

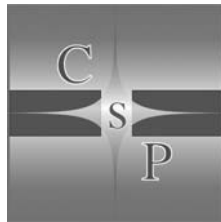
## W. K. Clifford and “The Ethics of Belief”



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by

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# INTRODUCTION

William Kingdon Clifford's essay "The Ethics of Belief" was originally delivered on April 11, 1876, to the learned debate organization the Metaphysical Society. It has never since ceased to be a focal point of discussion for individuals interested in the overlap between the fields of epistemology and ethics.

The following study will examine "The Ethics of Belief" and its continuing relevance to epistemological and ethical discussions. First, the essay will be placed in its historical context, focusing on the origins of the "ethics of belief" discussion in the English empirical tradition. The so-called Victorian Crisis of Faith, and the origins of the Metaphysical Society, will also be discussed. Secondly, the life and philosophical teachings of W. K. Clifford himself will be summarized. Third, a detailed analysis of his essay "The Ethics of Belief" will be given. The fourth chapter will present a representative perspective on the ways in which several of Clifford's contemporaries responded to its chief points. The ways in which modern-day philosophers have continued to refer to, and critique, Clifford's evidentialism will then be examined in chapter five. Finally, chapter six will present a defense of "The Ethics of Belief" from a virtue-theory approach which utilizes an "as if" methodology to encourage intellectual inquiry and communal harmony. A synopsis of each chapter follows.

## **Chapter One: The Ethics of Belief and the Victorian Crisis of Faith**

The first part of this chapter will focus on the influences of Locke, Hume, and Mill on "the Ethics of Belief" debate in general, and on Clifford in particular.

The so-called Victorian Crisis of Faith will be discussed in the second part of this chapter. Clifford most definitely underwent such a crisis. The Metaphysical Society, which he joined as an active participant, was founded in 1869 by Sir James Knowles because of his concern that a growing sense of disbelief among the educated elite would have a deleterious impact on the morals of general society. Most of the members

of the Society, whatever their personal metaphysical views, shared this concern, and the discussions tended to address the main challenges to traditional beliefs found in physics, biology, mathematics, and logic. It is within such a context that Clifford presented his talk “The Ethics of Belief”.

## **Chapter Two: W. K. Clifford: Life and Philosophy**

This chapter will trace Clifford's intellectual development. He shared many of the virtues of the Victorian era: a strong sense of duty, a melioristic attitude, and an emphasis on hard work.

Clifford was one of the first persons to discuss the ethical implications of Darwin's work, and as a mathematician he was among the first to appreciate the work being done by Lobachevski and Riemann in non-Euclidean geometry. He was also impressed by the systematic philosophy of Herbert Spencer, although he found it to be overly speculative. It was Clifford's expressed desire to develop a new system of ethics, combining the exactness of utilitarianism with the evolutionary perspective of Darwinism. He had hoped to arrange all of his ethical writings in a systematic treatise, but unfortunately he died before completing this project. His friends Leslie Stephen and Frederick Pollock arranged for the posthumous publication of his various lectures and essays, including “The Ethics of Belief”. A knowledge of Clifford's other writings offers a better understanding of “The Ethics of Belief”. Like that essay, most of these were originally delivered as public lectures, or published in learned journals meant to reach a nonacademic audience. They demonstrate his urgent desire to promulgate an ethics that is in harmony with the latest scientific findings of his time.

The influence which Clifford had on such areas as mathematics, psychology, and the social sciences in general will also be examined, to show the connection all of these had with his philosophical writings, most particularly “The Ethics of Belief”.

## **Chapter Three: An Analysis of “The Ethics of Belief”**

Clifford begins his essay with a description of a shipowner who allows a vessel which was badly in need of repairs to go out to sea. He dismisses from his mind any doubts as to the ship's seaworthiness. The ship, laden with passengers, goes down in mid-ocean, killing all aboard. Clifford holds that the owner is culpable for their deaths, because he had no right

to believe on such evidence as was before him that the ship could make the journey. He adds that even if the ship *had* made it safely to shore, the owner would still be guilty. This might lead one to assume that Clifford's argument for evidentialism is essentially deontological—one has a duty to apportion one's belief to the evidence, regardless of the consequences. However, later in the essay, he pursues a more teleological line of argument. He declares that believing is not a private matter. Believing for unworthy reasons not only weakens a person's powers of self-control, it also adversely affects one's community of inquirers. If this were to continue, then humankind itself would sink back into savagery.

Another element explored is the religious language of the essay. This is not wholly ironic. Clifford recognized that such language would resonate with his readers, most of whom had been raised in religious environments. In a sense, he sought to use traditional language as a means of getting people to accept untraditional, even iconoclastic, ideas.

## **Chapter Four: Clifford's Contemporary Critics**

This chapter will summarize the immediate reaction to “The Ethics of Belief” from such Metaphysical Society members as R. H. Hutton, T. H. Huxley, Leslie Stephen and W. G. Ward, and from nonmembers such as Matthew Arnold. The views toward “The Ethics of Belief” of two great philosophical contemporaries—William James and Charles S. Peirce—will then be examined in detail.

Although they were unaware of each other's writings, there are many similarities between the writings of Clifford and Friedrich Nietzsche. These will be looked at in the following section.

Karl Pearson was Clifford's successor as professor of applied mathematics at University College, London, and was in many ways his intellectual successor. This chapter will discuss how Pearson was influenced by and contributed to Clifford's writings.

The final figure to be discussed was not technically a contemporary of Clifford's, for he was only seven years old at the time of Clifford's death. Nonetheless, he shared many of his values, and Clifford was an influence on his own decision to become a mathematician and philosopher. Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) can be considered to be last Victorian. He continued to espouse a Cliffordian ethical view well into the twentieth century.

## Chapter Five: Clifford's Modern Critics

A brief overview will be given of the ways in which such modern figures as C. S. Lewis, Walter Kaufmann, J. L. Mackie, and Richard Double have continued to explore the Clifford/James debate.

In recent years, the focus of attention has tended to shift to Clifford's epistemic views. The second part of this chapter will therefore examine how this has been addressed by such philosophers as Michael Martin, Peter van Inwagen, and Alvin Plantinga.

Other philosophers have addressed Clifford's ethical views. A brief examination of the writings of Richard Gale and Richard Rorty on this aspect of Clifford will follow.

This chapter will end with a look at three philosophers who have examined the interconnection between Clifford's epistemic and ethical arguments: Susan Haack, Anthony Quinton, and Lorraine Code.

## Chapter Six: The Virtues of "The Ethics of Belief"

In the final chapter, I will discuss my own views on the relevance of Clifford's "Ethics of Belief", and attempt to defend it from a virtue ethics perspective. The concluding chapter will propose that Clifford's own ethics of belief can be viewed as an "as if" position for moral betterment and epistemic perfection.

I will argue that Clifford's evidentialism is a type of creative fiction. Even if Clifford did not actually believe that all people, regardless of their station, could live up to the ideal he set, he felt that by *assuming* they could do so one showed them respect, and could help to motivate them to fulfill whatever intellectual capacities they did in fact possess. Clifford, particularly in his discussions of metaphysics, was willing to use an "as if" approach when it came to issues like the uniformity of nature, and it is not inconsistent to think that this approach could also pertain to his ethical writings.

The "as if" attitude can best explain why "The Ethics of Belief" is still relevant, and still worth discussing, even if its ethical and epistemological assumptions are no longer tenable. Such an approach is in accord with a virtue ethics. Clifford not only hoped to combat the growth of nihilism which he felt might spring from the growing dissatisfaction with theologically grounded ethics, but also welcomed the challenge. He hoped to foster a new, more scientifically grounded ethics which could unify all humankind. Without taking this aspiration into account, it is difficult to

understand what Clifford was attempting to achieve in "The Ethics of Belief".





# CHAPTER ONE

## THE ETHICS OF BELIEF AND THE VICTORIAN CRISIS OF FAITH

### I. Introduction

“It is wrong always, everywhere, and for any one, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote William Kingdon Clifford (1845-1879) in his 1876 essay, “The Ethics of Belief”. Clifford was 31 years old when he delivered his lecture to the exclusive debating group called the Metaphysical Society, the members of which met in London nine times a year to discuss issues pertaining to philosophical ideas and religious beliefs. He was at the time Professor of Applied Mathematics at University College, London.

Clifford, who found attending the Society's meetings and participating in its often heated discussions to be one of the chief pleasures of his life, delivered a total of three papers before the Society, whose members included such notables as future English Prime Minister Arthur James Balfour, current English Prime Minister William Gladstone, biologist Thomas Henry Huxley, theologian F. D. Maurice, Catholic Archbishop Henry Edward Manning and Alfred Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate. But it is “The Ethics of Belief” which generated the most controversy of all his three talks, and it remains his best-known work. Even today, the essay is often reprinted in philosophy of religion and introduction to philosophy textbooks.

Unfortunately, such textbooks give little if any background information on Clifford which would help to enlighten the reader as to why he might have held such a strong position regarding the duty to apportion one's beliefs to sufficient evidence. Clifford's position is, at times, set up as a "straw man" argument. For instance, Richard Gale writes: “. . . Clifford

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<sup>1</sup> W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief” in *Lectures and Essays, Vol. II.* (London: Macmillan, 1879), 186.

has greatly exaggerated the deleterious consequences of allowing ourselves even a single epistemically unwarranted belief, however trivial and disconnected from the workaday world.”<sup>2</sup> Anthologies which reprint “The Ethics of Belief” quite often couple it with William James’ “The Will to Believe” (1897), which was written in part to respond to (using James’ own description of him) Clifford’s ‘robustious” evidentialism.

And yet, this “*enfant terrible*”, as James affectionately referred to him, still has relevance to the present day. Even those who strongly disagree with his epistemological views often express admiration for him. In his 1996 book *Metaphilosophy and Free Will*, the philosopher Richard Double writes: “For me, the persona of W. K. Clifford I derived from reading ‘The Ethics of Belief’ was very moving, although I think Clifford’s argument is hyperbolic and philosophically weak.”<sup>3</sup> George Levine, Professor of English at Rutgers University, goes so far as to make allowances for Clifford’s hyperbole, and that of such other members of the Metaphysical Society as Thomas Huxley and Leslie Stephen, stating that “the naturalists’ pugnacity was not unreasonable in a society that was only slowly and reluctantly allowing them serious professional status . . .”<sup>4</sup> Intellectuals in those days were still expected to accept, and indeed to publicly profess belief in, the tenets of the Anglican faith if they expected to be gainfully employed in any academic position. Criticizing religious dogmas was not simply a matter of demonstrating one’s own personal convictions – it was also a political maneuver done in an attempt to get the Church to relinquish its hold on the scientific professions.

Placing “The Ethics of Belief”, then, in its historical context, and attempting to understand just what it was that the naturalists themselves were advocating, will help us to see why Clifford engaged in such hyperbole, and why a distinguished mathematician and logician made assertions which he himself must have known to be exaggerations.

In his own study of the Victorian time period, the Swedish intellectual historian Stefan Andersson asserts: “Although Clifford is briefly discussed in studies on agnosticism and histories of mathematics, no monographs, as far as I have been able to find out, have been written about him as a critic

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Gale, *On the Nature and Existence of God* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 356.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Double, *Metaphilosophy and Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 54.

<sup>4</sup> George Levine, “Scientific Discourse as an Alternative to Faith” in *Victorian Faith in Crisis*, edited by Richard J. Helmstadter and Bernard Lightman (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1990), 231.

of religion and ethics, as a philosopher of science and as a mathematician.”<sup>5</sup> It is interesting to note that, like many of his fellow Victorians, Clifford engaged in numerous personal activities, all done to enlighten his fellow citizens to the many exciting intellectual revolutions occurring in such fields as biblical history, biology, geometry, and politics (Clifford, for instance, was an ardent admirer of the Italian revolutionary Giuseppe Mazzini, who helped to unify the Italian states by challenging the temporal holdings of the Catholic Church). He was somehow able to balance his meticulous work in mathematics with an almost full-time career as a polemicist against what he felt to be the pernicious influence of sloppy thinking.

## II. The Roots of the Victorian Crisis of Faith

To best grasp why such a careful scholar as Clifford would deliver such a pugnacious address as “The Ethics of Belief”, one needs to place him within the context of his time. One of the reasons Clifford's essay had such power is due to its use of biblical and religious language—for instance, his assertion that to purposefully avoid examining one's beliefs constitutes one long “sin” against humankind. It seems rather strange that a forthright opponent of organized religion in general, and Christianity in particular, would use such terminology. However, if one looks at the audience to whom he was addressing “The Ethics of Belief”, this becomes less paradoxical. “The Ethics of Belief” is in many ways a secular sermon, delivered to exhort individuals to live up to their highest epistemic abilities. It was Clifford's fear that a growing societal dissatisfaction with traditional theological arguments might lead to increasing laxity toward ethical obligations. This was a fear he shared with most of the members of the Metaphysical Society, who—regardless of their own worldviews—all tended to have experienced what has been called the Victorian Crisis of Faith. This was a growing feeling that the tried-and-true teachings of the Anglican religion, or indeed of any Christian religion, were no longer relevant to the contemporary world. There was a sense that the scientific perspective and traditional religious faith were becoming increasingly incompatible. Such a rift might well have consequences for the moral realm. How were people to live if they were no longer satisfied with the teachings of religion? What, if anything, could replace such time-honored views?

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<sup>5</sup> Stefan Andersson, *In Quest of Certainty* (Stockholm, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1994), 33.

Although these questions became of prime interest during the Victorian period, they were by no means new. They can in fact be traced to the earlier period of the English Civil War (1640-1660), when religious differences had great political repercussions. John Locke (1632-1704) was the first philosopher to issue what might be called an “evidentialist” challenge to religious believers, although as Nicholas Wolterstorff rightly points out, he did so “as a Christian who thought that he could meet the challenge.”<sup>6</sup> Locke was critical of those he called *enthusiasts*—individuals who claimed to have received private revelations from God but who could offer no evidence other than their own claims to support these. He was not only troubled by the seeming irrationality of such claims; he also held that enthusiasm in this regard was anti-social. “Who can reasonably expect arguments and conviction from him in dealing with others,” Locke wrote, “whose understanding is not accustomed to them in his dealing with himself?”<sup>7</sup> Locke held that only religious beliefs that could be supported by evidence were worthy of being held. He was confident that the doctrines of Christianity could be so supported—a view which Clifford would later strongly oppose.

Gerald McCarthy, in his introduction to the 1986 book *The Ethics of Belief Debate*, writes that a prime motivator in this quest for intellectual integrity was the new research program inaugurated by Francis Bacon in works such as *The Great Instauration*, the *Novum Organon*, and *The Advancement of Learning*. These books argued that human intellectual progress had been stymied for centuries by adherence to superstition, bad reasoning, and credulity. Experimental logic, properly used, would free the mind from its shackles and bring about an era of unprecedented progress. In this program, McCarthy argues, one can see the roots of the cognitive-ethical formula (namely, intellectual error begets moral evil) which would find further development in Locke’s writings: “Such arguments for the connection between meliorism and scientific procedure recur frequently in the centuries that follow and . . . find their most explicit statement in Clifford’s essay [“The Ethics of Belief”].”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, “The Migration of the Theistic Arguments: From Natural Theology to Evidentialist Apologetics,” in *Rationality, Religious Belief, and Moral Commitment: New Essays in the Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Robert Audi and William J. Wainwright (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986), 39.

<sup>7</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), 698.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Another factor motivating Locke was the savage religious conflict which had followed from the Protestant Reformation, splitting most of Europe into warring camps. The rise of religious sects basing their beliefs primarily upon the fervency of their emotions was particularly evident in England after its Civil War. Locke was interested in finding a means to bind people together rather than seeing them further divide due to baseless enthusiasms.

“Thus,” McCarthy writes, “Locke’s attack on ‘Enthusiasm’ in the course of which he formulated the description of the ‘lover of truth’ that was to be so influential in the subsequent discussion of the ‘Ethics of Belief’ was not motivated exclusively by epistemological concerns.”<sup>9</sup>

One key issue which arose in this discussion was whether or not it is possible to actually choose one’s beliefs, or alter them at will. Unlike Locke, David Hume (1711-1776) raised serious questions about humans’ ability to actually control their own beliefs. Most people, he argued, simply accept what they are told without much examination of whether these views can be supported by objective evidence. It is only a tiny minority which can even evaluate the reasonableness of such beliefs, let alone consciously alter them. Locke had given the following definition of belief: “The admitting or receiving [of] any proposition for true, upon arguments or proofs that are found to persuade us to receive it as true, without certain knowledge that it is so” (*Essay*, IV, xv, 3). John Passmore, in his 1976 essay “Hume and the Ethics of Belief”, writes:

Hume would object to this definition on three grounds: the first, that vague phrases like ‘the admitting’, ‘the receiving’ conceal the fact that we are not told in what *believing* consists as a psychological phenomenon; the second, that to define belief as admitting or receiving a proposition as true upon *arguments* or *proofs* wrongly suggests that our beliefs are all of them the conclusions of arguments; the third, that the phrase ‘admitting or receiving’—‘receiving’ has here the same force as in ‘the Ambassador received the guests’—makes it appear that we believe as we do only after scrutiny, whereas in fact our beliefs are automatic responses to particular forms of experience.<sup>10</sup>

But Hume also had his own “ethics of belief.” He made a distinction between the vulgar masses, who in general do not examine their beliefs,

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 8.

<sup>10</sup> John A. Passmore, “Hume and the Ethics of Belief” in *David Hume—Bicentenary Papers*, edited by G. Morice (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977), 89.

and the wise, who as a result of experience have formed the habit of developing their critical faculties. Clifford would make no such distinction. For him, the duty to examine one's beliefs is the same for the intellectual in the ivory tower as it is for the simple tradesman drinking a beer in the alehouse. "No simplicity of mind," he was to write in "The Ethics of Belief", "no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe."<sup>11</sup> McCarthy notes that: "Interestingly, Hume's arguments influenced both sides of the 'Ethics of Belief' debate" in Victorian England.<sup>12</sup>

### III. Mill

In his book *A History of Atheism in Great Britain*, David Berman claims that it was John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) who could be said to "inaugurate the ethics of belief—a merging of logic and morality."<sup>13</sup> Mill had argued that the onus of proof had passed from the unbeliever to the believer regarding the truths of religion. While Clifford shared this aspect of Mill's philosophy, he would nonetheless disagree with Mill's further assertion, in the latter's posthumously published *Three Essays on Religion*, that from the standpoint of rationality, the belief in an eternal life and the belief that there is no eternal life are on the same level, since each lacks sufficient evidence. Indeed, D. C. Somervell, in *English Thought in the Nineteenth Century*, writes the following about Mill's *Three Essays on Religion*:

. . . when they were posthumously published they met with much disapproval among most of those who had accounted themselves his disciples; and indeed it is not hard to imagine what Bentham and James Mill would have thought of them. Not only does the apostle of rationalism recognize the "Utility of Religion" but he holds in the last essay (though not in its predecessor) that the best religion is one involving a Personal God.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, Mill argued that a hopeful disposition—believing something when there is insufficient evidence either for it or against it—

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<sup>11</sup> Clifford, *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>12</sup> McCarthy, 12.

<sup>13</sup> David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Routledge, 1988), 235.

<sup>14</sup> D. C. Somervell, *English Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: David McKay Company, 1965), 97.

can have a positive effect upon one's life. These were issues that William James would return to, in his own criticism of Clifford's ethics of belief.

Yet Somervell also points out the tremendous *personal* influence which Mill had on the times. "He did as much as any freethinker to persuade simple-minded religious people that it is possible to be both an atheist and a good man, and he did this more by his life than by his writings."<sup>15</sup> In his autobiography (which was also published posthumously), Mill described his unique upbringing. His father James Mill, a friend of the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham, decided to educate his son as soon after birth as possible, and to prepare him to become a public servant. Mill was raised without any indoctrination in religious belief, writing that "I looked upon the modern exactly as I did upon the ancient religion, as something which in no way concerned me."<sup>16</sup> Mill argued that those without religion had a moral obligation to make known the irrational bases of such religious beliefs:

On religion in particular the time appears to me to have come, when it is the duty of all who being qualified in point of knowledge, have on mature consideration satisfied themselves that the current opinions are not only false but hurtful, to make their dissent known; at least, if they are among those whose station, or reputation, gives their opinion a chance of being attended to. Such an avowal would put an end, at once and for ever, to the vulgar prejudice, that what is called, very improperly, unbelief, is connected with any bad qualities either of mind or heart. The world would be astonished if it knew how great a proportion of its brightest ornaments—of those most distinguished even in popular estimation for wisdom and virtue—are compete sceptics in religion; many of them refraining from avowal, less from personal considerations, than from a conscientious, though now in my opinion a most mistaken apprehension lest by speaking out what would tend to weaken existing beliefs, and by consequence (as they suppose) existing restraints, they should do harm instead of good.<sup>17</sup>

In addition, Mill points out in his "Utility of Religion" (1874) that the very notion of religion having a pragmatic justification would not have even arisen if the arguments for its *truth* had not first been found wanting. Utility is an inferior ground of defense, and for unbelievers in particular it means advocating a well-meant hypocrisy. He calls this a kind of moral

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography*, edited by Jack Stillinger (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1969), 28.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

bribery, in which those who find the evidence for religious beliefs to be less than sufficient are urged to quiet their doubts so as to avoid doing irreparable damage to humankind. Mill wonders whether humankind might not be more damaged by such suppression of doubts—a theme which Clifford would explore in great detail in “The Ethics of Belief”.

Yet Mill allowed that religion could be morally useful even if intellectually unsustainable, and that to deny this would be itself a form of prejudice. It is here that he comes closest to the later arguments of William James and other advocates of the “Will to Believe”. Interestingly enough, Mill did not consider himself to be an atheist, and had qualms about those who made it their personal task to show the flaws in religious arguments in-and-of-themselves. He therefore distanced himself from the freethought community of his time, and such champions of aggressive agnosticism as Clifford.

Mill was a prominent figure in the so-called Victorian Crisis of Faith, although he was one of the few figures who did not personally seem to have experienced such a crisis. As Richard Taylor writes in his introduction to Mill's last work, *Theism* (1874):

John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) was virtually unique in his generation, and would be hardly less so in ours, in having passed to maturity with no deliberately inculcated religious influences, the remarkable education he received from his father simply omitting both religious and anti-religious instruction altogether. He thus, unlike many distinguished men of his day, never lost his religion, simply because he had none to lose, and he was able, in his writings, to view the Christianity of his contemporaries in much the same detached way in which we consider the religious and moral concepts of antiquity, with a disposition neither to defend nor to attack them, but simply to consider them on their own merits, in the light of such knowledge as we have from experience, science and philosophy, and without any pretensions to special revelations from the Almighty.<sup>18</sup>

It is this lack of deep feeling toward metaphysics of any sort which perhaps led to Mill's “a plague on both your houses” attitude toward religionists and freethinkers, and which led him to refuse membership in the Metaphysical Society upon its formation in 1869.

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Taylor, editor's introduction, John Stuart Mill, *Theism* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), vii.



#### IV. Evolution and the Crisis of Faith

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the most cherished Christian beliefs regarding the origin of humankind, the authenticity of the Bible, and the nature of God, had been called into question. As James C. Livingston writes in *The Ethics of Belief: An Essay on the Victorian Religious Conscience*: “The Victorian Era was an age of faith. It was also the time when that faith underwent a series of severe crises . . . The Victorian conscience was torn between two moral commitments: viz., to a scrupulous intellectual honesty and the demand for a forthright assent to the creeds and formularities of the Church of England.”<sup>19</sup> Clifford, as we shall see, most definitely underwent such a crisis of faith.

The certainties that had shored up the social, economic and political – as well as the religious—foundations of society were being called into question. In *The Victorian Frame of Mind*, Walter E. Houghton describes the radical changes that were occurring:

The fact is, while moral values were firm until about 1870, all intellectual theories, including those of morality, were insecure. . . . It was not only in religion that one faced a series of alternatives: is there a God or is there not, and if so, is he a person or an impersonal force? Is there a heaven and a hell? Or a heaven but no hell? or neither? If there *is* a true religion, is it Theism or Christianity? And what is Christianity? Roman Catholicism or Protestantism? Is it Church or Chapel? High Church? Broad Church? Low Church? Similar questions, if not so pressing or so widespread, invaded ethical theory and the conception of man: have we free-will or are we human automatons? And if we have the power of moral choice, what is its basis? A God-given voice of conscience? Or a rational calculation deciding which of two actions will promote the greatest happiness of the greatest number? Is man a man or simply a higher ape?<sup>20</sup>

Houghton adds: “Most of the time the Victorian mind contained beliefs and not doubts – but the beliefs were shaky. What *is* constantly present . . . is the fear or suspicion, or simply the vague uneasy feeling, that one was not sure he believed what he believed.”<sup>21</sup>

The Victorian Crisis of Faith involved more than just personal struggles of conscience. There was also a struggle to reform the existing

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<sup>19</sup> James C. Livingston, *The Ethics of Belief: An Essay on the Victorian Religious Conscience* (Tallahassee, Florida: American Academy of Religion, 1974), 1.

<sup>20</sup> Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 11-12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

educational institutions. One of the most active in this movement was Thomas Huxley (1825-1895). As Frank Miller Turner writes in *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England*, Huxley had boasted of “a New Nature created by science”, which needed to be defended against those who continued to interpret the natural world in a theistic framework. In Turner’s words:

Huxley and others believed the New Nature and the scientific theories associated with it sufficient for the expression, explanation, and guidance of human life. A wholly secular culture seemed altogether possible. Nevertheless, Huxley realized that before the complete physical and moral benefits of the New Nature could be enjoyed, two tasks must be accomplished. First, the ordinary Englishman must be persuaded to look toward rational, scientific, and secular ideas to solve his problems and to interpret his experiences rather than toward Christian, metaphysical, or other prescientific modes of thought. Second, scientifically trained and scientifically oriented men must supplant clergymen and Christian laymen as educators and leaders of English culture.<sup>22</sup>

The defense of the scientific endeavor had become a sort of crusade. Houghton writes: “Perhaps the most important development in nineteenth-century intellectual history was the extension of scientific assumptions and methods from the physical world to the whole life of man.”<sup>23</sup> Nowhere was this more evident than in the heated debates arising from the contemporary writings of Charles Darwin (1809-1882) on evolution, with Thomas Huxley and Ernst Haeckel being the most famous defenders of the scientific theory of organic evolution.

Darwin himself was careful to avoid getting into polemical debates over the implications of evolution, allowing Huxley and other defenders to take the field in his name. Darwin studiously avoided references to *human* evolution in his major work *On the Origin of Species* (1859), with the exception of a brief remark that “Much light will be shed on the nature of man and his history.”<sup>24</sup> He added references to God in the last four editions of the work, to counter the criticism that his scientific theory was irreligious. Huxley, though, was not loathe to draw out the meaning of

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<sup>22</sup> Frank Miller Turner, *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 9.

<sup>23</sup> Houghton, 33.

<sup>24</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species*, sixth and final edition of 1872 (New York: Modern Library, 1936), 373.

evolution for the human species, addressing this in countless public lectures and his own work *Evidence as to Man's Place in Nature* (1863).

In 1871, Darwin published his *The Descent of Man*, which did directly address the role that evolution had played in the origin and history of the human species. Of particular interest was his discussion of the role of morality in distinguishing our species from other members of the animal kingdom. Although the difference between the human animal and the ape is admittedly immense, he even speculated that the moral sense was not necessarily unique to humans:

The following proposition seems to me in a high degree probable—namely, that any animal whatever, endowed with well-marked social instincts, the parental and filial affections being here included, would inevitably acquire a moral sense or conscience, as soon as its intellectual powers had become as well, or nearly as well developed, as in man.<sup>25</sup>

Although he kept his views on religion to himself, it is clear from his posthumously published autobiography that Darwin had long ceased to be a believing Christian. He accepted the classification that Huxley would coin—“agnostic”. Darwin wrote: “The mystery of the beginning of all things is insoluble by us; and I for one must be content to remain an Agnostic.”<sup>26</sup> He remained content to let Huxley and other evolutionists draw out the metaphysical implications and theological ramifications of this all-important theory in science.

There was no denying that evolution had caused a great degree of excitement in the mid-Victorian era. In Houghton's words: “After Darwin had made the greatest ‘discovery’ of the period in 1859, the imagination of young liberals was fired by the vision of a life spent in contributing, no matter how little, to the great revelation of all knowledge.”<sup>27</sup> Concomitant with an understanding of the meaning of this theory for human society was a desire for the reconstruction of such society on a scientific and rational basis. Leaders of this movement, including Darwin's cousin Francis Galton, argued that the new knowledge meant a new ethical outlook. Houghton describes their aspirations thusly: “To improve the physical conditions of life, especially in the new towns, through the alliance of legislation and science, was to improve not only health but

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<sup>25</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man*, second edition, 1874 (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), 101.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1969), 48.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

moral habits as well.”<sup>28</sup> Yet to do so, it would be necessary to directly challenge the moral authority, as well as the political and social powers, of the dominant religious institutions.

## V. The Metaphysical Society

During the Victorian era, many religious leaders and intellectuals became concerned that a growing sense of disbelief among the educated elite would have a deleterious impact on the morals of general society. One such individual was the influential editor of the *Contemporary Review*, James Knowles. In the autumn of 1868, he had as dinner guests Alfred Lord Tennyson, the Poet Laureate, and the Reverend Charles Pritchard, the noted astronomer. During their discussion, the idea came to them to found a Theological Society, in which individuals interested in such topics could gather together to explore the issues. Knowles volunteered to found such a Society, with the provision that Tennyson and Pritchard would promise to belong to it. Although Tennyson was to later joke that Knowles could not differentiate a “concept” from a “hippopotamus”, he and Pritchard agreed to join.

Knowles was known for his organizing skills. He immediately contacted other notables with whom he was familiar, such as Archbishop Manning, the Reverend James Martineau, and his fellow editors, William Ward of the *Dublin Review* and R. H. Hutton of the *Spectator*, all of whom consented to become founding members. One of Knowles’ closest friends was the liberal theologian Arthur Stanley, Dean of Westminster, who not only became a member but helped to shape the structure of the Society, suggesting that it open the membership to those who were *opposed* to theology. As Alan Willard Brown describes it:

Dean Stanley was one of Knowles’s best friends and as one of the first to be asked was in a position to offer advice. To him and to his wife, Lady Augusta Stanley, the plan for a Theological Society seemed narrow and unwise. All that such a society could do would be to widen the breach between the religious and scientific points of view. *Rapprochement*, Stanley felt, would help more than organized resistance. Martineau, too, refused to join a society of believers to fight unbelievers. Knowles himself, with his own theological uncertainty, his eclecticism of mind, his breadth of social and conversational sympathy, now found himself in hearty sympathy with Stanley’s attitude. All finally agreed, with an English love of fair play, that it was only just that their opponents be allowed to state

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

their case. So, apparently at the suggestion of Lady Augusta Stanley, the name of the Society was changed from “Theological” to “Metaphysical,” and plans were laid for a tactful ensnaring of the scientific and materialist opposition.<sup>29</sup>

Mill was invited to become a member, but begged off due to ill health. His lack of interest in metaphysics was another reason he remained aloof from the organization. Another much sought after potential member was Herbert Spencer (1820-1903). Even though the subject of the very first meeting was his own philosophical writings on ethics, Spencer, who was famous for his reclusiveness, never became a member. Nor did the prominent convert to Catholicism John Newman. But many other well-known figures of the time eagerly accepted the invitation to join.

Sir Frederick Pollock, who was elected to the Society near its end, had a long acquaintance with Knowles. In his autobiography, Pollock wrote that Knowles “did believe in the simplest good faith that if a number of students of philosophy and natural science, representing every kind of school and opinion, could only be brought together to discuss the nature of things freely and at large on a neutral ground, the ultimate truth, or a sure cure to it, would somehow emerge.”<sup>30</sup> He went on to add: “The Metaphysical Society was the oddest mixture of philosophers and persons otherwise more or less eminent who did not even know where metaphysics began, and did not understand the most elementary philosophical terms.”<sup>31</sup>

The best capsule description of the Society comes from Alan Willard Brown:

There is little question that the Metaphysical Society attracted the most distinguished and representative Englishmen of the seventies, with the exception of Matthew Arnold, G. H. Lewes, and the aged Carlyle, besides Browning, Mill, Newman, Spencer, and Bain, who were asked but refused to join. There were statesmen: Gladstone, Robert Lowe, Lord Selborne, and the Duke of Argyll; powerful ecclesiastical figures: Archbishop Manning, Thomson, Archbishop of York, and Magee, Bishop of Peterborough; politicians and men of the world: Grant Duff and Lord Arthur Russell; lawyers: Fitzjames Stephen and Frederick Pollock. There were others whose primary concern was with the life of the heart and the

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<sup>29</sup> Alan Willard Brown, *The Metaphysical Society: Victorian Minds in Crisis, 1869-1880* (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), 21-22.

<sup>30</sup> Frederick Pollock, *Remembrances of an Ancient Victorian* (London: John Murray, 1933), 93.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

intellect; theologians: Martineau, Maurice, Mozley, Ward, and Dalgairns; scholars: Bishop Ellicott and F. Gasquet; professional philosophers: Sidgwick, A. C. Fraser, Hodgson, and C. B. Upton; amateur philosophers and philosophical critics: James Hinton, Roden Noel, Matthew Boulton, Balfour, and Barratt. There were historians: Thirlwall, Froude, Seeley, Stanley, Church, Grove, and Pattison; important editors and critics; R. H. Hutton, Alford, Leslie Stephen, Morley, Knowles, Bagehot, W. R. Greg, Frederic Harrison, and Ruskin. There were great physiologists: W. B. Carpenter, Huxley, and Mivart, as well as the latter's friend Robert Clarke; an astronomer, Pritchard; a physicist, Tyndall; an anthropologist, Lubbock. There were the psychologists G. Croom Robinson and James Sully; a famous mathematician, Sylvester; and a philosophical mathematician, Clifford. There were academic leaders from great universities: Alfred Barry, E. Lushington, Sir Alexander Grant. And there were the distinguished representatives of the profession of medicine: Dr. Henry Acland, Dr. J. C. Bucknill, Sir William Gull, and Dr. Andrew Clark. And aloof from them all, symbolizing the virtues as well as the weaknesses of that brilliant and tortured age, Tennyson, the Poet Laureate.<sup>32</sup>

It was indeed a unique collection of individuals, but it would be wrong to say, as Pollock did, that none of the members were learned in metaphysics. Indeed, several were professional theologians, and even the professional scientists involved had either written or lectured on speculative topics pertaining to the origins of the universe and the place of humankind within it.

Perhaps the two members who were most active, as well as most opinionated, throughout the Society's history were the agnostic Huxley and the ultra-conservative Catholic W. G. Ward. Their differences were expressed at one of the earliest of the Society's meetings. Houston Peterson, in his biography of Huxley, gives the following amusing anecdote, which nicely captures the sharp differences as well as the mutual respect the members had for one another:

Someone had suggested that all moral approbation should be avoided during the debates and Ward interrupted: "While acquiescing in this condition as a general rule, I think it cannot be expected that Christian thinkers should give no sign of the horror with which they would view the spread of such extreme opinions as those advocated by Mr. Huxley." Thereupon Huxley retorted: "As Dr. Ward has spoken, I must in fairness say that it will be very difficult for me to conceal my feeling as to the intellectual degradation which would come of the general acceptance of such views as Dr. Ward holds." Henceforward, Ward and Huxley clashed

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<sup>32</sup> Brown, 165-166.