In January 1877, the liberal monthly *Contemporary Review* published an article by W. K. Clifford that elicited a storm of protest from the wider periodical press. Like other famously provocative articles of the 1860s and the 1870s, such as Huxley’s “On the Physical Basis of Life” (*Fortnightly Review*, 1869) and Henry Thompson’s “The ‘Prayer for the Sick’: Hints towards a Serious Attempt to Estimate Its Value” (*Contemporary Review*, 1872), Clifford’s essay was seen as a serious attempt by a scientific naturalist to undermine the philosophical claims of religion and metaphysics, and (for many) worrying evidence of the growing influence of an agnostic wing within the liberal intellectual press.

“The Ethics of Belief” was one of numerous articles in the *Contemporary Review* and its principal rival, the *Fortnightly Review*, that sought a rational debate on such fundamental philosophical questions as the status of evidence, credibility, and authority—with a view to extending scientific principles beyond science itself into all regions of intellectual inquiry. Unlike any other major contribution to the war of ideas between scientific naturalism and metaphysics, however, “The Ethics of Belief” was published in a context where the liberalism of the liberal periodical press was suddenly much less able to be taken for granted than it had been hitherto. In January 1877 the *Contemporary Review* became embroiled in a serious public dispute over editorial direction and policy which saw the dismissal of James Knowles from the assistant editorial post that he had held since 1870—this despite general recognition that his efforts had transformed the magazine from a staid and only modestly successful publication into one of the leading intellectual organs of its day. For Knowles “The Ethics of Belief” may well have felt like “an excellent joke at the expense of those earnest believers”—or at least a sharp parting jab.

If so, it was a jab which said more than Knowles himself, or the scientists who wrote for him, should have been entirely comfortable with. This chapter will argue that “The Ethics of Belief” identified a serious
difficulty with the definition of credibility, both in mid-to-late-nineteenth-century science generally and, more specifically, within the liberal periodical press which had helped to shape and promote a particular version of science for the public. Clifford's article was in several respects not outstandingly original or philosophically subtle, but it exposed (and, discomfittingly, demonstrated) strains within the prevailing account of the grounds for legitimate scientific belief. The circumstances under which the article was published were themselves unexpectedly ethically complex. Copies of the January edition of the *Contemporary Review* had been on the bookstands for barely three weeks when the editorship of the journal became the subject of a high profile court case in Chancery, in February 1877, in which questions of belief were very publicly played out, and contributors to the journal were required to make a decision about the validity of the *Contemporary Review*’s claim to be a liberal forum for debate. Read in that context, the tensions and contradictions within the argument of Clifford's essay were, I shall be arguing, predictive of the concessions that had to be made in his strenuous ethics of belief when moving from the realm of philosophy of science to the practical world of periodical publishing.

"The Ethics of Belief" is remembered now, almost exclusively, for the swagger of brutal rationalism about its claim that there is a "universal duty of questioning all that we believe"—a duty that "no simplicity of mind, no obscurity of station, can escape." Clifford was 31 years old when it was published, Professor of Applied Mathematics at University College London, a fellow of the Royal Society since 1874, and the youngest member ever elected to the Metaphysical Society. (The paper had been read before the Society on April 11, 1876.) He already possessed a reputation as an "ardent libertarian," a "convincing republican," and so fearless a goader of the public's "religious prejudices" that even a friend and admirer like Leslie Stephen would soon hesitate to publish him in the *Cornhill Magazine*. He was also fighting the pulmonary disease which would kill him within little more than two years.

His reputation for unflinching rationalism has served in some measure to obscure those aspects of Clifford's thinking which distinguished him from many of his fellow promoters of science in the liberal press. In a series of papers published in the *Fortnightly Review* and the *Contemporary Review* during the earlier 1870s, he argued vigorously against that very visible strain within scientific rationalism—Huxley and James Fitzjames Stephen being the prime exemplars—that habitually denied or at least deferred indefinitely the application of scientific modes of inquiry to the spheres of ethics and, relatively, moral psychology. Stephen, for example, bullishly concluded a duffing up of W. G. Ward in the December 1874 issue of the *Contemporary Review* with a statement that "For my part I can only regret, as a waste of power, the passionless efforts which are continually being made to get at some superior kind of truth, by poring over the speculations of the mind." Even John Tyndall, the great defender of the use of the imagination in science, found it necessary in certain contexts, such as the 1860s debate on the scientific credibility of miracles, to make a strict distinction between "affair[s] of the heart"—in which he included the affections, the emotions, and "the estimation of moral goodness"—and the work of weighing "the credibility of physical facts": "... these must be judged by the dry light of the intellect alone." At its strictest, which is not infrequently, this rhetorical strain in the public defense of scientific rationalism banishes to the future everything that does not deal purely and logically with "objective fact." More commonly, it draws a pragmatic dividing line between the empirical work of science (glossed by G. H. Lewes as "work of Reason and Demonstration," of "Verification, and Not Conviction") and the acknowledgment of "those Moral Instincts and Aesthetic Instincts which determine conduct and magnify existence"—"ultimate facts of Feeling" which we cannot explain and must "simply accept."
theoretical claim which enables its identification as a fact, and there can be no theory which is not established by reference to perceived facts and what he called “fundamental Ideas” (Space, Time, Number, Motion, Cause, Force, and Uniformity, among them). Mill’s version of scientific induction was, by comparison, toughly empiricist. In A System of Logic (1843) he defined hypotheses much more narrowly as the logical mental manipulations of observed facts—his opposition to the residual metaphysics in Whewell’s philosophy leading him to misrepresent his opponent’s thinking (as E. W. Strong argued in a much cited essay of 1955), ignoring the arguments for the historical conditioning of thought and the relativity of theory and fact. In short, Mill’s Logic turned its back on those elements of Whewell’s philosophy of induction which presented facts as anything other than the sufficient and objectively perceivable bases for those operations of logic which lead to knowledge.

Broadly speaking, Mill’s empiricism dominated the popular presentation of science for much of the nineteenth century. But the Mill who had attracted most comment in the liberal journals during the three years preceding the publication of Clifford’s paper was, importantly, not the Mill of A System of Logic, but the Mill of the posthumously published Three Essays on Religion which, greatly to the consternation of disciples like John Morley (editor of the Fortnightly), found it “legitimate and philosophically defensible” to preserve an “indulgent hope” that the world progresses toward an ideal good, that there is “a large balance of probability” in favor of the creation of Nature “by intelligence . . . perhaps unlimited intelligence,” and even that there might be an afterlife. Morley devoted a two-part review article in the Fortnightly Review to countering this apostasy by turning the clear-sighted empiricism of the younger Mill back on the “twilight hopes and tepid possibilities” of the late Mill. The Contemporary, perhaps as tellingly, did not review the book at all—but both periodicals found themselves giving expanded room, as the 1870s progressed, to the arguments of men like R. H. Hutton, W. R. Greg, and W. B. Carpenter who sought to retain a place for idealism and (often) for religion alongside an empiricist science. It was partly in reaction against such defenses of idealism and theism that the most publicly committed empiricists, including Huxley, Stephen, and Tyndall, found themselves rhetorically banishing metaphysics and morals to the realm of the “non-scientific.”

Clifford, by comparison, was a proselytizer on behalf of science who devoted himself, in his writing for the general periodical press, to bringing morals within the domain of scientific rationalism. One of the reasons for his greater willingness to put ethics at the center of scientific inquiry may well be the extent of his influence by Whewell in addition to Mill—a fact often forgotten by his contemporaries and by later historians when they place him too exclusively in the camp of Mill’s empiricists. It is, for example, rarely recalled now that Clifford delivered the oration at Whewell’s memorial service in Trinity College, Cambridge. "The Ethics of Belief" is, I want to suggest, torn between the clinical empiricism of Mill’s Logic and something closer to the more flexible rationalism of Whewell and the later Mill. It fights shy of asserting the philosophical viability of theism, but not out of antipathy to the unscientific realms of possibility—rather out of a desire to draw attention back from the enticements of hope to the moral virtue of skepticism, and to find room, within his conception of the philosophy of science, for the demands of conscience. The primary duty for Clifford is to inquire constantly into the conditions of all our beliefs and inquiries—not in order to secure “Truth” (which he conceives may be beyond our reach even in small matters) but as a moral and intellectual good in its own right.

Clifford began with a cautionary tale:

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship. He knew that she was old, and not over-well built at the first; that she had seen many seas and chimes, and often had needed repairs. Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy. These doubts preyed upon his mind, and made him unhappy; he thought that perhaps he ought to have her thoroughly overhauled and refitted, even though this should put him to great expense. Before the ship sailed, however, he succeeded in overcoming these melancholy reflections. He said to himself that she had gone safely through so many voyages and weathered so many storms, that it was idle to suppose that she would not come safely home from this trip also. He would put his trust in Providence, which could hardly fail to protect all these unhappy families that were leaving their fatherland to seek for better times elsewhere. He would dismiss from his mind all ungenerous suspicions about the honesty of builders and contractors. In such ways he acquired a sincere and comfortable conviction that his vessel was thoroughly safe and seaworthy; he watched her departure with a light heart, and benevolent wishes for the success of the exiles in their strange new home that was to be; and he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales.

What shall we say of him? Surely this, that he was verily guilty of the death of those men. It is admitted that he did sincerely believe
in the soundness of his ship; but the sincerity of his conviction can in no wise help him, because he had no right to believe on such evidence as was before him.  

The subject matter and the idiom ("he was verily guilty") left few of the essay's first readers in doubt that Clifford intended an analogy between the ship and the Church of England (or religion more broadly)—and the parallel prompted several readers to complain vehemently. R. H. Hutton protested (anonymously) in the Spectator that Clifford had "muddied the waters by causing his credulous shipowner to profit commercially by the disaster." The Saturday Review columnist objected, similarly, to an argument based on "supposed instances of credulity prompted by self-interest, regardless of the possible or certain injury to others." But the nature of self-interest was precisely what Clifford was concerned with. The burden of almost all his writing on ethics is that the primary question of knowledge is not the ascertainment of Truth but the rigorous pursuit of the best possible conditions for belief by exercising "our powers of self-control, of doubting, of judicially and fairly weighing the evidence." Self-interest, as he saw it, tends too often to take the easiest route—to accept what is comfortable and involves the least effort to ourselves—whereas Clifford (the athlete who had once appalled, and thrilled, his contemporaries at Cambridge by swinging off a church weathercock by his toes) believed in the virtue of making life as exacting and arduous for oneself as possible.

It is perhaps because of the tone of exactingness that Clifford's article was too quickly perceived by opponents and supporters as of a piece with the scientific rationalism of Huxley or Stephen. In fact Clifford's empiricism is quickly modified by strains much closer to Whewell's sense of the historical and social contingency of facts. "The Ethics of Belief" moves on from the analogy of the shipowner to acknowledge that there are "many cases," both in society and in science, when "it is our duty to act upon probabilities, although the evidence is not such as to justify present belief" (p. 296), and equally many cases when we are asked to believe not on the evidence of our own experience but on the testimony of others. Too often, Clifford claims, we are unreasonably satisfied with the reputation of a person for excellent moral character "as ground for accepting his statements about things which he cannot possibly have known." His first examples are drawn from religion (tautfully, from Buddhism and from Islam rather than from Christianity), his next from science. "If a chemist tells me, who am no chemist, that a certain substance can be made by putting together other substances in certain proportions and subjecting them to a known process, I am justified in believing him unless I know anything against his character or his judgment." (p. 301) His professional training, the fact that his experiments are subject to verification by other chemists who have an interest in watching and testing for error, are sufficient to lend him authority. "But if my chemist tells me that an atom of oxygen has existed unaltered in weight and rate of vibration throughout all time, I have no right to believe this on his authority, for it is a thing which he cannot know without ceasing to be a man... No eminence of character and genius can give a man authority enough to justify us in believing him when he makes statements implying exact and universal knowledge." (p. 301) The unobjectionable conclusion is in danger of obscuring the implications of the preamble. Credibility has to do not just with facts but with social context: with the individual "character" of the scientist, the structure of the profession and the collective "character" of scientists generally.

"The Ethics of Belief" begins to look still less comfortably empiricist as it progresses. Not long into the first section, "The Duty of Inquiry," Clifford complicates the argument sufficiently to bring into doubt whether there are any circumstances under which one can adequately scrutinize the rightness of one's own convictions: "No man holding a strong belief on one side of a question, or even wishing to hold a belief on one side, can investigate it with such fairness and completeness as if he were really in doubt and unbiased; so that the existence of a belief not founded on fair inquiry, unfits a man for the performance of this necessary duty." (p. 291) If this is so, it would appear to disqualify most people from doing adequately what, Clifford was insisting, none could be excused from attempting. Soon after, Clifford is to be found arguing that no instance of belief can ever be trivial given that, first, it goes to make up that "aggregate of beliefs" which stamps an individual character, and second, it necessarily impinges on the life of society, for our words, phrases, forms and processes and modes of thought are indissolubly social. With a (no doubt tactical but in the context unexpected) return of the language of religion, he identifies a "sacred faculty" of belief in those truths which "have been established by long experience." (p. 292). The intention is clearly to signal a moral duty of inquiry into all our beliefs, but in invoking the social nature of belief, and asserting its "sacred" quality, no less, he comes very close once again to a Whewellian perception of the social contingency of belief.
The argument for the "universal duty of questioning all that we believe" occupies only the first part of a three part essay, the second and third sections of which have attracted curiously little attention. In the second part, on "The Weight of Authority," Clifford endeavors to salvage from "tradition" something that can serve as guidance in the moral as well as in the material world; "...
conceptions of right in general, of justice, of truth, of beneficence" are, he asserts, not "statements or propositions" but they "answer to certain definite instincts, which are certainly within us, however they came there... [A] man retires within himself and finds something, wider and more lasting than his solitary personality." (p. 303)

The agnostic reflex ("however they came there") is in tune with the Mill of the Logic, but the concession that there exists such an "instinct" at all is far more reminiscent of Whewell's claims for the role of intuition in the formation of scientific theories. This is not, however, territory which Clifford seems comfortable occupying for long. He rapidly redirects the reader's attention to the practical deployment of that instinct: the necessity of continually turning the instinctive wish to do good into the question, Is this action or convention good or not?

The final part of "The Ethics of Belief" confronts most squarely the implications of this argument for an inferential philosophy of science. Here Clifford poses the crucial philosophical question of the limits of inference: How are we justified in moving beyond our own experience to more general truths? His answer is that "we may go beyond experience by assuming that what we do not know is like what we do know; or, in other words, we may add to our experience on the assumption of a uniformity in nature" (p. 306). But what is meant by "uniformity" here? It was a standard term in Millite induction, but equally a key term for Whewell—classed under those "fundamental Ideas" which are not facts but conditions for systematic inquiry into the relations of things. Elsewhere Clifford had already argued that "uniformity of nature is necessary to responsibility... Only upon this moral basis can the foundations of the empirical method be justified," and knowledge of that background makes it unclear whether he means here nature as "the physical world" and/or nature as the defining qualities of a person. Clifford ducks the question: "What this uniformity precisely is, how we grow in the knowledge of it from generation to generation, these are questions which for the present we lay aside..." (p. 306)

The conflict between Whewellian relativism and Millite empiricism in "The Ethics of Belief" extends finally to the examples offered of a justified extension of belief beyond personal experience. The first of Clifford's cases is bluntly empiricist—we may infer the existence of hydrogen in the sun because, when shone on the slit of a spectroscope, the sun produces the same bright lines as are produced by hydrogen. The second is altogether less tidy, though Clifford declines to recognize its untruthfulness. How do we know that the siege of Syracuse in the Peloponnesian war took place? Answer: we have a number of distinct and mutually reinforcing historical documents to that effect, and "we find... that men do not, as a rule, forge books and histories without a special motive; we assume that men in the past were like men in the present; and we observe that in this case no special motive was present. That is, we add to our experience on the basis of an assumption of a uniformity in the characters of men" (p. 308). Is that assumption justified? Henry Sidgwick and W. G. Ward thought not. Moreover, there is no role here for error, or for the accidental loss of testimony which might have complicated or contradicted the surviving evidence, or for what Clifford elsewhere called "involuntary action"—only for deceit: "if there is any special reason to suspect the character of the persons who wrote or transmitted certain books, then the case becomes altered... Then we must say that upon such documents no true historical inference can be founded, but only unsatisfactory conjecture."

Clifford's article was guaranteed to cause dismay among churchmen. Its choice of language was calculated to make them feel singled out for philosophical rebuke, even if the instances discussed steered carefully away from Christian theology and church practice. But the indignation of "believing" readers of the Contemporary Review was also a distraction from the more fundamental challenges posed by the article to the definition of scientific knowledge and—by extension—to the liberal periodical press. Though superficially in accord with the versions of scientific credibility advocated by Huxley, Stephen, and Tyndall, Clifford had argued his way into repeated concessions to a much less clear-cut perception of the grounds for belief. Like Whewell, he had found himself required to make certain allowances for what many of his fellow promoters of science in the Contemporary Review would have dismissed out of hand as "subjectivism" or "metaphysics": that it might prove impossible to separate rationalism from belief; that there might exist such a thing as an intuitive apprehension of "truth"; that a man's claim to credibility might in part be a function of his social, professional and, not least, historical context. Each time such a concession is made, Clifford closes the questions down again and retreats.
Given Clifford’s own reluctance on this occasion to pursue moments of unwanted philosophical complication, it is not surprising that critics did not, in the main, pick up on them.30 The ethics of belief were, however, anything but a theoretical question for the Contemporary Review’s editorship at the time Clifford’s article was published. On February 22, the case of “Strahan and Co. [Ltd.] and others v. King and Co. and Knowles” was heard before the Chancery Division of the High Court of Justice. The terms of that case, and the extended public jostling for position that went on around it, represent, I want to suggest, something like a return of the repressed in the sphere of liberal ethics—an object lesson, if one were needed, in the social contingency of believing in what men or their magazines say.

The clash between Knowles and Strahan occurred primarily as a consequence of serious embarrassments in Strahan’s business affairs. Since the early 1860s Strahan had been propping up his publishing company through ever more complicated debt and mortgage arrangements with a string of creditors.31 In 1876 the whole fragile structure collapsed around him, but with characteristic resilience and luck he managed to secure financial backing, through the assistance of the Congregationalist minister John Brown Paton, from Samuel Morley: hosiery magnate, influential member of the Liberal party, and prominent Evangelical.32 Together, Morley, Paton, and probably (but by no means certainly) Strahan, saw an ideal opportunity to counter the damage that the spread of “rationalism” was doing via the periodical press. Knowles reported to Gladstone, in dismay, that when he met Morley at the start of November 1876, “he did not scruple to tell me that his own wish was to see an Editor of the C. R. with a strong bias in his own direction (ex. gr. as to his own view of the doctrine of the atonement).”33 Knowles was gone from the editorial offices of the Contemporary Review by December.

Within weeks he was advertising the imminent publication of a new liberal monthly under his sole proprietorship and editorship, to be published and distributed by the same company which handled the Contemporary Review, Henry S. King & Co. Faced with a mass exodus by his contributors, almost all of whom chose to support Knowles now, and by the likelihood that the Nineteenth Century would profit significantly from access to the commercial structures of the Contemporary, Strahan went to court. Public interest in the case, and unduly much of the case itself, was focused on Knowles’s advertisement. It was, in effect rather more than that:

\[\text{THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: A MONTHLY REVIEW. EDITED BY JAMES KNOWLES, LATE OF THE CONTEMPORARY REVIEW.}\]

The management of the Contemporary Review has recently passed into the hands of a limited company, consisting of Mr. Samuel Morley, Mr. Francis Peck, the Rev. Paton (of the Independent College at Nottingham), and others, and formed for the purpose of “editing, managing, and publishing” the Contemporary Review, the Day of Rest, Good Things for the Young, and Periplo. A separation has taken place between the Review and Mr. Knowles, whose editorial connexion with it dated from the resignation in 1870 of Dean Alford, its first editor. The change made after Mr. Knowles joined it in the conduct of the Contemporary by enlarging the comparatively limited “platform” of the Dean and converting it into an entirely free and open field, where all forms of honest opinion and belief (represented by men of sufficient weight) should be not only tolerated, but equally welcomed, met with the marked approval of the public. The results of that policy were such as now encourage Mr. Knowles in establishing, by the help of his friends, a new review, under the title the Nineteenth Century, which will be conducted on the absolutely impartial and unsectarian principles which governed the Contemporary during his connexion with it.

The statement was signed by 110 names, including most of the leading contributors to the Contemporary Review in the past seven years: Lewes, Huxley, Stephen, and with them Arnold, Tennyson, Frederic Harrison, Mark Pattison, R. H. Hutton, W. R. Greg, Walter Bagehot, Frederic Myers, Croom Robertson, James Sully—and W. K. Clifford.34

It was, to say the least, a damaging document for the Contemporary Review. Without directly accusing the new management of anything, Knowles had succeeded in presenting them as intellectually “illiberal” by dint of their known religious affiliations; he had depicted himself, doubly advantageously, as the rightful heir to the Review’s first editor, and a clear improver on his policies and work. He had also given the strong impression that the “staff” of the Contemporary Review viewed him as the defender of its principles against a hostile takeover. Strahan’s decision to seek legal redress is understandable, but, in a fundamental error, he allowed his case to become tied to the question of whether, here and more generally, Knowles had been falsely representing himself as the editor of the Contemporary Review rather than, as the terms of his agreement with Strahan had always been, a “consulting” or “assistant” editor and “friend.” Knowles had no difficulty in establishing in court that he had never claimed to be editor in name, but that he had been an active assistant editor, and salaried as such.
Strahan's still greater mistake was in seeking an injunction to restrain the publication of the Nineteenth Century altogether. The Vice Chancellor, Sir Richard Malins, threw the case out, with costs against Strahan, and unqualified support for Knowles. In essence, Malins read the case as one of the freedom of the press, and the freedom of an individual to earn a living. Having been wrongfully dismissed from his position on the Review, Knowles had been "quite justified in seeking further employment [and] had exercised the right which every Englishman possessed, of setting up a publication on his own account; it was really marvellous, said his Lordship, that his conduct should have been made the subject of the long discussion which had arisen upon it." As for the advertisements and statements issued by Knowles, he "could see no inaccuracy in them."

All well and good for Knowles, but neither he nor, unsurprisingly, Strahan was content to let the court alone decide the issue. By the time Strahan and Co. Ltd's suit against Knowles and King came to court, Knowles and Strahan had been engaging in gloved fistfights in the mainstream press, and the trade journals, for more than a month. Both men energetically sought endorsement of their positions from the Contemporary's contributors through private letters and personal interviews, but also public statements to the press, and (in Strahan's case) at least three privately printed pamphlets. In a pamphlet dated February 7, 1877, circulated by Strahan among former writers for the Contemporary Review, he explicitly stated his rationale for resorting to such measures: "contributors," he wrote, need to know "how much of truth there is in statements which have induced them...to give promises to a rival publication introduced by its proprietor in such terms that those promises might possibly be read as a revocation of their confidence in the Contemporary." Just over a week later he was writing again, this time to Gladstone, the Duke of Argyll, and the Dean of Westminster (and probably to others), protesting more specifically against "the use being made" of their "names and influence to cast discredit upon that journal."

It is not simply the appearance of your names beneath the advertisement of the Nineteenth Century that is working the injury, but the fact that your names were used to get other names, and that the other names cannot be withdrawn while yours stand. I have seen several of the other gentlemen whose names are on the list, and have been told by them that they will virtually be guided by what you do. If you dissociate yourselves from The Contemporary they will do the same. If you abide by it, so will they.  

Knowles was meanwhile making much the same point in trying to secure contributions from Gladstone and from Tennyon for the first issue of the Nineteenth Century. "Of course it lies with you" he wrote to Tennyon, "to do more towards helping me to realise my purpose than with any other one man—I mean—my purpose of collecting all of the very best & highest—for you know quite well that it is no flattery to say your name will draw others which no other name would do in literature." And to Gladstone, ingenuously: "my Fortune as an Editor would be made." "It rests—my dear Mr. Gladstone—with yourself alone." Gladstone, especially, was singled out by Strahan and by Knowles as the key figure in each man's campaign to ensure public faith in himself and the "liberalism" of his periodical. Strahan besieged him with long letters of self-justification, copies of his correspondence with Knowles, and accusations against Knowles which grew more detailed and vituperative with each missive. Knowles was less importunate, but no less clearly determined to secure the great man's support.  

The question was, fundamentally, one of belief—in these men and in their claims to be fostering liberal journalism—but this was not the ethics Clifford had in mind when he described the necessity of submitting credence to "free and fearless questioning." Unlike the courts, neither Tennyon nor Gladstone was in a position to conduct a full investigation of the facts. Nor did either have authority in this sphere beyond that of being perceived, in Clifford's terms, as a "man of excellent moral character"—and the character of a man may be "excellent evidence that he [is] honest and spoke the truth so far as he knew it; but it is no evidence at all that he knew what the truth was." The ethics at work here, on Knowles and Strahan's side, were plainly pragmatic and, to a degree, cynical. If Gladstone would lend his name, other prominent supporters of the liberal periodical press would follow. Knowles and those who followed him in leaving the Contemporary Review might do so in the name of an ideal of free and fearless rational inquiry, but in practice the world was neither so ethical nor so rational as Clifford, at his most bracing, would have had it be.

Gladstone's response was, ambiguously, liable to be read either as equivalently pragmatic, or as the one "Cliffordianly" ethical stance taken in all this. His diaries for 1877 record numerous letters to both Strahan and Knowles. Whether or not he was inquiring deeply into the rights and wrongs of their conflict is unclear, but he appears to have endorsed neither too explicitly in public, and he declined to sign the advertisement for the Nineteenth Century. He continued to write for both, and the piece
he gave Knowles for the first issue of the *Nineteenth Century* was, fittingly enough, a review of George Lewis’s *On the Influence of Authority in Matters of Opinion* (1849, second edition 1875), in which he staunchly opposed Lewis’s claim that there can be no authority in matters of religion, and championed the view that mass assent to the propositions of Christianity may be sufficient grounds for belief.25 Knowles led with the piece, of course, but James Fitzjames Stephen was disgusted, and produced a brisk demolition of Gladstone’s logic, and scholarly accuracy, for the next issue.43 Gladstone replied, defending himself but adding the benignly pragmatic rider that “Authority is... not an ideal or normal, but a practical or working, standard.”44

More telling, in light of the ongoing history of the liberal periodical press and its championing of the cause of science, is the structure James Knowles worked out for representing science in the *Nineteenth Century*. One of the features which most clearly distinguishes that magazine from its liberal predecessors is its attachment to that revealing phrase Knowles had included when setting out his terms for the journal; “all forms of honest opinion and belief (represented by men of sufficient weight) should be not only tolerated, but equally welcomed.” It is a familiar criticism of the *Nineteenth Century* that it drew too heavily on the pulling power of established names, at the expense of that openness to rational ideas, irrespective of their authorship, which was supposed to characterize a liberal debate. The *Contemporary Review* put the objection pithily at the outset of Knowles’s publishing venture: “[A good editor’s] menagerie must not be all lions.”45 Knowles’s attraction to the big cats of the publishing world had no more telling expression than in his choice of Huxley as the primary spokesman for science in his pages. Too busy to write a regular summary of scientific developments himself, Huxley agreed to act as an advisor to Knowles, who produced a (somewhat) regular column called “Recent Science” under a headnote: “Professor Huxley has kindly read, and aided the Editor with his advice upon, the following article.” The columns were compilations, probably of abstracts from scientific journals, perhaps (Priscilla Metcalf has suggested) with the help of learned-society librarians at New Burlington House.46 Was this “ethical” use of Huxley’s claim to the credence of the public? John Tyndall, for one, thought not, and wrote to Huxley in 1880 to express his dismay that Huxley was lending the weight of his supposed authority to statements about areas of science in which he was not competent to guide the public. Huxley replied in some confusion:

My dear old Tyndall
I must tell you the ins and outs of this XIX century business. I was anxious to help Knowles when he started the journal and at his earnest and pressing request I agreed to do what I have done. But being quite aware of the misinterpretation to which I should be liable if my name “sans phrase” were attached to the article—I insisted upon the exact words which you will find at the head of it; and which seemed, and still seem, to me, to define my position as a mere advisor to the Editor—

Moreover by diligently excluding any expression of opinion on the part of the writers of the compilation—I thought that nobody could possibly suspect me of assuming the position of an authority even on subjects with which I may be supposed to be acquainted, let alone those such as Physics & Chemistry of which I know no more than any one of the Public may know—

Therefore your remarks came upon me tonight with the sort of painful surprise which a man feels who is accused of the particular sin of which he flatters himself he is especially not guilty... 57

W. K. Clifford would have not have accepted the defense. In principle, that is. In practice, he knew the compulsions of embarrassment. “A great misfortune has fallen upon me,” he wrote once: “I shook hands with—[the name was suppressed by Clifford’s editor]. I believe if all the murderers and all the priests and all the liars in the world were united in one man, and he came suddenly upon me round a corner and said, “How do you do?” in a smilling way, I could not be rude to him upon the instant.”58

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Liberal not, of course, in the party political sense but in the Millite philosophical sense of espousing “the natural emergence of truth by free expression and interplay
of as many points of view as possible" (D. A. Hamer, John Morley: Liberal Intellectual in Politics, Clarendon, 1968, pp. 73–74).


5. Srebnik, Alexander Stahan, p. 156.


13. George Henry Lewes, Problems of Life and Mind, first series, The Foundations of a Creed, vol. 1, third edition (Trübner, 1874), p. 456. Lewes was among the most prominent of those scientific rationalists who did attempt to draw science into the sphere of ethics, Herbert Spencer being another. See particularly the Data of Ethics (1879) and its later volumes, published together as Principles of Ethics (Williams and Nongate, 1892–93).

14. Both volumes were significantly revised in 1847 and again in 1858–1860, and supplemented by Whewell’s essay On Induction, with special reference to Mr. J. Stuart Mill’s System of Logic (1849). For Mill’s further responses to Whewell, see especially the revised edition of 1851.


17. On Mill’s efforts in his Examination of Sir William Hamilton’s Philosophy to find an empiricist alternative to idealism, and the dissatisfaction of Clifford and his fellow scientific agnostics with those efforts, see Luntman, Origins of Agnosticism, pp. 173–174.


26. Bernard Lightman has commented on the part Darwin’s concept of natural selection, and probabilistic thought more broadly, played in Clifford’s increased
skepticism, from the 1860s, about the ability of science to supply “precise and necessary knowledge of a constantly evolving natural world” (Origins of Agnosticism, pp. 166–172).


30. Ward is an exception.


32. Morley was a member of the Congregational Union.


35. British Library, Gladstone Papers and Correspondence, Add MSS 44453, fol. 73–76, February 7, 1877; fol. 114, February 16, 1877.

36. Tennyson Research Centre, Knowles to Tennyson, January 6, 1877, quoted in Metcalf, James Knowles, p. 278.


38. British Library, Gladstone Papers and Correspondence, Add MSS 44453, fol. 44–47 (Strahan to Gladstone, January 17, 1877); fol. 69–76 (Strahan to Gladstone, July 8, 1877, enclosing privately printed pamphlets by Francis Peek and by himself, both dated February 7, 1877); fol. 114 (Strahan to the Duke of Argyll, Gladstone, and the Dean of Westminster, February 16, 1877); fol. 204 (an eight-page pamphlet entitled “Last Words from Alexander Strahan about The Contemporary Review and Mr. J. T. Knowles.” See also Add MSS 44454, fol. 364–369 (privately printed pamphlet by Strahan titled “Strahan and Co. versus King”).


