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# The Ethics of Belief by William Clifford - Climate Change Denial?

## Ethics of Climate Change Denialism

“The scientific consensus is clear: global climate change caused by human activities is occurring now, and is a growing threat to society.” This statement, made by the American Association for the Advancement of Science, is met with agreement from the National Academies of Sciences from eleven countries (Academia Brasileira de Ciências, et al.), and between 90% to 100% of published climate scientists (Cook, et al. 2016). Yet, despite this nearly unanimous consensus in the scientific community, only 48% of Americans believe that climate change is human-caused, and 20% believe that there is absolutely no evidence to support the existence of climate change (Funk, et al., 2016). Clearly, with such striking unanimity in the scientific community, such evidence must exist. This raises a question: is climate change denialism, the belief that the scientific evidence for climate change is unreliable and should be rejected, unethical? The writings of William Clifford can be applied to provide an answer to this question.

In Clifford’s “The Ethics of Belief,” he begins by invoking a parable. A ship owner is preparing his ship for a voyage. He knows that this ship is not seaworthy, but he does not want to put forward the expense to repair it. Through force of will, he makes himself believe that the ship is seaworthy, despite the abundant evidence to the contrary. Unfortunately, the ship sinks, killing the passengers, and leaving the ship owner with a heavy heart and even heavier insurance repayment.

It is clear that the ship owner is guilty for the deaths of his passengers. But would he still be guilty of wrongdoing if the ship had made the voyage successfully? Clifford argues that the ship owner would still be liable, and that the culpability comes not from the consequences of his belief, but from manner in which he obtained his belief. Though his belief was sincerely held, it was based not on evidence and investigation, but on the denial of his doubts. This parable has an analog in climate change denialism. Clifford would likely argue that climate change deniers have no right to believe such a thing since they come to their belief not through investigation, but through denial of evidence. Even if they are correct in their belief, and climate change turns out to not be true, Clifford would argue that they are still acting immorally, since the culpability of their belief lies in the manner it is obtained, and not in the trueness of the belief (Clifford, 1877).

What obligation does the average American have to hold beliefs backed by evidence? Most climate change deniers are non-scientists, meaning that there is no real obligation to the scientific community, their credibility, or their careers to hold beliefs backed by scientific evidence. Is denialism still unethical if the belief is privately held? To this, Clifford answers “yes,” by saying.

It is not only the leader of men, statesmen, philosopher, or poet, that owes this bounden duty to mankind. Every rustic who delivers in the village alehouse his slow, infrequent sentences, may help to kill or keep alive the fatal superstitions which clog his race. Every hard-worked wife of an artisan may transmit to her children beliefs which shall knit society together, or rend it in pieces.

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No simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape the universal duty of questioning all that we believe.

Like a plague, superstition and conspiracy theories, such as climate change denialism, can spread through society, and it is the responsibility of all citizens to curb this pestilence by holding only justified belief earned through investigation. Clifford argues that for citizens to hold only justified belief creates not only personal benefit, but also a collective one.

A common defense of climate change denialism is that it is a form of skepticism. The difference between the two is important, and is described by the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry in this way:

Proper skepticism promotes scientific inquiry, critical investigation, and the use of reason in examining controversial and extraordinary claims. It is foundational to the scientific method. Denial, on the other hand, is the a priori rejection of ideas without objective consideration.

This does, however, raise the question: how can we be sure, in a system as complex as global climate, that climate science is trustworthy? This too is answered by Clifford. He uses the example of the (at the time, groundbreaking) discovery that the Sun is made of mostly hydrogen. This was discovered using a spectroscope, a device which can be used to deduce the chemical makeup of an object from light. It was known at the time that the spectroscope was effective for identifying terrestrial substances. But how could scientists be sure that it was effective for the Sun? Clifford argues that it is justified to add to experience by inference on the assumption of nature's uniformity. That is, it is justified to assume that the spectroscope is reliable for testing of the Sun based on its terrestrial reliability. Clifford states this rule for the justification of inference: "We may believe what goes beyond our experience, only when it is inferred from that experience by the assumption that what we do not know is like what we know." That is, we can assume that further climate investigation is trustworthy and will reveal similar results based on our current understanding of climate and the abundance of investigation already in existence which confirms this theory.

Clifford's "The Ethics of Belief" shows that climate change denial is not only unscientific, but also unethical. He states clearly that "it is wrong in all cases to believe on insufficient evidence." But with belief in human-caused climate change at only 48% among Americans, and with only slight fluctuation of this percentage over the past decade (Funk, et al., 2016), it appears that this immorally held belief, or as Clifford put it, pestilence, will not be cured any time soon.