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Lovering, R. 2019. “An Argument for the Prima Facie Wrongness of Having Propositional Faith” [in English]. *Filosofiya. Zhurnal Vysshey shkoly ekonomiki [Philosophy. Journal of the Higher School of Economics]* III (3), 95–128.

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## AN ARGUMENT FOR THE PRIMA FACIE WRONGNESS OF HAVING PROPOSITIONAL FAITH\*\*

**Abstract:** W.K. Clifford famously argued that it is «wrong always, everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence». Though the spirit of this claim resonates with me, the letter does not. To wit, I am inclined to think that it is not morally wrong for, say, an elderly woman on her death bed to believe privately that she is going to heaven even if she does so on insufficient evidence—indeed, and lest there be any confusion, even if the woman *herself* deems the evidence for her so believing to be insufficient. After all, her believing so does not appear to endanger, harm, or violate the rights of anyone, nor does it make the world a worse place in a significant, if any, way. That Clifford might have put too fine a point on the matter, however, does not entail that there are no conditions under which it is wrong to believe something upon insufficient evidence. In this paper, I argue that in cases where believing a proposition (read: believing a proposition to be true) will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong to have propositional faith—for present purposes, to believe the proposition despite deeming the evidence for one’s believing to be insufficient—before one has attempted to believe the proposition by proportioning one’s belief to the evidence.

**Keywords:** Belief, Faith, Evidence, Doxastic Practice, W. K. Clifford.

DOI: 10.17323/2587-8719-2019-3-95-128.

### INTRODUCTION

W. K. Clifford famously argued that it is “wrong always, everywhere and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence” (Clifford, 2014: 107). Though the spirit of this claim resonates with me, the letter does not. To wit, I am inclined to think that it is not morally wrong for, say, an elderly woman on her death bed to believe privately that she is going to heaven even if she does so on insufficient evidence—indeed, and lest there be any confusion, even if the woman *herself* deems the evidence for her so believing to be insufficient. After all, her believing so does not appear to endanger, harm, or violate the rights of anyone, nor does it make the world a worse

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place in a significant, if any, way. That Clifford might have put too fine a point on the matter, however, does not entail that there are no conditions under which it is wrong to believe something upon insufficient evidence. In this paper, I argue that, in cases where believing a proposition (read: believing a proposition to be true) will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong to have propositional faith—for present purposes, to believe the proposition despite deeming the evidence for one’s believing to be insufficient—before one has attempted to believe the proposition by proportioning one’s belief to the evidence. To be clear, I do not argue that it is always wrong to have propositional faith or even that it often is. I simply argue that, under certain conditions, it can be—hence the *prima facie* language. (To say that an act is *prima facie* wrong is to say that it is wrong *all else being equal*. I will have more to say about this as the paper ensues.) With these preliminary remarks out of the way, let us now turn to a more detailed analysis of having propositional faith (as it is understood here) as well as my reasons for employing this understanding.

#### ON HAVING PROPOSITIONAL FAITH

Again, for present purposes, to have propositional faith—formally, to have faith that  $p$ —is to believe a proposition (believe that  $p$ ) despite deeming the evidence for one’s believing to be insufficient. If this is to be understood properly, an analysis of some of key terms is required. Beginning with “evidence”, by it I mean epistemic reasons, those that indicate the truth of a proposition. (“Indicate” is to be understood conservatively, meaning that such reasons do not always or even often *necessitate* the truth of a proposition—though, of course, at times they do.) Said reasons may be inferential or noninferential in nature, public or private, and more<sup>1</sup>. The presence of tire marks on a street, for example, serves as a public, inferential epistemic reason for believing the proposition “Someone’s driven here”. Epistemic reasons are to be contrasted with practical reasons, those

<sup>1</sup>John Bishop describes the distinction between inferential and noninferential evidence well as follows: “A proposition’s truth is inferentially evident when its truth is correctly inferable [...] from other propositions whose truth is accepted; a proposition’s truth is non-inferentially (basically) evident when its truth is acceptable [...] without being derived by inference from other evidentially established truths” (Bishop, 2006: 23). And Stephen Davis captures the distinction between public and private evidence well when he writes that public evidence is evidence that is “open to the awareness and inspection to anyone who is interested enough to consider”, whereas private evidence is evidence open “only to the awareness and scrutiny of the given individual to whom [it is] private” (Davis, 1978: 26, 28).

that indicate, not the truth of a proposition, but the benefits of believing a proposition. For instance, a benefit of believing that I will do well on the exam — namely, that I increase the likelihood of my doing well on the exam by doing so — is a practical reason for believing the proposition “I will do well on the exam”.

By “sufficient” evidence, I mean evidence the strength of which is roughly proportional to the strength of the belief derived from it. Simply put, the stronger one believes something, the stronger the evidence must be if it is to be sufficient. To illustrate this, consider two spectra. For the first spectrum, 10 will represent the extreme of maximally strong belief, while 1 will represent the other extreme of maximally weak belief. For the second spectrum, 10 will represent the extreme of maximally strong evidence, while 1 will represent the other extreme of maximally weak evidence. If the strength of my belief that I am typing right now is approximately 7, then the strength of the evidence for my belief must be approximately 7 as well if it is to be sufficient.

But what counts as evidence? And in what does evidential strength consist? As interesting and important these questions are, they need not be addressed here to proceed with my argument for the *prima facie* wrongness of having faith that *p*. This is because *regardless* of what counts as evidence and what makes for evidential strength, the individual who has faith that *p* deems the evidence, *whatever it might be*, for her believing that *p* to be insufficient. That is, she deems her belief that *p* to be stronger than the evidence — again, whatever it might be — warrants. Perhaps her deeming it so is since she has not consulted any evidence whatsoever and, thus, does not know what the evidence warrants. Perhaps it is due to the fact that she has consulted (some) evidence and considers it too weak to warrant her strength of belief. In any case, to proceed with the question of whether it is *prima facie* wrong to have such faith, we need not answer the questions above. It is enough to know that the individual who has such faith deems the evidence for her believing that *p* to be insufficient<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup>Some philosophers, such as Jonathan Adler and Georges Rey, argue that believing something while deeming the evidence for one’s so believing to be insufficient is incoherent. As Rey writes, “try thinking something of the form: *p*, however, I don’t have adequate evidence or reasons for believing it [...] where you substitute for *p*, some non-religious claim, for example,  $2 + 2 = 37$ , ‘the number of stars is even’, or ‘Columbus sailed in 1962’. Imagine how baffling it would be if someone claimed merely to ‘have faith’ about these things” (Rey, 2007: 260). Though I grant this is a possibility, as Adler himself suggests, said incoherence can be avoided by adding that the belief in question is not attended to in full awareness. See Adler, 2002: 12ff.

It behooves me to address why I have chosen to employ an understanding of having propositional faith that involves this subjective, negative assessment of the strength of the evidence for one's belief that  $p$ , that of deeming the evidence for one's believing that  $p$  to be insufficient for one's so believing. I have three reasons for doing so—two empirical, one philosophical. Beginning with the empirical reasons, first, and perhaps most importantly, cases involving this understanding of having propositional faith are pervasive, particularly among believers in God's existence. As Hilary Kornblith writes:

I've heard many people say quite sincerely, "I believe that God exists, but by my own lights, I am not justified in believing that God exists". [...] [S]uch a person believes that God exists, regards this belief as unjustified and finds that so regarding the belief does not make it go out of existence (Kornblith, 1987: 119).

Similarly, T. J. Mawson writes:

There are some who believe in God even though they do not take themselves to have any positive reasons for doing so and who do not consider themselves in any way intellectually irresponsible in so believing. Deciding whether or not there's a God, such people say, is a "leap of faith", rather than a conclusion of reason (Mawson, 2010: 93).

Like Kornblith and Mawson, I too have encountered many individuals, both personally and through various media, who had or have such faith that God exists. Indeed, the majority of theists with whom I have discussed God's existence have professed to have such faith that God exists, either straight away or after a bit of philosophizing (I ask the theist on what grounds she believes that God exists, she lays out an argument for God's existence, I raise objections, she submits replies, and this is repeated until she declares, "None of this really matters since, at the bottom, I have faith that God exists"). And various philosophers—Soren Kierkegaard, most notably—have had this kind of faith that God exists. This is not meant to suggest that, objectively speaking, sufficient evidence of God's existence is lacking. It is only to say that the understanding of having propositional faith at work here is pervasive, and especially so among believers in God's existence.

The second empirical reason that I employ this understanding of having propositional faith is that people do not usually claim to have propositional faith when it comes to beliefs for which they think they possess sufficient evidence. As Matthew McCormick puts it:

...we don't invoke [faith] or feel like it is necessary in situations where there is sufficient evidence in support of the desired outcome [...]. [F]aith is invoked and

it is only necessary when there is some shortcoming in the evidence. If there is sufficient evidence to justify the conclusion, then faith isn't needed (McCormick, 2012: 217).

The third and the philosophical reason that I employ this understanding of having propositional faith may be motivated by way of the following illustration. Suppose someone (let's call him "Joe") believes a proposition — say, that intelligent extraterrestrials exist — and does so on the basis of what he deems to be sufficient evidence, namely, a gut feeling. Suppose also that he is mistaken about having sufficient evidence for his belief: the strength of Joe's belief that intelligent extraterrestrials exist is 8, but the strength of his evidence for his belief (the gut feeling) is 1. In this case, Joe believes that intelligent extraterrestrials exist but he erroneously fails to deem the evidence for his believing so to be insufficient.

Now, some scholars appear to understand having propositional faith in such a way that, in this case, Joe has such faith that intelligent extraterrestrials exist. That is, they seem to understand having propositional faith in such a way that Joe's believing that intelligent extraterrestrials exist without sufficient evidence is one and the same as his having faith that they exist, regardless of whether Joe *himself* also deems the evidence for his so believing to be insufficient. Richard Dawkins, for example, understands propositional faith to be "belief that isn't based on evidence" (Dawkins, 2008: 426). And Richard Creel writes of "those who have faith that God exists, that is, those who have nonevidential confidence that God exists" (Creel, 2003: 69). In neither of these understandings of having propositional faith is it stated explicitly that deeming the evidence for one's believing that  $p$  to be insufficient is a condition of having such faith<sup>3</sup>.

But not including this condition — at least, not including it explicitly — strikes me as a problematic omission. To see this, consider Joe again. To be sure, Joe lacks sufficient evidence (*ex hypothesi*) for his belief that intelligent extraterrestrials exist. But it seems premature to say that he thereby has faith that intelligent extraterrestrials exist. Indeed, Joe himself would not profess to have faith that intelligent extraterrestrials exist. Rather, he would profess to believe it on the basis of what he deems to be sufficient evidence: the gut feeling. It seems, then, that in addition to the pervasiveness of cases involving the understanding of having propositional faith to be employed here as well as the fact that people do not usually claim to have propositional

<sup>3</sup>It may be that this condition is stated implicitly, of course, hence my claim that they *seem* to understand propositional faith in this way.

faith when it comes to beliefs for which they think they possess sufficient evidence, there is a third, philosophical reason to employ this understanding.

Much more could be said about this understanding of having propositional faith, to be sure. And it should be noted that other understandings of having faith — propositional or other — are available for one to consider and, if desirable, employ elsewhere<sup>4</sup>. What’s more, and perhaps more to the point, some understandings of having faith are fundamentally at odds with the understanding at work here. For example, as J. L. Schellenberg’s understands it, having faith does not involve having a belief; having faith is, as he puts it, “beliefless”. Instead, to have faith involves having an attitude, specifically a “purely voluntary attitude of mental assent toward [a] proposition, undertaken in circumstances where one views the state of affairs to which it refers as good and desirable but in which one lacks evidence causally sufficient for belief of the proposition” (Schellenberg, 2007: 7)<sup>5</sup>. And though arguments similar to mine may be formulated and raised against some of these other understandings of having faith (even Schellenberg’s — see the following footnote), this is not true across the board<sup>6</sup>. Suffice it to say, then, the argument presented below is applicable only to the understanding of having faith at work here. And, for the sake of space, I will have to leave the matter at that and move on to my argument for the *prima facie* wrongness of having propositional faith.

#### ON THE PRIMA FACIE WRONGNESS OF HAVING PROPOSITIONAL FAITH

The specific claim that I defend below is as follows: In cases where believing that *p* will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that *p* before one has attempted to believe that *p* by proportioning one’s belief to the evidence. My argument for this claim is as follows:

P<sub>1</sub>: In cases where one’s doing something will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong not to attempt not to wrong those who will be affected by one’s doing it.

<sup>4</sup>See, for example, Howard-Snyder, nodate; Buchak, 2012.

<sup>5</sup>See also Schellenberg, 2005, Chapters 5 and 6. For others who argue that having faith does not involve having belief, see Audi, 2008; Zamulinski, 2008; Howard-Snyder, 2016; Matheson, 2018.

<sup>6</sup>Given Schellenberg’s understanding of having faith, one could argue for the *prima facie* wrongness of voluntarily adopting an attitude of mental assent toward *p* under the circumstances he describes.

C1: In cases where believing that  $p$  will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong not to attempt not to wrong those who will be affected by one's believing that  $p$ .

P2: Attempting not to wrong those who will be affected by one's believing that  $p$  involves attempting to believe that  $p$  by way of a doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable.

C2: In cases where believing that  $p$  will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong not to attempt to believe that  $p$  by way of a doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable.

P3: The practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence is the only doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable.

C3: In cases where believing that  $p$  will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong not to attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence.

P4: One way not to attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence is to have faith that  $p$  before one has attempted to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence.

C4: In cases where believing that  $p$  will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that  $p$  before one has attempted to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence.

Each of the preceding premises will be defended in turn.

#### DEFENSE OF P1

My defense of P1 begins with an assumption, albeit a safe one by my lights: that, morally speaking, and other things being equal, one should not wrong others. I will not defend this assumption here, not only because I trust most readers will grant it, but because doing so would involve a major digression into matters of meta- and normative ethics (If the reader does not share this assumption, she is free to commit this paper to the flames, as it were). Given this assumption, it seems to follow that, all else being equal, one should *attempt* not to wrong others. That is to say, if it is true that one should not wrong others, then it appears that it is also true that one should attempt not to wrong others. To say otherwise — to say that one should not wrong others but that one should make no attempt not to wrong others — is hardly plausible or even intelligible. Among other implausibilities, such a view on what one should do would render the first “should” (that of “one

should not wrong others”) so weak — to wit, weak enough as to require not even the *attempt* to fulfill it — that the claim in which it is found would, for all practical purposes, be meaningless. Given this, I am inclined to think that if it is true that one should not wrong others, then it is also true that one should attempt not to wrong others.

#### DEFENSE OF P2

My defense of P2 is made in two steps. The first step involves establishing how one might come to wrong another. The second step involves establishing how one attempts not to wrong another. Beginning with the first step, there are, of course, numerous ways in which one might come to wrong another. But the two ways most pertinent to this discussion are as follows: by committing errors of moral fact and by committing errors of nonmoral fact. By “committing errors of moral fact”, I mean believing that an act or state of affairs has a moral status that it does not actually have (e. g., believing that murder is morally permissible or that the starvation of innocent children is morally good). By “committing errors of nonmoral fact”, I mean believing that an act or state of affairs has a nonmoral status that it does not actually have (e. g., believing that cats can breathe under water or that the chemical composition of water is  $SiO_2$ ). That coming to wrong another can and, indeed, occasionally does involve committing one or both of these errors may be seen as follows.

Take murder. When one murders another and thereby wrongs him, this can be and sometimes is the result of committing one or both of the preceding errors. Beginning with errors of moral fact, wronging another by murdering him can be the result of erroneously believing that the victim deserves to be killed (as some Nazis believed of the Jews), that murder is morally estimable (as some gang members seem to think given their approval of initiation murders), and so on. In such cases, an error of moral fact is committed. Second, wronging another by murdering him can be the result of erroneously believing that one’s victim is not genetically human (as some Ku Klux Klan members have suggested of African-Americans), that one’s victim desires to be killed (as some patient-killing nurses have believed), and so forth. In such cases, an error of nonmoral fact is committed.

This brings us to the second step, that of establishing how one attempts not to wrong another. Given that how one might come to wrong another can and, at times, does involve committing errors of moral and nonmoral fact, attempting not to wrong others in these ways involves attempting not to commit such errors. And attempting not to commit such errors involves



attempting to believe purported statements of moral and nonmoral fact by way of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable, or so I will argue. Perhaps the clearest way to convey what I mean by a “fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable” is to break this clause into its constitutive parts and analyze them in a piecemeal fashion. So, to begin with, by a “doxastic practice”, I mean simply a belief-acquiring practice, whatever its nature. Proportioning one’s belief to the evidence, having propositional faith, believing by way of sense perception, memory, reasoning, flipping coins, reading tea leaves — each of these is an example of a doxastic practice.

By a “fact-determining” doxastic practice, I mean a doxastic practice that regards facts as opposed to mere opinions or tastes. The reason for this should be obvious: the issue at hand is what attempting not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral *fact* involves. Thus, whatever doxastic practice is proposed as a solution, it should be one that pertains to facts, not mere opinions or tastes.

Finally, by a doxastic practice that has “demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable”, I mean a doxastic practice that can generally be counted on for the acquisition of true or probably true beliefs *and* is plausibly causally connected to said beliefs. It is important that the doxastic practice be reliable since one is attempting to acquire true or probably true beliefs about purported statements of moral and nonmoral fact — one is *not* attempting to acquire, say, merely rationally held beliefs about such facts, beliefs that need not be true or even probably true in order to be rationally held. And it is important that the doxastic practice be nonarbitrarily reliable so as to avoid doxastic practices that might be reliable but nevertheless should be rejected on the grounds that they are not plausibly causally connected to the true or probably true beliefs one acquires through them. Consider, again, the doxastic practice of believing by way of flipping coins<sup>7</sup>. Such a practice might turn out to be reliable in that it might (however bizarrely) be counted on for the acquisition of true or probably true beliefs. But even if it did, it seems one ought to reject it and do so on the grounds that it is not plausibly causally connected to the true or probably true beliefs one acquires through it. Simply put, there appears to be no connection at all, let alone a plausible causal connection, between sides of coins and truths such as “Three is greater than two” and “The capital of New York is Albany”.

<sup>7</sup>The possibility of such a doxastic practice is discussed in Mavrodes, 1983: 209.

Given the preceding description of a doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable, one might think that such a practice presupposes an externalist — specifically, reliabilist — approach to epistemology<sup>8</sup>. As understandable as this thought might be, the preceding description does not presuppose this. In short, “reliable” is meant to convey merely that the doxastic practice can generally be counted on the acquisition of true or probably true beliefs. And a doxastic practice that can generally be counted on the acquisition of true or probably true beliefs is consistent with both externalist (e. g., reliabilism) and internalist (e. g., foundationalism) approaches to epistemology.

That attempting not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral fact involves — at least, *should* involve — attempting to believe purported statements of moral and nonmoral fact by way of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable may be seen as follows.

Take cases of punishment. Whether or not to punish someone for something he allegedly did — say, stealing a gold watch — is a moral matter, at least in part. How, in good faith, should one attempt to refrain from wrongly punishing such an individual? One should attempt not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral fact, among other things. And one should do this by believing the relevant moral facts (that stealing is or is not wrong, that stealing is or is not deserving of punishment — whatever the moral facts may be) and nonmoral facts (that the accused did or did not steal the gold watch, that the alleged gold watch is an actual gold watch — whatever the nonmoral facts may be) by way of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. To do otherwise would be morally irresponsible — a judgment, it is worth noting, that is reflected in many countries’ due process laws and procedures. In other words, and from another angle, one should not attempt not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral fact by way of doxastic practices (flipping coins, reading tea leaves) that cannot generally be counted on for the acquisition of true or probably true beliefs or that are not plausibly causally connected to the true or probably true beliefs one might acquire through them. To do so would be morally irresponsible.

<sup>8</sup>Briefly, an externalist approach to epistemology deems the justifiability of a belief to be partly a function of considerations external to one’s internal states — i. e., one’s mental states, such as what one believes — whereas an internalist approach to epistemology deems the justifiability of a belief to be wholly a function of one’s internal states. For more on this distinction, see Pollock, 1986: 21–24.

Or, to consider a case not involving punishment, suppose a new, seemingly sentient and sapient life form were discovered to be on Earth and one was genuinely concerned about not wronging it. How, in good faith, should one attempt to refrain from doing so? Again, one should attempt not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral fact. And one should do this by believing the relevant moral facts (that killing this life form is wrong, or morally acceptable, or morally required — whatever the moral facts may be) and nonmoral facts (that this new life form is indeed sentient and sapient, or not sentient, or not sapient — whatever the nonmoral facts may be) by way of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. One should not attempt not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral fact by flipping coins or reading tea leaves. As above, to do so would be morally irresponsible.

Attempting not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral fact, then, involves attempting to believe purported statements of moral and nonmoral fact by way of a fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable.

#### DEFENSE OF P3

This brings us to P3. One fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable — indeed, the *only* fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be so, ostensibly (more on this in a moment) — is that of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. By “proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence”, I mean consulting as much of the evidence (whatever it might be) both for and against a proposition ( $p$ ) that one can reasonably obtain and believing that  $p$  or that not- $p$  as strongly as the evidence warrants. That proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence is a fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable may be argued for as follows.

Beginning with this doxastic practice's reliability, consider the history of intellectual progress, specifically that of the sciences (formal, natural, social). Progress in the sciences is at once undeniable and impressive. And the doxastic practice through which we have come this far, particularly in more recent history, is principally that of proportioning our beliefs to the evidence. As a result, we have come to deem this doxastic practice to be one that has demonstrated itself to be reliable in these domains (there is no better place to witness that we deem this doxastic practice to be one that has demonstrated itself to be reliable in these domains than the place wherein intellectual development is expected to occur: the classroom).

A thorough presentation of this fact would involve describing in greater detail the history of the sciences<sup>9</sup>. For the sake of space, I will have to trust that the reader is sufficiently familiar with their histories to grant the point.

This is not to say that we have always proportioned our beliefs to the evidence or that all intellectual progress is rooted in doing so. Indeed, the history of intellectual progress is filled with anecdotes of intellectual advancement occurring as a result of chance events<sup>10</sup>. It is simply to say that, when we reflect upon the history of intellectual progress — especially that of the sciences — we see a stronger and stronger correlation between proportioning beliefs to the evidence and intellectual progress. It is also not to say that no other doxastic practices have had a role in intellectual progress. Clearly, others have (e. g., believing by way of sense perception, memory, reasoning, etc.). Though I will have more to say about these practices and their relation to that of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence in a moment, let it suffice for now to say that acknowledging that they have had a role in intellectual progress is not inconsistent with my claim above that the doxastic practice through which we have come so far intellectually is principally that of proportioning our beliefs to the evidence.

Consider, also, the history of moral progress. There is no doubt that moral progress has occurred throughout history. What was once considered morally acceptable in many societies — slavery, torture, the eye-for-an-eye principle of justice (at least, the literal implementation of it), the unequal regard for and treatment of women and racial minorities, etc. — is now largely condemned as immoral, and plausibly so. And the doxastic practice through which we have so progressed, especially in more recent history, is principally that of proportioning our beliefs to the evidence (the turn to equal regard for and treatment of women and racial minorities is a clear case in point, as is the turn to moral concern, and treatment reflective thereof, for nonhuman animals). As a result, we have come to deem this doxastic practice to be one that has demonstrated itself to be reliable in this domain (there is no better place to witness that we deem this doxastic

<sup>9</sup>This is evidenced in a wide variety of works, including Bauer, 2015; Gibbon, 2019; The Oxford Illustrated History of Science, 2017; The Cambridge History of Science, 2002–2020 and more.

<sup>10</sup>For example, two Nobel Prize winners: Francis Crick and Kary Mullis attributed some of their prize-winning work to their use of acid. In Mullis' own words: "Would I have invented PCR [polymerase chain reaction] if I hadn't taken LSD? I seriously doubt it [...] [having taken LSD] I could sit on a DNA molecule and watch the polymers go by. I learned that partly on psychedelic drugs" (quoted in Nutt, 2012: 258).

practice as one that has demonstrated itself to be reliable in this domain then in a course on moral philosophy). As with the history of intellectual progress, a thorough presentation of the history of moral progress would involve describing in greater detail the history of moral progress<sup>11</sup>. But, as above, for the sake of space, I will trust that the reader is sufficiently familiar with its history to grant the point.

Similar to before, this is not to say that we have always proportioned our beliefs to the evidence, that all moral progress is rooted in doing so, or that no other doxastic practices have had a role in moral progress. Acknowledging these things, however, is not inconsistent with my claim that the doxastic practice through which we have come so far morally is principally that of proportioning our beliefs to the evidence.

But is the doxastic practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence *nonarbitrarily* reliable? That is, is it plausibly causally connected to the true or probably true beliefs one acquires through it? Though a full defense of the claim that it requires more space than is available here, the following will do for now.

One way to see that the doxastic practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence is *nonarbitrarily* reliable is to consider the various roles that evidence plays in a theoretical inquiry. As Thomas Kelly observes, evidence has played and continues to play a number of roles in theoretical inquiry, including but not limited to those of belief justifier and neutral arbiter (Kelly, 2018). But the role most pertinent to this discussion is that of truth indicator (hence my construing "evidence" in terms of epistemic reasons above). As Kelly puts it:

As a general matter, evidence seems to play a *mediating* role vis-à-vis our efforts to arrive at an accurate picture of the world: we seek to believe what is true by means of holding beliefs that are well-supported by the evidence, and we seek to avoid believing what is false by means of not holding beliefs that are not well-supported by the evidence. The picture is well summarized by Blanshard: "Surely the only possible rule', one may say, 'is to believe what is true and disbelieve what is false'. And of course, that would be the rule if we were in a position to know what was true and what false. But the whole difficulty arises from the fact that we do not and often cannot. What is to guide us then? [...] The ideal is believed no more, but also no less than what the evidence warrants" (Kelly, 2014).

<sup>11</sup>This is evidenced in various works, including *A History of Western Ethics*, 2003; MacIntyre, 1998.

Indeed, Kelly suggests that the role of truth indicator is evidence's most fundamental role in a theoretical inquiry. "Perhaps the root notion of evidence", he writes, "is that of something which serves as a reliable sign, symptom, or mark of that of which it is evidence *of*" (Kelly, 2014).

That evidence has played and continues to play the role of truth indicator supports the view that proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence is a fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. To begin with, and as Kelly explains:

When evidence is understood in this way, it is no mystery why attending to evidence is a good strategy for one who is concerned to arrive at an accurate picture of the world: given that Koplik spots are in fact a reliable indicator of measles, it obviously behooves those who are concerned to have true beliefs about which individuals are suffering from measles to pay attention to facts about which individuals have Koplik spots. Similarly, given that smoke is, in fact, a reliable indicator of fire, those who are concerned to have true beliefs about the presence or absence of fire do well to pay attention to the presence or absence of smoke. Thus, when we understand " $E$  is evidence for  $H$ " as more or less synonymous with " $E$  is a reliable indicator of  $H$ ", the connection between evidence and truth seems easily secured and relatively straightforward (ibid.).

Exactly *how* evidence indicates the truth of some proposition need not be established in order to agree with Kelly, and reasonably believe, that it reliably does. We need not, for example, know exactly how the presence of Koplik spots reliably indicates the truth of the proposition "This individual has measles" in order to reasonably believe that it does, or exactly how the presence of smoke reliably indicates the truth of the proposition "Something is on fire" in order to reasonably believe that it reliably does. We often do have an idea of how the evidence so indicates, of course. For example, the presence of smoke is (to use Hume's locution) "constantly conjoined" with the presence of fire, the specific chemical composition of smoke is constantly conjoined with the temperature of the fire, and so on. But precise knowledge of the way(s) in which evidence indicates the truth of some proposition is not necessary for reasonably believing that it reliably does. All this to say, however exactly evidence indicates the truth of some proposition, one may reasonably believe not only that it does but does so reliably.

With the preceding in mind, one can see how proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence has demonstrated itself to be not only reliable (as the histories of intellectual and moral progress suggest), but nonarbitrarily so. For when one proportions one's beliefs to the evidence, one believes that  $p$  or that not- $p$  and does so only as strong as the evidence permits. In other words, one

allows the evidence to determine not only *what* one believes but *how strongly* one believes it. And given that evidence plays the role of truth indicator—that of reliably pointing to the truth of the proposition for which it serves as evidence—it is, in that way and to that extent, plausibly causally connected to the true or probably true beliefs one acquires through it. A good faith attempt not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral fact and, in turn, wrong others, then, involves attempting to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence. That is, it involves attempting to consult as much of the evidence for and against  $p$  that one can reasonably obtain and attempting to believe that  $p$  or that not- $p$  as strongly as the evidence warrants.

But might it involve something else? After all, even if one grants that proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence is *a* fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable, one need not grant that it is the *only* fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. And some might contend that, in addition to proportioning one's belief to the evidence, there are other fact-determining doxastic practices that have demonstrated themselves to be nonarbitrarily reliable.

Now, I am happy to grant that there might be a fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable *and* that is significantly distinct from the doxastic practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. If there is, however, I have no idea what it is. This is due to the fact when it comes to other possible fact-determining doxastic practices, either they have not demonstrated themselves to be nonarbitrarily reliable, or they have but are not significantly distinct from the doxastic practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. Beginning with the latter, there are, to be sure, other doxastic practices that have demonstrated themselves to be nonarbitrarily reliable. Nicholas Everitt summarizes this well when he writes:

All of us are equipped with a range of cognitive faculties which allow us to acquire, store and manipulate information about a huge variety of subjects. Our sensory equipment enables us to know about our perceptual environment; our memory enables us to store information both about specific events in the past and about general truths; and our reasoning capacity enables us to see the implications of the information which we have and to draw sometimes long and complicated inferences. We all assume that these cognitive faculties are substantially reliable. When they are operating properly, they reveal to us truths, probable truths, or near truths. They are, we might say, truth-directed. Of course, on occasions, we arrive at falsehoods. We are careless in our inferences, our observations, or the

viewing conditions are not ideal, or there is some malfunction in the relevant organs. But, in general, we take it that our cognitive faculties succeed in giving us truths (or probable or approximate truths [...]) (Everitt, 2004: 178–179).

But to the extent that these other doxastic practices have demonstrated themselves to be nonarbitrarily reliable, they have so only when regulated by the practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. Take sense perception. Were someone to believe strongly that it's raining outside, do so by way of sense perception, but not proportion her belief to the evidence (e.g., the strength of her belief that it is raining outside is 9, but the strength of her evidence for that belief — acquired through sense perception — is 1), then the doxastic practice by which she believes that it is raining outside, that of sense perception, would not, in that instance, demonstrate itself to be reliable. More broadly, were people to believe by way of sense perception, memory, or reasoning but not proportion the beliefs they arrive at through these things to the evidence, then these doxastic practices would not demonstrate themselves to be nonarbitrarily reliable (it's worth noting that Everitt seems to acknowledge this implicitly in the last few lines of the quotation above. So, again, to the extent that believing by way of other doxastic practices has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable, it has so only when regulated by the practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. In this way, believing by way of sense perception, memory, and reasoning qua doxastic practices that have demonstrated themselves to be nonarbitrarily reliable are not significantly distinct from the doxastic practice of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence.

As for the former, some might think that having propositional faith is a doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. This, however, does not appear to be the case. To wit, when we reflect upon the histories of intellectual and moral progress, we do not see (as we do with proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence) a stronger and stronger correlation between such progress and having propositional faith. In that way and to that extent, having propositional faith has not demonstrated itself to be reliable in these domains. But even if it had, it would still be an open question as to whether it demonstrated itself to be *nonarbitrarily* reliable. And believing by way of having propositional faith does not seem to be plausibly causally connected to the true or probably true beliefs that one might acquire through it. For there appears to be no connection at all, let alone a plausible causal connection, between believing that  $p$  despite deeming the evidence for one's so believing to be insufficient, on the one



hand, and  $p$  being true or probably true, on the other. After all, if evidence does not connect this doxastic practice to the true or probably true beliefs that one might acquire through it, what does? Hope? Will? Fear? Social inclusion? None of these plausibly connects having propositional faith with the true or probably true beliefs that one might acquire through it — or so it seems to me — and no other plausible candidate comes to mind.

#### DEFENSE OF P<sub>4</sub>

My defense of P<sub>4</sub> is rather straightforward. This is due to the fact that P<sub>4</sub> simply identifies one way in which one could fail to attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence. To have faith that  $p$  — to believe that  $p$  despite deeming the evidence for one's believing that  $p$  to be insufficient — *before* one has attempted to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence is one way not to attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence. This could occur in a number of different ways, naturally, including but not limited to:

- ◇ one could fail to consult any evidence for and against  $p$  whatsoever and just immediately have faith that  $p$ ;
- ◇ one could consult some but not all of the evidence for and against  $p$  that one could have reasonably obtained and then, desiring a strength of belief not warranted by said evidence, move on to having faith that  $p$ ;
- ◇ one could consult all the evidence for and against  $p$  that one could have reasonably obtained, fail to attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence, and then move on to having faith that  $p$ .

But the last of these is of particular import to the present argument and, thus, worthy of analysis.

So, what does the last of these — failing to attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence after one has consulted all the evidence for and against  $p$  that one could have reasonably obtained — involve? Though it likely involves a number of things which, in turn, may vary in presence and degree from case to case, one that I would like to focus on here is that of *neither honestly nor sincerely* attempting to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence. Simply put, a dishonest and insincere attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence is, for all practical purposes, no attempt at all. Given this, if one consults all the evidence for and against  $p$  that one could have reasonably obtained but does not honestly and sincerely attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence, then one fails to attempt

to believe that  $p$  by proportioning one's belief to the evidence. So, for instance, if an Islamic apologist consults all the evidence for and against the proposition that Allah exists that she could have reasonably obtained but does not honestly and sincerely attempt to believe that Allah exists by proportioning her belief to the evidence, she fails to attempt to believe that Allah exists by proportioning her belief to the evidence.

Exactly *why* someone would not honestly and sincerely attempt to believe that  $p$  by proportioning her belief to the evidence will vary from person to person, with some reasons (lack of mental energy) being more innocuous than others (willful bias). But there is little doubt that some people some of the time do not honestly and sincerely attempt to believe this or that proposition by proportioning their belief to the evidence. To motivate this, consider that, according to Christian theistic philosopher Brian Leftow, Christian theists are particularly vulnerable to cognitive biases when it comes to the issue of God's existence. As he puts it:

Christian commitment [...] is not just abstractly intellectual. It is passionate. It involves hopes, ideals, self-discipline, and personal sacrifice. Passions can tempt one to intellectual dishonesty. Further, the more hope and effort one invests in a religious belief, the more it would hurt to find that belief false, and the more foolish one would feel. So depth of Christian commitment can also tempt one to intellectual dishonesty — for example, weighing anti-Christian arguments unfairly (Leftow, 1994: 199).

Given this, it stands to reason that at least some Christian theists do not honestly and sincerely attempt to believe that God exists by proportioning their belief to the evidence. In any case, there is little doubt that people do not always honestly and sincerely attempt to believe propositions by proportioning their beliefs to the evidence.

#### SUMMARY

My argument for the *prima facie* wrongness of having propositional faith may be summarized as follows. In cases where one's doing something will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong not to attempt not to wrong those who will be affected by one's doing it. In cases where believing that  $p$  will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong not to attempt not to wrong those who will be affected by one's so believing. Attempting not to wrong those who will be affected by one's believing that  $p$  involves attempting not to commit errors of moral and nonmoral fact. And this involves attempting to believe purported statements of moral and nonmoral fact by way of a doxastic

practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable. One and seemingly the only fact-determining doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable is that of proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. Thus, attempting not to wrong those who will be affected by one's believing that  $p$  involves attempting to proportion one's belief that  $p$  to the evidence. In cases where believing that  $p$  will affect others, then, it is *prima facie* wrong not to attempt to proportion one's belief that  $p$  to the evidence. Thus, it is *prima facie* wrong to have propositional faith that  $p$  before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that  $p$  to the evidence.

#### A QUALIFICATION

At this point, an important qualification is in order. The extent to which believing a proposition will affect others is partly a function of the content of the belief itself. For, content-wise, some beliefs are more other-regarding than others (by "more other-regarding", I have in mind both quantitative considerations—how many "others" are affected—as well as qualitative considerations—the ways in which they are affected). The belief that human beings are never to be trusted, for example, is more other-regarding than the belief that elves have pointy ears since the former makes a claim about how one is to behave with respect to beings with whom one (in all likelihood) regularly interacts while the latter does not. Given this, one might maintain that the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that  $p$  before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that  $p$  to the evidence is proportional to the extent to which the belief is other-regarding: the more other-regarding the belief, the more wrong it is (all else being equal) not to attempt to proportion one's beliefs to the evidence. Though Clifford might reject this, I will proceed as if this is the case<sup>12</sup>.

If, then, the belief that  $p$  is not other-regarding, then the degree to which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that  $p$  before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that  $p$  to the evidence is zero. In other words, it is not *prima facie* wrong to have faith that  $p$  (the aforementioned case involving the elderly, dying woman is an example of this). Even when this is the case, however, it does not follow that having propositional faith is never *prima facie* wrong. This would be true only if those who have propositional faith do so completely independently of other beliefs. But such is generally not

<sup>12</sup>Clifford held that even believing statements that are not other-regarding has deleterious effects, such as making the individual who does so (repeatedly) more gullible and, in turn, more susceptible to believing on the basis of insufficient evidence statements that *are* other-regarding.

the case. People who have propositional faith usually possess many beliefs about many matters, including many beliefs that are other-regarding.

With the preceding in mind, even if, in and of itself, the belief that  $p$  is not directly other-regarding, it may be conjoined with other-regarding beliefs in such a way that it becomes indirectly other-regarding. When this does, in fact, occur, then the degree to which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that  $p$  before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that  $p$  to the evidence is proportional to the extent to which the conjunction of these beliefs is other-regarding. Take, for example, the beliefs that God exists (which I will stipulate to be a belief that is not other-regarding) and that God wants wives to submit to their husbands (which is an other-regarding belief). The degree to which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that God exists before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that God exists to the evidence is proportional to the extent to which the conjunction of these beliefs—that God exists and that God wants wives to submit to their husbands—is other-regarding.

Finally, and most obviously, if the belief that  $p$ , in and of itself, is other-regarding, then the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that  $p$  before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that  $p$  to the evidence is proportional to the extent to which the belief that  $p$  is other-regarding.

#### APPLYING THE ARGUMENT

Before raising objections to my argument, I would like to further motivate the latter by applying it to sundry beliefs, religious and nonreligious alike. Beginning with the latter, imagine a physician who believes that her patient needs a liver transplant. The belief “My patient needs a liver transplant” is other-regarding, of course, as it regards her patient (among others). Given this, as well as my argument for the *prima facie* wrongness of having propositional faith, it would be *prima facie* wrong for the physician to have faith that this is so before she has attempted to proportion her belief that it is to the evidence. And this seems to be the correct verdict.

And so it is with myriad other cases of nonreligious belief: imagine a car mechanic who believes his customer's car needs a new engine, a dentist who believes her patient needs a root canal, a criminal defense lawyer who believes his client should plead guilty, a stockbroker who believes her client should purchase as much stock in Microsoft as possible, and so on. Each of these beliefs is clearly other-regarding. Given this, as well as my argument, it would be *prima facie* wrong for these individuals to have faith that these

things are so before they attempted to proportion their beliefs that they are to the evidence. And, as before, this seems to be the correct verdict.

As for religious beliefs, take Raëliism, the religion that teaches that life on Earth was scientifically created by a species of intelligent extraterrestrials. Among other things, Raëlians believe that to usher in the “Great Return”—the return of our alleged extraterrestrial creators—an embassy must be built, preferably in Jerusalem (Why an Embassy for an ET Civilization?, 2019). Accordingly, they believe that such an embassy ought to be built. Now, the belief “An embassy for our extraterrestrial creators ought to be built, preferably in Jerusalem” is other-regarding—it regards, among many others, people who reside in Jerusalem. Given this and my argument, it would *prima facie* wrong for Raëlians to have faith that this is so before they have attempted to proportion their belief that it is to the evidence. And this appears to be the correct verdict.

Or, take Satanism (LaVeyan), a religion that emphasizes the use of reason, among other things (but not, despite their name, the worship of Satan). The Church of Satan embraces what are referred to as “Eleven Satanic Rules of the Earth”, one of which is: “When walking in open territory, bother no one. If someone bothers you, ask them to stop. If they don’t stop, destroy them” (LaVey, 1967). The belief “I ought to destroy he who does not stop bothering me after I’ve asked him to” is clearly other-regarding. Given this and my argument, it would *prima facie* wrong for members of the Church of Satan to have faith that this is so before they have attempted to proportion their belief that it is to the evidence. And, as with the cases above, this seems to be the correct verdict.

Before moving on, it is worth considering a religious belief that is not obviously other-regarding but is often assented to by way of having propositional faith, and that is the belief that God exists. What does my argument have to say about the belief that God exists? As alluded to above, the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that God exists before one has attempted to proportion one’s belief that God exists to the evidence depends on the extent to which the belief that God exists is other-regarding. The question, then, is: To what extent is the belief that God exists other-regarding? Some might think that it is not other-regarding at all, while others might think that it is other-regarding to one extent or another. Rather than settling this dispute, I will simply repeat (briefly) what was discussed above. If the belief that God exists is not other-regarding, then it is not at all *prima facie* wrong to have faith that God exists. If the belief that God exists, in and of itself, is not directly other-regarding but becomes indirectly

other-regarding as a result of being combined with other-regarding beliefs, then the degree to which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that God exists before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that God exists to the evidence is proportional to the extent to which the conjunction of these beliefs is other-regarding. And if the belief that God exists, in and of itself, is other-regarding, then the extent to which it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that God exists before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that God exists to the evidence is proportional to the extent to which the belief that God exists is other-regarding.

#### OBJECTIONS

There are numerous objections that may be raised against my argument for the *prima facie* wrongness of having propositional faith; indeed, too many to be addressed here. That said, the four to be discussed below are what I take to be among the most pressing.

#### PRIMA FACIE WRONGNESS DOES NOT ENTAIL ULTIMA FACIE WRONGNESS

I have argued that it is *prima facie* wrong — again, wrong all else being equal — to have faith that *p* before one has attempted to proportion one's other-regarding belief that *p* to the evidence. But this does not entail that having faith that *p* is *ultima facie* wrong — that is, wrong *all things considered*. Given this, one might object to my argument on both theoretical and practical grounds as follows. With respect to the theoretical grounds, one could argue that my argument leaves the theoretical door open for the *ultima facie* moral *permissibility* of having faith that *p*. As for the practical grounds, one could argue that, when applied to actual cases of individuals having faith that *p*, the argument's conclusion will be inapplicable to the vast majority of them. I will respond to each of these objections in turn.

Regarding the former, that my argument leaves the theoretical door open for the *ultima facie* moral permissibility of having faith that *p* is, as I see it, no problem at all. Indeed, I have already conceded that there are cases wherein having faith that *p* is *ultima facie* morally permissible, such as the aforementioned case of the elderly woman on her death bed privately believing that she is going to heaven on evidence that she deems insufficient for so believing. To be clear (and frank), I offer my argument for the *prima facie* wrongness of having propositional faith, not to have an excuse for morally condemning people who have propositional faith. Rather, I am merely attempting to determine the conditions (if any) under which is it *prima facie* wrong to have such faith.

Having said that, though my argument leaves the theoretical door open for the *ultima facie* moral permissibility of having propositional faith, it also leaves the theoretical door open for the *ultima facie wrongness* of having propositional faith. And sometimes the *prima facie* wrongness of an act can become *ultima facie* moral wrongness. This occurs when, after all things are in fact considered, no wrongness-defeating factors arise (exactly *when* no wrongness-defeating factors arise will depend on the particulars of one's having propositional faith).

As for the latter — that, when applied to actual cases of individuals having faith that *p*, the argument's conclusion will be inapplicable to the vast majority of them — the idea here is that, were one to empirically investigate the matter, one would find that most people attempt to proportion their belief that *p* to the evidence before having faith that *p* and, thus, their having faith that *p* is, or at least can be, *ultima facie* morally permissible.

The first thing to note about this objection is that it amounts to speculation about the results of some future empirical investigation of the matter. But speculation is just that, speculation. And I, for one, am agnostic about what the conclusion of such an investigation would be.

The second thing to note is that the soundness of my argument does not turn on empirical predictions. Whether my argument is sound is a function of the truth values of its premises and the logical relation between the premises and the conclusion. Empirical predictions, as interesting as they may be, do not bear upon the soundness of the argument.

The last thing to note is that this objection rests upon an implicit and dubious assumption, namely: if one has attempted to proportion one's other-regarding belief that *p* to the evidence *just once* before having faith that *p*, then one's having faith that *p* is, or at least can be, *ultima facie* morally permissible. To be sure, my argument does not explicitly address the number of times one must attempt to proportion one's other-regarding beliefs to the evidence in order to avoid *prima* or *ultima facie* wrongdoing. But it implicitly suggests that the number is not *one*. To see this, suppose Joe attempts to proportion his other-regarding belief that *p* to the evidence, deems the evidence for *p* to be insufficient for the strength of belief that he desires to have and, thus, has faith that *p*. According to my argument, Joe has avoided *prima* and perhaps even *ultima facie* wrongdoing, other things being equal. So far, so good. But what if Joe later confronts new evidence for or against *p*? Given that this evidence is new, Joe's previous attempt at proportioning his belief that *p* to the evidence is rendered obsolete, since it does not include all the evidence — which includes this new evidence —

that Joe can reasonably obtain. In order to avoid *prima* or *ultima facie* wrongdoing with respect to his believing that *p*, then, Joe must attempt anew to proportion his belief that *p* to the evidence which, in this case, includes the new evidence.

With the preceding in mind, even if most people attempt to proportion their other-regarding beliefs that *p* to the evidence before having faith that *p*, it does not immediately follow that their having faith that *p* is *ultima facie* morally permissible, let alone indefinitely so. For attempting to proportion one's belief that *p* to the evidence can be an ongoing process, depending on whether and how often one is confronted with new evidence for or against *p*. And for those who are confronted with new evidence for or against *p*, they must attempt anew to proportion their belief that *p* to the evidence (which includes the new evidence) if they are to avoid *prima* and *ultima facie* wrongdoing (whether one might be morally obligated to *seek* new evidence for or against one's other-regarding beliefs that *p* is a related but separate matter, one best explored elsewhere).

#### MORAL FACTS DO NOT EXIST

Some might object to my argument on the grounds that moral facts do not exist and, thus, attempting not to wrong others does *not* involve attempting not to commit errors of such facts. A thorough reply to this objection would involve a lengthy digression into metaethics, something that is beyond the scope of this paper. But a thorough reply is not one and the same as an adequate reply, and an adequate reply to this objection is available.

To begin with, there are at least two senses of "moral fact", what I will refer to as a "stronger sense" and a "weaker sense." According to the stronger sense of "moral fact", a moral fact is an objective (read: mind-independent) fact. On this understanding of "moral fact", the moral rightness and wrongness of acts as well as the moral goodness or badness of persons or states of affairs are properties of reality (whatever reality's other properties might be). According to the weaker sense of "moral fact", on the other hand, a moral fact is a subjective (read: mind-dependent) fact. On this understanding of "moral fact", the moral rightness and wrongness of acts as well as the moral goodness or badness of persons or states of affairs are properties imputed to but not *of* reality.

With the preceding distinction in mind, if "moral fact" is meant in the stronger sense (as it is here) and it is true that such moral facts do not exist, then my argument is, to that extent, undermined. I write "to that extent" deliberately, however, as it would remain the case that one ought to



attempt not to commit errors of *nonmoral* fact, and this would still involve attempting to believe purported statements of nonmoral fact by way of a doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable, as is proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. As for whether it *is* true that such moral facts do not exist, in order to avoid wading into deep metaethical waters, I will not defend here the view that they do. Instead, I will simply make the following observation: denying the existence of such moral facts is going to be a hard pill for many people to swallow, philosophers and non-philosophers alike. Regarding philosophers, according to one survey, fifty-six percent of philosophy professors accept or lean toward moral realism, a view according to which there are such moral facts (The PhilPapers Surveys: Results, Analysis and Discussion, 2018). As for nonphilosophers' take on such moral facts, one philosopher who has studied the matter, Michael Smith, writes that they "seem to think moral questions have correct answers; that the correct answers are made correct by objective moral facts; that moral facts are wholly determined by circumstances and that, by engaging in moral conversation and argument, we can discover what these objective moral facts determined by the circumstances are" (Smith, 1994: 6). Perhaps the denial of the existence of such moral facts is a pill we all should swallow nonetheless. But that's a discussion for another time.

But even if "moral fact" is meant in the weaker sense, my argument would be largely unaffected. To begin with, and as above, it would remain the case that one ought to attempt not to commit errors of nonmoral fact, and this would still involve attempting to believe purported statements of nonmoral fact by way of a doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable, as is proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence. It would even remain the case that one ought to attempt not to commit errors of *moral* fact, the difference would be simply that "moral fact" would now refer to a fact about moral properties that are imputed to reality. And this, too, would still involve attempting to believe purported statements of moral fact — statements about moral properties that are imputed to reality — by way of a doxastic practice that has demonstrated itself to be nonarbitrarily reliable, as is (once again) proportioning one's beliefs to the evidence.

#### THE ARGUMENT PROVES TOO MUCH

Some might contend that my argument faith proves too much. Consider, for example, the following statements:

- ◇ Dogs exist independently of our minds.
- ◇ Other people are not actually automata.

◇ One's memories are usually reliable.

Surely, some might maintain, it is not *prima facie* wrong to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence.

But of course, if my argument is sound, then it *is prima facie* wrong to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence. And more than mere declaration is needed here. After all, each of these statements either is or can be other-regarding, either in and of itself or when combined with other beliefs. For example, if the context in which one believes that one's memories are usually reliable is such that another will be harmed depending on what one believes, then what one believes could turn out to involve wrongdoing. If one is to attempt to refrain from wronging those who will be affected by one's belief, then, one ought to attempt to proportion one's belief to the evidence. And so it is, *mutatis mutandis*, with the other statements.

That said, and perhaps more to the point, to be *prima facie* wrong is to be wrong *all else being equal*. This is consistent with the claim that it is *not* wrong *all things considered* to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence. In this case, one can consistently hold that, though it is wrong, all else being equal, to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence, it might not be wrong, all things considered, to do so. And this strikes me as the correct verdict.

Consider, next, the following statements:

- ◇ My son will overcome his illness.
- ◇ My daughter will live a long, fulfilling life.
- ◇ My future will be as good as or better than my past.

Once again, some might insist that it is not *prima facie* wrong to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence. But there are at least two reasons to think this objection is misguided.

First, in some cases, statements such as these are properly understood to be statements of hope or desire rather than statements of belief. Accordingly, they are not instances of failing to attempt to proportion one's belief to the evidence.

Second, even in cases where statements such as these are not statements of hope or desire but, instead, belief, they nevertheless fail to serve as counterexamples to my argument's conclusion. To see this, consider the case of Madeline Neumann, an 11-year-old girl who died after her parents

prayed for healing rather than seek medical help for a treatable form of diabetes. According to the local police chief, the girl's parents attributed the death to not having "enough faith" (Police: Girl Dies After Parents Pray for Healing Instead of Seeking Medical Help, 2008). Now, whether the Neumanns understand having "faith" as it is understood here is unclear, but it need not be clear to make my point, which is as follows: *If* the Neumann's believed that their daughter would survive without medical treatment and made no attempt to proportion that belief to the evidence, then, according to my argument, their having such faith was *prima facie* wrong. And this seems to be the correct verdict<sup>13</sup>.

Consider, third, the following statements:

- ◇ God desires that I love others.
- ◇ God desires that I help those in need.
- ◇ God desires that I be good to others.

Yet again, some might argue that it is not *prima facie* wrong to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence. After all, loving others, helping those who are in need, and being good to others are morally commendable acts.

But, as above, if my argument is sound, then it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence, and more than mere declaration is needed here. Moreover, this objection appears to take too much for granted, as it seems to assume that doing what God desires—even loving others, helping those in need, being good to others—cannot be morally problematic. But doing what God desires *can* be morally problematic, of course, depending on one's understanding of God and, specifically, what he thinks loving, helping, and being good to others permits. During the various inquisitions, for example, "helping" others turn from their heretical ways involved torturing and even killing them, among other things. And torturing and killing others in the name of "helping" them strike me as paradigmatic cases of wrongful behavior. More recently, "loving", "helping", and "being good to" others has involved picketing the funerals of dead soldiers, informing those mourning that "God hates fags" (à la the Westboro Baptist Church), relying solely on prayer for healing rather than seeking medical help for treatable life-threatening illnesses (à la the Neumanns), crucifying and

<sup>13</sup>Incidentally, this seems to be reflected in the legal outcome of this case. Though there is not a one-to-one correspondence between the moral and legal statuses of acts, it is worth noting that the mother was subsequently convicted of second-degree *reckless* homicide.

ultimately killing a nun during a would-be exorcism (à la a Romanian priest and four other nuns), and so on<sup>14</sup>. Each of these cases constitute wrongful behavior, or so it seems to me.

Furthermore, and as with a previous reply, to be *prima facie* wrong is to be all-else-being-equal wrong. In this case, one can consistently hold that, though it is wrong, all else being equal, to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence, it might not be wrong, all things considered, to do so. And this strikes me as the correct verdict.

Or, finally, consider the following statements:

- ◊ This food ought to be thrown away since it has gone bad.
- ◊ This forest ought to be avoided since it is ridden with poison ivy.
- ◊ This building ought to be evacuated since a bomb threat has been issued.

As with the preceding statements, some might argue that it is not *prima facie* wrong to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence. After all, what could be wrong with erring on the side of caution? What's more, with some of these statements, there may not be enough time to attempt to proportion one's belief to the evidence.

I will begin with the latter point as my reply to it is rather straightforward. If one doesn't have enough time to attempt to proportion one's belief to the evidence in a given case, then it is not wrong when one fails to do so in said case. "Ought", after all, implies "can". However, this in no way detracts from my argument's conclusion; it merely sets a reasonable limitation on its applicability.

As for the former, for final time, if my argument is sound, then it is *prima facie* wrong to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence, and mere declaration to the contrary is not enough. Additionally, erring on the side of caution can indeed be wrong, depending, of course, on the circumstances in which one does so. If, for example, the aforementioned food is the only food left to feed one's desperately starving child, then it might be wrong — and arguably is — to have faith that the food ought to be thrown away since it has gone bad before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that this (the entire statement, which includes both of its constitutive claims) is so

<sup>14</sup>For the Westboro Baptist Church, see Westboro Baptist Church, 2019; for the crucifixion of the nun, see Crucified Nun Dies in "Exorcism", 2005

to the evidence. Similarly, if crossing through the forest is the quickest way to get help for an injured (nonlethally) friend, then it might be wrong—and arguably is—to have faith that the forest ought to be avoided since it is ridden with poison ivy before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that this (again, the entire statement) is so to the evidence. This is not to say that erring on the side of caution is always wrong, naturally; only that, in certain circumstances, it can be.

But what about the third statement, namely, “This building ought to be evacuated since a bomb threat has been issued”? Would it be, *could* it be, *prima facie* wrong for one to believe it before one has attempted to proportion one's belief to the evidence? As with the first two statements, I can think of circumstances in which it could—and arguably would—be (e. g., when evacuating the building will result in even more harm to those in the building than would result if a bomb were detonated). But what about the typical bomb threat, wherein the harm of evacuating the building is relatively innocuous? Would it be *prima facie* wrong for one to believe that the building ought to be evacuated since a bomb threat has been issued before one has attempted to proportion one's belief to the evidence? It seems to me that it would not. But this is consistent with my argument's conclusion. For, again, “ought” implies “can” and, with typical bomb threats, there is not enough time to attempt to proportion one's belief to the evidence. That said, if one *did* have enough time to attempt to proportion one's belief to the evidence, then, according to my argument, it would be *prima facie* wrong for one not to do so given the other-regarding nature of the belief and, more specifically, the harm (physical, psychological, financial, social) that may come with evacuating a building. And, once again, this strikes me as the correct verdict.

Finally, and to say it one more, to be *prima facie* wrong is to be all-else-being-equal wrong. In this case, one can consistently hold that, though it is wrong, all else being equal, to have faith that these things are so before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that they are to the evidence, it might not be wrong, all things considered, to do so. And this strikes me as the correct verdict.

#### ONE IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR WHAT ONE BELIEVES

Another objection to my argument may be elicited by asking the following questions. First, doesn't my argument entail that one can control what one believes and, thus, that one is responsible for what one believes? If

so, doesn't this undermine my argument, since one is not in control of what one believes?

Regarding the first question — whether my argument entails that one can control and is responsible for what one believes — simply put, it does not entail this. Nor, however, does it entail that one *cannot* control and is not responsible for what one believes. Strictly speaking, my argument entails the following: *to the extent that* one can control and is responsible for what one believes, it is *prima facie* wrong to have propositional faith before one has attempted to proportion one's belief to the evidence. This is consistent both with the view that one can control and is responsible for what one believes as well as the view that one cannot control and is not responsible for what one believes. My argument does not entail, then, that one can control and is responsible for what one believes (and if one *can* control and *is* responsible for what one believes, so much the better for my argument).

But even if it did, and in answer to the second question, this would not undermine my argument. For though one may not have direct control over what one believes — though one may not be able to *will* oneself to adopt any given belief, for example — one nevertheless appears to have indirect control over what one believes. As Jonathan Adler puts it:

...for many of our beliefs we do have the ability to influence and shape the dispositions underlying their acceptance. If you are quick to ascribe ill motives to others, you have probably had many occasions to discern and evaluate this pattern of your attributions and you can undertake to control them accordingly. The modification does not require direct control over your believing (Adler, 2002: 66).

And if the Adlers of the world are correct about this (as it seems to me they are), then one can control what one believes, at least indirectly. In the spirit of this paper, one would want to know what evidence they have for this. For the sake of space, however, I will have to forgo this discussion and refer the reader to the relevant literature<sup>15</sup>.

Of course, even if this is correct, it does not follow that one has the ability to influence and shape the dispositions underlying the acceptance of *all* of one's beliefs. To use examples from above, it might be that one does not have the ability to influence and shape the dispositions underlying the acceptance of the beliefs that dogs exist independently of our minds, that other people are not actually automata, or that one's memories are usually

<sup>15</sup>See Adler, 2002: 66ff. It should be noted here that some philosophers have argued for the stronger view that we have direct control over some of our beliefs. See Mourad, 2008; Helm, 2004, Chapter 2 and Peels, 2016: 61ff.

reliable. Try as one may, one might not be able to reject these beliefs; at least, one might not be able to reject these beliefs while remaining sane (similar to before, if one is able to reject these beliefs while remaining sane, so much the better for my argument).

But even if one does not have the ability to influence and shape the dispositions underlying the acceptance of all of one's beliefs, it does not follow that one does not have the ability to influence and shape the disposition underlying the acceptance of other beliefs, especially beliefs commonly assented to by way of having propositional faith, such as the belief that God exists. Indeed, the belief that God exists is significantly different from the beliefs that dogs exist independently of our minds, that other people are not actually automata, and that one's memories are usually reliable. One might not be able to reject the latter beliefs, but one *is* able to reject the former belief. To wit, assuming religious affiliation is some indication, more than half the world's population does just this: according to Oxford University Press's *World Christian Encyclopedia*, in 2009, roughly 3 billion out of the world's 6.8 billion were adherents of religions that include belief in God (World Christian Encyclopedia, 2001). Moreover, since being an adherent of a religion does not entail that one *really* believes that God exists, the number of believers in God's existence is likely to be (much) smaller<sup>16</sup>. So, even if one does not have the ability to influence and shape the dispositions underlying the acceptance of all of one's beliefs, it does not follow that one does not have the ability to influence and shape the disposition underlying the acceptance of other beliefs.

#### CONCLUSION

I have argued here that, in cases where believing that *p* will affect others, it is *prima facie* wrong to have propositional faith — to have faith that *p* — before one has attempted to proportion one's belief that *p* to the evidence, where having faith that *p* is believing a proposition despite deeming the evidence for one's believing to be insufficient<sup>17</sup>. As I addressed above, there are other understandings of having propositional faith, and much more could be

<sup>16</sup>Daniel Dennett's "belief in belief" is pertinent here. See Dennett, 2006, Chapter 8.

<sup>17</sup>Though my argument has focused on the possibility of wronging *others*, Allen Wood has argued that having propositional faith can be wrong on *self*-regarding grounds. See Wood, 2008.

said both for and against my argument. But enough has been said here to stimulate further discussion on the matter — or so, dare I say, I have faith<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup>I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.



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## ДОВОД В ПОЛЬЗУ ОШИБОЧНОСТИ PRIMA FACIE ПРОПОЗИЦИОНАЛЬНОЙ ВЕРЫ

**Аннотация:** У. К. Клиффорд убедительно утверждал, что: «всегда, везде и для каждого — неправильно иметь какие-либо убеждения, основанные на недостаточных свидетельствах». Однако, если дух этого заявления находит отклик у меня, то буква — нет. А именно, я не склонен считать, что морально ошибочно, например, для престарелой женщины при смерти иметь убеждение о том, что она отправится в рай, даже если у нее нет для этой уверенности достаточных оснований. То есть, разумеется, даже если она сама полагает, что у нее нет для этого убеждения достаточных оснований. В конце концов — ее убеждение не несет опасности, вреда или нарушения чьих-либо прав, не делает мир хуже. Строгий подход Клиффорда к разрешению этого вопроса не означает, что не существует условий, при которых нельзя верить чему-либо без достаточных на то оснований. В данной статье я утверждаю, что в тех случаях, когда убеждение относительно некоторой пропозиции (т. е. вера в то, что пропозиция истинна) влияет на других, морально ошибочно *prima facie* придерживаться пропозициональной веры (в данном случае — иметь убеждение относительно некоторой пропозиции, несмотря на убеждение в том, что свидетельство в ее пользу недостаточны), не попытавшись убедиться в пропозиции, соотнеся собственную веру с фактом.

**Ключевые слова:** У. К. Клиффорд, убеждение, вера, свидетельство, доксистическая практика.

DOI: 10.17323/2587-8719-2019-3-95-128.