen one....it is sinful, because it is stolen in defiance of our duty to mankind."<sup>[4]</sup> Given the tone of this assertion it seems likely that Clifford takes himself to be proposing a moral duty regarding believing. Regardless, it is interesting to assess the merit of Clifford's proposal as a proposal of an epistemic duty regarding believing.<sup>[5]</sup>

James proposes that "*We must know the truth; and we must avoid error* - these are our first great commandments as would-be knowers...."<sup>[6]</sup> He adds,

Believe truth! Shun error! - these, we see, are two materially different laws; and by choosing between them we may end by coloring differently our whole intellectual life. We may regard the chase for truth as paramount, and the

avoidance of error as secondary; or we may, on the other hand, treat the avoidance of error as more imperative, and let truth take its chance.<sup>[7]</sup>

James points out that one may direct his intellectual life more by one principle and less by the other. One may direct his intellectual life more by the maxim to believe the truth and less by the maxim to avoid error by believing any proposition that tempts her. On the other hand, one may direct his intellectual life more by the maxim to avoid error and less by the maxim to know the truth by maintaining a skeptical attitude toward those propositions that he considers. However, it seems plausible to suppose that by assigning equal weight to these two laws one may direct his intellectual life according to his epistemic duties. Let us consider the following Jamesian proposal: it is one's epistemic duty, for every proposition that she considers, to believe it if and only if it is true. Now there is no logical incompatibility between Clifford's proposal and its Jamesian counterpart; it is logically possible that the world be such that every proposition for which we lack sufficient evidence is false. However, it is clear that we sometimes lack sufficient evidence for true propositions. Does this show that we should reject one of the proposals? I don't think so. There does seem to be a sense in which it is one's epistemic duty to believe the true propositions that he considers and not believe the false ones; but there also seems to be a sense in which it seems initially plausible that it is one's epistemic duty not to believe propositions that are not supported by adequate evidence. How are we to understand these two senses?

I believe that an analogy to moral duties is useful here. Suppose that Jones nonculpably believes that he morally ought to tend to his ailing mother but really has a more stringent moral obligation to keep a promise to Smith and cannot do both. Suppose, further, that Smith leaves his mother's side to fulfill his promise. We may evaluate Jones as morally blameworthy for not doing what he nonculpably believed he morally ought to do. In some sense of "moral duty" it is true that Jones failed to do his moral duty. However, Jones did what he really morally ought to have done. In another sense of "moral duty" it is true that Jones did fulfill his moral duty. We may resolve the apparent conflict by distinguishing subjective duty from objective duty. It is one's subjective moral duty to do what she would be morally blameworthy for failing to do and not to do what she would be morally blameworthy for doing.<sup>[8]</sup> By contrast, it is one's objective moral duty (not) to do whatever he really morally ought (not) to do. So, while it was Jones's subjective moral duty to tend to his ailing mother, it was Jones's objective moral duty to keep his promise to Smith. While one's subjective moral duty is dependent upon facts about his perspective of the situation, one's objective moral duty is independent of such facts. It is one's objective moral duty (not) to do what in fact is (not) best or good enough.

Analogously, we may say that it is one's subjective epistemic duty to do what he would be epistemically blameworthy for failing to do and not to do what he would be epistemically blameworthy for doing. And we may say that it is one's objective epistemic duty (not) to do whatever he really epistemically ought (not) to do. Furthermore, we may take the Jamesian proposal as a proposal of objective epistemic duty; on this view, for

every proposition that we consider, we really epistemically ought to believe it if and only if it is true. In addition, we may take Clifford's proposal as a proposal of *prima facie* subjective epistemic duty. On that understanding of Clifford's proposal the fact that one believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is a reason to epistemically blame him.<sup>[9]</sup>

Philosophers may reject the Jamesian view that, for every proposition that we consider, it is our objective epistemic duty to believe it if and only if it is true because the view limits the range of interesting questions to be raised in epistemology.<sup>[10]</sup> The notion of what is best in ethics is the subject of much controversy and interest. Philosophers take much interest in and debate extensively over whether what is best is determined by consequences and how consequences should be evaluated. If what is best in epistemology is equated with believing truths and not believing falsehoods, there would be no parallel questions in epistemology to attract our interest.

Although this reason may be a good explanation of why epistemologists reject the Jamesian view, this reason does not amount to a good justification for such a rejection. Analogies between ethics and epistemology are often useful. Both areas of thought are normative, or evaluative; and it is in virtue of this fact that we expect analogies to hold. For instance, the widespread acceptance of the ethical claim that deontological terms apply to acts gives us some reason to think accept the epistemological claim that deontological terms apply to beliefs. But we don't expect the analogous claims to be equally interesting or controversial. In fact, it is *because* the analogous claims differ in these respects that we rely so heavily on analogies between these areas of thought. The claim that deontological terms apply to acts is much less interesting and controversial than

the analogous claim that deontological terms apply to beliefs. Thus, we appeal to the less controversial ethical claim to support its more controversial counterpart. Thus, the widely accepted claim that one's objective moral duty is independent of her perspective on the situation provides us with some reason to believe the parallel claim that one's objective epistemic duty is independent of one's perspective. If the epistemic claim is true, then there are far fewer interesting questions about what we really epistemically ought to do than about what we really morally ought to do. But a lack of parallel in regard to what questions are the subject of interest and controversy is what we should come to expect.

Philosophers may also reject the Jamesian view because it runs counter to what they consider the fundamental concept of epistemic justification.<sup>[11]</sup> In that fundamental sense it is not true that one must be believing as he ought when he believes a truth. The fundamental notion involves good reasons or evidence. These opponents of the Jamesian view hold that to be an objectively good believer is to follow one's evidence.

Undoubtedly, epistemologists allot much of their attention to the notion of epistemic duty according to which one who follows her evidence thereby fulfills her epistemic duty. But such focus should not be surprising because the notion of what is sufficient evidence is the subject of much interest and controversy. It would be a mistake to infer that this notion of epistemic duty is fundamental from the fact that it receives so much attention.

Proponents of the view that our fundamental notion of epistemic duty involves evidence must give an account of what seems right about James's remarks that "*We must know the truth; and we must avoid error....*" An opponent of my Jamesian proposal

might suggest that these remarks are better understood as comments about epistemic ends, not epistemic obligations.<sup>[12]</sup> Consider an analogy. Investment companies operate by the slogan: “buy low and sell high.” We may formulate the following duty: it is the duty of an investment company to buy stocks that have a low value that will increase and sell stocks that have a high value that will decrease. But surely, a company that buys a stock despite all indications that its value will decrease violates its duty whether or not the value does increase. The opponent may hold that what seems true about the slogan is that the proper goals of investing include buying stocks whose value is low but will increase and selling stocks whose value is high but will decrease. He may also hold that our obligations are to do what is best (in some sense) to achieve our proper goals. Thus, he may urge that knowing the truth and avoiding error are our proper epistemic goals, but that there is no epistemic duty to know the truth and avoid error, .

The opponent’s general suggestion is that we have obligations to do what is best to achieve our proper goals but we have no obligations to achieve our proper goals. But consider teleological ethical theories. Such theories tell us that the criterion of right action is the value of an act’s consequences. If such a theory is correct, then it seems correct to say that the proper goal of acting is to produce the most valuable consequences that circumstances allow. Nevertheless, if such a theory is correct, it also seems correct to say that it is one’s fundamental moral duty to produce the most valuable consequences that circumstances allow. Consider act utilitarianism. If act utilitarianism is true, then it seems correct to say that the proper goal of human acting is to maximize utility. But furthermore, one acceptable way of characterizing act utilitarianism is as the view that it is

our fundamental moral duty to maximize utility. So, the opponent's general suggestion that we have no obligations to achieve our proper goals seems mistaken. So, James's proposal that our fundamental epistemic duty is, roughly, to believe truths and not believe falsehoods (i. e. to achieve our proper epistemic goals) seems acceptable after all.

## II. Two Proposals: Compatibility

If the Jamesian proposal is the correct account of objective epistemic duty, then what is the status of Clifford's proposal as an account of subjective epistemic duty? I believe that given the traditional account of what constitutes sufficient evidence it turns out to be too strict. There are cases in which the fact that a person believes a proposition for which he lacks sufficient evidence is no reason whatsoever to epistemically blame him. I think two types of such cases are suggested by James.

James points out that our beliefs are often produced not merely by our intellect but also by our nonintellectual nature. He asserts:

*Our passional nature not only lawfully may, but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds; for to say, under such circumstances, "Do not decide, but leave the question open," is itself a passional decision - just like deciding yes or no - and is attended with the same risk of losing truth.*<sup>[13]</sup>

A genuine option is one that is living, momentous, and forced. A living option is one such that both propositions are live; and a live proposition is one that "appeals as a

real possibility to whom it is proposed.”<sup>[14]</sup> For most geography experts the proposition that Louisville is the capital of Kentucky is not live; however, the proposition may be live for some of those who do not realize that the capital of Kentucky is Frankfort. A momentous option is one that is not trivial; an option is trivial “when the opportunity is not unique, when the stake is insignificant, or when the decision is reversible if it latter prove unwise.”<sup>[15]</sup> Finally, a forced option is one such that one must choose. If one requests that another choose vanilla ice cream or choose chocolate ice cream, the option is not forced because the requestee need not choose at all. He may go without ice cream altogether. But if one requests that another eat vanilla ice cream or not eat vanilla ice cream, the option is forced because the requestee cannot help but make a choice. If he hears but ignores the request, he thereby chooses not to eat vanilla ice cream.

James’s claim is that, if one confronts a genuine option between propositions, she should choose one proposition over the other. But it seems dubious to me that any choice between two propositions is ever forced; that is, I doubt that anyone must choose to believe one or the other from any pair of propositions that present themselves as a living and momentous option. Consider the option between the proposition that God exists and its negation - God does not exist. Both options might be live for many of us. And it seems that, because of the impact that accepting the doctrine may have on one’s life, it may be a momentous option for one. Nevertheless, the option between these propositions does not seem to be forced; it seems that one may refuse to choose one over the other. One may neither believe the proposition nor its negation.<sup>[16]</sup>



One type of option that cannot be settled on intellectual grounds is the option to believe a proposition or believe its negation whenever one's evidence is counterbalanced. Some such options may be both live and momentous; but, like all options between two propositions, they are not forced. If one's evidence regarding a proposition and its negation is counterbalanced, then the proposition will seem as likely to be true as it is likely to be false. James claims that each of the following three attitudes bears the same risk of losing truth: believing the proposition, believing its negation, and withholding belief about the matter.<sup>[17]</sup> I take it that one loses truth just in case he fails to believe a true proposition that he considers. Let us examine the situation. Since either the proposition or its negation is true and there is no evidence to favor one over the other, believing the proposition and believing its negation carry equal risk of losing truth. Believing the proposition carries the risk that one loses the truth of the negation; believing the negation carries the risk that one loses the truth of the proposition. And from the agent's perspective the likelihood that each option will lose the truth is fifty percent. However, withholding belief about the matter, or neither believing the proposition nor its negation, has a one hundred percent chance of losing the truth. So, James is mistaken to claim that these three attitudes are equally likely to lose truth.

Regardless, if we give equal weight to believing truths and not believing falsehoods, we see that, from the agent's perspective, these three attitudes are on a par with respect to the duty to believe truths and not to believe falsehoods. From his perspective believing the proposition carries a fifty percent chance of believing a truth and a fifty percent chance of not *not* believing a falsehood; believing its negation does likewise.

And believing neither carries a zero percent chance of believing a truth and a zero percent chance of *not* believing a falsehood. So, believing the proposition gives us a fifty percent chance of gaining some good and a fifty percent chance of acquiring some bad. Likewise, believing its negation carries a fifty percent chance of acquiring some good and a fifty percent chance of acquiring some bad. And believing neither carries a zero percent chance of gaining some good and a zero percent chance of acquiring some bad. Since the three options, from the agent's perspective, are on a par with respect to the duty to believe truths and not to believe falsehoods, I take it that the three options are on a par with regard to subjective epistemic obligation. If the Jamesian proposal is the correct proposal of objective epistemic duty, that is, if it is one's objective epistemic duty for any proposition she considers to believe it if and only if it is true (regardless of her evidence concerning its truth,) then it seems that, whenever one considers both a proposition and its negation and has equibalanced evidence regarding the two, the fact that one believes the proposition, believes the negation, or believes neither would not by itself be a reason to epistemically blame him.<sup>[18]</sup> The fact that one chose any one of the three options by itself would not be any reason whatsoever to epistemically blame him.<sup>[19]</sup> Thus, if James's proposal is correct, then it seems that, even if we take "sufficient evidence" in the loosest sense that tradition allows (as James does) and say that one's evidence for a proposition is sufficient if and only if his evidence for that proposition outweighs his evidence for its negation, Clifford's proposal that we have a subjective epistemic duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence is too strict.

I believe that there is yet another type of case that demonstrates this relation between James's proposal and Clifford's proposal. This type of case is also suggested by comments made by James. He writes,

Turn now...to a certain class of questions of fact, questions concerning personal relations, states of mind between one man and another. *Do you like me or not?* - for example. Whether you do or not depends in countless instances, on whether I meet you half-way, am willing to assume that you must like me, and show you trust and expectation. The previous faith on my part in your liking's existence is in such cases what makes your liking come. But if I stand aloof, and refuse to budge an inch until I have objective evidence, until you have done something apt,...then to one your liking never comes....The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth's existence.<sup>[20]</sup>

James is calling our attention to cases in which believing that *p* makes it more likely that *p*. A desire that *p* is true may motivate one to make it the case that *p* is true. But in the cases to which James is referring the belief that *p* goes even further to motivate one to make it the case that *p*. Suppose that Smith desires that Jones likes him. Smith might be so constituted that only by believing that Jones likes him Smith will treat Jones in a manner that will bring it about that Jones does like him. James suggests that the value of the desired state of affairs may make it ethically permissible to believe that *p* whenever believing that *p* makes it more likely that *p*. Thus, there may be instances in which it is ethically permissible to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence. Thus, James presents us with a reason to think that, regardless of the status of the proposed duty not to

believe without sufficient evidence as an epistemic duty, it is too restrictive to be an ethical duty.

I believe that a slight modification of this type of case can be used to show that, if the Jamesian proposal is a correct account of epistemic duty, then Clifford's proposal is too strict as an account of epistemic duty. I think that a modified case will show that believing an inadequately supported proposition may offer no reason whatsoever to epistemically blame the agent. Suppose again that Smith desires that Jones likes him. Consider the following propositions:

(p) At t2 Jones likes Smith.

(q) At t1 Smith believes that at t2 Jones likes Smith.

Smith may be the sort of person who finds that slightly more often than not he does not believe that a given person likes him and may have no other evidence on the topic. Thus, we may say that at t0 Smith's evidence does not support believing (q). However, whenever he has shown 'trust and expectation' toward another person he has found that, usually, the other person comes to like him. Thus, we may say that even at t0 Smith's evidence does support believing (If q, then p). But, whenever he has stood aloof, the other person's liking has been unlikely to come. Smith's evidence supports believing that he will stand aloof; so, at t0 Smith's evidence does not support believing (p).

Now suppose that Smith believes at t1 that at t2 Jones likes him. This case seems to fall within the range of cases James alludes to; the value of the state of affairs of Jones liking Smith may make it ethically permissible for Smith to believe at t1 at t2 Jones likes him in order to bring it about that Jones likes him.

I want to go further and maintain that this case is one in which the fact that one believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is no reason whatsoever to blame him. Even though at  $t_0$  Smith does not have sufficient evidence for (p), that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him, Smith does have sufficient evidence for (If q, then p) that, if he believes at  $t_1$  that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him, then at  $t_2$  Jones likes him. Furthermore, it seems that Smith has sufficient evidence for (r) if he believes at  $t_1$  that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him, his believing makes it true that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him. In such a case it seems that the fact that Smith believes at  $t_1$  that at  $t_2$  Jones likes Smith without sufficient evidence would not be any reason whatsoever to epistemically blame Smith.

Is it an important feature of the case that Smith has sufficient evidence for (r)? Consider the following case: Brown is playing bridge and is about to try a play that is unlikely to succeed but is such that Brown is sure that if it does succeed he will win. Suppose  $t_2$  is when the game is ends,  $t_1$  is the time of the play, and  $t_0$  is just before the play. So, at  $t_0$  Brown's evidence does not support either: (s) At  $t_2$  Brown wins, or (t) At  $t_1$  Brown believes that at  $t_2$  Brown wins. But Brown's evidence does support (If t, then s.) However, it is clear that these facts do not support the claim that it is epistemically permissible at  $t_0$  for Brown to believe that he wins.<sup>[21]</sup> It seems that the important difference between these cases is that in the former case it seems that Smith's evidence supports believing that believing that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him makes it true that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him but in the latter case Brown's evidence does not support believing that believing that at  $t_2$  he wins makes it true that at  $t_2$  he wins. Thus, in my case it seems reasonable for Smith to believe that by believing at  $t_0$  that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him he brings it about that

he believes a truth. But in the bridge case it is not reasonable for Brown to believe that by believing at  $t_0$  that at  $t_2$  he wins he brings it about that he believes a truth. It is an important feature of my case that Smith's evidence supports (r). When one's evidence adequately supports believing that believing a proposition will make it true, then the fact that one believes the proposition in question without sufficient evidence is no reason whatsoever to epistemically blame him.

At this point one might object that in this case Smith does have sufficient evidence for the proposition in question; as soon as he believes that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him he has evidence that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him. If Clifford's proposal as a proposal of subjective epistemic duty is correct, then it is subjectively epistemically permissible for Smith to believe at  $t_1$  that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him only if Smith has sufficient evidence that at  $t_2$  Jones likes him. But the question arises: At what point must Smith have that evidence?

To answer this question it is helpful to appeal to an analogy to ethics. Whether or not one's act is subjectively morally permissible, obligatory, or forbidden depends upon facts about the agent's perspective immediately *before* he acts. If immediately before he criticizes Jones Smith nonculpably believes that he morally ought not to do so, he may be morally blameworthy for doing what he nonculpably believes he morally ought not to do as he violates his subjective moral duty. He violates this duty even if he discovers a good reason for criticizing Jones while or after he does so.

Analogously, we may say that whether one's believing is subjectively epistemically permissible, obligatory, or forbidden depends upon facts about the agent's perspective immediately *before* he does it. And thus, if Clifford's proposal is correct and Smith does

not have adequate evidence that at t2 Jones likes him immediately *before* he believes that at t2 Jones likes him (i. e., immediately before t1,) then it appears that it is a violation of Smith's subjective epistemic duty to believe that at t2 Jones likes him.<sup>[22]</sup>

Now it is Smith's objective epistemic duty to believe at t1 that at t2 Jones likes him if and only if at t2 Jones likes him. And Smith's evidence indicates that he can make it true that at t2 Jones likes him by believing at t1 that at t2 Jones likes him despite the lack of sufficient evidence at t0. Under those conditions it would seem that the fact that Smith believes that at t2 Jones likes Smith even though he does not have sufficient evidence for it immediately before he believes it is no reason whatsoever to epistemically blame Smith. Thus, we have a case in which it seems that the fact that one believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is no reason whatsoever to epistemically blame him. Thus, if the Jamesian proposal is correct, then given the traditional account of what constitutes sufficient evidence Clifford's proposal is too strict.

### III. Conclusion

Whether or not James is correct to maintain that our fundamental epistemic duties are to seek truth and to avoid error, we may agree that the goals of seeking truth and avoiding error are among the proper goals of epistemic agents as epistemic agents. We may also agree that the proper goals of epistemic agents as epistemic agents determine the epistemic duties of those agents. If seeking truth and avoiding error are the only proper epistemic goals, then it seems, given the traditional account of what constitutes sufficient

evidence, that one may in some circumstances the fact that one believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is no reason whatsoever to epistemically blame him. Thus, it does not appear that there is a *prima facie* subjective epistemic duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence. Thus, proponents of the tradition that holds that epistemic duty fulfillment is a matter of believing a proposition only if the relevant evidence favors it over its negation must describe and defend other proper goals of epistemic agents as epistemic agents.



[1] Our epistemic duty is our duty as epistemic, rather than moral, agents. We are epistemic agents insofar as we are capable of believing truths, having epistemically justified beliefs, and obtaining knowledge. People say things such as, “You should believe what Bob says; he’s a reliable source of information.” and “You shouldn’t believe everything you hear.” When people say such things, it seems unlikely that they are giving moral advice (what people believe is not *obviously* a moral issue.) Furthermore, I doubt that such advice is merely prudential; I suspect that most of us believe that one should not believe everything she hears even if it is in her best interest to do so. Rather, when people say such things, they seem to imply that we have duties of an epistemic nature.

[2] Clifford’s essay appears in his *Lectures and Essays* London, 1886. James’s essay appears in his “*The Will to Believe*” and *Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* New York, 1897.

[3] p. 346.

[4] p. 344.

[5] It seems to me that Clifford’s principle is incomplete in the following regard: it does not tell us for what the evidence must be sufficient. One way of filling out the principle goes as follows: it is morally wrong to believe without evidence that is sufficient for making the belief morally right. This formulation comes close to being trivial; but it is not. It makes the moral rightness of believing strictly a matter of evidence. Rival theories may make the moral rightness of believing a matter, not of evidence, but of consequences. I don’t think that Clifford had this formulation in mind. Whether or not evidence is sufficient for making a belief morally right may or may not depend upon solely epistemic

considerations. Considerations of loyalty may dictate that the testimony of my mother may be sufficient evidence for making my belief based on that testimony morally right but may not be sufficient evidence for making my belief epistemically right. Clifford devotes much attention to the status of the testimony of others. He asserts,

In order that we may have the right to accept [one's] testimony as the ground for believing what he says, 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 a proper use of those opportunities in coming to the conclusion which he affirms (p. 348).

Clifford seems to be saying that, when one assesses the rightness of believing on the basis of testimony, only purely epistemic considerations are relevant. It seems plausible to suppose that Clifford would agree to filling out his principle as follows: it is morally wrong to believe without evidence that is sufficient for making the belief epistemically right. I take it that the moral principle presupposes the epistemic principle that it is epistemically wrong to believe without evidence that is sufficient for making the belief epistemically right. This principle, also, comes close to being trivial. It makes the epistemic rightness of believing strictly a matter of evidence. However, rival theories may make the epistemic rightness of believing, not strictly a matter of evidence, but also a matter of instrumental epistemic merit. A belief may be epistemically right, not because it is backed by evidence, but because it indirectly contributes causally to our inventory of true and/or well-supported beliefs. It is the epistemic principle presupposed by the ethical

principle that I focus on in this chapter. I shall understand “sufficient evidence” in the loosest sense that tradition allows: evidence, *e*, is sufficient for making it epistemically right for a person, *S*, to believe a proposition, *p*, if and only *e* is the total evidence *S* has regarding the truth of *p* and *e* makes *p* more likely to be true than its negation from the perspective of *S*.

[6] p. 17.

[7] p. 18.

[8] One is morally blameworthy only if she has violated her subjective moral duty; similarly, one is epistemically blameworthy only if she has violated her subjective epistemic duty. While we may only infrequently engage in the act of blaming someone for falling short of her moral duties, we engage in the act of blaming someone for falling short of his epistemic duties much less frequently. The comparative infrequency of acts of blaming someone for falling short of his epistemic duties should not be surprising since we are much less concerned with how others conduct themselves as epistemic agents than how others conduct themselves as moral agents. Educators are among those who have a substantial concern for how others conduct themselves as epistemic agents. And educators will fault their students for failing to conform to principles of reasonable belief. However, to avoid discouraging their students educators ordinarily impart such blame with much caution and sensitivity.

[9] For a helpful discussion of the distinction between subjective epistemic duty and objective epistemic duty see Alvin Plantinga’s *Warrant: The Current Debate*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993. p. 16-9. I borrow much from his account.

[10] Richard Feldman presents this line of thought in "Subjective and Objective Justification in Ethics and Epistemology." *The Monist* 71. p. 410.

[11] Feldman makes this suggestion in "Subjective and Objective Justification in Ethics and Epistemology." p. 410-1.

[12] Richard Feldman outlines this position in "Epistemic Obligations." *Philosophical Perspectives, 2 Epistemology, 1988*. ed. James Tomberlin. Atascadero, Ca: Ridgeview Publishing Co. p. 551.

[13] p. 11.

[14] p. 3.

[15] p. 4.

[16] It is worth noting that an option to believe a proposition or not believe it may be forced.

[17] p.11.

[18] On one account of epistemic obligation one may be obligated to hold one of three doxastic attitudes toward a proposition: believe it, disbelieve it, or withhold belief about it. It may be pointed out that disbelieving is not the same as merely not believing. One does not believe a proposition that he has not considered; but he does not, thereby, disbelieve it. Also, withholding belief about a proposition is not the same as either believing or disbelieving it. Nevertheless, we may understand these notions as follows: disbelieving a proposition is considering and believing its negation. And withholding belief about a proposition is considering a proposition and its negation but believing neither. By presenting our options as believing and not believing a proposition I leave it open whether

or not one has obligations to disbelieve or withhold belief about a proposition. If the Jamesian proposal is correct and it is one's duty, for every proposition he considers, to believe it if and only if it is true, one will have a duty to disbelieve, or a duty to withhold belief about, a proposition only if considering a proposition involves considering its negation.

[19] If one non-culpably believed that he epistemically ought not to choose one option but chose it anyway, we would have some reason to epistemically blame him. But the fact that he chose that option *by itself* would not be a reason to epistemically blame him.

[20] p. 23-4.

[21] This example is due to Richard Feldman.

[22] It has been suggested to me that as Smith is making up his mind at  $t_0$ , he may have substantial evidence for (q) as well as (r). Since the conjunction of (q) and (r) support (p), it seems that Smith may have adequate evidence for (p) at  $t_0$  and, thus, may perform the belief act or the act that promotes the belief state (p), that at  $t_2$  Jones likes Smith, with sufficient evidence for (p) in hand. However, we need only suppose that Smith is not justified in believing that his intention to believe (p) at  $t_0$  will result in his believing (p) at  $t_1$ . I maintain that, even though Smith lacks adequate evidence for (q) and for (p) immediately prior to  $t_1$ , it is epistemically permissible for him to believe (p) at  $t_1$ .

Now that we have closely examined the nature of our epistemic obligation to believe let us consider whether or not we have a *moral* obligation to believe and, if so, what the nature of that obligation is. Let us begin by reviewing the literature regarding such obligations. I will assess the merits of several positions endorsed in the literature. Let us begin with W. K. Clifford's essay "The Ethics of Belief."

## I. Clifford

In his essay Clifford defends the view that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence."<sup>[1]</sup> We may take Clifford as suggesting that our moral obligations require us not to believe a proposition unless we have sufficient evidence for its truth.<sup>[2]</sup>

Clifford defends his view by an example. He tells us of a ship owner who has reason to doubt that his emigrant ship is seaworthy. Troubled by his doubts he turns his attention toward reasons for thinking that the ship is seaworthy and away from reasons for doubt. Clifford writes,

In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance money when she went down in midocean and told no tales.<sup>[3]</sup>

Clifford assesses the ship owner as guilty of the deaths of those who drowned on his sinking ship. He adds, "It is admitted that he did sincerely believe in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because *he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.*"<sup>[4]</sup> I think that we can construct an argument based on Clifford's example.

- (1) The ship owner is blameworthy for the loss of human life.
- (2) The ship owner is blameworthy for the loss of human life only if he is blameworthy for acting on his conviction per se or he is blameworthy for coming to have his conviction.
- (3) The ship owner's conviction was sincerely held.
- (4) If the ship owner's conviction was sincerely held, then he is not blameworthy for acting on his conviction per se.
- (5) Therefore, the ship owner is blameworthy for coming to have his conviction.<sup>[5]</sup>

Clifford offers, as the best explanation of the fact that the shipowner is blameworthy for coming to have his conviction, that it was wrong for him to believe on the basis of insufficient evidence; the ship owner violated the duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence for its truth.

Clifford entertains the objection that it is merely the act of sending the ship off uninspected, and not also the belief that it was sound, that is morally wrong. After all, despite his conviction the shipowner could have had the ship inspected anyway.

Clifford replies

it is not possible to sever the belief from the action it suggests as to condemn the one without condemning the other. No man holding a strong belief on one side of a question...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.<sup>[6]</sup>

We may characterize Clifford's response as insisting that in order for one to investigate a matter thoroughly and completely she must not come to have a belief about the matter until she possesses sufficient evidence one way or another. It was the ship owner's duty to ensure that the ship was entirely and impartially inspected. If it is necessary that one withhold assent on the matter of the ship's soundness until sufficient evidence is in hand in order to fulfill the duty to have the ship properly inspected, then we may say that the ship owner had an *enabling* duty to withhold assent. Withholding assent *enables* the ship owner to fulfill his duty to investigate. Clearly, if at a time,  $t_1$ , a person,  $S$ , is obligated to perform an act,  $A$ , and it is necessary for  $S$  to perform another act,  $B$ , at  $t_1$  or some later time, to perform  $A$ , then at  $t_1$   $S$  is obligated to perform  $B$ . Clear cut examples of such enabling duties are not hard to come by. When it is a fire fighter's obligation to rescue a child from a burning building and he must use the right equipment to do so, then it is his obligation to use that equipment. And when maintaining a fence is necessary to protect passersby from a temperamental dog, the dog's owner's duty to protect passersby entails his duty to maintain a fence.



The question now arises: Is it really necessary for the ship owner to withhold assent regarding the ship's soundness in order to ensure that she's thoroughly inspected? If the ship owner is the only person available with the necessary expertise to make such an investigation, and the laws of psychology dictate that an unbiased state of mind is necessary for a proper investigation, then it is necessary for him to withhold assent in order to perform his duty to have her inspected. However, if others are in a position to conduct a proper investigation, the shipowner's bias need not prevent him from having another person conduct a proper investigation. If, on the other hand, Clifford would spell out his example so that only the ship owner could properly investigate the soundness of his ship, then his example speaks only to those situations in which the duty to have a matter investigated befalls the only person available to conduct the investigation. Thus, Clifford's example supports at best a duty not to believe without sufficient evidence only in cases in which one must investigate matters herself.

Furthermore, it is far from clear that the laws of psychology dictate that one must remain unbiased to perform a thorough and fair investigation of matters. Good science requires that the scientist investigate his hypothesis thoroughly and fairly. But it seems too strict to maintain that good science requires that no scientist give in to an inclination to assent to an hypothesis until after he completes his investigations. By assenting to an hypothesis the scientist may provide himself with motivation to conduct his investigation thoroughly and fairly; by choosing a side the scientist may come to feel a desire to demonstrate her side as right. Even though biased scientists

may be less likely to be fair and complete, I don't think that it is plausible to maintain that the laws of psychology prohibit a biased scientist from conducting a proper investigation. If it is not necessary to withhold assent about a matter in order to conduct a fair investigation, it is unclear that Clifford has provided us with a reason to believe our moral obligations forbid us to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence for its truth in cases in which one is morally obligated to further investigate the matter.

But since it is far from clear that we are morally obligated to investigate every proposition whose evidence is not decisive, it is not clear that Clifford's examples speak to every proposition that we may consider. Clifford suggests,

Nor is that truly a belief at all which has not some influence upon the actions of him who holds it....If a belief is not realized immediately in open deeds, it is stored for the guidance of the future. It goes to make a part of that aggregate of beliefs which is the link between sensation and action at every moment of all our lives, and which is so organized and compacted together that no part of it can be isolated from the rest, but every new addition modifies the structure of the whole.<sup>[7]</sup>

It is not clear how this passage supports Clifford's principle that it is wrong to believe without sufficient evidence; however, the passage does propose a feature common to all beliefs: influencing the actions of the believer.

The question now arises: How does the claim that all beliefs influence action support the view that all unsupported beliefs are morally wrong? Although the

shipowner example shows how disastrous credulous believing can be, Clifford offers no clear answer to the question. While it is difficult to argue for the principle that every unsupported believing is wrong, it is much easier to argue against the principle; one needs only to find a counterexample.

## II. James

In his essay “The Will to Believe” William James attempts to rebut Clifford’s position by describing classes of propositions which seem morally permissible for one to believe without sufficient evidence. One class of such propositions consists of those in which one’s evidence is counterbalanced and some significant good is supposed to be gained by believing. One example of such a proposition that James offers is the religious hypothesis: first, that “the best things are the more eternal things” and, second, that “we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true.”

<sup>[8]</sup> James believes that the religious hypothesis is such that our evidence regarding its truth is counterbalanced and such that we are supposed to gain some significant good by believing it.

James grants Clifford’s point that there are risks to believing unsupported propositions; but James insists that sometimes there is a chance that some significant good may be obtained by believing a proposition whose evidence is counterbalanced and that the balance of expected good over expected harm of believing it may make it morally permissible for one to believe it. While it is not so clear that morality requires

us to secure goods for ourselves, it may require us to secure goods for others.

Perhaps sometimes believing a proposition whose evidence is counterbalanced offers a chance of securing some good for another and is such that the balance of expected good over expected harm of believing makes it morally permissible to believe.<sup>[9]</sup>

Perhaps the religious hypothesis is counterbalanced and believing it would motivate otherwise unmotivated people to perform acts of heroism to the benefit of many in her community.

James points to a class of propositions such that it may be morally permissible for one to believe a member of the class despite lacking sufficient evidence for its truth. Clifford may have pointed in the direction of some wrong-making feature of every instance of believing without sufficient evidence.<sup>[10]</sup> However, it is dubious that every instance of believing without sufficient evidence is all-things-considered morally wrong. Generally, it seems that there are but few sorts of action such that every instance of that sort is all-things-considered morally wrong. If the consequences of an action are very, very good, it is probably morally right no matter whether it is an instance of promise-breaking, lying, killing, or believing without sufficient evidence. If one can prevent serious bodily harm by breaking a promise, it is probably morally right for her to do so. Suppose Smith promises Jones that he will store and return on demand Jones' combat knife and that Jones demands his knife in a fit of rage. It is probably all-things-considered morally right for Smith to deny Jones his knife although denying Jones his knife would have the wrong-making characteristic of being an instance of promise breaking. Believing the religious hypothesis might motivate one to

perform acts of heroism. In that case believing the proposition whose evidence is counterbalanced may be all-things-considered morally right even if it has the wrong-making quality of being an instance of believing without sufficient evidence.

However, if there is some wrong-making feature present in all cases of believing without sufficient evidence, then it seems that, even if one's evidence is counterbalanced, it is not permissible to believe an unsupported proposition merely because by so believing we are *supposed* to gain a significant good. Many people may *suppose* that we may gain a significant good by believing all sorts of things. But many of those suppositions are quite unfounded. The mere fact that many suppose that there is much good to be gained by believing that the end of the world is near does nothing for the moral status of so believing; what matters is whether or not that supposition is correct or reasonable. Whether or not an unsupported believing is morally permissible depends upon (among other things), not what is *supposed* that consequences of believing are, but what is reasonable to think the consequences of believing are or what the consequences in fact are.

Furthermore, there seems to be no good reason to limit the cases of permissible believing to those in which the evidence is counterbalanced. If it is reasonable to believe that the value of a potential good is high enough the balance of the expected good over expected harm may be high enough to warrant belief even if the epistemic likelihood that the proposition in question is true is below fifty percent. If astronomical investigation were to reveal a forty-five percent chance that the earth will collide with a meteor that will destroy our protective atmosphere and end life as we

know it and being prepared for the end is a very, very good thing, then perhaps one would be morally obligated to believe that the end is neigh.

James proposes another class of propositions as counterexamples to Clifford's principle. This class may be characterized as one in which "faith in a fact can help create the fact."<sup>[11]</sup> This class involves propositions concerning future events such that our believing them makes them true. James offers this example: one man's believing that another will like him may make it true that he will be liked; the believing affects motivation and other internal factors that ensure that a friendship will develop. James holds that one may lack sufficient evidence that some future event will occur yet be right to believe that it will occur because his believing would bring that event about.<sup>[12]</sup> I think that this class of propositions needs to be restricted if it is to consist entirely of counterexamples to Clifford's principle. Believing the unsupported candidate must not promote a worse state of affairs than not believing would promote. If the unsupported candidate for believing is that, when I lose my temper, somebody is going to get hurt, then, regardless of whether or not believing that proposition makes it true, I am not morally permitted to believe that it is true.

While James's examples require modification, the modified versions seem to make it clear that Clifford is mistaken to hold that believing without sufficient evidence is always (all things considered) wrong. If the consequences of believing without sufficient evidence are significantly better than the consequences of not believing, or it is reasonable to think so, it may be permissible to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence for its truth. Furthermore, if the consequences of believing without

sufficient evidence are not worse than the consequences of not believing and believing the proposition makes it true, it may be permissible to believe it despite its evidential status before it is believed.

### III. Meiland

Jack Meiland offers counterexamples to Clifford's principle in which, it is argued, one is permitted to believe a proposition *against* total evidence that supports its negation.<sup>[13]</sup> One counterexample goes as follows: a woman comes to possess sufficient evidence that her husband has been cheating on her. Furthermore, she cannot, and realizes that she cannot, conceal her feelings and beliefs from others. If she tries to conceal her belief, she knows that she will eventually act in a distant, bitter manner toward her husband. She knows that if she believes that her husband has been cheating on her, her believing will threaten their marriage. Furthermore, she believes that the marriage can weather the storm. So, she believes that he has been faithful. Later, the husband stops cheating on his wife and a loving marriage continues.

Meiland believes that it is morally permissible for the woman to believe that her husband did not cheat on her, even though the evidence is sufficient to epistemically justify the belief that he did cheat. Furthermore, Meiland maintains that, even if things had not turned out so good, it would not have been morally wrong for the woman to believe that her husband did not cheat. Meiland offers two reasons for believing that it is morally permissible for her to believe that her husband was faithful. First, by

believing that the husband was faithful a very precious thing - the marriage - might be saved. Second, the wife has a duty to her husband, arising from their commitment to each other, to trust in her husband's marital fidelity until conclusive evidence shows her that he is untrue. Let us examine each reason in turn.

The first reason is Jamesian. Meiland's case is not one in which faith in a fact helps create that fact because the wife's believing has no causal impact on whether or not her belief is true. Furthermore, Meiland's case is not one in which the evidence is counterbalanced. In James's view what makes believing the religious hypothesis permissible is that there is much good to be obtained *if it is true*. Meiland constructs his example so that there is a some chance for good by believing regardless of the truth of the belief. It is no accidental feature of Meiland's cases that good consequences of believing may follow regardless of the truth of the belief.<sup>[14]</sup> If we alter the case so that the woman's faith in her husband would yield good results if he has been faithful and bad results if he has not, then given her evidence it is doubtful that the expected good of believing would outweigh the expected harm of believing. I think that Meiland's example causes much the same trouble as James's religious hypothesis; when the expected consequences of believing are good, the goodness of the consequences may override any *prima facie* wrongness of believing without sufficient evidence.

The second reason that Meiland offers for believing that it is permissible for the woman to believe that her husband has been faithful is the she has a duty to demand stronger evidence than others. If there is such a duty, it may be morally obligatory for her to believe that he is faithful. There may be two ways to bolster this reason. First,



if the woman made a promise, tacit or otherwise, to trust in her husband's fidelity until decisive evidence shows him untrue, then perhaps it is at least *prima facie* right for her to hold out for such evidence. Notice that if such a promise were the lone consideration in favor of believing that the husband was true, then it would be irrelevant that the wife could not conceal her feelings and beliefs. Even if the woman said that she promises to hold out for decisive evidence, it may be that her words do not bind her. I take it that one cannot obligate himself to do something that is otherwise wrong in virtue of merely promising to do so. For example, if I utter, "I promise to punch the next person who insults you," I do not make it even *prima facie* wrong for me not to follow through; either my utterance does not amount to a promise, or, if it does, my promise does not by itself create a (*prima facie*) obligation. Likewise, if it is otherwise wrong to believe without sufficient evidence, then one cannot make it right, or even *prima facie* right, in virtue of merely promising to do so.

[15]

Another way to bolster the idea that the woman has a duty to trust her husband until decisive evidence proves him disloyal is to maintain that special relationships create special duties. Familial ties as well as those of friendship are among those relationships that may create obligations between people. For example, it is plausible to hold that being someone's biological mother obligates her to ensure that the offspring is properly cared for through his entire childhood. However, it is far from clear that such relationships morally obligate us to believe that one is true when there is enough evidence to epistemically obligate us to believe that she is not. If the

proposal that such ties create obligations to trust others (believe that they are honest and faithful until conclusive evidence proves otherwise) were the lone consideration in favor of trusting the husband, then the fact that the woman could not conceal her suspicions would be irrelevant. The proposal is that believing, and not merely acting as though the belief were true, is obligated. H. H. Price offers this criticism of the proposal under consideration:

It looks rather like saying that in some cases one has a moral obligation to be prejudiced or biased, and a moral obligation to persist in one's prejudice even when one is inclined to adopt a more reasonable and "objective" attitude. We should all agree that such persistence in one's prejudice might sometimes be excusable, and indeed that it might be a psychological consequence of something highly admirable, namely an affectionate disposition. But can we really suppose that there is ever a moral duty to be prejudiced, and to persist in one's prejudice when one is confronted with strong evidence against the proposition one believes?<sup>[16]</sup>

I take it that Price's answer to his rhetorical question is "no."

However, if there are special duties to act as though one believes that another is true, then the woman, given the transparency of her thoughts, might have an enabling duty to believe that her husband has been true. Meiland provides us with yet another reason to hold that a duty not to believe without sufficient evidence, if we are bound by one at all, is merely a *prima facie* duty.

At this point we have encountered many counterexamples to the principle that it is always wrong to believe without sufficient evidence. But it remains less than clear that believing is a proper subject of moral evaluation at all. Usually moral evaluation is reserved for overt actions that may be readily observed by others. Price holds that there are no moral obligations to believe anything; he asserts, "Even if it were in our power to be wholly reasonable all the time, it still would not follow that that there is anything morally blameworthy about assenting unreasonably or that we ought to be chastised for doing so. There is nothing wicked about such assents."<sup>17</sup> What reasons, if any, are there to believe that believing is a proper subject of moral evaluation?

#### IV. Chisholm

Roderick Chisholm defends the view that believing is a proper subject of moral evaluation. He suggests that a belief can be wrong in the sense that a criminal act is wrong if by "belief" we refer to the psychological act of accepting a proposition and not the proposition itself.<sup>18</sup> A good example of a psychological act for which one may be morally blameworthy is the act of forming an intention to harm another. It seems that a belief may be morally wrong even if by "belief" we refer to a psychological state rather than an act. Roderick Firth points out that psychological states are suitable

objects for moral evaluation; he urges, “We may say of someone that he ought to have felt sorrow rather than anger, that he ought not to have been embarrassed by the praise he received and so on.”<sup>[19]</sup>

Furthermore, Chisholm suggests that we may formulate the defense of a moral judgment of an action by means of practical syllogism and that we defend our judgments of believing and concluding likewise. He explains,

Whatever I may have had in mind in making the moral judgment, my defense of it may be formulated in...a ‘practical syllogism,’ one premise of which is a universal ethical principle which holds for everyone. We defend our believing and concluding in a similar way. If you ask me to defend some conclusion of mine which you may think unreasonable, I will present evidence which I take to be such that, for anyone having that evidence (and no additional relevant evidence), the conclusion is a reasonable one to accept.<sup>[20]</sup>

In both cases the practical syllogism has a major premise that consists of a principle that states that anyone in such-and-such circumstances ought to perform such-and-such act. The second premise states that a particular person faces those circumstances. And the conclusion states that that person ought to perform that act. The fact that we defend our judgments regarding believing and concluding in the same fashion as we defend our paradigm moral judgments is some reason to think believing is a sort of human conduct that may lend itself to moral evaluation.

Chisholm also offers a line of reasoning intended to show “how all of ethics...might be said to presuppose the ethics of belief.”<sup>[21]</sup> He argues that the following propositions are independently plausible but mutually inconsistent.

- (1) No act is right unless its consequences are at least as good as are those which any of its alternatives would have.
- (2) It is right for us to do what we ought to do and we never ought to do what isn't right.
- (3) It sometimes is possible for us to know what we ought to do and what we ought not to do.
- (4) But it is never possible for us to know what all of the consequences of any act, or of any possible act, will be.<sup>[22]</sup>

Chisholm suggests that one can resolve the apparent inconsistency by distinguishing two senses of “ought.” One objectively ought to do what is right; and one subjectively ought to do what it is reasonable for her to believe is right.<sup>[23]</sup> Thus, Chisholm may say that, since we do not know all of the consequences of possible acts, and what we objectively ought to do is determined by consequences, we never know what we objectively ought to do. However, he may add, it is possible for us to know what is reasonable for us to believe is right, or what we subjectively ought to do.

In order to resolve the conflict we must appeal to the notion of subjective duty. And it is our subjective duty to do what is reasonable for us to believe is right. And what is reasonable for us to believe is right is what we *ought* to believe is right. Thus, the evaluation of some believings as ones we *ought* to do is presupposed by the notion of subjective duty. Thus, Chisholm concludes, ethics presupposes an ethics of belief.

If by the phrase “ethics presupposes an ethics of belief” Chisholm means that ethics presupposes that beliefs are subject to moral evaluation, then I think that, even if the four propositions were inconsistent, Chisholm would fall short of establishing his conclusion. We may concede that there is a sense of “ought” that applies to our beliefs yet deny that that sense is moral. There is an epistemic sense of “ought” that is distinct from the moral sense; whenever it is the case that one epistemically ought to believe a proposition, *p*, it remains an open question whether or not he morally ought to believe *p*. Whether or not one morally ought to believe *p* may depend upon, among other things, the affect his believing *p* has on the happiness of himself and others; whereas whether or not one epistemically ought to believe *p* does not depend upon such consequential considerations.<sup>[24]</sup> The objective/subjective duty distinction presupposes that some sense of “ought” applies to belief, but the distinction does not guarantee that a moral sense applies. If the four propositions were incompatible, the position that only an epistemic sense of “ought” applies to belief would not be ruled out.

If, on the other hand, by the phrase “ethics presupposes an ethics of belief” Chisholm means that ethics presupposes that beliefs are subject to evaluation by terms that are paradigmatically used in their moral sense, I think that the argument comes up short because the four propositions are not incompatible after all. Chisholm argues that the evaluation of some believings as ones that we ought to do is presupposed by the notion of subjective duty that one must appeal to to resolve the incompatibility of the four propositions. But, if the four propositions are not incompatible, then

Chisholm loses his grounds for maintaining that such evaluation of some believings is a proper evaluation. The four propositions are not inconsistent because they do not rule out the possibility that one might know that the consequences of an act are at least as good as are those which any of its alternatives would have without knowing what all of the consequences of an act and any of its alternatives would be. However, we get an inconsistent quintet by adding (5) It is possible to know that the consequences of an act are at least as good as are those which any of its alternatives would have only if it is possible to know what all of the consequences of an act and any of its alternatives would be. But (5) is doubtful. Consider an adult who witnesses a child chasing a ball as it rolls toward a busy street. The adult may know that the consequences of intercepting the child before the child reaches the street are at least as good as (if not better than) the consequences of any other act that she could perform instead even though she could not know *all* of the consequences of each of her options. Against his utilitarian principle John Stuart Mill considers the objection that “there is not time, previous to action, for calculating and weighing the effects of any line of conduct on the general happiness.”<sup>[25]</sup> He responds, “There is no difficulty in proving any ethical standard to work ill if we suppose universal idiocy to be conjoined with it; but on any hypothesis short of that, mankind must by this time have acquired positive beliefs as to the effects of some actions on their happiness.”<sup>[26]</sup> Mill holds that in some circumstances one can know that the consequences of one option are at least as good as the consequences of his other options even if there is too little time to calculate and weigh the utilities of each option. Just as we can identify a utility maximizing option

without calculating the utility of all options available to us, we can identify such an option without knowing *all* the consequences of those options. Thus, Chisholm's reasoning does not show that ethics presupposes that terms that are paradigmatically used in their moral sense apply to beliefs. Nonetheless, regardless of his failure to *show* that belief is a proper subject of moral evaluation, Chisholm does present us with considerations that seem to warrant including belief among the proper subjects of moral evaluation.

## V. Pojman

There is a moral presumption against believing without sufficient evidence; whenever one believes a proposition for which she lacks sufficient evidence, she may be properly asked for a justification for doing so.<sup>[27]</sup> We may show that this presumption is justified by finding a wrong-making characteristic present in every instance of believing without sufficient evidence. Louis Pojman argues for the value of believing according to the evidence. In the course of his argument he hints at two candidates for a wrong-making characteristic of every instance of believing without sufficient evidence. He writes,

General truthfulness is a desideratum without which society cannot function.

Without it, language itself would not be possible, because it depends on faithful use of words and sentences to stand for appropriately similar objects and states of affairs. Communication depends on a general adherence to accurate



reporting. More specifically, it is very important that a society have true beliefs with regard to important issues, so that actions based on beliefs have a firm basis.<sup>[28]</sup>

If we are required on teleological grounds to avoid having beliefs on important matters without sufficient evidence, are we still free (from obligation) to have beliefs on less important matters without sufficient evidence of their truth? Pojman thinks not; his reason is that truth seeking is dispositional, a habit. He urges, "If [truth seeking] is to be effective at all, it must be deeply engrained within us, so it is not at all easy to dispense with."<sup>[29]</sup> Finally, he adds,

Furthermore, our beliefs do not exist in isolation from each other, so that to overthrow one belief may have reverberations throughout our entire noetic structure, affecting many of our other beliefs. Getting oneself to believe against the evidence that supports a belief that *p*, may upset our other justified beliefs *q*, *r*, and *s*, which in turn may affect still other beliefs.<sup>[30]</sup>

But is being an impediment to the functioning of society a successful candidate of the wrong-making feature of every instance of believing without sufficient evidence. I do not think so. Some potential cases of believing without sufficient evidence have no impact *whatsoever* on the functioning of society. We may present an objection to the view that being an impediment to society is the wrong-making feature of every instance of believing without sufficient evidence by way of counterexample. The following objection may be labelled as a dying man objection. It goes like this: an elderly man finds himself near his last breath of life. Frightened by the prospect of

eternal nothingness he entertains the thought that immortality, as described by the teachings of some organized religions, is obtainable by affirming some doctrine or saying some prayer. He weighs his evidence and finds that there is not enough evidence to support believing that mere affirmation of doctrine or prayer will affect the immortality of his soul. But in his last moment of life he allows his dread to motivate him to believe that mere affirmation of doctrine or prayer will positively affect the immortality of his soul. If a man believes a proposition without sufficient evidence in his last moment of life, his doing so does not “have reverberations throughout [his] entire noetic structure” and is not an impediment to the functioning of society. So, regardless of the importance of truth-seeking for society and regardless of the interconnectedness of our beliefs, there is no bad consequence at all of a man believing a proposition without sufficient evidence in his last moment of life. Thus, not all cases of believing without sufficient evidence have the wrong-making feature hinted at by Pojman.

Here one might maintain that, even though the dying man’s unsupported believing did not result in damage throughout his noetic structure, his unsupported believing did impose a *risk* of such damage. And it may be urged that imposing that sort of risk is the wrong-making feature common to every believing without sufficient evidence. However, *every* act that we perform carries some risk, from the perspective of the agent, of producing harmful consequences and that the harm will outweigh any benefit. Such risk obtains because we can never be *certain* about what harm will result from any act we opt to perform.<sup>[31]</sup> The most well-intentioned and seemingly

benevolent of acts may have disastrous results; saving a drowning child may give tomorrow's most wicked tyrant an opportunity to realize his evil potential. Even saving a drowning child who will become a great philanthropist carries a risk, from the perspective of the agent, that she is doing the world a great disservice. More specifically, every *belief* we adopt carries a risk that the benefits of doing so will be outweighed by the harm. Believing that Springfield is the capital of Illinois in light of favorable evidence may result in disaster when the believer encounters a lunatic who believes that Chicago is the capitol of Illinois and hates to be corrected. Even if so believing proves only helpful to the believer, from her perspective, so believing carries a risk that the benefits will be outweighed by the harm.

Since all believings and all acts generally carry a risk, from the perspective of the agent, of harmful consequences, we may say one of the following: (i) all acts have a wrong-making feature in common in virtue of the risk, from the perspective of the agent, that the act will result in harm (or more harm than good) or (ii) such risk is not a wrong-making feature of acts after all. Since some acts seem to have no wrongness about them whatsoever (e. g. saving a drowning child,) I lean toward (ii). Notice that, if we say (i), we have not found a wrong-making feature common to every believing without sufficient evidence that is not a wrong-making feature of every believing in accordance with the evidence and every act generally. But the presumption is that the moral status of believing without sufficient evidence is poorer than the moral status of believing in accordance with the evidence. Thus, we seek a feature common to every believing without sufficient evidence that accounts for its poorer moral status; thus, we

seek a feature common to every believing without sufficient evidence that is not a feature of every believing in accordance with the evidence.

It may be argued that whenever one believes without sufficient evidence she creates, from her perspective, some unacceptable level of risk; and that such risk is the wrong-making feature common to every believing without sufficient evidence that grounds the moral presumption against it. However, there seem to be cases in which the level of the risk of believing without sufficient evidence is not unacceptable. Suppose I gaze toward the sky on a clear night and because it brings me great joy I believe that there is an even number of stars visible to me without sufficient evidence to support the belief. It seems quite unlikely that I will bring about disastrous results from so believing. There seems very little chance that so believing will have “reverberations throughout [my] entire noetic structure,” and on the off chance that believing that there is an even number of stars visible to me will upset some other justified beliefs it seems improbable that such changes in my noetic structure will result in harm that is obviously of moral concern because the subject of the belief in question is so far removed from subjects that may affect other people. So, while believing without sufficient evidence always carries some risk of harm, sometimes it seems that the risk is at an acceptable level.

Pojman also suggests that believing without sufficient evidence is a sort of self-deception, or lying to oneself. There is a moral presumption against lying; all lies are thought to stand in need of justification. One promising way to justify the moral presumption against lies is to identify a wrong-making feature that all lies have in

common. If we can pick out a wrong-making feature shared by all lies told to others, we might find that that feature is present in all lies to oneself. In the next chapter we will examine some proposals of a wrong-making feature shared by all lies told to others.

[1] W. K. Clifford. "The Ethics of Belief." *Lectures and Essays*. London, 1886. p. 346. I argued in the last chapter that, if we accept the Jamesian proposal that, for every proposition that we consider, we are epistemically obligated to believe it if and only if it is true as an account of objective epistemic obligation, then Clifford's principle as a proposal of subjective epistemic obligation is too strict. Here, I am taking Clifford's principle as one of subjective *moral* obligation. I'm taking his proposal as saying that one is morally forbidden to believe any proposition that she is epistemically forbidden to believe. And in the last chapter I understood Clifford as saying that one is epistemically forbidden to believe any proposition whose evidence does not make it likely to be true from his perspective before he believes it. I will now take Clifford's principle as saying that one is morally forbidden to believe any proposition whose evidence does not make it likely to be true from her perspective before she believes it.

[2] It is interesting to note that Clifford fails to tell us whether or not it is ethically permissible or even ethically obligatory to believe that which is supported by sufficient evidence. Given Clifford's principle it may still be ethically forbidden to believe statements that are supported by sufficient evidence. If we take "sufficient evidence" to mean evidence that is sufficient to epistemically justify belief rather than evidence that is sufficient to morally justify belief, there may be moral principles that forbid believing propositions that meet the evidential requirement. Perhaps when the stakes are high an epistemically justified belief may not be morally justified. Perhaps, for example, a the owner of a vicious dog may be epistemically justified in believing that

his fence is sound without being ethically justified in so believing until after he thoroughly inspects it.

[3] p. 339.

[4] p. 339-40.

[5] The “per se” in premises (2) and (4) is added for the following reason: there may be nothing *intrinsically* wrong with acting on a sincerely held conviction but acting on such a conviction may be wrong in virtue of the fact that it is wrong to come to hold that conviction.

[6] p. 342.

[7] p. 342.

[8] William James. *“The Will to Believe” and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York, 1897. p. 25-6.

[9] Expected good is the product of what is reasonable to believe the value of the favored consequence is and what is reasonable to believe is the likelihood that the favored consequence will follow the action. For example, suppose that it is reasonable to believe that a good’s value may be quantified as 25 and that it is reasonable to believe that the likelihood the good will be a consequence of the action is 50 percent. In that case the expected good may be quantified as 12 and half. Expected harm may be similarly calculated.

[10] In the next chapter we will look at what that might be. For my purposes we need not address that now.

[11] p. 25.

[12] In section II of the previous chapter I argue that Clifford's principle taken as a principle about epistemic obligation requires that one have sufficient evidence for a proposition *before* he believes it. For much the same reason his principle taken as a principle about moral obligation requires that one have sufficient evidence for a proposition before she believes it. One's subjective duty depends upon what he non-culpably believes he ought to do immediately *before* he acts. Clifford's principle taken as a proposal of subjective moral obligation regarding believing holds that one who has a non-culpable belief regarding whether he morally ought to believe a proposition believes that he morally ought to believe it if and only if his evidence makes it more likely to be true than its negation. Thus, on this understanding of Clifford's principle it is the evidence that one has before she believes that determines the moral status of that believing.

[13] Jack Meiland. "What Ought We to Believe? or the Ethics of Belief Revisited." *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 17. p. 15.

[14] One may hold that there is little good about a marriage between a faithful woman and her adulterous husband. In reply we need only alter the case so that the psychological well being of several young children is at stake. In the modified case the woman can best preserve the psychological well being of her children by believing that her husband is faithful and, thus, saving the marriage.

[15] Even though one cannot create a (*prima facie*) obligation to do something otherwise wrong merely in virtue of the fact that he says that he promises to do so, he may create (*prima facie*) obligations by saying that he promises to do so in virtue of



the expectations that he instills in others and the impact of those expectations on the utility of future possible acts. If I say that I promise to punch the next person who threatens to harm you, I do not create an obligation to punch anyone in virtue of merely saying that I promise to do so, but I may create an obligation to protect you (perhaps even by punching someone who threatens you) in virtue of the expectations that my words generate and the impact of those expectations on the utility of future possible acts.

[16] H. H. Price. "Belief and Will." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volume 28. p. 14.

[17] H. H. Price. *Belief*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1967. p. 238.

[18] Roderick Chisholm. "Lewis' Ethic of Belief." *The Philosophy of C. I. Lewis*. Paul Arthur Schlipp ed. LaSalle, IL; Open Court, 1968. p. 223.

[19] Roderick Firth. "Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Concepts?" *Values and Morals*. A. I. Goldman and J. Kim eds. Dordrecht; Reidel, 1978.

[20] p. 226.

[21] p. 229.

[22] p. 229.

[23] Chisholm draws and labels the distinction this way: one absolutely ought to do what is right, one objectively ought to do what it is reasonable for him to believe is right, and one subjectively ought to do what she believes it is reasonable for her to believe is right. For the sake of clarity I continue to draw an objective/subjective distinction as follows: it is one's objective duty, or one objectively ought, to do what is

best and it is one's subjective duty, or one subjectively ought, to do what it is reasonable for her to believe is best. My "objectively ought" lines up with Chisholm's "absolutely ought;" and my "subjectively ought" lines up with Chisholm's "objectively ought." I reject Chisholm's notion of subjective duty. From the mere fact the one believes that it is reasonable for her to believe that it is right for her to do some act, nothing follows regarding what she ought to do in any sense of "ought." Only if the belief that it is reasonable for her to believe that it is right for her to do some act were reasonable, would it be plausible to infer what she ought, in some sense, to do.

[24] For a helpful discussion of the distinction between epistemic and moral concepts see Firth's "Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Concepts?"

[25] John Stuart Mill. *Utilitarianism, Liberty and Representative Government*. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1910. p. 21.

[26] p. 22.

[27] Naturally, this presumption is held only by those who have thought much about the moral status of believing without sufficient evidence. Among those who hold this presumption are W. K. Clifford, William James, Jack Meiland, and Louis Pojman.

[28] Louis Pojman. "Believing, Willing, and the Ethics of Belief." *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1993. p. 540.

[29] p. 541.

[30] p. 541.

[31] Mill points out that sometimes an agent may know that an act has better

consequences than any other alternative he could perform instead. But the fact that sometimes an agent may know that an act has better consequences than any other alternative he could perform instead is compatible with the fact that no agent can ever be *certain* about what harm will result from any act he opts to perform.

The last chapter ended with an important suggestion: believing a proposition without sufficient evidence is a sort of lying to oneself. In light of that suggestion let us now examine proposals of wrong-making features common to all lies told to others in an effort to reveal a wrong-making feature common to all believings without sufficient evidence.

Clearly, not all lies are wrong. Law enforcement officers may be morally justified in lying to a criminal in order to protect his hostages. They may be morally justified in telling him, for example, that they are busy arranging for his escape vehicle when they are actually busy placing snipers in the area. Nonetheless, there is a moral presumption against lying; whenever one tells a lie, it is appropriate to ask for a justification for doing so. But is this presumption warranted? One promising way to determine whether the presumption against lying is warranted is to investigate whether there is a wrong-making feature that all lies have in common. Even if every lie does have a wrong-making feature, right-making features of some lies may overshadow the wrong-making feature and the lie may be morally permissible or even obligatory. We may say being an instance of lying is a wrong-making quality of the hostage negotiators' act of assuring the criminal that they are arranging his escape but that being the only available means of protecting the hostages is a right-making quality that overshadows the wrong-making quality.

What is lying? One can speak falsely without lying. If I overhear an expert seemingly sincerely speak a falsehood about her area of expertise and I report this falsehood to others, regardless of whether the expert lies, I do not. Joseph Kupfer

begins an examination of the moral presumption against lying with a definition: “A person lies when he asserts something to another which he believes to be false with the intention of getting the other to believe it to be true.”<sup>[1]</sup> Let us accept Kupfer’s definition for the sake of argument and assess his examination.

Kupfer limits the scope of his analysis to what he calls “successful” lies: lies that are both false and believed by the would-be deceived. He justifies this approach on the grounds that

the presumption against lying turns on the inherent negative weight of successful lies. They are the paradigmatic case for our intuition concerning the justificatory burden that all lies bear. “Unsuccessful” lies...are derivatively discredited by being failed attempts at successful lies. (In a similar way do we demand justification for failed attempts to do bodily harm to another.)<sup>[2]</sup>

Kupfer argues for two wrong-making features common to all successful lies.

### I. Self-opposition

One alleged wrong-making feature common to all successful lies that Kupfer offers is the personality disintegration generated by “the self-opposition or distancing from the self necessarily generated by repudiating in speech what we believe.”<sup>[3]</sup> He explains,

When we lie we are not “following through” on what we truly believe. Thus we are separated *in action* from our beliefs. It is as if the actor were a different

person, one acting on a different set of beliefs. The act does not present the real self, for the real self is identified with and by the beliefs held to be true.

The beliefs held to be true interlock with the individual's character and conduct in a way that those thought false do not.... The content of a lie, therefore, is antagonistic to what the individual is.<sup>[4]</sup>

So, by lying one creates a gap, and perhaps a conflict, between the "self" that is comprised of beliefs, attitudes, and other inner states and the "self" that is comprised of the behavior observable by others. Kupfer claims that such self-opposition promotes personality disintegration. He explains,

The liar must be circumspect in his speech and action, guarding against the emergence of his real beliefs. The need to maintain the deception binds him....

The circumstances of the lie limit the way the liar interacts and speaks with others. The social, linguistic isolation obstructs personality integration because social intercourse is needed to organize our opinions and know ourselves.<sup>[5]</sup>

Kupfer holds that lying jeopardizes personality integration in two ways.<sup>[6]</sup> First, lying impedes the integration of our opinions. By isolating our beliefs from others we do not allow other people to respond to them. Such response is held as necessary for their proper assessment and integration. Kupfer holds that the more our beliefs cohere with one another the more unified we become. Second, lying impedes self-knowledge. Isolation of belief from others limits our access to their feedback. Kupfer holds that such feedback constitutes the building blocks of our self-evaluation and self-understanding.

While Kupfer admits that self-opposition by itself is not morally significant, he believes that it is morally significant insofar as it promotes personality disintegration. Kupfer holds that personality integration is held to be good insofar as some degree of such integration is necessary for moral agency.<sup>[7]</sup> One whose personality is sufficiently disintegrated is no longer a member of the moral community. And although personality integration is not intrinsically good, moral agency seems to be.

Anne Wiles offers two alleged counterexamples to Kupfer's claim that every lie promotes personality disintegration via self-opposition.<sup>[8]</sup> First, she suggests that a habitual liar "presumably feels *less* psychological self-opposition when he *does* lie than when he does not."<sup>[9]</sup> But while it is true that the habitual liar presumably does not *feel* any conflict when he lies, he still creates an opposition between his inner beliefs and attitudes and the behavior that is observable by others. And since it is the opposition between inner states and observable behavior, and not any *feeling* of conflict, that promotes personality disintegration, Wiles's first alleged counterexample does not threaten Kupfer's argument.

Second, Wiles suggests,

In the case of the practically wise man (or the principled liar), there is an opposition between what the person knows and what he says, but since the practically wise man is a paradigm of psychological integration, it is difficult to support the view that this opposition is "psychologically unhealthy."<sup>[10]</sup>

Kupfer's claim is merely that the self-opposition created by lying promotes personality disintegration. The fact that many people lie at one time or another but have well

integrated personalities is compatible with Kupfer's claim. Furthermore, the fact that a principled liar is a paradigm of personality integration is compatible with Kupfer's claim. Ordinarily, one who only lies on principle need not lie very often and, thus, suffers negligible degrees of personality disintegration. If one who only lies on principle finds herself lying very often, it seems plausible that she will become tangled in the webs of her lies and suffer significant personality disintegration. Thus, Wiles second apparent counterexample poses little threat to Kupfer's claim that every lie promotes personality disintegration via self-opposition.

Let us now examine whether or not self-opposition and subsequent personality disintegration are consequences, not of lying, but of believing without sufficient evidence. It may be held that a conflict between one's evidence and his beliefs is itself a lack of unity of the personality. Furthermore, one may hold that a conflict between one's evidence and his beliefs would contribute to a lack of unity among the beliefs themselves. Unless some part of one's evidence is consistently ignored, it will cause a lack of coherence between those beliefs that reflect that evidence and those beliefs that should but do not. There is a lack of coherence among the beliefs of the alcoholic who inconsistently applies standards for applying the term "alcoholism;" he may believe

- (a) I am not an alcoholic.
- (b) Smith is an alcoholic.
- (c) Smith and I exhibit the same drinking patterns.
- (d) To be an alcoholic is to exhibit a certain drinking pattern.



I believe that it is plausible to hold that, like lying, believing against the evidence contributes to personality disintegration.

However, if Kupfer intends to show that *every* (successful) lie has the wrong-making quality of promoting personality disintegration, he comes up short. The following objection may be called the Lying Dying Man Objection. It goes as follows: an elderly man is nearing his last breath of life when his daughter asks him whether he ever loved her. The truth is that he did not; but *in his last moment of life* he lies and tells her that he did. Regardless of the consequences of the lie for the daughter and his relationship to his daughter, I think that it is safe to say that the lie did not have any impact on his personality integration. The reason for thinking that the lie had no such impact is that there was no time for any change in personality integration to occur after the lie was uttered. Thus, Kupfer's teleological considerations do not point to a wrong-making feature common to *every* (successful) lie.

At this point one may argue that every (successful) lie *tends* to promote personality disintegration and such a tendency is the wrong-making feature that all successful lies have in common. It may be urged that even the lie told by the dying man *tends* to promote personality disintegration. It may be held that the dying man's lie is an act-token of an act-type (lying) whose tokens normally promote personality disintegration; and it may be said that every token of the type lying has a tendency to promote personality disintegration. Furthermore, it may be urged that the tendency to

promote personality disintegration is a wrong-making feature common to every token lie.

However, even though act-tokens of some type normally promote a bad consequence, it seems inaccurate to attribute a wrong-making feature to a token of that type that does not *itself* promote that consequence. Screaming "Fire!" in a crowded theater normally promotes a dangerous panic among the patrons. However, an actor may scream "Fire!" in a crowded theater in such a way that it does not promote any panic whatsoever. And it seems inaccurate to attribute a wrong-making quality to the actor's scream in virtue of the fact that normally tokens of the act-type screaming "Fire!" in a crowded theater promote a dangerous panic among the patrons. If it is accurate to say that the actor's scream tends to promote a bad consequence, then it seems acceptable to say that the actor's scream *tends* to have a wrong-making feature. But, of course, tending to have a wrong-making feature is not the same as having one. So, even if a successful lie tends to promote personality disintegration, it is not the case that every successful lie has a wrong-making quality in virtue of that tendency.

However, even though a dying man can lie without promoting personality disintegration, it seems that a dying man cannot believe without sufficient evidence without promoting personality disintegration. If a dying man believes without sufficient evidence in his last moment of life, he creates a disparity between his evidence and his beliefs and, if he is inconsistent in his attention to the evidence, may even create a disparity among his beliefs. Regardless of whether he is inconsistent in

his attention to his evidence the dying man may be held to have promoted personality disintegration by creating or enlarging a disparity between his evidence and his beliefs.

Nevertheless, since personality integration is only instrumentally valuable and only valuable insofar as it is necessary for moral agency, we need only stipulate that the dying man maintains his moral agency throughout his believing; that is, we may suppose that any personality disintegration he suffers will not be enough to disqualify him from membership in the moral community.<sup>[11]</sup> Thus, it need not be (*prima facie*) morally wrong to promote personality disintegration because one may promote personality disintegration without, thereby, threatening his moral agency. More generally, from the fact that having some quality, A, is intrinsically good and the fact that some degree of another quality, B, is necessary for A, it does not follow that bringing about a decrease in B is always (*prima facie*) wrong. Suppose that the aesthetic beauty of a stone statue is not diminished by a limited amount of exposure to the effects of the weather but that at some threshold those effects would diminish the statue's beauty. If the statue has yet to be exposed to the effects of the weather, the fact that at the threshold such exposure would diminish the statue's beauty would not make it (*prima facie*) wrong to exhibit the statue in a park and, thereby, expose it to a very limited degree to the effects of the weather. Likewise, even though at some threshold personality disintegration destroys moral agency, it does not follow that some limited degree of personality disintegration is (*prima facie*) wrong. Thus, it is not the case that every believing without sufficient evidence has a wrong-making

quality in virtue of the fact that every such believing promotes personality disintegration.

## II. Restriction of Freedom

Kupfer offers another alleged wrong-making feature common to all successful lies. Common to all successful lies is deception; the liar's audience comes to believe a falsehood. He argues,

*Immediate* restriction of the deceived's freedom is inherent in all (successful) lies because they limit the practical exercise of his reason: reasoning about possible courses of action. Believing true what is false or vice versa, the deceived's perspective on the world and his possible futures in it are distorted. As a result, his choices of action concerning that future are circumscribed. By limiting the horizon or content of his practical reasoning, the lie restricts the choosing and subsequent acting of the deceived. He reasons with a more or less false view of the world; misinformed, his practical conclusions and the actions they motivate are misdirected.<sup>[12]</sup>

It is not difficult to understand how some lies restrict one's freedom in one sense of "freedom." If there are two ways out of a building and I assert that the only way out of the building is through the front door and you believe me, I have limited your freedom insofar as, *from your perspective*, your only option for exiting the building is through the front door. In another sense of "freedom" you retain the

freedom to exit through both exits (no one is stopping you;) in this other sense of “freedom” I have not restricted your freedom. Regardless, whenever a successful lie limits, from the perspective of the deceived, his options, we may say that it limits his freedom.

However, it is less clear that successful lies that present the illusion of new options limit the freedom of the deceived. Kupfer argues that such lies make reasoning about possible courses of action “practically fruitless, thereby retarding or postponing the deliberations necessary to the exercise of freedom.”<sup>(13)</sup> If the only way out of a building is through the front door and I assert that there are two ways out of the building and you believe me, I may make your reasoning about possible courses of action less effective. By widening the gap between what, from the deceived’s perspective, are her options and what in fact are her options, a successful liar makes her exercise of her freedom less effective. Perhaps in some sense of “freedom” we can say that by making one’s exercise of his freedom less effective she has, thereby, restricted his freedom.

Let us grant for the sake of argument that in some sense or other of “freedom” all successful lies restrict the freedom of the deceived. Even so, some lies will have only a short-lived impact on that freedom. Smith may lie to Jones and, thereby, deceive him into believing that Illinois is east of Indiana. But if Smith’s wife overhears her husband’s fib and quickly sets Jones straight, Smith restricts Jones’ freedom for a very short time. Because some lies only have a short-lived impact on the freedom of

the deceived Kupfer makes only the modest claim that all successful lies *immediately* restrict that freedom.

Analogously, one may propose that a wrong-making quality common to every believing without sufficient evidence is a restriction of freedom. Pojman makes such a suggestion. He addresses the merits of cognitive volition, or acts of will whereby one acquires a belief in full consciousness and independently of evidential considerations.<sup>[14]</sup> He claims,

To be an autonomous person is to have a high degree of warranted beliefs available on which to base one's actions. There is a tendency to lower freedom of choice as one shrinks the repertoire of well-justified beliefs regarding a plan of action, and because it is a generally accepted moral principle that it is wrong to lessen autonomy or personhood, it is wrong to lessen the degree of justification of one's beliefs on important matters. Hence, there is a general presumption against beliefs by willing to have them. Cognitive volition is a sort of lying or cheating in that it enjoins believing against what has the best guarantee of being the truth.<sup>[15]</sup>

I think that Pojman is right to point out that there is a tendency to restrict freedom by getting oneself to believe an epistemically unwarranted proposition. But there is *only* a tendency; there are cases in which getting oneself to believe what is epistemically unjustified does not restrict one's freedom: cases in which one gets herself to believe an unsupported truth. Thus, a restriction of freedom is not common to all cases of believing without sufficient evidence. At this point one might urge that the moral

status of getting oneself to believe an unsupported truth is somehow derivative of the moral status of getting oneself to believe an unsupported falsehood. However, I intend to show that not even every case of getting oneself to believe an unsupported *falsehood* has a wrong-making feature in virtue of restricting one's freedom.

One may object to Kupfer's proposal by maintaining that some successful lies do not restrict the freedom of the deceived on the grounds that the lie may be about something the deceived has no interest in reasoning about and, thus, does not restrict the deceived's reasoning.<sup>[16]</sup> However, regardless of the deceived's interests, a successful lie limits her choices or gives her an illusion of choices. Whether or not I reason about those choices, my ability to reason about them is impaired. I think that such impairment constitutes a restriction of my freedom even if I my actual reasoning is not affected by the impairment. Whether or not I like bananas, a banana shortage may affect my freedom with regard to the fruit I eat. Likewise, whether or not I like bananas, if someone falsely reports to me that there is a banana shortage and I believe her, from my perspective my options with regard to the fruit I eat becomes immediately restricted.

Another objection against the proposed disvalue of lying goes as follows:

Other activities such as withholding information or remaining silent when speaking would disabuse someone of a false belief, may also restrict one's freedom, yet such activities are not *inherently* wrong, but wrong only in certain contexts, for example, if the person has a right to know the information being withheld.<sup>[17]</sup>

If I fail to correct you when you reveal the erroneous belief that Texas is the largest state, the objection goes, I may restrict your freedom; but my omission need not be wrong since it is doubtful that you have a right to know that Alaska is the largest state. I find fault with this objection on the grounds that failing to correct someone's erroneous belief or failing to share one's knowledge with others seems like a failure to enhance the freedom of others rather than a *restriction* of that freedom. Whether or not we have some obligation to enhance the freedom of others is much less clear than whether we have some obligation *not* to restrict that freedom. Since this objection does not present us with a case in which one's act or omission restricts the freedom of another, as lying does, but has no wrongness about it, it does not pose a threat to Kupfer's proposal that every (successful) lie has a wrong-making feature in virtue of immediately restricting the freedom of the deceived.

One might think that we could press a dying man objection to this proposal of a wrong-making feature common to all successful lies. It might be argued that, if a man dies immediately after he has been lied to, his freedom never becomes restricted. Let us examine the issue. Suppose that a daughter tells her dying father that she loves him. Suppose further that she does not love him but wants to offer words of comfort. A successful lie is one such that what is asserted is both false and believed by the audience. So, if the father dies before he comes to believe that his daughter loves him, she does not successfully lie to her father. Let us suppose, on the other hand, that the father does come to believe that his daughter loves him, on the basis of her testimony, in his last moment of life. In this case the daughter does successfully lie to her father.



One might urge that, in this case, although the dying man has no opportunity to exercise his freedom after he is deceived, his freedom is, nonetheless, restricted. However, it seems inconsistent to hold that one both has freedom but cannot exercise it. Even supposing that the daughter loved her father and, thus, did not deceive him with her testimony, the father would not enjoy any greater freedom because death prevents him from acting. On this account of freedom one's freedom may become restricted or curtailed the moment before one becomes physically restrained or dies. If a would-be captor is in a position to prevent a would-be captive from exercising any freedom to move his limbs, even though he has not yet physically restrained him, it seems inaccurate to say that the captive retains freedom to move his limbs right up to the point he is actually restrained. Likewise, if death prevents the dying man from exercising freedom, then it seems mistaken to maintain that, in his last moment of life he has freedom in any sense of "freedom." To have freedom is to be in a position to exercise freedom. Thus, our dying man case is one in which one tells a successful lie but does not restrict the freedom of the deceived.

The proposal that every case of believing a falsehood without sufficient evidence restricts one's freedom will, likewise, be subject to a dying man objection. Recall our death bed conversion example. Even if in his last moment of life a man comes to believe without sufficient evidence that immortality can be secured merely by believing some religious doctrine or by praying and it is false that immortality can be secured by such means, then his freedom is not restricted. Death prevents him from exercising freedom and, thus, in his last moment he has no freedom to restrict.

Furthermore, I think that it is too much of a stretch to say that successful lies may immediately restrict the freedom of the deceived in virtue of making the exercise of practical reason less effective. Recall that successful lies may either eliminate options, from the perspective of the deceived, regarding future actions or give the illusion of choices not actually available. I find it unproblematic that a lie can restrict freedom by eliminating apparent options; however, it is far less clear that giving the illusion of choice amounts to restricting one's freedom. Kupfer maintains that giving the illusion of choice restricts freedom insofar as it makes the immediate exercise of practical reason less effective. However, if one does not choose an illusory alternative, it is not clear how the illusion of choice makes the immediate exercise of practical reason less effective.<sup>[18]</sup> Furthermore, it seems mistaken to hold that other ways that we may make another's immediate exercise of practical reason less effective invariably have some wrong-making feature. Telling a laugh-till-it-hurts joke to someone with a good sense of humor will, in all likelihood, impair the immediate effectiveness of the exercise of the practical reason of the audience but need not have any wrong-making quality whatsoever. In many other ways one can affect another's concentration and impair the immediate effectiveness of her exercise of practical reason without doing anything *prima facie* wrong. Lies ordinarily have a more lasting impact on the effectiveness of our practical reason than do momentary distractions; however, some lies, especially those that are quickly revealed, have only an immediate impact on the deceived's practical reason. Since other things that we may do that immediately weaken the effectiveness of the another's exercise of practical reason need not be

(prima facie) wrong, not every successful lie is prima facie wrong in virtue of either eliminating apparent options for the deceived or making the immediate exercise of the practical reason of the deceived less effective.

Likewise, even if getting oneself to believe a falsehood without sufficient evidence either eliminates one's own apparent options or makes the immediate exercise of one's own practical reason less effective, this impact on practical reason need not be a wrong-making feature of such endeavors. One may set out to acquire a state of mind that inhibits concentration without doing anything prima facie wrong. If one slips into a hot bath and thereby makes the immediate effectiveness of his practical reason less effective, he need not have done anything prima facie wrong. Just as it need not be prima facie wrong to do things that may limit the immediate effectiveness of another's practical reason, it need not be prima facie wrong to do things that may limit the immediate effectiveness of one's own practical reason.

### III. Conclusion

I find it unsatisfactory that Kupfer limits his analysis to what he demarks "successful" lies. I don't find the comparison between unsuccessful lies and failed attempts to do bodily harm to another compelling. On Kupfer's view a lie is unsuccessful if either it is not believed by the audience or it is true. I concede that an assertion that the speaker believes is false but is not believed by the audience is similar to a failed attempt to do bodily harm to another. If such a failed attempt is not wrong

in virtue of the expected consequences of the act, then perhaps the moral wrongness of the failed attempt is derivative of the wrongness of successful attempts.<sup>[19]</sup> However, I think that an assertion that the speaker believes is false but is true and that is accompanied by the fulfilled intention of getting the audience to believe it is presumed to have a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality. True lies, as well as false lies, lead the audience to hold a belief that, from the perspective of the liar, is unlikely to be true. Leading others to have such a belief seems to have a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality regardless of whether or not the belief is true. Likewise, believing without sufficient evidence leads oneself to hold a belief that, from his perspective, is unlikely to be true and seems to have a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality regardless of whether or not the belief is true. In virtue of what quality does leading oneself or another to hold a belief that, from the deceiver's perspective, is unlikely to be true have a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality? I propose an answer in the next, and final, chapter.

[1] Joseph Kupfer. "The Moral Presumption Against Lying." *Review of Metaphysics*

36. p. 104.

[2] p. 104

[3] p. 116.

[4] p. 116.

[5] p. 119.

[6] p. 119-20.

[7] p. 124.

[8] Anne Wiles. "Lying: Its Inconstant Value." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy*

26. p. 277.

[9] p. 277.

[10] p. 277.

[11] It has been suggested to me that personality integration may have intrinsic value and that one might make a case for the intrinsic value of a personality integration by comparing personality integration to organization in work of art. Yet, while organization may contribute to the beauty of a work of art, it seems accurate to say that beauty is intrinsically good and organization is only instrumentally good insofar as it promotes beauty. Likewise, while integration may contribute to the moral goodness and wisdom of a person, it seems accurate to say that moral goodness and wisdom are intrinsically good and integration is instrumentally good insofar as it promotes moral goodness and wisdom.

[12] p. 106.

[13] p. 106.

[14] Louis Pojman. "Believing, Willing, and the Ethics of Belief." *The Theory of Knowledge: Classic and Contemporary Readings*. Louis Pojman ed. Wadsworth: Belmont, California, 1993. p. 528.

[15] p. 540.

[16] Wiles. p. 278.

[17] p. 278.

[18] This point is due to Earl Conee.

[19] Notice that the dying man examples are not examples of failed attempts at lying (to another or oneself.) Those examples are designed to show that one's *successful* attempts to make another or oneself believe what appears to him to be false need not result in the bad consequences that Kupfer attributes to all successful lies. Since the dying man examples are not examples of unsuccessful attempts at lying, the lies in the examples cannot be said to have a wrongness that is *derivative* of some wrongness common to all successful lies.

The purpose of this chapter is to defend the presumption that every instance of believing without sufficient evidence has a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality. Let us begin by recalling the distinction between subjective and objective duty. It is one's objective moral duty to do what he really morally ought to do. What one really morally ought to do depends upon which circumstances she is in and which objective moral principles are correct. Objective moral principles determine whether an act is morally right or morally wrong.<sup>[1]</sup> One likely candidate for a correct moral principle is: whenever one makes a promise to another, if no conflicting obligations arise, it is morally right for him to do what he promised. The circumstances that play a role in determining what one really morally ought to do do not include the agent's perspective on the situation. What an agent believes as well as what her evidence warrants play no role in determining her objective moral duty. Suppose that Smith promises Jones that he will help him make repairs on his house and Smith has no moral obligation that conflicts with his helping Jones. In such a case it is right for Smith (assuming the above principle is correct) to help Jones no matter what he believes or what his evidence warrants believing. In such a case it is right for Smith to keep his promise even if he believes that he never made a promise to Jones or even if his evidence warrants believing that he has no obligation to help Jones.

By contrast, it is one's subjective moral duty to do (among other things) what she non-culpably believes that she morally ought to do. Thus, if Smith non-culpably, or through no fault of his own, believes that he ought not to help Jones, then, although it is his objective moral duty to help Jones, it is his subjective moral duty not to help

Jones. Subjective moral principles determine, not whether an act is morally right or morally wrong, but whether or not an agent is morally blameworthy. One who does a morally wrong act, A, is morally blameless, if he non-culpably believed that he morally ought to do A. Likewise, one who fails to do a morally right act, B, is morally blameless, if he non-culpably believed that he morally ought not to do B.

But suppose that one does not have a non-culpable belief about what he morally ought (not) to do in his current situation. In such a case one could be morally blameworthy in virtue of the fact that her doing a morally wrong act or not doing a morally right act is a result of her failing to arrive at a non-culpable belief about what she morally ought (not) to do in her situation. Thus, we may say that one also has a subjective moral duty to arrive at a non-culpable belief regarding what he morally ought to do in his situation. Now we may ask: what must one do to arrive at such a belief?

Consider someone to who believes that in his current situation he morally ought to do an act, A, but it is not clear to him what he morally ought to do and he does not give the matter much thought. Suppose further that by doing A he does something morally wrong. In such a case we may be apt to find him morally blameworthy on the grounds that he failed to properly use his beliefs in moral deliberation over the value of his options. The subjective moral duty to come to a non-culpable belief about what one morally (not) ought to do in his current situation ordinarily entails a subjective duty to properly use his beliefs in moral deliberation over the value of options available to him. Unless it is clear to us what we morally ought



(not) to do or time does not permit us, such deliberation is what is required by the duty to have a non-culpable belief about what we morally ought (not) to do in our current situation.

Now consider someone who believes that in his current situation he morally ought to do an act, A, has properly used his beliefs in moral deliberation over the matter, but by doing A does something morally wrong. I think that, if he did not give much thought to the beliefs that are neither clearly true nor clearly false for him and constitute the inputs of his moral deliberation, we may be apt to morally blame this person on the grounds that he failed to properly deliberate over the epistemic merit of those candidates for belief. The subjective duty to come to a non-culpable belief about what one morally ought to do entails a subjective duty to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding candidates for belief that are neither clearly true nor clearly false for her.

## I. An Example

Let us consider the following case: laboratory's chemist places hydrochloric acid in a drinking glass for the sake of expediency. While he is out of the lab, a thirsty, but poorly trained lab assistant unwittingly drinks the acid. I think that we may properly blame the chemist for the injury the acid causes the lab assistant because we may properly blame him for placing the acid in a drinking glass. And we may properly

blame him for placing the acid in a drinking glass because either (i) we may properly blame him for doing what he non-culpably believed that he ought not do or (ii) we may properly blame him for failing to have a non-culpable belief about how he morally ought to store the acid. If the chemist had any belief at all about how he ought to store the acid, it would be a culpable belief if: (a) he failed to acquire information about safe chemical storage, (b) he failed to properly use his beliefs in moral deliberation about the value of his options regarding storing the acid, or (c) he failed to engage in proper epistemic deliberation over the beliefs that are neither clearly true nor clearly false for him and constitute the inputs of his deliberation over the value of his chemical storing options.<sup>[2]</sup> Let us examine each of these potential grounds for the culpability of the chemist's belief in turn.

If the chemist did not acquire information regarding the safe storage of chemicals, he may be morally blameworthy. As a chemist he has a special duty to gather information pertaining to the safety of others who work in his laboratory. Duties to gather information are not universal; those who have such duties have them in virtue of special relationships that they have to others. Lifeguards have a special duty to gather information about effective life saving techniques. And they have that duty in virtue of the special relationship that arises between one who takes on the role of lifeguards and swimmers under her watch. Likewise, property owners have a special duty to acquire information about potential hazards for passers-through. And that duty arises because of the special relationship that holds between those who own property and those who pass through that property.

If the chemist did not properly use his beliefs in moral deliberation about the value of his options for storing the acid, he may be morally blameworthy. The chemist might have fulfilled his duty to acquire information about the safe storage of chemicals, but, if he failed to apply the general guidelines to his specific situation, any belief he has about where he morally ought to store the acid may be culpable.

If the chemist did not engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding the candidates for belief that are neither clearly true nor clearly false for him and constitute the inputs of his moral deliberation, then he may be morally blameworthy. Suppose that the chemist believes that no one would mistake the acid for water but never gave the belief much thought. It is plausible to think that, if the chemist had properly deliberated over the epistemic merit of the belief, his attention would have been turned toward evidence that showed that belief unwarranted (suppose that his relevant evidence includes evidence that hydrochloric acid is a colorless, odorless liquid and evidence that water is a colorless, odorless liquid.)

When faced with a decision about what she ought to do, one usually finds that time permits properly using one's beliefs in moral deliberation about one's alternative courses of action, but, when faced with such a decision, time ordinarily does not permit proper epistemic deliberation about all of the beliefs that constitute the inputs of that moral deliberation. Such beliefs consist of ones regarding objective moral principles and ones regarding facts about one's circumstances. Objective moral principles dictate that it is *prima facie* morally right to protect others from bodily injury and, more specifically, that it is *prima facie* obligatory for a laboratory's chemist to

protect others who work in his laboratory from injury due to harmful exposure to chemicals. Presumably, the chemist has numerous beliefs about his circumstances. He presumably has beliefs about the qualities of hydrochloric acid, the habits of thirsty, but poorly trained lab assistants, the accessibility of the drinking glass to lab assistants, the likelihood of a lab assistant discovering the acid, and the likelihood that once discovered the acid would be mistaken for water, as well as many other aspects of his situation. There simply is not enough time to properly deliberate about the epistemic status of these beliefs immediately before acting; this is work that, as much as possible, must be done ahead of time.

But any belief could be called upon to help us in our moral deliberations. And it is unfair to blame someone for an act or omission unless (at the time of the act or omission) he is in a position to see or tell that that act or omission provides a reason to morally blame him. But one is not ordinarily in a position to see or tell whether failing to engage in properly epistemic deliberation will *actually* contribute to his doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right. So, we cannot limit moral blameworthiness for failing to engage in proper epistemic deliberation to cases in which the failure actually contributes to the agent doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right.

One might suggest limiting moral blameworthiness for failing to engage in proper epistemic deliberation to cases in which it is sufficiently likely, from the perspective of the agent, that the failure will contribute to her doing something morally wrong or not doing something morally right. Since one is always in a position to see

or tell whether it is sufficiently likely, from his own perspective, that a failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation will contribute to his doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right, this proposal meets the restriction that to be blameworthy one must be in a position to see or tell that an act or omission provides a reason to morally blame her. But some cases in which it is quite unlikely, from the perspective of the agent, that failing to engage in epistemic deliberation will contribute to his doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right are ones in which we might assess the agent as morally blameworthy. No matter how unlikely, from the chemist's perspective, it is that his failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding how he morally ought to store the hydrochloric acid would result in his doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right, we would might assess him as morally blameworthy on the grounds that he failed to engage in such deliberation.

In contrast, my proposal is that the fact that one has failed to engage in proper epistemic deliberation over a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false is always a reason (that may be overridden) to morally blame the agent.<sup>[3]</sup> Since we are in a position to see or tell whether we are engaging in epistemic deliberation, my proposal meets the restriction that to be morally blameworthy one must be in a position to see or tell that her act or omission provides a reason to morally blame her. Again, if the expedient chemist did something morally wrong as a result a culpable belief about how he morally ought to store the acid, we would be apt to blame him; and any belief that he had about how he morally ought to store the acid might be

culpable if he did not engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding candidates for belief that are neither clearly true nor clearly false and constitute the inputs of a thorough moral deliberation regarding how he morally ought to store the acid. I believe that the case of the expedient chemist supports the following claim:

(MRB1) The fact that one does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as a result of her failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false is a reason to morally blame her.

Sometimes there are considerations that override our grounds for blaming one who does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as a result of a failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation.

I believe that (MRB1) presupposes the following claim:

(MRB2) The fact that one fails to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false is itself a reason to morally blame her.

The truth of (MRB2) helps explain the truth of (MRB1.) Since the fact that one does something wrong or fails to do something right as a result of a failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false for her is a reason to morally blame her, we have strong reason for thinking that we have a (prima facie) subjective moral duty to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding every candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false.<sup>[4]</sup>

Let us compare this principle with a seemingly similar principle. One might hold that, since the fact that one fails to do something morally right or does something morally wrong as a result of a failure to develop an attribute is a reason to morally blame her, we have strong reason for thinking that we have an obligation to develop every attribute that may affect the moral status of our future actions. It is possible that someday I will come across a person who is trapped beneath a heavy object and whose well-being depends on me promptly lifting the object and bringing the person to medical attention. If I were to come across such a person I would need considerable muscular strength to secure his well-being. One might argue that, since for all I know I may need considerable muscular strength to do something morally right, I am obligated to develop, or at least try to develop, considerable muscular strength.

An important problem with this principle is that, if one doesn't have an attribute that is necessary to prevent something bad from happening, then it follows that she does not fail to do something morally right, something that she really morally ought to do, by not doing so. If I do not have enough strength to lift a fallen tree off of the leg of an unfortunate lumberjack, then I do not fail to do something morally right by not doing so. So, I do not have an obligation to develop muscular strength in virtue of a need for such strength to do something morally right. More generally, I do not have an obligation to develop any quality in virtue of a need for the quality to do something morally right.

By contrast, it may be morally right for one to prevent something bad from happening even though, as a result of a failure to engage in proper epistemic

deliberation, one is unaware of the moral status of that option. It was morally right for the chemist to store hydrochloric acid in an appropriate container, even though, as a result of a failure to engage in epistemic deliberation, he may not have been aware of the moral status of that option. So, while we do not have a moral obligation to develop an attribute on the grounds that we may be properly blamed because we fail to do something morally right or do something morally wrong as a result of failing to develop the attribute, we have a moral obligation to engage in epistemic deliberation on the grounds that we may be properly blamed because we fail to do something morally right or do something morally wrong as a result of failing to engage in proper epistemic deliberation.

I think that my account of subjective duty lines up well with the standards that we employ when making attributions of blame. We do not blame those who do something morally wrong or fail to do something morally right if they do what they non-culpably believed that they ought to do or do not do what they non-culpably believed that they ought not to do. However, in cases in which one does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right without doing what she non-culpably believes that she ought not to do or failing to do what she non-culpably believes that she ought to do we justify our attributions of blame by pointing to failures to come to have a non-culpable belief regarding what she ought to do in her circumstances. Morality demands that we acquire such beliefs; and, thus, morality demands that we properly use our beliefs in moral deliberation whenever it is unclear



what we morally ought to do and engage in proper epistemic deliberation whenever a candidate for belief is neither clearly true nor clearly false.

## II. The Presumption Against Believing Without Sufficient Evidence

Now we are in a position to defend our presumption that every believing without sufficient evidence has a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality. Whenever a candidate for belief is clearly true, our evidence for it compels our belief. Some beliefs that carry a feeling of conviction may not be clearly true. If our conviction is the result of our biases, moods, and attitudes, rather than the force of our evidence, it is not clearly true. But many of our beliefs are forced on us by the strength of our evidence and are thus clear to us. Most of our simple perceptual beliefs are forced upon us by our evidence and are thus clear to us. When I look out my window, my sensory experience compels my belief that a tree's limbs are blowing in the wind. By contrast, whenever a candidate for belief is clearly false, our evidence prohibits us from accepting it. If I were to consider the proposition that the tree's limbs are still as a candidate for belief, my sensory experience would prohibit me from believing it. Only those candidates for belief that are neither clearly true nor clearly false can be believed without sufficient evidence. However, by engaging in proper epistemic deliberation over a candidate for belief we bring it about that we believe the proposition only if our evidence permits us to do so, or our evidence is sufficient. So, it is only by failing to engage in proper epistemic deliberation over a candidate for

belief that we allow ourselves to believe without sufficient evidence. And we have a (prima facie) subjective moral duty to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding candidates for belief that are neither clearly true nor clearly false; that a belief that is not clearly true is a product of a failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation is a reason (that may be overridden) for taking the belief as morally culpable, or the agent as morally blameworthy for the belief. Thus, since every believing without sufficient evidence is the product of a failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation, it follows that there is a reason to morally blame an agent whenever he believes a proposition without sufficient evidence.<sup>[3]</sup> Every believing without sufficient evidence has a non-derivative poor moral status making-quality of being the product of a failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation.

Now let us consider some objections to my account. Let us call the first objection the trivial beliefs objection. This objection contends that the subject of some candidates for belief is so trivial that it is implausible to suppose that we are always *morally* obligated to choose a candidate for belief over its negation. While we may have moral obligations concerning candidates for belief regarding, say, the effects of our behavior on others, so the objection goes, we have no such obligations concerning candidates for belief on trivial matters. In reply let me say again that any belief could have a significant impact on the moral value of our future actions. Examples that incorporate beliefs about obscure topics may seem quite unlikely; however, whenever unlikely circumstances arise and one does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as the result of his adopting a belief without sufficient

evidence, we would have a reason to morally blame him and that reason would be that she did something morally wrong or failed to do something morally right as the result of a failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding a candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false and adopting a belief without sufficient evidence.

Suppose that a kidnapper offers no more than a riddle regarding the whereabouts of his victim and that the victim can be rescued only if his friends contribute to his rescue by solving the riddle. In such a case, we may suppose, it is morally right for the friends of the victim to contribute to his rescue by solving the riddle. Suppose that one of them is prohibited from doing so only by the fact that he failed to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding an obscure candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false and adopted an obscure belief without sufficient evidence and that no one else solves the riddle. We may say that (i) the fact that he fails to contribute to the rescue of the victim as a result of failing to engage in epistemic deliberation and adopting that belief without sufficient evidence is a reason (that may be overridden) to morally blame him. And (i) seems to presuppose (ii) that fact that he failed to engage in proper epistemic deliberation and adopted a belief without sufficient evidence is itself a reason to morally blame him.

I think that the moral presumption against lying may be justified in much the same way as the moral presumption against believing without sufficient evidence. Of course, we can account for the wrongness of many lies by pointing to the negative consequences of the lie, actual or expected. But, as we saw in the preceding chapter,

appealing to consequential considerations did not help us identify a non-derivative poor moral status-making quality common to every lie. I don't think that we can account for the moral presumption against all lies by pointing to some feature common to every lie in virtue of which lying is *prima facie* wrong; my investigations of the matter have failed to produce any such feature. Rather, I think that we can justify the moral presumption against every lie by showing that whenever a person, A, does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as a result of acting under the deception that was engendered by the lie of another person, B, (iii) the fact that A's doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right is a result of B's lie is a reason (that may be overridden) to morally blame B, and (iv) the fact that B lied to A is itself a reason to morally blame B.

Suppose that Smith lies to Jones by telling him that he saw Jones's aging mother and that she appeared to be doing fine; and suppose that Jones's mother did not appear to be doing fine, but rather appeared to be in need of assistance from her son (she seemed to be quite frail and in no position to do her own grocery shopping.) Now suppose that Jones fails to do what is morally right (assist his mother) as a result of the deception engendered by Smith's lie. It seems that (v) that fact that Jones's failure to do what is morally right (assist his mother) is the result of Smith's lying to Jones is a reason to morally blame Smith. And (v) seems to presuppose (vi) the fact that Jones lied to Smith is itself a reason to morally blame Jones.<sup>[6]</sup>

Again, it is unfair to blame someone for an act or omission unless she is in a position to see or tell that her act or omission provides a reason to morally blame her.

So, since one is normally not in a position to see or tell whether his lie will in fact contribute to his audience doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right, we cannot tie having a reason to morally blame one for telling a lie to its actually contributing to the audience doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right. Can we tie having a reason to morally blame someone for telling a lie to it being sufficiently likely, from the perspective of the liar, that it will contribute to the audience to doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right? I don't think so. I believe that examining a case of a white lie will shed light on the issue.

Suppose that Jones lies to Smith telling him that Louisville is the capital of Kentucky. Suppose further that unbeknownst to Jones Smith needs five hundred dollars to buy medicine for his ailing mother and the only way that he can get it is by doing well in a trivia contest in which he is entered. In this situation it may be said that it is morally right for Smith to aid his mother and, thus, morally right for Smith to do well in the trivia contest. If Smith loses the cash prize because he asserts that Louisville is the capital of Kentucky, (vii) the fact that Smith's failure to do something morally right (aid his mother) is the result of Jones lying to Smith is a reason to morally blame Jones. And (vii) seems to presuppose that (viii) the fact that Jones lied to Smith is itself a reason to morally blame Jones. In this case, even though it may have been quite unlikely, from Jones's perspective, that his lie would contribute to Smith failing to do something morally right, the fact that he lied to Smith is a reason to

morally blame him. The fact that one tells a lie is always a reason (that may be overridden) to morally blame her.

Likewise, whenever one does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as the result of the self-deception of even the smallest, “whitest” believing without sufficient evidence, (ix) the fact that she does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as the result of her believing without sufficient evidence is a reason to morally blame her. And (ix) seems to presuppose (x) the fact that one believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is itself a moral reason to blame her. Whether or not a white lie or a “white” believing without sufficient evidence results in one doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right is a matter of luck. Most of us are lucky, our white lies and “white” believings without sufficient evidence rarely, if ever, result in our doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right. But whether there is a reason to morally blame us for our believings without sufficient evidence is not a matter of luck. Those believings without sufficient evidence that result in one doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right provide no more reason to morally blame us than those that do not.

One may also press a dying man objection to my account. One may consider some candidate for belief and then fail to deliberate over its epistemic merit in his last moments of living. In such a case, it may be argued, this failure cannot lead to him to do something morally wrong or fail to do something morally right and, thus, cannot provide a reason to morally blame the agent. However, even the dying man is not in a

position to see or tell whether his failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation can result in his doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right.

So, whether there is a reason to blame the dying man cannot be tied to the fact that his failure to engage in epistemic deliberation cannot result in his doing something morally wrong or failing to do something morally right.

One may modify this dying man objection so that it is reasonable for the dying man to believe that failure to fulfill his duty to engage in epistemic deliberation cannot lead to him to do something morally wrong or to fail to do something morally right.

In such a case, so the modified objection goes, the dying man has no obligation to engage in such deliberation. I have already argued that even if it is reasonable for one to believe that engaging in epistemic deliberation will not affect the moral status of his future actions on the grounds that it is reasonable for him to believe that the subject of the candidate for belief is too trivial, he still has an obligation to engage in such deliberation. I, likewise, maintain that even if it is reasonable for one to believe that engaging in proper epistemic deliberation will not affect the moral status of his future actions on the grounds that it is reasonable for him to believe that he will die in the immediate future, he is obligated to engage in such deliberation. Suppose that rather than dying right away the dying man who does not engage in proper epistemic deliberation experiences a surprising recovery and then later does something morally wrong as a result of his omission. I think that in such a case (xi) the fact that he does something morally wrong as the result of his believing without sufficient evidence is a reason to morally blame him. And (xi) seems to presuppose (xii) the fact that he

believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is itself a reason to morally blame him. Thus, both a dying man and a person for whom it is reasonable to believe that he will die have a subjective moral duty to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding candidates for belief that are neither clearly true nor clearly false.



[1] An act is morally right if and only if it is what the agent really ought to do; and an act is morally wrong if and only if it is what the agent really ought not to do.

[2] Epistemic deliberation about a candidate for belief is a weighing of considerations relevant to the epistemic merit of the candidate for belief. Proper epistemic deliberation is epistemic deliberation in which one makes no mistakes.

[3] To be a candidate for belief is to be a proposition under consideration for belief, or acceptance as true. Notice that one may consider a proposition merely for the sake of argument or as an hypothesis in need of testing. Furthermore, one may perhaps consider a proposition to take part in the joy of pretending that it is true.

One may, through no fault of his own, fail to engage in proper epistemic deliberation by making a non-culpable mistake in his deliberation. In such a case I think that we should say that the fact that he failed to engage in proper epistemic deliberation is a reason to morally blame him, but the fact that he failed to do so, through no fault of his own, is an overriding reason not to morally blame him. Also, one may, through no fault of his own, fail to engage in proper epistemic deliberation by non-culpably failing to realize that such deliberation is required of him. In such a case I think that we should say that the fact that he failed to engage in proper epistemic deliberation is a reason to morally blame him, but the fact that he was non-culpably unaware that he was required to do so is an overriding reason not to morally blame him.

[4] Why do I say that the duty to engage in epistemic deliberation regarding candidates for belief that are neither clearly true nor clearly false is merely a prima

facie duty? There are situations that require prompt action and thus do not permit deliberation. When one non-culpably believes that her duty proper requires immediate action she is excused from engaging in any deliberation that would have otherwise been required. When one non-culpably believes that doing his duty allows too little time to deliberate, he is exempt from a subjective duty to deliberation. The subjective moral duty to deliberate is not absolute; when fulfilling that duty conflicts with fulfilling more stringent moral duties, we are not morally required to deliberate.

[5] We need to understand “believing without sufficient evidence” as adopting a belief without sufficient evidence. If one’s evidence concerning one of his beliefs changes after he adopts it, he may have that belief without sufficient evidence for its truth while at the same time remain faithful to the subjective epistemic duty to engage in proper epistemic deliberation regarding every candidate for belief that is neither clearly true nor clearly false. However, no one can adopt a belief without sufficient evidence and at the same time remain faithful to the subjective epistemic duty to engage in proper epistemic deliberation.

[6] Notice that, if Jones non-culpably believed that he had no moral obligation to assist his mother (he just checked on her a week ago and she appeared to be doing fine then,) then he would not be blameworthy for his failure to do his objective moral duty.

In this dissertation I employ a distinction between objective and subjective duty to resolve several apparent conflicts regarding epistemic and moral duties regarding intellectual conduct. It is one's objective duty to do what he really ought to do; and it is one's subjective duty to do what she would be blameworthy for not doing and not to do what she would be blameworthy for doing. One such conflict arises because it seems that (i) we have an epistemic duty to disregard evidence against propositions that we know to be true, but (ii) we have an epistemic duty not to disregard evidence of any sort. On one Jamesian proposal it is one's objective epistemic duty, for every proposition that she considers, to believe it if and only if it is true. I suggest that, if that proposal is correct, then we may say that one has an enabling objective epistemic duty to disregard evidence against a proposition that he knows to be true whenever attending to that evidence would cause him to lose confidence in and cease to believe that proposition. Yet it seems that the fact that one disregards evidence is always a reason to epistemically blame him because, from one's perspective, attending to all evidence relevant to the truth of a proposition is the best chance he has at believing that proposition if and only if it is true.

Also, I argue that, if it is our objective epistemic duty, for every proposition that we consider, to believe it if and only if it is true, then given the traditional account of what counts as sufficient evidence the proposal that it is our *prima facie* subjective epistemic duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence is too strict. On the weakest version of the traditional account of what counts as sufficient evidence one has sufficient evidence for a proposition if and only if his evidence for *that*

*proposition* outweighs his evidence for its negation. Jamesian examples seem to show that, whenever her evidence for a proposition, *p*, and its negation are counterbalanced and whenever one's evidence for the proposition that, if she believes that *p*, her believing *p* will make *p* true is sufficiently strong, the fact that one believes *p* without sufficient evidence is no reason whatsoever to epistemically blame him.

However, I believe that the presumption that every believing without sufficient evidence has a poor non-derivative moral status-making quality can be defended provided that we abandon the traditional account of what constitutes sufficient evidence in favor of one such that one's counterbalanced evidence or sufficiently high evidence for the proposition that, if he believes the proposition in question, his believing it will make it true counts as sufficient evidence for the proposition in question. I argue that (iii) the fact that one does something morally wrong or fails to do something morally right as a result of his failure to engage in proper epistemic deliberation is a moral reason (that may be overridden) to blame him. And, I argue, that (iii) seems to presuppose (iv) that the fact that one fails to engage in proper epistemic deliberation is itself a moral reason to blame him. Thus, it is our *prima facie* subjective moral duty to engage in proper epistemic deliberation. One may, through no fault of his own, fail to engage in proper deliberation; I think that in such a case the fact that she fails to engage in proper epistemic deliberation is a moral reason to blame her but the fact that her failure is not due to any fault of her own is an overriding reason not to blame her. Whenever one fails, through no fault of her own, to engage in proper epistemic deliberation, we may say that it was her duty to engage in proper

epistemic deliberation but she is excused from not doing her duty on the grounds that the failure was not due to any fault of her own.

Since proper epistemic deliberation always yields the correct result and the result of proper epistemic deliberation always dictates belief, one may adopt a belief without sufficient evidence, only if she does not engage in proper epistemic deliberation. Thus, the fact that one believes a proposition without sufficient evidence is a reason (that may be overridden) to morally blame her. Thus, it is our *prima facie* subjective moral duty not to believe a proposition without sufficient evidence. One may be excused from or justified for not doing this duty; but it remains his duty nonetheless.

### Bibliography

- Alston, William. *Epistemic Justification*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1989.
- Chisholm, Roderick. "Lewis' Ethics of Belief." *The Philosophy of C. I. Lewis*. Paul Schlipp ed. LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1968.
- . *Theory of Knowledge*, third ed. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989.
- Clifford, W. K. *Lectures and Essays*, second ed. London, 1886.
- Feldman, Richard. "Epistemic Obligations." *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2 *Epistemology*. James Tomberlin. Atascadero, CA: Ridgeview, 1988.
- . "Subjective and Objective Justification in Ethics and Epistemology." *Monist* 71.
- Firth, Roderick. "Are Epistemic Concepts Reducible to Ethical Concepts." *Values and Morals*. A. I. Goldman and J. Kim eds. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1978.
- Harman, Gilbert. *Thought*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973.
- James, William. *"The Will to Believe" and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York, 1897.
- Kupfer, Joseph. "The Moral Presumption Against Lying." *Review of Metaphysics* 36.
- Meiland, Jack. "What We Ought to Believe, or the Ethics of Belief Revisited." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 17.
- Mill, John Stuart. *Utilitarianism, Liberty, and Representative Government*. New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., 1910.

Plantinga, Alvin. *Warrant: the Current Debate*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993.

Pojman, Louis. "Believing, Willing, and the Ethics of Belief." *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1993.

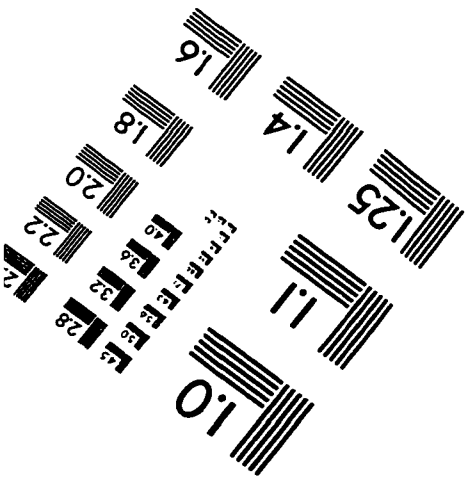
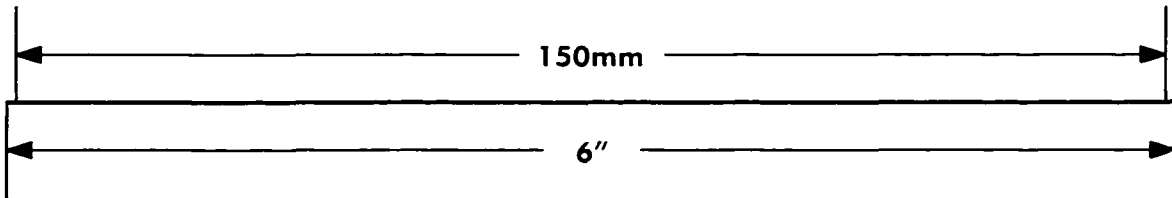
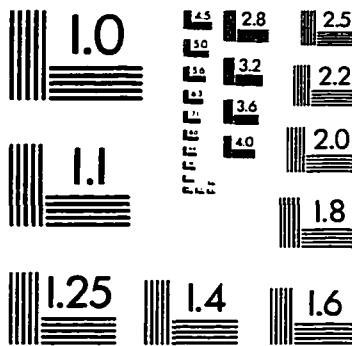
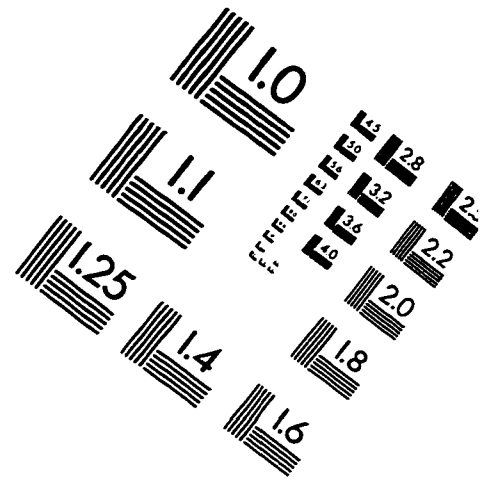
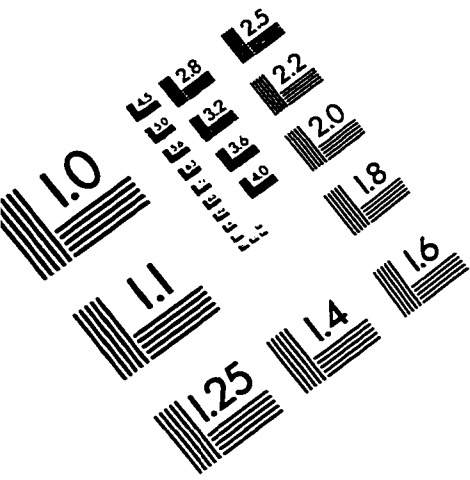
Price, H. H. *Belief*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1967.

---. "Belief and Will." *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 28*. 1-22.

Wiles, Anne. "Lying: Its Inconstant Value." *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 26.

Williams, Bernard. *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1972.

# IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)



APPLIED IMAGE, Inc.  
1653 East Main Street  
Rochester, NY 14609 USA  
Phone: 716/482-0300  
Fax: 716/288-5989

© 1993, Applied Image, Inc., All Rights Reserved

