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<CH>2 He Had Taught Himself to Think: Anthony Trollope on Self-Control in Knowledge and Belief

Patrick Fessenbecker

In his 1877 essay ‘The Ethics of Belief’, W. K. Clifford famously argued that our moral responsibility is not limited to our actions, but extends to our beliefs.[[1]](#endnote-1) Our ethical duties entail more than the requirement to act in certain ways; in fact, we have a duty to believe in certain ways as well. It can sound slightly Orwellian to say that one has a duty to believe something – a point I’ll come back to – but the initial question is really about what sort of failure it is when one believes something false in the face of obvious evidence to the contrary. In his now-famous phrase, Clifford argues that ‘it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence’.[[2]](#endnote-2) Anytime I have a belief that is based on ‘insufficient evidence’, then, I do something wrong.

His key argument for this claims depends, interestingly, upon a narrative:

A shipowner was about to send to sea an emigrant-ship . . . Doubts had been suggested to him that possibly she was not seaworthy . . . 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 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 he got his insurance-money when she went down in mid-ocean and told no tales. (*EB*, p. 70)

Clifford concludes such a shipowner would be guilty of murder. And he contends that this is true even if the shipowner is sincere: ‘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’ (*EB*, p. 70). In other words, the epistemological failure of believing the ship to be safe is at one and the same time a moral failure.

It is not hard to imagine a Trollope novel based around a similar story. Perhaps there is a young man on the board of directors of a shipping company; perhaps he is sent to conduct an inspection of a property while simultaneously having the opportunity to buy shares in it; of course, he is in debt, and resents any recognition that expensive repairs are necessary. As Trollope writes of Ferdinand Lopez, ‘And so he taught himself to regard . . . himself as a victim. Who among us is there that does not teach himself the same lesson?’[[3]](#endnote-3) Indeed, in that phrase – ‘he taught himself’ – Trollope marks precisely our epistemological responsibility: to teach oneself is, after all, to exert control over what one believes, and to make something a matter of one’s control is also to make it subject to obligation. At the same time, in his rhetorical question – ‘Who among us is there that does not teach himself the same lesson?’ – Trollope indicates that the problem is by no means unique to villains like Ferdinand Lopez.

As David Skilton has pointed out, the idea of ‘teaching oneself’ is a characteristic feature in Trollope’s fiction.[[4]](#endnote-4) So much so, he observes, that it was in fact a source of criticism: Amy Dillwyn’s 1881 review of *Ayala’s Angel* faults Trollope ‘for making people ‘tell’, ‘teach’, ‘encourage’, or ‘bring’ themselves to think this, that, or the other’, when – in her opinion – ‘various tenses of the verb ‘to think’ would do equally well’.[[5]](#endnote-5) Skilton argues – to my mind rightly – that Dillwyn here misses a key dimension of Trollope’s art; what Skilton calls the ‘internal monologue’ and ‘internal debate’ forms a distinct level of action, and purely internal events at this purely internal level often form turning points in Trollope’s narratives.[[6]](#endnote-6) Without disagreeing with this characterization, I want to argue here that Trollope’s idea of teaching oneself marks something more specific: a distinctive kind of responsibility, an obligation to be selfless in belief as well as action.

John Kucich contended twenty years ago that ‘one of the most important nineteenth-century conflations wrought by preoccupations with honesty . . . is that the relatively clean separation of epistemological and ethical concerns . . . suffered a wholesale collapse’.[[7]](#endnote-7) I think that is right: for Trollope, the duty to be honest pertains to both beliefs and actions, and much of his thought is devoted to understanding how self-deception and irrationality can so pervasively threaten our honesty. My goal in this essay will be to briefly trace Trollope’s use of the formula ‘he taught himself to think’ as a way of tracking his thinking about our responsibility for our beliefs. What that tracking suggests is that while Trollope would agree that Clifford’s shipowner does indeed have a moral failing, it is not his dismissal of the evidence; it is rather his failure to be honest. To see this, let me turn to a brief taxonomy of the phrase ‘he had taught himself to think’.

1. Varieties of Teaching Oneself

First and most straightforwardly, Trollope uses the idea of teaching oneself to mark a certain kind of self-deception. I’ve argued elsewhere that Trollope often depicts what philosophers call motivated reasoning in the use of lay hypothesis formation: that is, when they are assessing evidence in support of beliefs, their desires affect which evidence seems most prominent, and Trollope’s references to teaching oneself often indicate this kind of failure.[[8]](#endnote-8) In *The Three Clerks*, for instance, Gertrude wants to believe that her husband Alaric Tudor is not doing anything underhanded; thus, she convinces herself that he is justified in being away from home during the evening – ‘she taught herself to believe that his career required him to be among public men’.[[9]](#endnote-9) A more specific type of this kind of self-deception is the motivated reasoning that characters use to justify their own selfishness. This is certainly what Ferdinand Lopez was doing, and *Barchester Tower*’s Mr Slope offers a similar example, since, ‘with that subtle, selfish, ambiguous sophistry to which the minds of all men are so subject, he had taught himself to think that in doing much for the promotion of his own interests, he was doing much also for the promotion of religion’.[[10]](#endnote-10) Indeed, the analysis of this sort of ‘sophistry’ is common in Trollope: as Alice Vavasor observes in *Can You Forgive Her*, Glencora Palliser has ‘taught herself to think that she might excuse herself for this sin to her own conscience by the fact that she was childless’.[[11]](#endnote-11) It is in part by describing motivated reasoning of this sort that Trollope’s novels point to the psychological impediments constantly interrupting ethical behaviour. It is very difficult to tell, for Trollope’s characters, whether they are deceiving themselves in acting as they do.

Yet teaching oneself can sometimes not be a failure but in fact a duty, or at least a praiseworthy action, marking the way a character reinforces her decision to act virtuously. For instance, Kate Vavasor, having come to believe that her brother George is not worthy of the support she has given him, attempts to reinforce the belief that she must not ‘submit herself to his masterdom’ (*CY*, ch. 55 p. 455). Thus we learn: ‘She had gradually so taught herself since he had compelled her to write the first letter in which Alice had been asked to give her money’ (*CY*, ch. 55, p. 455). Here, teaching oneself is an epistemic act at some distance from self-deception: rather than a failure of self-control, in which one’s desires influence the process producing beliefs, it marks an act of successful self-control, where a character deliberately changes her beliefs to make sure she acts in the way she believes she should. Moreover, when Trollope uses the notion of teaching oneself in the simple past or present tenses – as opposed to the more common past perfect formulation, as in a man who ‘had taught himself’ – it is often a metaphor for ordinary self-control. Thus we find Henry Norman ‘schooling himself’ in a praiseworthy attempt to master his jealousy of Alaric Tudor (*TC*, chapter 13, p.130).

In its largest sense, then, the notion of teaching oneself in Trollope marks the responsibility agents have for their own character. And perhaps the most complex philosophical issues involved in the notion of teaching oneself occur in this light, when a lesson one teaches oneself conflicts with that character. This conflict is part of what is involved when characters fail to teach themselves something; often, it fails because the lesson violates a core value. A mark of wisdom in Trollope, in fact, is a recognition of what one can and cannot teach oneself; thus, in *The Last Chronicle of Barset*, the narrator tells us that Mr Harding ‘could not teach himself to hope that Mr Crawley should be acquitted if Mr Crawley were guilty; – but he could teach himself to believe that Mr Crawley was innocent’.[[12]](#endnote-12) Mr Harding’s values will not permit him to sincerely believe that Mr Crawley should escape the penalty for a crime, but they do permit him to believe that the preponderance of the evidence is in this case mistaken and that Mr Crawley is innocent.

Yet often the characters do succeed in teaching themselves such lessons: in a tension between a belief they wish to have and a value at the core of their character, they exert sufficient self-control to instill the belief genuinely. In fact, this is perhaps the aspect of self-deception that most fascinates Trollope and forms one of his archetypes for tragedy. I can only touch on the complexities of the issue here, but perhaps no one in Trollope teaches herself as often as Lady Laura Kennedy does. And for her it is rarely straightforward: as Trollope represents it, it is always that she ‘would’ teach herself, or perhaps that she ‘could not’ teach herself, or – most intriguingly – that she ‘had almost’ taught herself.[[13]](#endnote-13) In one of the instances of lengthy internal monologue that Skilton emphasises, Trollope writes this of Lady Laura:

She had *schooled herself* about [Phineas Finn] very severely, and had come to various resolutions. She had found out and confessed to herself that she did not, and could not, love her husband. She had found out and confessed to herself that she did love, and could not help loving, Phineas Finn. Then she had resolved to banish him from her presence, and had gone the length of telling him so. After that she had perceived that she had been wrong, and had determined to meet him as she met other men, – and to conquer her love. Then, when this could not be done, when something almost like idolatry grew upon her, she determined that it should be the idolatry of friendship, that she would not sin even in thought, that there should be nothing in her heart of which she need be ashamed; – but that the one great object and purport of her life should be the promotion of this friend's welfare. She had just begun to love after this fashion, *had taught herself to believe* that she might combine something of the pleasure of idolatry towards her friend with a full complement of duty towards her husband, when Phineas came to her with his tale of love for Violet Effingham. The lesson which she got then was a very rough one, – so hard that at first she could not bear it . . . But by sheer force of mind she had conquered that dismay, that feeling of desolation at her heart, and *had almost taught herself to hop*e that Phineas might succeed with Violet. (*PF*, ch. 44, p. 332, my emphasis)

Lady Laura prevents a revealing contrast to Mr Harding: far from knowing herself well enough to know what she cannot teach herself, she has only come to certain unpleasant realisations through failed attempts at such teaching. In particular, she only sees how thoroughly she loves Phineas Finn when she tries to build a life without him, or with him as something other than her husband. Indeed, this last is striking, insofar as the passage emphasises Lady Laura’s attempt to integrate her affection with the life she has made in some reasonably coherent way. After her failure to ‘conquer’ and erase her love, she then attempts to channel it into a career of advocacy on Phineas’s behalf and a corresponding belief that this life can be satisfying, only for this belief to fail when Phineas wants to marry someone else. That she has ‘almost’ – but not quite – taught herself to accept the new fact of a Phineas married to someone else marks the strength of the conflict in Lady Laura’s self. The ‘almost’ indicates the power of her ability to control her own beliefs, knowing as the reader does how difficult it is for her to abandon her love, yet it also indicates the power of the self that resists attempts at epistemological self-control by marking her failure. It’s not surprising, then, that *Phineas Redux* shows Lady Laura on the brink of falling into reclusive insanity: her epistemological and emotional struggles demonstrate the deep fractures in her self.

*The Claverings* is notable for setting these three kinds of self-education in relation. The story is one common to Trollope’s oeuvre: a young man, Harry Clavering, is engaged to one woman but drawn to another; committed to Florence Burton, he cannot help but visit Lady Ongar, who rejected him as a young man but who has now returned to England a rich widow. Like many of Trollope’s other heroes, Harry is often self-deceived: he convinces himself that he is justified in flirting with Lady Ongar and can remain committed to Florence while doing so. For example, a key plot point involves whether Lady Ongar knows that Harry is engaged, or whether she thinks he is free. Without telling her that he is engaged, Harry convinces himself both that it would be a good idea for her to know and that she already does know: ‘it would be well that she should know of his engagement. Then he thought of the whole interview, and felt sure that she must know it. At any rate he told himself that he was sure’.[[14]](#endnote-14) As with the ‘taught himself’ formulation, the ‘told himself’ phrase here marks the extent to which Harry is deceiving himself. At the same time, we suspect will find his way back to Florence, because he has ‘taught himself to think much of the quiet domesticities of life’, thus reinforcing his virtuous character (*C*, ch. 4, p. 31).

One might situate Harry Clavering in the middle of a self-control continuum, with Lady Ongar on the one end and Florence on the other. Lady Ongar’s great sin, of course, is that she has married for money without love, while Florence has stayed true to her own affection for Harry. But we can perhaps be more precise: Lady Ongar has controlled her own beliefs. ‘She had taught herself that romance could not be allowed to a woman in her position’ (*C*, ch. 3, p. 21) and that, ‘for such an one as her, riches were a necessity’ (*C*, ch. 13, p. 105). As with Lady Laura Kennedy, this is a warping of her character; as she thinks of her ‘riches’ at the end of the novel, ‘she came to understand that she was degraded by their acquisition’, and thus ‘she felt like Judas’ (*C*, ch. 42, pp. 359–360). Florence presents a contrast in this regard, because, as the narrator emphasises, she has not taught herself anything: we learn that she ‘had never taught herself to think that she, if she married, would want anything different from that which Providence had given to [her sisters]’ (*C*, ch. 9, p. 70). This suggests that it is not only the mercenary impulse that makes Lady Ongar unworthy of Harry’s affection. A more fundamental distinction is between a woman who exerts control over her beliefs, altering her character, and a woman who does not.

What this points towards, of course, is a balancing ideal: where what one teaches oneself accords with and allows for the expression of moral character, without overly repressing it. Trollope’s comparison is revealing: ‘nor is the heart of any man made so like a weathercock that it needs must turn itself hither and thither, as the wind directs, and be altogether beyond the man's control’ (*C*, ch. 25, p. 209). In expanding upon the kind of control a man should exert, the narrator explains that ‘a man, though he may love many, should be devoted only to one’. Much of what a man should do to respect his wife is ‘quite independent of love’, and ‘may be done without love. This is devotion, and it is this which a man owes to the woman who has once promised to be his wife’ (*C*, ch. 25, pp. 239–40). In other words, Harry might not be at fault in being in love with both Lady Ongar and Florence Burton, but he is at fault in devoting himself to both of them. Devotion is within his control, as it is independent of love, and it is his duty to be devoted to Florence that he has violated in flirting with Lady Ongar.

This suggests a tension of the sort characteristic of ideological effects. Trollope suggests that it is proper for men to practice devotion: they may fall in love with many people in a morally unimpeachable way, and the only moral requisite is the conscious fostering of one particular relationship to the exclusion of others. However, for women to exert this kind of control is abhorrent: it is somehow a violation of who they really are. If there is anything to say in Trollope’s defence, it is perhaps only that he recognises this issue. One of the most striking conversations in the book occurs between Florence’s brother and his wife, debating Harry’s merits:

‘Can you believe any good of a man who tells you to your face that he is engaged to two women at once?’

‘I think I can’, said Cecilia, hardly venturing to express so dangerous an opinion above her breath.

‘And what would you think of a woman who did so?’

‘Ah, that is so different! I cannot explain it, but you know that it is different’.

‘I know that you would forgive a man anything, and a woman nothing’. (*C*, ch. 21, p. 265)

In other words, Trollope does not inhabit these conceptions of gender unreflectively. In fact, it is striking that Trollope puts the defence of Harry in the mouth of a woman, and the critique of Harry – and, by extension, the principle that men and women should be held to the same standard – in the mouth of a man.

2. Dishonesty and Self-Awareness

It is worth acknowledging too that self-deception in Trollope occasionally works precisely by seeming to be an expression of one’s real self or fundamental character. In *The Small House at Allington* this is the striking implication of a turning point in the narrative: the moment when Lily Dale, sensing inchoately that Adolphus Crosbie might be regretting their engagement, offers to end the relationship.[[15]](#endnote-15) In one sense this is precisely what Crosbie has hoped for: the amount of money Lily would bring with her upon marriage has disappointed him. But he cannot bring himself to end the relationship: ‘Then his heart misgave him, and he lacked the courage to extricate himself from his trouble; or, as he afterwards said to himself, he had not the heart to do it’ (*SA*, ch. 15, p. 159). In this moment, Crosbie crucially lies to himself. As the narrator emphasises with the contrast between his initial reaction and subsequent self-reflection, Crosbie’s desire to think well of himself – to not be the kind of person who would abandon a girl who loved him because she didn’t have enough money – alters his understanding of what has happened. And it does so precisely through a representation of his inner nature. It is more tolerable to believe that his inner core of moral strength refused to let him abandon Lily than to believe that he was too weak to do what he ought to do; thus, he says to himself subsequently that it is his ‘heart’ that would not let him do it. Taking Crosbie’s experience seriously indicates the extent to which one’s fundamental character is often inaccessible for Trollope; the mere presence of self-reflection offers no guarantee that characters have succeeded in understanding themselves.

As Skilton notes, *The Small House at Allington* is fascinated more generally with the idea of self-management, and Trollope’s depiction of Crosbie offers a sophisticated and extensive example of the failure of epistemological self-control and its relation to one’s character.[[16]](#endnote-16) It is important, first of all, that Crosbie refuses at another turning point in the novel to confront what his beliefs actually are. At Courcy Castle following his departure from Lucy – a visit of which Trollope’s narrator remarks, ‘Under such circumstances Mr Crosbie should not have gone to Courcy Castle’ (*SA*, ch. 17, p. 177) – Crosbie’s thoughts reveal that he has yet to really reflect on what he wants. Confronted by the public knowledge of his engagement, he finds himself telling John de Courcy, almost without thinking, that he is not in fact engaged – that it is ‘all a lie’ (*SA*, ch. 17, p. 181). Subsequently reflecting on what exactly to say to others about his engagement, he finds himself torn: on the one hand, he ‘had never for a moment entertained a plea of not guilty’; on the other hand, ‘he was aware of an aversion on his part to declare himself as engaged to Lilian Dale’ (*SA*, ch. 17, p. 181). Importantly, he settles on a strategy that avoids any firm conclusion either way: ‘might he not skillfully [sic] laugh off the subject?’ (*SA*, ch. 17, p. 181). And indeed, he begins to resent the Dales precisely for making him commit: he ‘felt for the first time that the Dale family had been almost indelicate in their want of reticence’ while talking of his engagement to Lily (*SA*, ch. 17, p. 181). This is of course partly a question of practical deliberation – Crosbie has not yet decided what to do. But it is to a certain extent a question of knowledge as well: Crosbie does not know what to do because he does not yet know what he really wants. The failure to control himself, then, stems from a failure to know himself – a failure in particular to acknowledge his competing desires to marry Lily, to have the social life of an eligible bachelor, and to flirt with Alexandrina de Courcy. In this way, Trollope here, too, marks the close connection between self-control in belief and action.

Crosbie’s subsequent deliberations reveal an important dimension of Trollope’s representation of the relationship between belief, knowledge, and character. As Crosbie engages in the process that will end in the conclusion that he should abandon Lily and marry Alexandrina, he does something besides merely betraying his moral character: he also misunderstands and acts against his own best interests. The moral failure is quite clear: Trollope’s narrator writes that ‘[t]he atmosphere of Courcy Castle had been at work upon him . . . And every word that he had heard, and every word that he had spoken, had tended to destroy all that was good and true within him, and to foster all that was selfish and false’ (*SA*, ch. 22, p. 245). This appears most directly in his conviction that in fact a relationship with Alexandrina would be good for Lily: ‘What an advantage would such an alliance confer upon that dear little girl; – for, after all, though the dear little girl's attractions were very great, he could not but admit to himself that she wanted a something . . . which some people call style. Lily might certainly learn a great deal from Lady Alexandrina’ (*SA*, ch. 17, p. 185). Needless to say, it takes a particularly blinkered view to think that one should have an affair to further the stylistic education of one’s fiancée. The narrator’s sarcasm in a subsequent remark drives home the point: ‘it was this conviction, no doubt, which made him so sedulous in pleasing that lady on the present occasion’ (*SA*, ch. 17, p. 185).

But Crosbie’s failure is also a prudential one – both a crime and a mistake, so to speak. This link emerges first when he conclusively decides to break with Lily, on the basis of reasons that Trollope represents as the products of a deep self-deception:

He had said to himself a dozen times during that week that he never could be happy with Lily Dale, and that he never could make her happy. And then he had used the old sophistry in his endeavour to *teach himself* that it was right to do that which he wished to do. Would it not be better for Lily that he should desert her, than marry her against the dictates of his own heart? And if he really did not love her, would he not be committing a greater crime in marrying her than in deserting her? He confessed to himself that he had been very wrong in allowing the outer world to get such a hold upon him that the love of a pure girl like Lily could not suffice for his happiness. But *there was the fact*, and he found himself unable to contend against it. If by any absolute self-sacrifice he could secure Lily’s well-being, he would not hesitate for a moment. But would it be well to sacrifice her as well as himself? He had discussed the matter in this way within his own breast, till he *had almost taught himself* to believe that it was his duty to break off his engagement with Lily: and *he had also taught himself* to believe that a marriage with a daughter of the house of Courcy would satisfy his ambition and assist him in his battle with the world. (*SA*, ch. 22, p. 245, emphases mine)

Of course, Trollope’s narrator is unsparing here: the overt designation of this chain of reasoning as ‘sophistry’ drives the moral point home. Noteworthy, though, is the link between two separate acts of self-teaching in the final sentence: it brings together his work on himself to believe that he has a moral duty to break his engagement and his corresponding work to believe that marrying Alexandrina will be the best way to pursue his interests. This is to say that moral and practical beliefs are here combined: in addition to considering what he owes to Lily, Crosbie is considering at the same time what will make him happy. The passage drives home in this moment the extent to which the first act is self-deceived, but what the end of the novel shows is that the second is similar: in other words, Crosbie makes just as significant a mistake in assessing what will make him happy as what he owes to Lily.

This conjunction may seem surprising. After all, on a common-sense view, it is precisely the egoistic emphasis on one’s own happiness that leads one to self-deceiving justifications of dismissing obligations to other people. But Trollope touches on a subtle philosophical point – the inadequacy of the simplistic conception of egoism, and the extent to which prudence and morality are in fact expressions of the same capacity for self-mastery. To put it somewhat more precisely, for Trollope there is a link between practical deliberation capable of recognising one’s long-term interest over short-term desires and moral deliberation that acknowledges other people, in the sense that an inability to do one is often caused by and causative of a failure to do the other. In her recent work on egoism, Christine Korsgaard has pointed out that the idea of a selfish pursuit of one’s happiness is a kind of normativity – after all, it requires the egoistic agent to dismiss those desires that seem to distract from the pursuit of maximum happiness, and prioritise those that contribute most substantively to it.[[17]](#endnote-17) Thus, given a conflict between two incompatible desires, where satisfying one offers more immediate pleasure while satisfying the other offers more happiness overall (that is, over the course of one’s life), it is a normative claim to say that is more ‘rational’ to pursue the second.

If one can imagine taking the perspective of the first, ignored desire, a kind of scepticism about this appeal to rationality seems possible. Why, exactly, is it more rational to prefer greater happiness over the course of one’s life to greater satisfaction right now? ‘The individual desire whose satisfaction is sacrificed for the sake of overall happiness’, Korsgaard points out, ‘seems to have some right to protest’.[[18]](#endnote-18) This skepticism, however, is structurally parallel to skepticism about morality more generally; as Korsgaard writes, ‘‘‘Why should I be prudent?’ is as much in need of an answer as its more famous cousin’.[[19]](#endnote-19) Accordingly, an account of rationality strong enough to answer the question of prudence – in other words, why I ought to care for some broader, long-term fact like my overall happiness more than I care about some powerful desire right now – also justifies an account of moral obligation. Conversely, it shouldn’t be surprising – and this is what Trollope depicts with such subtlety – that prudential mistakes and moral failures go together. The sort of selflessness that enables one to recognize one’s duties is also the sort of broader perspective that enables recognition of what will actually contribute to one’s overall happiness. So it’s not at all surprising, in this light, for Crosbie to have made both mistakes. In fact, they’re really the same mistake: an inability to confront and surmount the desires of the moment.

There is a corresponding epistemological point. Crosbie’s failure is not an inadequate confrontation with the evidence: indeed, in this context there’s no relevant evidence other than his own internal psychological data. But his belief formation is nevertheless still be deeply flawed, a fact Trollope highlights – as usual – by explaining what Crosbie has ‘taught himself’ to think. Ironically, the self-deception consists in precisely his conviction that he is not being selfish. Under the guise of an open and honest ‘confession’ to himself that he has behaved badly, Crosbie licenses his selfishness. The narrator is not quiet about condemning this sort of dishonesty, asking rhetorically, ‘How many a false hound of a man has endeavored to salve his own conscience by such mock humility?’ (*SA*, ch. 22, p. 247). And in treating his desires to live in the ‘outer world’ as a fact that must be acknowledged rather than overcome, Crosbie’s limited sincerity serves to conceal a greater selfishness.

The tragicomic effects of Crosbie’s story depend on this self-deception, as he does not achieve clarity until it is too late, when he is irretrievably committed to Alexandrina de Courcy. After he has realised how painful life with Alexandrina will be, the narrator explains that the life will be all the more painful because of his missed opportunity: ‘It was in this that Crosbie's failure had been so grievous, – that he had seen and approved the better course, but had chosen for himself to walk in that which was worse. During that week at Courcy Castle, – the week which he passed there immediately after his second visit to Allington, – he had deliberately made up his mind that he was more fit for the bad course than for the good one. The course was now before him, and he had no choice but to walk in it’ (*SA*, ch. 45, p. 400). Notably, the passage refuses to excuse Crosbie for his self-deception. Rather than suggesting that he was unfortunate in being misled, the narrator here condemns Crosbie for ‘deliberately’ choosing the ‘bad course’. It is a slightly confusing way to describe the scene – after all, in the moment of decision, Crosbie seems to have convinced himself that the bad course was good, rather than reflectively choosing the bad course while recognising its badness – but what the narrator means to emphasise is the extent to which Crosbie is responsible for his own self-deception. Rather than openly confronting his unattractive desires for more money, he let himself be deceived both into thinking that abandoning Lily was really the right thing to do, and that what he really required for happiness was a connection to the de Courcy family.

3. Honesty and Evidence

We saw at the beginning that Clifford thinks our duties to believe something stem from the evidence available to us. As I have suggested, this is not an especially important criterion for Trollope: while he is inclined to agree that we have duties to believe certain things, what and how we should teach ourselves has more to do with our characters than anything to do with the evidence. Now, just at this moment in history, it might seem that Clifford captures a powerful truth. One doesn’t have to read too many essays calling climate change a hoax to think that perhaps we do indeed have a duty to follow the evidence.[[20]](#endnote-20) As Clifford puts it, ‘no one man’s belief is in any case a private matter which concerns himself alone. Our words, our phrases, our forms and processes and modes of thought, are common property . . . An awful privilege, and an awful responsibility, that we should help to create the world in which posterity will live’ (*EB*, p. 74). As the experience of global climate change is demonstrating every day, the refusal of every individual to hold their beliefs to a rigorous standard and the corresponding determination of some to hold onto beliefs not supported by the evidence has real consequences. Much as we might like to think otherwise, we do not hold our beliefs independently of each other. As Simon Blackburn has recently put it, ‘Clifford is right. Someone sitting on a completely unreasonable belief is sitting on a time bomb’.[[21]](#endnote-21)

But I mentioned that there was something slightly Orwellian about Clifford’s position, and it comes in the implicit ideal of a fully rational society, without disagreement, where all beliefs reflect a shared assessment of the evidence. It’s not an accident, I think, that Clifford doesn’t imagine the search for evidence will impair the beliefs in moral truths:

Certain great principles . . . have stood out more and more clearly in proportion to the care and honesty with which they were tested, and have acquired in this way a practical certainty. The beliefs about right and wrong which guide our actions in dealing with men in society . . . these never suffer from investigation; they can take care of themselves. (*EB*, pp. 78–9)

In other words, Clifford’s world is one that very explicitly does not allow for substantive moral disagreement: he simply assumes that the ‘great principles’ of moral life are already known and acted upon, and that the call to base beliefs entirely and only upon evidence will have no effect on these beliefs. As Helen Small has brought out, it’s important to remember that Clifford was not in fact aligned with the utilitarian tradition – which offers a view of moral deliberation that fits naturally with an emphasis on evidence – but rather demonstrated significant sympathy with the intuitionist ethics of William Whewell.[[22]](#endnote-22)

And in ‘Right and Wrong: The Scientific Ground of their Distinction’, the essay Clifford wrote immediately before ‘The Ethics of Belief’, empirical investigation is limited to considering how best a moral belief might contribute to society; the basic moral assumption – that the ‘function’ of ‘conscience’ is ‘the preservation of society in the struggle for existence’, and that it carries normative force – is unquestioned.[[23]](#endnote-23) Indeed the end of the essay becomes quite declarative on moral truths and feels no need to appeal to evidence: ‘I cannot believe’, Clifford writes, ‘that any falsehood whatever is necessary to morality. It cannot be true of my race and yours that to keep ourselves from becoming scoundrels we must needs believe a lie’.[[24]](#endnote-24) The phrase ‘it cannot be true’ is striking, since a rigorous attempt to ground all our beliefs on evidence requires admitting precisely that all sorts of fundamental beliefs might be true or false and thus in need of investigation. Thus Clifford only defended his rigorous criterion for belief by separating certain classes of beliefs – in particular our moral beliefs – off from it.

It is to Trollope’s credit that he sees this account cannot be quite right: moral disagreement is more fundamental than Clifford would have it. Yet it still seems right to say that people like Clifford’s shipowner, not to mention climate-change deniers like Senator James Inhofe, are committing a failure of some sort in believing as they do. If the problem is not their dismissal of evidence, then what is it? For Trollope, the worry about what you might ‘teach yourself’ wasn’t that you might ignore relevant evidence: it was that you might let what you want to be true affect the way you would have assessed the evidence anyway. The self-deception he traces in the moments when his characters ‘teach themselves’ into a moral failing is one that licenses selfishness, and it is that selfishness that is the problem, not the dismissal of evidence. Clifford’s interpreters have often portrayed him as gesturing (somewhat inchoately) towards a special kind of duty: epistemic duties, as opposed to moral or political duties. As Susan Haack puts the point, ‘Clifford fails to distinguish “epistemologically wrong” from “morally wrong,”’ but is correct in thinking that ‘it is always epistemologically wrong to believe on inadequate evidence’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Such a distinction is however irrelevant for Trollope: there is no special obligation to believe the truth, whatever that might be. Rather, the obligation in belief is the same as in ordinary action – namely, to not let one’s preference for oneself enable the dismissal of other people.

This is to say, in Trollope’s preferred terminology, that the shipbuilder is not honest: the problem is not that he dismissed relevant evidence, but that in forming his beliefs about the ship, he did not attain the selflessness he needed. And if he had done so, my own sense is that we would then not hold him necessarily at fault: in a residue of Victorian terminology, we would say he had committed ‘an honest mistake’. As regards global climate change, one need only consult the donations from fossil-fuel companies to those politicians who claim it is a hoax to see that Trollope’s contention about honesty might have some bearing there as well.[[26]](#endnote-26)

To understand honesty in this way is to see it as an ethics of belief meaningfully different from Clifford’s. To take Clifford’s test seriously imposes a radical scepticism: genuinely subjecting all our beliefs to the requirement of evidentiary support, after all, will at least at first require a kind of epistemological forest-clearing. As a number of philosophers since Clifford have pointed out – William James perhaps most prominently – many trees we have good reason to care about will get cut down by Clifford’s axe.[[27]](#endnote-27) One can see Trollope’s recommendation of honesty, then, as a way of preserving the intuitions behind Clifford’s view in an account of the ethics of belief that nevertheless permits a space for the many kinds of belief where an insistence on evidence is unhelpful or damaging.

This description of Trollope’s conceptualisation of honesty aligns with the view that Amanda Anderson has been developing recently, which portrays Trollope as torn between respect for ‘traditional forms of life’ and deep liberal commitments.[[28]](#endnote-28) On this view, honesty has a double role: on the one hand, it is a form of ‘characterological virtue’ exemplified in the silent dignity of Trollope’s traditional, ‘gentlemanly’ characters; on the other hand, it can be an openly articulated form of critique, when the honest moral agent encounters pervasive dishonesty and directly states that it is so.[[29]](#endnote-29) What my account shows is that this double role of honesty is made possible by a re-description of the ethics of belief. To require that all one’s virtues and psychological characteristics be assessed on the basis of the best available evidence, after all, would be to let the capacity for critique inherent in honesty overwhelm its characterological dimensions. Limiting epistemic normativity to an aspiration to selflessness, defined as the recognition and dismissal of biasing desire, is a thus a necessary condition for the view that unreflective honesty and indeed the virtues more generally should play a role in moral life.

And though a longer treatment would be necessary to bring this point out, my account of Trollope aligns as well with George Levine’s argument in *Dying To Know*, insofar as Levine finds in Trollope’s *Autobiography* an interest in the problem of objectivity and the belief that a kind of self-effacement is necessary to attain knowledge.[[30]](#endnote-30) There is however a minor but interesting difference: Levine aligns the pursuit of honesty and the pursuit of objectivity, as if each are versions of the same project.[[31]](#endnote-31) But if the argument given here is correct, honesty does not require the same self-abnegation as the epistemic norms of Cliffordian evidentialism, and is in fact already a compromise between that conception of the objective stance and the limits of the embodied self.

But I want to end by returning briefly to John Kucich. Reading *The Power of Lies* a generation after it was first published, what’s striking is how the book feels the need to justify caring about Victorian moral philosophy at all. Kucich can only address the ‘bewilderment or indifference’ of colleagues who hear he’s ‘writing about Victorian ethics’ by showing that such ethics are not simply ‘a philosophical system’ but are also a (presumably more interesting) ‘reservoir of ideological content’.[[32]](#endnote-32) Without addressing the methodological questions involved here, it seems to me that critics have not exhausted the possibilities that lie in reading Victorian writers philosophically.[[33]](#endnote-33) Much of what makes novels like *The Claverings* or *The Small House of Allington* worth reading is the complexity of their investigations of moral psychology: thinking through their depiction of moral agency is often just what it means to enjoy them.[[34]](#endnote-34) In that sense, to treat Trollope as substantively engaging philosophical questions is to respect the nature of his art.

1. This article was written with financial support from the Danish National Research Foundation (DNRF127). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. W.K. Clifford, ‘The Ethics of Belief’, in *The Ethics of Belief and Other Essays* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1999): pp. 70–96, p. 77. Further citations are marked *EB* and included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Anthony Trollope, *The Prime Minister* (New York: Penguin, 1994), ch. 45, p. 389. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. David Skilton, *Anthony Trollope and His Contemporaries: A Study in the Theory and Conventions of Mid-Victorian Fiction* (London: Macmillan, 1996), p. 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Amy Dillwyn, ‘Ayala’s Angel’, *The Spectator* (18 June 1881): pp. 804–805. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. David Skilton, *Anthony Trollope and His Contemporaries*, p. 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. John Kucich, *The Power of Lies: Transgression in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 13. Further citations included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Patrick Fessenbecker ‘Anthony Trollope on Akrasia, Self-Deception, and Ethical Confusion’, *Victorian Studies* 56.4 (Summer 2014), pp. 649–674. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Anthony Trollope, *The Three Clerks* (London: Bentley, 1867), ch. 33, p. 401. Further citations marked *TC* and included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Anthony Trollope, *Barchester Towers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 15, p. 136. Further citations marked *BT* and included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Anthony Trollope, *Can You Forgive Her?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 235, ch. 28. Further citations marked *CY* and included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Anthony Trollope, *The Last Chronicle of Barset* (New York: Penguin, 2002), ch. 42, p. 421. Further citations included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This passage, for instance, shows her wavering between several states: ‘Having put aside all romance as unfitted to her life, she could, she thought, do her duty as Mr Kennedy’s wife. She would teach herself to love him. Nay, – she had taught herself to love him’. Anthony Trollope, *Phineas Finn* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), ch. 22, p. 164. Further citations marked *PF* and included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Anthony Trollope, *The Claverings* (New York: Dover, 1977), ch. 8, p. 63. Further citations marked *C* and included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Anthony Trollope, *The Small House at Allington* (New York: Penguin, 1991). Citations marked *SA* and included parenthetically in the text. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. See Skilton, p. 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *The Constitution of Agency: Essays on Practical Reason and Moral Psychology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *The Constitution of Agency*, p. 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *The Constitution of Agency*, p. 72. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. See, for instance, ‘Tens of Thousands of Scientists Declare Climate Change A Hoax’, on YourNewsWire.com, last accessed 11 November 2016. For a more thorough study of climate change denialism, see Naomi Oreskes and Eric M. Conway, *Merchants of Doubt* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Helen Small, ‘Science, Liberalism, and the Ethics of Belief: The *Contemporary Review* in 1877’, in Geoffrey Cantor and Sally Shuttleworth (eds), *Science Serialized: Representations of the Sciences in Nineteenth-Century Periodicals* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2004), pp. 239–257, p. 243. She goes on to offer a telling example – Clifford’s own inability to maintain a rigorous self-control in the face of the complexity of actual, lived moral dilemmas. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. ‘Right and Wrong: The Scientific Ground of Their Distinction’, in *Ethics of Belief and Other Essays*, pp. 28–69, p. 64. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. ‘Right and Wrong’, p? 69. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Susan Haack, ‘“The Ethics of Belief” Reconsidered’. In Matthias Steup (ed.), *Knowledge, Truth, and Duty: Essays on Epistemic Justification, Responsibility, and Virtue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 21–33, pp. 27–28. There is a significant and growing literature on the nature of epistemic norms and their relation to other forms of normativity; see, for instance, Nikolaj Nottelmann’s *Blameworthy Belief*: *A Study in Epistemic Deontologism* (New York: Springer, 2007). [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. See *Merchants of Doubt*, or more specifically opensecrets.org’s page on Senator James Inhofe’s donations, which include $481,450 from the oil and gas industry between 2011 and 2016 (www.opensecrets.org/politicians/summary.php?cid=N00005582, last accessed 11 November 2016). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. James’s famous defence of a pragmatic theory of truth was developed in part against Clifford’s insistence on evidence: the analysis of a ‘will to believe’ in particular saw him arguing that one could hold certain beliefs even in cases of insufficient or absent evidence. See Timothy Madigan, *W.K. Clifford and the Ethics of Belief* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2009) for a clear explanation of the various responses to Clifford’s argument, including James’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2016), p. 68. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *Bleak Liberalism*, pp. 64–66. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. *Dying To Know: Scientific Epistemology and Narrative in Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 99. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. *Dying To Know*, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. *The Power of Lies* ­pp. 37–8, p. 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. I have gone somewhat further in addressing these matters at a methodological level ‘In Defense of Paraphrase’, *New Literary History* 44.1 (January 2013), pp. 117–139. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Frederik Van Dam has persuasively argued that many of Trollope’s works should be read as intentional paraphrases of classical ideas and texts, reflecting his attempt to bring such works to a reading public unable to read easily in Latin or Greek; see *Anthony Trollope’s Late Style: Victorian Liberalism and Literary Form* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 82. In that sense, to use philosophical paraphrase as our approach to his novels now is only in keeping with Trollope’s project. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)