# INTRODUCTION¹

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The ethics of belief, broadly speaking, has to do with how we ought to form, sustain, and revise beliefs. Philosophers have of course long been in the business of articulating rules for belief-formation, and there are a variety of questions to address and strategies for addressing them. Contemporary work falling under the label 'the ethics of belief' tends to draw much of its inspiration and guiding questions from the well-known exchange between W.K. Clifford and William James. In his essay, "The Ethics of Belief,"² Clifford argued for the strong evidentialist principle that it is always morally wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. In support of this principle, he described a case where a ship-owner acquires good evidence for thinking that his ship might not survive another voyage, but because he doesn't want to spend money on repairs, he ignores the evidence, convincing himself that the ship will be fine. Later, the ship heads out to sea and sinks, killing everyone on board. Clifford argued that the ship-owner is clearly morally blameworthy for having held the evidentially unjustified belief that the ship could take another voyage. And, Clifford thought, the ship-owner would have been just as morally blameworthy for holding that belief even if the ship had managed to survive another trip and nobody had died.

In "The Will to Believe,"³ James famously replied to Clifford that there are cases where a choice about whether or not to believe *p* is *forced* (the choice cannot be avoided), *momentous* (it is important, and it has perhaps irreversible consequences), and *live* (both believing and refraining from believing are possible for the subject – in particular, the truth or falsity of *p* is not decided by the available evidence). James called these kinds of cases *genuine* options. When it

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² William K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief," in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 1999), 70-96. Originally published in 1877.
³ William James, "The Will to Believe," in his *Essays in Pragmatism* (New York: Hafner, 1949), 88-109. Originally published in 1896.

comes to a genuine option, James argued, we are not rationally required to suspend judgment about $p$, as evidentialists would have us do. Because we cannot avoid choosing, and the evidence is insufficient to settle what to believe, we may allow non-evidential considerations to play a role in belief-formation in these kinds of cases.

We can tease out a number of interesting and important questions about the principles that Clifford and James put forward, and the picture of the mind and mental states that underpin the debate. For example, do Clifford and James presuppose that we have any serious sort of voluntary control over our belief-formation in claiming that there is a moral responsibility to believe what the evidence supports, or in claiming that there are cases where we may legitimately decide what to believe? Should the responsibility to believe what the evidence supports be understood as a moral responsibility, or is it more properly cast as an epistemic, or intellectual, responsibility (or is it both)? What is an acceptable level of evidential support for forming beliefs? Does every body of evidence support only one rational degree of confidence in any given proposition? Are there legitimate non-evidential reasons for belief? Would such reasons necessarily be pragmatic or practical reasons, or could there be non-evidential but still epistemic or intellectual reasons? And just what sorts of attitudes are beliefs, anyway?

This introduction is not meant to serve as a survey of work in the field,[4] but it's worth pointing out that the ethics of belief as a sub-field of philosophy is alive and well.[5] There are many defenses and criticisms of forms of evidentialism in the

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[4] For a more comprehensive overview, see Andrew Chignell's entry "The Ethics of Belief," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2013 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2013/entries/ethics-belief/>.

[5] Sometimes philosophers say things that can lead us to think that the ethics of belief in general as an area of research is under threat and needs to be defended, but these tend to be misleading statements. For example, Quine famously claimed that epistemology should be subsumed by empirical psychology, and that normative prescriptions for belief-formation should be replaced by the empirical study of how beliefs are actually formed in response to stimuli (see W. V. Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," in his *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 69–90). But Quine later clarified that he wanted to retain a place for normative evaluations of belief. It's just that, in his view, the right kind of normative talk for epistemologists to engage in is instrumental in character: we should proceed by identifying the relevant cognitive goals, such as the achievement of true beliefs, and then we should proceed to identify good and bad ways to achieve those goals, and recommend the good ones. (See W. V. Quine, "Reply to White," in *The Philosophy of W.V. Quine*, ed. Lewis Edwin Hahn and Paul Arthur Schilpp (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1986), 663–665).

Another potentially misleading discussion of the ethics of belief can be found in Brian Huss, "Three Challenges (and Three Replies) to the Ethics of Belief," *Synthese* 168 (2009): 249-

literature,[6] as well as arguments over instrumental conceptions of epistemic reasons and rationality,[7] and arguments over whether we have any kind of control over our beliefs and what kind of control would be required for deontological terms of appraisal to be properly applicable to us as believers,[8] and arguments over what kinds of things count as evidence at all.[9]

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271. Huss identifies and replies to what he calls three challenges to the ethics of belief. The challenges Huss identifies are real, but they are challenges to particular views people have defended about the normative requirements on beliefs, not challenges to the business of working on normative requirements for beliefs in general.

[6] Just a small sampling: Earl Conee and Richard Feldman, *Evidentialism: Essays in Epistemology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), Nishi Shah, "A New Argument for Evidentialism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 56, 225 (2006): 481-498, Pamela Hieronymi, "The Wrong Kind of Reason," *The Journal of Philosophy* 102, 9 (2005): 437-457, Andrew Reisner, "The Possibility of Pragmatic Reasons for Belief and the Wrong Kind of Reasons Problem," *Philosophical Studies* 145, 2 (2009): 257-272, Andrew Reisner, "A Short Refutation of Strict Normative Evidentialism," *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 58, 5 (2015): 477-485, and Trent Dougherty, ed., *Evidentialism and its Discontents* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

[7] See Richard Foley, *The Theory of Epistemic Rationality* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987), Richard Foley, *Working Without a Net: A Study of Egocentric Rationality* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), Thomas Kelly, "Epistemic Rationality as Instrumental Rationality: A Critique," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66, 3 (2003): 612-640, Adam Leite, "Epistemic Instrumentalism and Reasons for Belief: A Reply to Tom Kelly's Epistemic Rationality as Instrumental Rationality: A Critique," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75, 2 (2007): 456-464, Thomas Kelly, "Evidence and Normativity: Reply to Leite," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 75, 2 (2007): 465-474, and Clayton Littlejohn, *Justification and the Truth-Connection* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[8] See William Alston, "The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification," *Philosophical Perspectives* 2 (1988): 257-299 (reprinted in his *Epistemic Justification: Essays in the Theory of Knowledge* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 81-114), Bernard Williams, "Deciding to Believe," in his *Problems of the Self: Philosophical Papers 1956-1972* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1973), 136-151, Barbara Winters, "Believing at Will," *The Journal of Philosophy* 76, 5 (1978): 243-256, Sharon Ryan, "Doxastic Compatibilism and the Ethics of Belief," *Philosophical Studies* 114 (2003): 47-79, Richard Feldman, "The Ethics of Belief," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 60 (2000): 667-695, Richard Feldman, "Modest Deontologism in Epistemology," *Synthese* 161 (2008): 339-355, Rik Peels, "Believing at Will is Possible," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 88 (2014): 1-18, and Patrick Bondy, "Epistemic Deontologism and Strong Doxastic Voluntarism: A Defense," *Dialogue* (2015), DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/S0012217315000487.

[9] See Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), John Turri, "The Ontology of Epistemic Reasons," *Nous* 43, 3 (2009): 490-512, Richard Feldman

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The abundance of interest in and research on the ethics of belief is a very happy circumstance indeed, both because many of the questions falling under the heading of the ethics of belief are intrinsically interesting (to me, at least!), and because many of these questions are directly relevant to other sub-fields of philosophy and to the world more generally. For example: plausibly, there is a moral requirement to learn a reasonable amount about subjects that are morally important. (You morally ought to learn about what kinds of food babies can safely eat and what kinds will kill them before you feed your infant, for instance.) But there are different ways to take that requirement: are we required to gain lots of *knowledge* about subjects that are morally important? Or are we only required to do our best to gain knowledge (so that, for example, gaining justified but false beliefs is enough to meet the requirement)? What about if we gain justified true beliefs about the moral domain, but due to quirky features of the situation, we fail to have knowledge? And how much are we required to learn before we can stop and do other things? These seem like morally important questions to answer, and once we start addressing them, we're working on the ethics of belief.

A related area of research has to do with the epistemic norms associated with treating beliefs or propositions as reasons in practical deliberation. Epistemologists have done quite a bit of work on the epistemic norms of assertion,[10] which is a special case of action, and some recent work has been done on epistemic requirements for treating propositions as reasons for acting more generally.[11] One particularly pressing question has to do with the relation of justifications, excuses, and control. For example: if Will is hosting a dinner party, and he serves a dish which contains an ingredient to which his guest Wanda is deathly allergic, we might naturally be inclined to morally blame Will for his oversight. It's normally expected that hosts inquire into the allergies of their

and Earl Connee, "Evidence," in *Epistemology: New Essays*, ed. Quentin Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 83-104, and Littlejohn, *Justification and the Truth-Connection*.

[10] e.g. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*; Rachel McKinnon, "The Supportive Reasons Norm of Assertion," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 50, 2 (2013): 121-135, John Turri, "Knowledge and Suberogatory Assertion," *Philosophical Studies* 167, 3 (2014): 557-567, Jonathan Kvanvig, "Assertion, Knowledge, and Lotteries," in *Williamson on Knowledge*, ed. Duncan Pritchard and Patrick Greenough (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 140-160, B. J. C. Madison, "Is Justification Knowledge?" *Journal of Philosophical Research* 35 (2010): 173-191, and Jennifer Lackey, "Norms of Assertion," *Nous* 41, 4 (2007): 594-626.

[11] e.g. John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, "Knowledge and Action," *Journal of Philosophy* 105, 10 (2008): 571-590, Mikkel Gerken, "Warrant and Action," *Synthese* 178, 3 (2011): 529-547. Susanne Mantel, "Acting for Reasons, Apt Action, and Knowledge," *Synthese* 190, 17 (2013): 3685-3888, and Clayton Littlejohn, *Justification and the Truth-Connection*.

guests, after all. But if we later find out that Will did inquire about allergies, and Wanda didn't reply because she didn't even know that she had the allergy in question, then we would of course withdraw our blame for Will. But beyond the appropriateness of withdrawing our blame, it's not entirely clear how we ought to regard Will and his dinner. Should we view Will as having done exactly what he ought to have done, since he did his best to serve food everyone could eat? Or should we only think that Will is *excused* or *blameless* because he couldn't know about Wanda's allergy, but that he was nevertheless *unjustified* in serving the dinner he did? After all, he didn't know that his meal was safe for his guests to eat. How we address these questions will depend, among other things, on what status beliefs must have in order to be properly treated as premises in practical deliberation. This is an area of research that deserves further development.

This special issue collects five new essays on various topics relevant to the ethics of belief. The issue begins with Sharon Ryan's paper, "Moral Evidentialism," in which Ryan defends Clifford's evidentialist principle. There are of course a number of recent epistemologists who defend evidentialist principles, but they typically reject Clifford's principle that it's *morally* wrong to believe on insufficient evidence. The standard evidentialist view tends to be that it's *epistemically* wrong, or impermissible, or unjustified, to form beliefs on insufficient evidence, but that Clifford went too far with his moral condemnation of evidentially unsupported beliefs. One common objection to Clifford's view is that it just seems too strong: there seem to be cases where it can be morally permissible and pragmatically justified to hold beliefs that go against the evidence.[12] Another kind of objection is that we need to have voluntary control over anything for which we can be morally responsible, and that we don't seem to have voluntary control over what we believe.[13]

Ryan argues that there are convincing replies to both of these sorts of objection. For example, against the second objection, she argues that we don't after all need to have voluntary control over events or actions in order to be praiseworthy or blameworthy for them. And furthermore, she argues, it seems that if we are going to make sense of the practice of holding people morally responsible for their actions, then we need to be able to hold people morally responsible for their beliefs, when their beliefs are held contrary to good evidence.

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[12] John Heil gives a standard case meant to illustrate this possibility, in "Believing Reasonably," *Noûs* 26, 1 (1992): 47-62.

[13] Alston, "Deontological Conception," gives an oft-cited formulation of this argument against doxastic obligations.

So the standard rejection of a moral version of evidentialism deserves at the very least to be seriously reconsidered.

The second paper in this issue is Andrew Reisner and Joseph Van Weelden's (RVW) "Moral Reasons for Moral Beliefs: A Puzzle Case for Moral Testimony Pessimism." *Moral testimony* is testimony to the effect that some moral claim is true, or that some action is morally right, and a *moral expert* is someone who is more likely than a non-expert to arrive at true beliefs about moral matters. Moral testimony *optimists* think that when an identifiable moral expert has given moral testimony, non-experts may legitimately form moral beliefs on the basis of that testimony, other things being equal (e.g. other identifiable moral experts mustn't be known to have given conflicting moral testimony). Moral testimony *pessimists* deny the legitimacy of forming moral beliefs in that way.

RVW construct a problem case for moral testimony pessimists. The case is designed to show that it is very natural to think that non-experts may legitimately form beliefs on the basis of the testimony of moral experts, because when non-experts form beliefs in this way, this makes it more likely that they will form true moral beliefs, and consequently that they will perform morally right actions. Requiring that we never form moral beliefs on the basis of expert testimony makes it likelier that we will perform morally wrong actions. RVW go on to consider a number of arguments for pessimism, such as Alison Hills's argument that it is better to have moral understanding than to have moral knowledge without understanding (where it's possible to gain moral knowledge but not moral understanding by forming beliefs on the basis of the testimony of moral experts).[14] They concede that this and other related arguments may be enough to show that there is some *pro tanto* reason not to form beliefs on the basis of moral testimony, but they argue that there is always also a contrary reason in favour of optimism. And, RVW argue, there doesn't seem to be any reason to think that the *pro tanto* reason in favour of pessimism ever decisively favours pessimism in any concrete case.

In "A Case for Epistemic Agency," Dustin Olson describes the concept of epistemic agency, and argues that it has a place in our theorizing about the formation and justification of beliefs. According to Olson, epistemic agency is a kind of agency which we exercise over our belief-formation. He argues that belief-formation is a skill, and like any other skill, it can be developed and refined. And, because we can improve or fail to improve our belief-forming skills, we can be better or worse at forming beliefs in various domains, and so normative evaluations of the way we form our beliefs can be appropriate.

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[14] Alison Hills, "Moral Testimony and Moral Epistemology," *Ethics* 120, 1 (2009): 94-127.

Central to Olson's account is that epistemic agency does not presuppose either direct or indirect doxastic voluntarism: you can exercise epistemic agency with respect to your formation of the belief that *p* even without ever having anything like an intention to form the belief that *p*. Olson goes on to defend the use of the concept of epistemic agency against the challenge that the mechanistic character of belief-formation rules out the possibility of epistemic agency,[15] and that employing a concept of epistemic agency doesn't respect the sense in which it's not possible to practice epistemic self-improvement.[16]

In "Transparency and Reasons for Belief," Benjamin Wald considers the relation between the aim of belief and the transparency of doxastic deliberation. It is commonly held among epistemologists that belief aims at the truth, although there are several importantly different ways to understand what this aim-of-belief-talk amounts to. According to 'normativists' about the aim of belief, it is partly constitutive of the mental state of belief that any belief is *correct* if and only if it is true (where 'correct' is supposed to be more than just a synonym for 'true'). And, according to Shah and Velleman,[17] appealing to the aim of belief in this normative sense can help us to explain what they call the 'transparency' of doxastic deliberation, which is the fact that in consciously deliberating about whether to believe *p*, we automatically deliberate directly about whether *p* is true, rather than, say, about whether it would be a good thing to believe that *p*. If belief *constitutively* has a (normative) truth-aim, the explanation goes, then anyone conceptually sophisticated enough to deliberate about whether to believe *p* must *already* endorse an evidential norm on belief. So the normative truth-aim of belief explains why we can only appeal to evidence for or against the truth of *p* in deliberating about whether to believe *p*.

Wald argues that Shah and Velleman's explanatory strategy fails. He agrees that it seems to be a conceptual truth that beliefs cannot be deliberately held on the basis of non-evidential reasons, but he argues that if anyone were to form a belief on the basis of such a reason, they would not thereby be rationally criticisable. But Shah and Velleman's aim-of-belief explanation of transparency entails that if anyone were to form a belief on the basis of a non-evidential consideration, they *would* thereby be rationally criticisable. So their explanation seems to be mistaken. Wald's positive strategy to explain why only evidential

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[15] See Hilary Kornblith, *On Reflection*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[16] See Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij, "Why We Cannot Rely on Ourselves for Epistemic Improvement," *Philosophical Issues* 23 (2013): 276-96.

[17] See Nishi Shah and David Velleman, "Doxastic Deliberation," *The Philosophical Review* 114, 4 (2005): 497-534.

reasons seem to be genuine normative reasons for belief involves combining the view that transparency is conceptually true together with a moderate form of motivational internalism about epistemic reasons.

Finally, in "Believing and Acting: Voluntary Control and the Pragmatic Theory of Belief," Brian Hedden explores an interesting and novel kind of control which we can exercise over our beliefs, if the pragmatic account of belief is correct. According to the pragmatic account, whether a subject S believes that *p* depends in part on how well an attribution of the belief that *p* to S would help render S's actions rationally intelligible. The pragmatic account of belief is of course controversial, but it does enjoy a certain amount of intuitive support – for example, if S appears to sincerely claim to believe that *p*, but we are unable to make S's actions seem at all rationally intelligible except by attributing to S the belief that *not-p*, then we might naturally be inclined to attribute to S the belief that *not-p*, and conclude that S is confused about the content of his beliefs.

If our actions constrain our beliefs in this way, Hedden argues, then it is possible to exercise voluntary control over our beliefs, in cases where our performing or failing to perform an action will be partly constitutive of our having or not having a particular belief. (After all, we do typically have voluntary control over our actions.) And, Hedden argues, this indirect sort of voluntary control over our beliefs might be sufficient to save a responsibilist conception of epistemic justification or evaluation from ought-implies-can objections of the kind given by Alston.[18]

The papers collected here address various themes from the ethics of belief. They shed fresh light on important questions, and bring new arguments to bear on familiar topics of concern to most epistemologists, and indeed, to anyone interested in normative requirements on beliefs either for their own sake or because of the way such requirements bear on other domains of inquiry.

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[18] Alston, "Deontological Conception."