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## Clifford and the Common Epistemic Norm

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**Abstract** This paper develops a “Cliffordian” argument for a common epistemic norm governing belief, action, and assertion. The idea is that beliefs are the sorts of things that lead to actions and assertions. What each of us believes influences what we act on and assert, and in turn influences what those around us believe, act on, and assert. Belief, action, and assertion should be held to a common epistemic norm because, otherwise, this system will become contaminated.

The paper finishes by drawing out the relativistic implications of the Cliffordian argument.

### 0. Introductory Remarks

Many epistemologists think belief, action, and assertion are governed by epistemic norms. I will take these norms to have the following form (where  $p$  is some proposition and “E”, “E\*” and “E\*\*” are epistemic conditions such as knowing  $p$ , having warrant for  $p$ , or  $p$  being true):

BELIEF NORM: One should believe  $p$  iff E.

ACTION NORM: One should act on  $p$  iff E\*.

ASSERTION NORM: One should assert  $p$  iff E\*\*.<sup>1</sup>

Before continuing, a quick word about these norms. These norms tell us that, epistemically speaking, we should believe, act, and assert just in case certain epistemic conditions are met. They do not tell us that, all things considered, we should believe, act, and assert just in case those conditions are met. I may be certain that the fugitive is in the cupboard, but if the enemy asks me where the fugitive is, I should not assert that she is in the cupboard. What to do when epistemic and moral requirements clash is an interesting question, but it does not concern me here.

There is intense debate about what the relevant epistemic conditions are. Some have suggested knowledge (Williamson 2000, chap. 9-11; 2005). Others have suggested warrant (Gerken 2011; 2012), justification (Fantl and McGrath 2009) or justification for believing one knows (Smithies 2012).<sup>2</sup> In this paper I abstract away from this debate and focus on what unites these disparate views, namely, the idea that the epistemic conditions for believing, acting, and asserting coincide. I’m going to defend the conjunction of two theses:

BELIEF-ACTION: One should believe  $p$  iff one should act on  $p$ . (So  $E=E^*$ ).

BELIEF-ASSERTION: One should believe  $p$  iff one should assert  $p$ . (So  $E=E^{**}$ ).

I'll call the conjunction of these two theses "strong equivalence commonality" (SEC for short).<sup>3</sup>

While a number of authors defend norms of belief, action, and assertion that require either one or both of BELIEF-ACTION and BELIEF-ASSERTION (see references above), both have recently come under attack (Gerken 2012, 2014; Brown 2012).<sup>4</sup> In this paper I offer what I call a "Cliffordian" argument for SEC. I call the argument Cliffordian because it utilizes a number of insights from W.K. Clifford's 1876 essay "The Ethics of Belief".<sup>5</sup> While the argument has been suggested in the literature (in particular, by McKinnon 2012, pp. 568-569) it hasn't been worked out in detail. The basic thought is this. What I believe influences what propositions I act on and assert, and in turn influences what propositions those around me believe, act on, and assert. If we don't hold belief, action, and assertion to the same epistemic condition this system will become contaminated, and disaster may well result. Consequently, we need to hold belief, action, and assertion to the same epistemic condition.

Here is the plan. I start by showing how an argument for SEC can be built around two insights from Clifford's essay (section one). However, I show that the argument faces two serious objections (section two). I then show how to run a better argument, based on the same two insights (section three). I finish with an upshot for the debate about the epistemic norms of belief, action, and assertion (section four).

## 1. The Cliffordian Argument

In his essay Clifford argues for a rather strict ethics of belief, which is nicely captured in his famous dictum:

CLIFFORD'S DICTUM: It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence (p. 295).

While it doesn't strictly follow from his dictum, it is reasonable to assume that Clifford also thinks it is right to believe something just in case one has sufficient evidence. The dictum and this corollary tell us that beliefs, like actions, can be evaluated with respect to normative standards. In the terms used in the introduction, one should believe some proposition  $p$  iff one satisfies some epistemic condition  $E$ , namely, having sufficient evidence. Defending Clifford's dictum requires specifying what the condition  $E$  is. But my aim here is to develop an argument

for SEC that utilizes insights from Clifford's essay. Because SEC is neutral as to what E is, I stay neutral on this too (but see the end of section three). In the rest of this section I will construct an argument for SEC based on two insights from Clifford's essay. While I will provide motivation for the premises of the argument, my aim here is primarily to spell it out. I discuss and deal with objections in sections two and three.

The first insight is that there are close ties between belief, action, and assertion:

No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may someday explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character forever (p. 292).

The idea is that beliefs are the sorts of things that influence actions and assertions. As Clifford puts it, they "lay a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts" until they "explode into overt action". Say I believe trains leave the station on the hour every hour. That belief may one day lead to action, for example going to the station at 2:50 p.m. to catch the next train, and assertion, for example telling my friend to go to the station at 2:50 p.m. to catch the next train. To this claim we can add that assertions are the sorts of things that influence actions and beliefs. If I tell my friend to go to the station at 2:50 p.m. to catch the next train, she may well come to believe that the train leaves a little after 2:50 p.m., and she may act on this basis. Thus, our beliefs, actions, and assertions form an interconnected system.

Clifford continues:

And no one man's belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone ... Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property, fashioned and perfected from age to age; an heirloom which every succeeding generation inherits as a precious deposit and a sacred trust to be handled on to the next one, not unchanged but enlarged and purified, with some clear marks of its proper handiwork. Into this, for good or ill, is woven every belief of every man who has speech of his fellows. An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live (p. 292).

Because our beliefs are part of this interconnected system, they are public properties. We can think of the system as producing a common store of information on which all can draw in deciding what to believe, assert, and act on. As Clifford emphasizes, we should all contribute

responsibly to this common store. This means that we should all ensure that our beliefs satisfy a certain epistemic condition.

Clifford's second insight is that the consequences of believing on insufficient evidence explain why we should not believe on insufficient evidence. He tells us the story of a ship owner who, despite knowing his ship wasn't in the best condition, decided not to make costly repairs and managed to convince himself that the ship would safely make it across the Atlantic (pp. 289-290).<sup>6</sup> He sold tickets for the journey, sent the ship on its way, and then quietly collected the insurance money when the ship sank. Clearly, this is a case where someone, quite wrongly, believed something (that the ship would make it safely across the Atlantic) on insufficient evidence. The reason why he was wrong to do so is that the consequences were disastrous.

Clifford goes on to urge that, if the ship had made it safely across, our verdict on the ship owner should be the same (p. 290). Whether the ship made it safely across or not, he still should not have believed on insufficient evidence. Further, Clifford also urges that, if the ship owner had never had the chance to act on his belief (e.g., he never planned the voyage), our verdict should still be the same (p. 291). Whether the ship owner acts on his belief or not, he should not have believed on insufficient evidence. This might make it look like Clifford denies that the consequences explain why it is wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. But this impression is mistaken.<sup>7</sup> Here's Clifford again:

[I]f I let myself believe anything on insufficient evidence, there may be no great harm done by the mere belief; it may be true after all, or I may never have occasion to exhibit it in outwards acts. But I cannot help doing this great wrong towards Man, that I make myself credulous. The danger to society is not merely that it should believe wrong things, though that is great enough; but that it should become credulous, and lose the habit of testing things and inquiring into them; for then it must sink back into savagery (p. 294).

It is wrong for the ship owner to believe on insufficient evidence, irrespective of whether the ship made it safely across, and irrespective of whether it ever influences his actions or assertions. This is because, in allowing oneself to be lax in gathering evidence about some matter - for instance, on the grounds that it doesn't matter much, or will never influence one's actions - one habituates oneself into bad practices, and sets a bad example to others. Imagine Alex believes that there are no more than four hundred million blades of grass on his lawn on the basis of a calculation involving unchecked assumptions about the size and health of his lawn compared to

the average. While Alex recognizes that he could check these assumptions, he knows that it doesn't matter much, and that this belief will never influence his actions. Clifford's view is that, because Alex is habituating himself into bad practices, and setting a bad example to others, he is wrong in believing on this meagre basis.

These two insights can be used to argue for SEC as follows. Again, call the epistemic conditions for belief, action and assertion "E", "E\*" and "E\*\*" respectively.

- (1) Our beliefs, actions, and assertions form an interconnected system. What I believe influences what I assert and act on, and in turn what others believe, act, and assert on. Further, what others assert influences what I believe, act, and assert on. This system provides us with a common store of information on which we can all draw in deciding what to believe, assert, and act on.
- (2) We should contribute responsibly to the common store.
- (3) A belief is a responsible contribution to the common store iff it satisfies epistemic condition E.
- (4) A belief is a responsible contribution to the common store iff it is fit for the purpose of acting and asserting.
- (5) A belief is fit for the purpose of acting and asserting iff actions and assertions based on it satisfy E\* and E\*\* respectively.
- (6) If E were less stringent than E\* and E\*\*, there would be beliefs such that (a) they satisfy E (b) actions and assertions based on them do not satisfy E\* or E\*\*. So there would be beliefs that satisfy E yet aren't fit for the purpose of acting and asserting.
- (7) By premise four, a belief that isn't fit for the purpose of acting and asserting isn't a responsible contribution to the common store. By premise three, a belief that satisfies condition E is a responsible contribution to the common store. So there are no beliefs that satisfy E yet aren't fit for the purpose of acting and asserting. So E is not less stringent than E\* or E\*\*.
- (8) If E were more stringent than E\* and E\*\*, there would be beliefs such that (a) they don't satisfy E (b) actions and assertions based on them do satisfy E\* or E\*\*. So there would be beliefs that don't satisfy E yet are fit for the purpose of acting and asserting.
- (9) By premise four, a belief that is fit for the purpose of acting and asserting is a responsible contribution to the common store. By premise three, a belief that doesn't satisfy E is not a responsible contribution to the common store. So there are no beliefs that don't satisfy E yet are fit for the purpose of acting and asserting. So E is not more stringent than E\* and E\*\*.
- (10) E is no more and no less stringent than E\* and E\*\*, that is,  $E=E*=E^{**}$ . So SEC is true.

Premises one through four are motivated by Clifford's two insights. Premise one expresses his view that the interconnected system of beliefs, actions, and assertions produces a common store

on which all can draw. Premise two expresses his view that we should contribute responsibly to the common store. Premise three expresses his view that a belief is a responsible contribution just in case it meets an epistemic condition, E. Premise four can be motivated as follows. The common store is a body of information on which everyone can draw on in deciding what to believe, act on, and assert. A contribution to the common store is responsible iff it is fit to be used for these purposes. So a belief is a responsible contribution to the common store iff it is fit for the purpose of asserting and acting.

The rest of the argument establishes that the epistemic condition on belief is exactly as stringent as that on action and assertion. Premise five articulates what it means for a belief to be fit for the purpose of acting and asserting. It must meet the epistemic conditions governing acting and asserting. Premises six draws out the consequence of E\* and E\*\* being less stringent than E. Premise eight draws out the consequence of E\* and E\*\* being more stringent. Premise seven explains why there can't be beliefs that satisfy E yet aren't fit for the purpose of acting or asserting. Given premises three and four, such a belief would be both a responsible and an irresponsible contribution to the common store. Premise nine explains why there can't be beliefs that don't satisfy E yet are fit for the purpose of acting or asserting. Again, given premises three and four, such a belief would be both a responsible and an irresponsible contribution to the common store. The conclusion follows from premises seven and nine.

My aim in this section has been to outline a Cliffordian argument for SEC. While I have offered a defense of the premises of the argument, the reader will no doubt complain that I have glossed over a number of objections. It is to these objects that I now turn.

## **2. Objections**

In this section I outline two objections to the Cliffordian argument. My aim in the next section is to provide a version of the argument that avoids both objections.

The first objection is that Clifford's argument requires an overly demanding ethics of belief. Clifford's position is that I should hold any belief, no matter how insignificant or how unlikely it is to lead to action, to the same epistemic condition. Surely this is too strong. Recall Alex, and his belief about the number of blades of grass on his lawn. Perhaps no belief is ever entirely insignificant. But some beliefs, like Alex's, are practically insignificant. How much difference can it make if Alex is lax in gathering evidence here? Why think that being lax here will make him

more lax in the future? Alex can distinguish between situations where laxity is permitted, and situations where it isn't.

This objection targets premise three in the Cliffordian argument. This premise presupposes that there is a *single* epistemic condition a belief must meet in order to be a responsible contribution to this common store. Cases like Alex's suggest that the strictness of the epistemic condition a belief must meet to be a responsible contribution is (roughly) proportional to the consequences of that belief becoming a member. The more important the belief, the stricter the condition.

The second objection is that there are putative counter examples to SEC. Consider this case:

TRAIN STATION: Catriona is getting the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow. She has good but not conclusive evidence that this is the fast train (she thinks she remembers that a fast train leaves at this time from this platform, but she hasn't checked). It's all the same to her whether she gets the fast train or the slow train. So she believes that it is the fast train. Another passenger, Ailsa, approaches and asks if this is the fast or slow train. She explains that she absolutely has to get the fast train as she'll miss an important appointment otherwise. Catriona tells her that she isn't sure if this is the fast train, and that Ailsa better go and check. She then immediately boards the train, on the basis of her belief that it's the fast train.<sup>8</sup>

Intuitively, Catriona should believe that it's the fast train, but she should not assert that it's the fast train. This is because she seems to have enough evidence to believe, but not to assert. So, *prima facie*, this case shows that the conclusion of the Cliffordian argument is false. There are cases, like TRAIN STATION, where we can recognize that the consequences of belief, action, and assertion differ. Because we recognize that the consequences differ, we hold our beliefs, actions, and assertions to different epistemic conditions.<sup>9</sup>

While the first objection points out that not all beliefs are on a par with respect to their consequences, the second points out that beliefs, actions, and assertions can differ in their consequences. So the second objection targets the fourth premise, which says that beliefs are responsible contributions to the common store iff they are fit for the purposes of acting and asserting. The problem with this premise is that some beliefs, like Catriona's, aren't intended for the purpose of acting or asserting. Just as Alex can tell the difference between beliefs that matter and beliefs that don't, Catriona can tell the difference between beliefs that will be used for acting or asserting, and beliefs that won't.

While these are not the only objections to the Cliffordian argument, I think they are the most serious. I now turn to the task of dealing with them.<sup>10</sup>

### **3. Improving the Cliffordian Argument**

Roughly, consequentialism is the view that normative properties depend on the consequences. The Cliffordian argument claims that epistemic normative properties depend on the consequences of believing, acting, and asserting. So we can think of the argument as defending an epistemic cousin to consequentialism in ethics. My general strategy in this section will be to show that the Cliffordian argument can be defended by appealing to some standard distinctions from the literature on consequentialism in ethics.

#### **3.1. Consequentialism in Ethics**

For our purposes we can think of ethical consequentialism as a view about the conditions under which one should perform an action and we can work with a version of the view on which one should perform an action iff performing that action will have better consequences than performing any other action that is available.<sup>11</sup> One common objection to ethical consequentialism is that it demands too much of us.<sup>12</sup> Say Lisa has an average income by Western European standards. Lisa is deciding how much of her income to give to charity. By the consequentialist's lights, it looks like Lisa should give a far greater proportion of her income to charity than most would deem morally required (say, 50 percent). Roughly, the more she gives, the better the consequences will be. But, while Lisa would be extremely admirable if she decided to give 50 percent of her income to charity, surely she isn't morally *required* to do so. So it looks like the consequentialist requires too much of us.

Superficially, the first objection to the Cliffordian argument is an epistemic analogue of the demandingness objection. Recall Alex. Clifford requires that Alex hold his belief about the number of blades of grass to the same epistemic condition as any other belief, which strikes us as too demanding. But what drives the demandingness objection is the idea that it is sometimes permissible to perform an action for personal gain or for personal reasons even though there are other actions one could have performed which would have had better consequences for the world at large. In this respect the demandingness objection differs from the first objection. The reason why it seems permissible for Alex to be lax about his belief is that doing so will *not* have bad consequences for the world at large. It isn't that only reasons of personal gain speak in favor



of Alex being lax. The overall consequences do too (or, at least, don't speak against it). So any similarity is, at best, superficial.

Now consider another common objection to ethical consequentialism. On the sort of ethical consequentialism we are considering, the normative properties of an act depend on the consequences of that act. This sort of consequentialism runs into trouble with acts that are intuitively right yet don't seem to have the best consequences.<sup>13</sup> Say Sophie has promised Janine that she will meet her for coffee tomorrow. Let's specify that Sophie and Janine both have busy schedules, and would both far rather not meet for coffee. We can also specify that neither realizes that the other would rather not go, so they haven't cancelled the appointment. Our moral intuitions tell us that promises should be kept, and Sophie's promise seems no different.<sup>14</sup> While there are ways of getting out of promises, Sophie hasn't used them here. If this intuition is taken at face value, the ethical consequentialist is in trouble. Sophie's breaking her promise would have better consequences for both her and Janine. So, by the consequentialist's lights, neither Sophie nor Janine should turn up.

An influential response to this objection is to say that the normative properties of an act depend on the consequences of a *rule*, not of the act itself.<sup>15</sup> For our purposes we can work with a version of this view on which one should perform an action iff it doesn't violate any rule the acceptance of which has better consequences than the acceptance of any rule that is incompatible with it.<sup>16</sup> For instance, in the case of promising, we have the general rule "One should keep one's promises". It is plausible that the acceptance of this rule in the community at large will have better consequences than the acceptance of any incompatible rule, such as the rule "One should keep one's promises, except when it doesn't matter". Over and above the obvious benefits to society of having a rule requiring everyone to keep their word, the acceptance of a simple rule requiring everyone to keep their promises has obvious benefits over the acceptance of a more complex rule that builds in various exceptions and provisos. For instance, a rule that allows exceptions for cases where it doesn't care is problematic because we will often be wrong about whether it matters.

### **3.2. Consequentialism in Epistemology**

My proposal is that we can deal with both objections to the Cliffordian argument if we think of epistemic consequentialism along the lines of this sort of rule consequentialism. So the idea is that the epistemic normative properties of a belief, action or assertion depend on the

consequences of rules, not of the beliefs, actions, or assertions themselves. Roughly, the view is that one should form a belief, action, or assertion iff doing so doesn't violate the acceptance of any rule the acceptance of which has better consequences than the acceptance of any rule that is incompatible with it. While I can't get too bogged down in the details here, a couple of remarks about this view are in order.<sup>17</sup>

First, when are the consequences of following one rule better than the consequences of following another? Consequentialist views say that whether one should do something depends on whether doing that thing will promote certain goods. While different epistemologists will dispute what the epistemic goods are, proposals include: truth, knowledge, understanding, and the like.<sup>18</sup> So the epistemic consequentialist says that the consequences of following one rule are better than the consequences of following another if following the former rule better promotes the epistemic goods than following the latter rule. Put like this, the Cliffordian view is that the acceptance of a common norm governing belief, action and assertion better promotes the epistemic goods than the acceptance of diverging norms. This is because acceptance of a common norm better contributes towards the production and maintenance of the common store of information. The common store consists in propositions that are (hopefully) true, known by members of the community, and so on.

Second, what does it mean to "accept" a rule? Roughly, the idea is that a community accepts a rule just in case a sufficiently high proportion of its members have internalized this rule; they use it as a guide in daily decision making. This does not mean that the members of the community are capable of giving a clear and precise articulation of the rule. There are plenty of rules we use as guides in our day-to-day life that we are unable to clearly and precisely articulate. For instance, we use a range of rules to navigate our everyday social interactions (e.g., don't stand too close to whomever one is addressing), but we can't give a clear and precise articulation of them.

The Cliffordian argument can now be run as follows. Beliefs, actions, and assertions form an interconnected system which produces a common store of information on which all can act. Maintaining the common store has good epistemic consequences in that it promotes a range of epistemic goods. But maintaining the common store requires us to hold our beliefs, actions, and assertions to certain epistemic conditions. There are various combinations of possible conditions that could conceivably maintain the common store. It could be that the conditions on belief, action, and assertion differ. It could even be that not all beliefs are governed by the same

condition. But what we need to find is the set of rules the acceptance of which will have better consequences than the acceptance of any other set of rules. Here are some reasons for thinking that the acceptance of a set of rules on which belief, action, and assertion are governed by the same epistemic condition will have better consequences than the acceptance of any other.

- (1) Having the same condition govern all beliefs is simpler than having different conditions for different beliefs. If we had different conditions for different beliefs, we would have to distinguish between: beliefs that matter and beliefs that don't, beliefs that will influence action or assertion and beliefs that won't, beliefs the forming of which will influence our future behavior and beliefs the forming of which won't. While we may be generally reliable at making these distinctions, we will make mistakes. These mistakes will reverberate through the interconnected system of belief, action, and assertion.
- (2) Having the same condition governing belief as action and assertion is simpler than having different conditions for belief, action, and assertion. If we had different conditions we would have to distinguish between beliefs that will influence actions or assertions and those that won't, and between assertions that will influence beliefs or actions and those that won't. While we may be generally reliable at making these distinctions, we will make mistakes. These mistakes will reverberate through the interconnected system of belief, action, and assertion.
- (3) Having the same condition governing belief as action and assertion means that our beliefs are "ready built" for the purposes of action and assertion. Perhaps some beliefs aren't going to be used for that purpose, or are not intended for it. But, again, if we had different conditions we would need the ability to distinguish. We will make mistakes. *Mutatis mutandis* for having the same condition governing assertion as belief and action.

The conclusion is that the acceptance of a set of rules on which all beliefs, actions, and assertions are governed by the same epistemic condition will have better consequences than the acceptance of any other. While this take on the Cliffordian argument differs substantially in structure from the original version, it appeals to both of Clifford's original insights. Thus, the argument is still recognizably Cliffordian.

How does this deal with our two objections? I take each in turn. The first objection was that, while all our beliefs are part of the common store, the strictness of the epistemic condition governing a particular belief should be (roughly) proportional to its consequences. But, as we have seen, the improved Cliffordian argument doesn't say anything about the consequences of forming individual beliefs. One mistake in the original argument was to try and derive SEC from

the consequences of individual beliefs. Even though forming a particular belief on insufficient evidence may have no bad consequences in itself, community acceptance of a general rule permitting one to be lax in gathering evidence when it matters little, or when the belief won't influence action, would have worse consequences overall than community acceptance of a rule that permits no such exceptions. Again: If the rule permits exceptions, we need to be able to recognize when an exception is called for. While we'll often get this right, we'll sometimes get it wrong. The mistakes will contaminate the common store of information. I take this to deal with the first objection.

The second objection was that, in certain cases, the consequences of belief, action, and assertion differ. Because we can recognize that the consequences differ, a belief can be unfit for the purposes of acting or asserting yet still a responsible contribution to the common store, so long as it is never used for a purpose for which it wasn't intended. Again, as we have seen, the improved Cliffordian argument doesn't say anything about the consequences of individual beliefs, actions, and assertions. Even though we can recognize that some beliefs aren't intended for the purpose of acting or asserting, acceptance of a general rule that permitted us to treat beliefs that aren't intended for acting or asserting differently from beliefs that are intended for acting or asserting would have worse consequences than acceptance of a rule with no such exceptions. Again: If the rule permits exceptions, we need to be able to recognize when an exception is called for. While we will often get this right, we will sometimes get it wrong. I take this to deal with the second objection.

I want to finish by dealing with a residual worry. I have not said *what* the common condition governing belief, action and assertion is. Take TRAIN STATION. Do I say that the condition is such that Catriona should believe and assert, or do I say that it is such that she shouldn't do either? The problem with the first option is that it seems to lead to scepticism. If Catriona isn't in a good enough epistemic position to believe that it's the fast train then what is she in a good enough epistemic position to believe? If the answer is "very little, if anything", scepticism results. The problem with the second option is that it conflicts with how we would have assessed Catriona if she had asserted to Ailsa that it's the fast train. If she had done so, we would have found her at fault. It would be natural to voice this criticism as follows: "Catriona shouldn't have said that!". This seems to leave the Cliffordian argument with two equally unpalatable options. Which do I pick?

Consider this variant of TRAIN STATION:

TRAIN STATION\*: Catriona is getting the train from Edinburgh to Glasgow. She has excellent evidence that this is the fast train (she has got the fast train at this time from this platform every day for the last two years, the station announcer has said that the fast train is leaving from this platform, and so on). So she believes that it is the fast train. Another passenger, Ailsa, approaches and asks if this is the fast or slow train. She explains that she absolutely has to get the fast train as she'll miss an important appointment otherwise. Catriona tells her that she gets this train all the time and it is definitely the fast one. Ailsa thanks her, and they both board the train.

In this case it seems clear that Catriona should both believe and assert that it's the fast train. What this tells us is that the common epistemic condition governing belief, action, and assertion is somewhat more stringent than we might have initially thought. But the Cliffordian argument for SEC doesn't lead to a problematic sort of scepticism. While the defender of SEC has to accept that the epistemic conditions governing belief, action, and assertion are relatively stringent - so stringent that Catriona in TRAIN STATION doesn't meet them - she doesn't have to accept that the conditions are so stringent that we are hardly ever in a good enough epistemic position to believe, act and assert. For example, Catriona in TRAIN STATION\* is in a good enough epistemic position to believe, act, and assert. While we don't always have such excellent evidence as Catriona does in this case, her position is far from extraordinary. I conclude that the defender of SEC need not fall into an objectionable sort of scepticism.

#### **4. An Upshot**

I have argued that considerations about the consequences of belief, action, and assertion support the view that belief, action, and assertion are governed by the same epistemic condition. But that belief, action, and assertion have these consequences is because of a range of contingent features of human psychology and of our societal makeup. For instance:

- (1) While we don't assert or act on everything that we believe, what we believe tends to influence what we assert or act on. But we can imagine creatures such that what they believe rarely influences what they assert.<sup>19</sup>
- (2) While we don't believe everything we hear, what we hear tends to influence what we believe. But we can imagine creatures such that what they hear rarely influences what they believe or act on
- (3) We can imagine creatures with superior mental capacities to ours, such that they are better off accepting rules governing belief, action, and assertion on which they are held to different

epistemic conditions. Such creatures will be near infallible about whether a given belief is insignificant, and whether it will ever influence action or assertion.

It follows that, while human beliefs, actions, and assertions are governed by the same epistemic condition, this is because of contingent features of human psychology and our societal makeup. For want of better labels, the view suggested here is a sort of psychological and sociological relativism about epistemic norms. On this view, the epistemic requirements on belief, action, and assertion are relative to contingent psychological and sociological features of human beings and human society. While these norms apply to creatures like us, who live in a society like ours, they do not apply to possible creatures who don't.

This view is at odds with the picture presented in much of the literature about the epistemic norms of belief, action, and assertion. For our purposes here, the relevant feature of the more usual picture is that these norms are viewed as constitutive or necessary.<sup>20</sup> For instance, Williamson (2000, chap. 11) argues that assertion is constitutively governed by the norm "One must: assert some proposition  $p$  only if one knows  $p$ ". On this view, there might be practices that resemble assertion (e.g., they involve the utterance of declarative sentences) that are governed by a different norm. But those are not assertoric practices.<sup>21</sup> If epistemic norms are constitutive or necessary, they apply to all creatures, no matter their psychological makeup or societal makeup.

While thinking of epistemic norms as contingent rather than constitutive goes against much of the recent literature on epistemic norms, it is the position we are forced to adopt if the Cliffordian argument is along the right lines. While some might take this consequence as a reason to reject the Cliffordian argument, I hope to have at least established that it is an argument that is worthy of our attention. It follows that the possibility that epistemic norms are contingent is also worthy of our attention.

## **5. Concluding Remarks**

In contemporary epistemology it is a commonplace that belief, action, and assertion are governed by epistemic norms. In this paper I have argued that, because of the connections between believing, acting, and asserting, those norms coincide. One upshot is that the epistemic norms governing belief, action, and assertion are rather more stringent than one might have initially thought (but not so stringent as to lead to scepticism). Another upshot is that these norms are contingent on features of human psychology and our societal makeup. This doesn't

just conflict with the usual picture of epistemic norms. It conflicts with Clifford's famous dictum. What Clifford should have said is, *for any human*, it is wrong, always and everywhere, to believe anything on insufficient evidence. For non-humans, all bets are off.

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### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> I don't assume that E, E\*, and E\*\* are identical. For defenses of various epistemic norms of belief see Fantl and McGrath (2009), chap. 5; Littlejohn (2013); Shah and Velleman (2005). For various epistemic norms of action see Fantl and McGrath (2009), chap. 3; Gerken (2011); Hawthorne and Stanley (2008). For various epistemic norms of assertion see Lackey (2007); Weiner (2005); Williamson (2000), chap. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Gerken's view is that, while one is in a good enough position to act or assert just in case one has warrant, the degree and type of warrant required for assertion can differ from that required for action (and vice versa). Consequently, Gerken denies SEC (see below).

<sup>3</sup> I take the label "commonality" from Brown (2012) and the label "equivalence commonality" from Gerken (2014).

<sup>4</sup> Montminy (2013) argues that assertion and action are governed by the same epistemic norm. While this paper supports Montminy's conclusion, it does so for different reasons. I criticize his argument in McKenna (2013).

<sup>5</sup> All references to Clifford below are to Clifford (1876).

<sup>6</sup> We can imagine that the ship owner managed to do this in the usual ways by which we allow our wants and desires to indirectly influence our beliefs.

<sup>7</sup> For an extended discussion of this point see Mitova (2008).

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<sup>8</sup> This case is from Brown (2012), p. 140. While she isn't targeting the Cliffordian argument presented here, her case poses a problem for it. For similar cases see Gerken (2014), pp. 731-733.

<sup>9</sup> I have focused on a single case, in which the consequences of belief and assertion differ. This case could be modified to show that the consequences of assertion and action can differ. Perhaps it can also be modified to show that the consequences of belief and action can differ, although this isn't so clear. At any rate, what I say about TRAIN STATION, both here and in section three, will apply to these cases too.

<sup>10</sup> One other sort of objection is worth mentioning. Because the Cliffordian argument appeals to connections between belief, action, and assertion, one might worry about the differences between belief, action, and assertion. Three differences are worth mentioning here. First, unlike action or assertion, belief comes in degrees. Second, beliefs are generally extended over time, whereas actions and assertions rarely are. Third, the practical import of belief is mediated via action and assertion, whereas the practical import of action and assertion is direct. My response is twofold. First, insofar as these differences cause problems, they cause problems for SEC in general, and not my Cliffordian argument in particular. Second, it isn't clear that these differences are relevant here. The epistemic norm of belief puts conditions on outright belief, not the various gradations of belief. Further, normative evaluations of beliefs, actions, and assertions are indexed to particular times – whether I should believe, act, or assert at a time *t* depends on my epistemic position at time *t*. Finally, the Cliffordian argument does not deny that the practical import of belief is indirect. Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing me on these issues.

<sup>11</sup> I work with this formulation because it mirrors the way I formulate a sort of epistemic consequentialism below. For a detailed overview of the historical and contemporary literature on consequentialism in ethics see Sinnott-Armstrong (2014).

<sup>12</sup> This is called the demandingness objection. Two things to mention. First, there are many versions of the demandingness objection (for an overview see Hooker 2009). Second, not all agree that demandingness is a problem for consequentialism (see, for example, Kagan 1984; Singer 1993).

<sup>13</sup> This objection is often attributed to Ross (1930), pp. 34–35.



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<sup>14</sup> The point of this detour through ethics is to motivate the distinction between act and rule consequentialism. I will argue that the Cliffordian argument can be defended if we adopt an epistemic analogue of rule consequentialism. So, for my purposes, it isn't essential that the reader agrees this sort of case poses a problem for ethical consequentialism.

<sup>15</sup> For versions of this view see Brandt (1959); Rawls (1955).

<sup>16</sup> For discussion of how to fill in the details (e.g., what acceptance is) see Brandt (1992); Hooker (2000).

<sup>17</sup> I take it for granted that a broadly consequentialist account of epistemic normativity is attractive (for an influential defense see Goldman 1986). My aim is to develop a broadly Cliffordian brand of epistemic consequentialism, not to sort out the foundations of epistemic normativity. It is worth noting that, while epistemic consequentialism is popular, it has its critics (e.g., Berker 2013).

<sup>18</sup> I take no stand here on what the epistemic goods are. For discussion see Goldman (1986); Kvanvig (2003); Zagzebski (1996).

<sup>19</sup> Perhaps we can even imagine creatures such that what they believe rarely influences what they act on, although this is less clear.

<sup>20</sup> For dissent on this issue see DeRose (2002); Kvanvig (2009). Whether either would accept the sort of view sketched here is an interesting question.

<sup>21</sup> For similar remarks about the norm of action see Hawthorne and Stanley (2008), p. 571. For the norm of belief see Shah and Velleman (2005), pp. 496-500.

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