

Martina Lindner: Epistemic norms or moral norms? - Can current evidentialists benefit from a closer look at W.K. Clifford's ethics of belief?

Abstract:

The concept of epistemic normativity figures prominently in recent discussions on the ethics of belief. But basing one's conception of an ethics of belief on epistemic normativity can be quite problematic - a notoriously controversial issue is the source of that specific kind of normativity

Pragmatists in the debate on an ethics of belief usually deny the idea that beliefs are subject to a particular and autonomous normative domain, and argue that they are instead subject to common practical norms (e.g. moral norms). Thus, pragmatists are structurally better off than evidentialists as they assume a position with weaker claims.

Taking a look back at the origin of the debate on an ethics of belief can broaden our view here and might perhaps be promising for the evidentialists. In his text "The Ethics of Belief", which ignited the debate, W. K. Clifford argues for an evidentialist conception within a framework of *moral* normativity. Thus, while he shares the content of his norms with the evidentialists, his structural framework comes close to a pragmatist account.

This specific feature of Clifford's ethics of belief may render his position rather attractive for the current debate. He claims to have established an evidentialist ethics of belief without the strong assumptions his later fellow evidentialists make. I will investigate whether and in how far the current debate on an ethics of belief might benefit from taking Clifford's position into account.

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