Willing and Knowing

ABSTRACT:

This paper discusses W. K. Clifford's classic paper, "The Ethics of Belief," and the significance of his use of the locution "knowingly and willingly" in the context of morally irresponsible ignorance. It is argued that this locution can point to a very subtle and important distinction in the premisses of ethically responsible belief formation. An analysis of willful ignorance is then given. It is argued that, strictly speaking, there is no such thing as willful ignorance: what is called willful ignorance in ordinary language is just the phenomena of getting oneself knowingly to believe something by willingly and knowingly altering the evidence for one's belief, rather than the genuine phenomenon of getting oneself willingly to believe something against the evidence. The former phenomenon is not, however, morally approvable. Therefore, willfulness .of belief is not a necessary condition of morally irresponsible ignorance

Main Article

1. There is a very famous passage in W. K. Clifford's classic paper "The Ethics of Belief" in which Clifford describes a shipowner who deceives himself to believe that his ship is seaworthy by 'knowingly and willingly' ignoring the evidence to the contrary, ie. by 'knowingly and willingly' changing the evidential situation that determines the content of his belief. According to Clifford, the shipowner's mental behaviour is unethical. He has no right to believe that the ship is seaworthy on such evidence as is before him. He is knowingly and willingly ignorant of the real condition of the ship and, as a consequence, carries moral responsibility for the consequences of his evil state of mind, consequences highlighted by the deaths of passengers and crew when the ship goes down.

The question of why Clifford uses the words 'knowingly and willingly' when he describes the way in which the shipowner makes himself ignorant of the real condition of the ship is significant not only to Clifford's own theory but to the ethics of belief in general. One commentator (see Haack, forthcoming) has recently argued that Clifford really means 'willful ignorance' and just lacks in subtlety when he says 'knowingly and willingly'. The motive behind this interpretation is the view that only a person who is willfully ignorant of the evidence against her belief can carry moral responsibility for the consequences of the belief. In particular, involuntary ignorance, according to this view, has no such effect. I question this interpretation. In particular, I question the idea that the description of the shipowner's

ignorance as 'knowingly and willingly' undertaken is somehow less subtle than its description as 'willfully' undertaken. My aim here is to show that the expression 'knowingly and willingly', chosen by Clifford to describe the shipowner's malicious manipulation of the evidence, points to a very subtle and important distinction in the premisses of ethically responsible belief formation. I am not saying that Clifford was fully aware of this distinction, only that his use of the locution 'knowingly and willingly' could also be interpreted as a sign of wise hesitation, or of insight that is not given justice to if we simply adopt the view that he only meant willful ignorance by his words.

2. It is a well-known fact that doing something willingly entails doing it knowingly, that 'we voluntarily do only what we know we are doing'. (1) Another way of putting this is to say that doing something willingly is self-intimating. It is impossible to do something willingly without learning by so doing that one is so doing. I believe that this is true and that this link between willing and knowing is 'importantly connected with activity and responsibility', that, for instance, 'non-negligent ignorance of effects may often preclude responsibility for them'. (2) I also believe, however, that this assumption can be dangerously misleading. The danger is that one forgets that the notion of willingly doing something and the notion of knowingly doing something are not coextensive, that, for instance, a mental state knowingly undertaken need not be a willful act of the mind. In the sphere of the mental, in particular, a clear distinction needs to be drawn between performing an act willfully and performing it knowingly. The latter is not a sufficient condition of the former, although the former is a sufficient condition of the latter.

That the expression 'willful ignorance' is so frequently employed in the premisses of morally irresponsible belief formation suggests, in fact, that this important distinction between mental acts willfully performed and mental states knowingly undertaken is not always acknowledged. For what is called 'willful ignorance' in such cases is not, strictly speaking, any such thing, but is only a state of mind knowingly undertaken. We may knowingly get ourselves into a state of believing something that is severely undermined by evidence without, genuinely speaking, being able to will to believe so or to believe so willingly. This satisfies an epistemic condition of self-control, ie. we know what is happening to us, but it fails to satisfy the condition of willfulness in action.

Notice that one can exercise epistemic self-control even over such things that are forced upon oneself. Let us say that during a process of raising my hand I am made to see that my act has been monitored for voting purposes. This happens so unexpectedly that I cannot do anything about it. I know that I am voting, but I am not willfully doing so. I just see my hand up there,

and all I can do is to acknowledge the situation: I willed to raise my hand, I came to know about my act of voting, but I do not willfully vote. The fact that I know that I am voting is not sufficient to make my act willful, although such knowledge may have a liberating effect on me in a Spinozistic sense.

Talk about 'willful ignorance' just represents one of those many ways in which ordinary language is apt to mislead us. To understand this better let us consider Clifford's irresponsible shipowner once again. For the sake of argument let us assume that the ship is the latest acquisition to the shipowner's fleet and that just before the ship is to depart to its first voyage the shipowner finds out that the previous owner of the ship wants to talk to him about the seaworthiness of this latest acquisition. Let us say that on the basis of some similiar incidents in the past the shipowner concludes that this very strongly indicates that there is a serious problem with the ship, and that the previous owner would tell him what the problem is if he, the present owner, arranged to meet with him. Such doubts make the shipowner very unhappy. Rather than acting on these doubts and arranging a meeting with the previous owner, however, the shipowner just decides to get rid of these doubts by focusing on something else than his present work. He calculates that he will be able to suppress all his doubts about the ship if he can spend the rest of the day, until the ship departs, with his best friend. As a consequence, he arranges a meeting with his friend and succeeds to suppress his doubts and to believe that the ship is seaworthy when, in fact, there is evidence that tells him that it is not.

All these arrangements to avert his thoughts from his work does the shipowner willingly and knowingly, ie. they are willful arrangements. We can also say that he knowingly becomes ignorant of the troubles with the ship. For knowledge, in this case, need not entail certainty. He cannot be certain either of what the previous owner would tell him if he were to contact him or of the successfulness of his arrangements designed to suppress his doubts about the ship's seaworthiness. If it is the case that the previous owner would tell him that the ship is not seaworthy, and that his arrangements do succeed to suppress his doubts, then he knows what he is doing, namely, that he is making himself ignorant of the troubles with the ship. He is not, however, willfully ignorant of these troubles. If he does become ignorant of them, then this is something that ultimately happens to him as a consequence of his willful arrangements. But it is not something he can willfully do. He cannot willfully ignore the evidence that so clearly points to the troubles with the ship. He can only willfully do things that he justifiably believes will lead to his ignoring this evidence.

What is called willful ignorance is, therefore, just the phenomenon of getting oneself knowingly to believe something by willingly and knowingly altering the evidence for one's belief rather

than the genuine phenomenon of getting oneself willingly to believe something against the evidence. Let me elaborate on this point by the following three clauses:

(1) A comes to believe knowingly that p, and p is false, by willingly and knowingly manipulating the evidential situation that determines the content of her belief.

(2) A comes to believe willingly that p, and p is false, by willingly and knowingly deciding to believe against the evidence.

(3) A comes to believe willingly that p, and p is false, by willingly and knowingly manipulating the evidential situation that determines the content of her belief.

Of these three clauses only the first one describes a possible state of affairs. It is also the state of affairs that is often misleadingly labelled as 'willful ignorance' in ordinary language. A genuine case of willful ignorance would have to be of the form (2) or (3). Neither (2) nor (3) is possible, however. (2) is impossible, because it is impossible to believe anything just by deciding to believe so — whether or not one does so against the evidence. Notice, however, that (2) is not fallacious. If it were possible to believe just by deciding to believe, then A could, indeed, willingly come to have a false belief that p. (3), on the other hand, is based on a fallacy. For it is possible willingly and knowingly manipulate the evidential situation that determines the content of one's belief, but it does not follow from this that one, thereby, comes willingly to have a false belief that p. To repeat, one can predict, but not willingly choose, what will happen to oneself in such a situation.

3. Consider now the implications of these conclusions to the ethics of belief. We are surely responsible for various incidents that happen to us. If I willingly and knowingly neglect the regular check-ups of my car, then I am surely responsible for my car breaking down in the middle of highway one day even though that incident could not be classified as a willful act of mine. In the same vein, I can be responsible for my beliefs. If I willingly and knowingly manage to manipulate the evidence that determines my belief, then I am responsible for my belief even though my belief cannot be classified as willful.

It is important to notice, however, that epistemic self-control does not suffice alone to justify such responsibility ascriptions. The fact that we may have foresight of what we come to do, as well as, of what we come to believe cannot be the main explaining factor of why we are responsible for doings that are not willful. If it were, we could be held responsible for all the incidents that we know about — a suggestion too absurd to deserve even a serious consideration. It must be the case that we are responsible for incidents that happen to us if and only if we are led to these incidents by willingly and knowingly manipulating the causal fabric on which the fact that they happen to us depend. In this way, we may be responsible for

both believings and behaviour that are not willingly undertaken by us. The distinction remains, however, between responsibility for willful acts and responsibility for beliefs. The latter depends on willful manipulation of the causal fabric on which our beliefs are grounded, and on a reliable foresight of the way in which this fabric will behave. The former, ie. responsibility for willful acts, depends much more directly on willful manipulation of ourselves, ie. of our internal .motives to act one way or the other

Notes

(1) Adams (1985) p. 5.

((2) Cf. Stocker (1982

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