Stratfordian Epistemology and the Ethics of Belief

by Michael Dudley

"Convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies."
—Frederick Nietzsche[1]

In their 2011 tract *Shakespeare Bites Back*, Paul Edmondson and Sir Stanley Wells of the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust make what they call the "deeply moral point" of condemning anti-Stratfordians for their "denial of evidence":

> Fictions we might choose to tell ourselves about the past become no less valid than interpretations constructed through empirical evidence such as documents and material remains. Ultimately, this is a deeply moral point. A denial of evidence amounts to a lie about the past. People who are duped by conspiracy theories find in them something they may like to believe…It may be enticing to believe in stolen documents, secret codes, buried treasure, and illegitimate children of Elizabeth I. But the belief itself doesn't make the fantasy true (19).

In this passage, Edmondson and Wells imply several significant claims: that individuals can choose their beliefs; that these choices can be for non-epistemological reasons—i.e., motivated by personal passions, goals or a desire for pleasure, rather than for the pursuit of knowledge; that there is a distinction between belief and inquiry; that inquiry must always be based on an honest interpretation of the available evidence; that one's misplaced beliefs can have a negative impact on others; and that beliefs will always be confronted by reality. Most importantly, they argue that actions taken based on unearned belief are unethical, so that criticizing such belief is a moral act.

The authors don't acknowledge it, but their arguments lie at the core of a branch of philosophy called epistemology, in discourses concerning the *Ethics of Belief*. First articulated in an 1876 lecture by English mathematician and philosopher William Kingdon Clifford, in which he declared that "it is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence" (28), the Ethics of Belief are a matter of considerable controversy among philosophers, many of whom point out the sheer impossibility of questioning and seeking evidence for absolutely *every* belief that one holds (Amesbury 30). Yet Clifford's work has engendered a rich and vigorous literature that seeks to connect belief states to believers themselves—their motivations, their biases, and the impacts of their beliefs on others.

Skeptics of the traditional Shakespeare biography will strenuously object to this ethical argument being targeted at them, but are Edmondson and Wells correct in suggesting that an ethical lens is an important one through which to view the authorship debate?

The authorship question is a uniquely peculiar academic phenomenon, in that partisans on each side exhibit scholarly behaviors and practices that are quite incomparable. On the one hand, skeptics of the traditional attribution of the plays and poems to the malt merchant and theatre investor William Shakspere have always sought to marshal their case by seeking out and synthesizing a combination of literary, historical and biographical evidence. On the other, defenders of the orthodox tradition do not consider the matter of scholarly interest at all. Instead, they treat it and skeptics themselves as a subject of ridicule, confidently repeating shibboleths

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and shoring up the biography of the "Bard of Avon" with a host of conjectural scenarios described with copious amounts of conditional prose (Chiljan; Ogburn).

Given the nature of traditional assertions, it is worth applying this ethical lens to Stratfordians by interrogating Stratfordianism *as a belief*: that is, not in terms of its substantive *content*, but rather in terms of its *nature* as a doxastic or grounded belief state. In short: what does it mean to say that the orthodox position on Shakespeare's authorship is a belief (*doxa*) as opposed to a search for knowledge (*episteme*), and what are the implications of that belief? To the extent that this belief has consequences for others, can it then be said to be an ethical one?

We shall consider the ethical implications of the mainstream belief that William Shakspere of Stratford-Upon-Avon was the author of the works of Shakespeare. In light of the total lack of documentary evidence connecting William of Stratford to a writing career (Price)—which even some Stratfordians acknowledge (see Danner; Ellis; Wells 81)—and the persistent refusal by most academicians to regard this lacunae as epistemologically problematic, or to seek to remedy it through open-minded investigation integrating the scholarship of authorship skeptics, we are well-justified in questioning the ethics of such a position.

Context: Locating a Stratfordian Epistemology

So that we might examine the ethics of this belief and all that it entails, we need to first understand Stratfordian epistemology. However, Shakespearean biographers do not as a rule frame their approach to their subject in epistemological terms (although see Epstein; Holland), but instead righteously defend their scholarly credentials with obscurantist references to their "approach to the facts and historical evidence" being "complex and… informed by a deep knowledge in order to understand them" (Edmondson and Wells *S. Bites Back*, 34).

In a previous work (Dudley "Becoming an Oxfordian") the author offered a stark comparison between the scholarly approaches taken by Stratfordians and proponents of the authorship of Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, detailing their assumptions regarding what exists (*ontology*), how we know what we think we know (*epistemology*), why we should pursue research into a given question (*axiology*), and how we might test our theories and gain more knowledge (*methodology*) (3). Together these comprise a field of inquiry's *research paradigm*, which for Stratfordian biographers would look something like this:

Table 1	**The Stratfordian Research Paradigm**
Ontology [i.e., object of study]	• Works resulting from *natural genius and imagination* • Historical person about which *little is known*
Epistemology [i.e., sources of knowledge]	• Biographical documents of *no literary relevance* • The works can offer us *no knowledge* of the author's life, social class, personality or beliefs • Heavy reliance on *traditions* found in previous biographies
Axiology [i.e., justification]	• Author's identity is a *sacred certainty* beyond questioning • Shakespeare must be defended against *"anti-Shakespearean" doub*t • Stratfordians are the *only reliable experts* on Shakespeare • Doubters are "anti-Shakespearean," non-scholarly and *unworthy of engagement*
Methodology	• Biographers must use their *imaginations* owing to lack of documentary evidence, layered with literary criticism.

Establishing the nature of Stratfordian epistemology in this way clarifies the multiple layers of belief involved, and what they imply for the work of the would-be Shakespeare biographer: to write about an author whose works derive from imagination—and about whom nothing relevant can be learned from contemporary documents or the content of his works—necessitates the use of the biographer's imagination. Therefore, it is essential that we recognize and distinguish between a primary proposition and ancillary beliefs, each with their own ethical implications and dimensions:

1) A **propositional belief** (*p*) William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon was the author William Shakespeare;
2) a **second-order belief** about that belief—that *p* is a certainty, beyond doubt and beyond questioning;
3) a host of varying **explanatory beliefs** each premised on faith and justifying *p* (e.g., the "lost years"; the "miracle of genius"; key documentary evidence being "now lost");
4) a **reflexive belief** that believers in *p*—themselves—are authoritative and as such cannot be questioned about *p*;
5) an **ethical belief** that questioning *p* is not just factually incorrect but immoral; and
6) a **juridical belief** that those who question *p* may justifiably be isolated, excluded and marginalized by institutions of scholarship.

My argument is that it is the mutually-reinforcing nature of all these beliefs—rather than just the contents of the authorship attribution itself—that makes Stratfordian believers so resistant to honestly examining the evidence at hand. This pattern of behavior is singularly ironic, given that many of Shakespeare's plays are deeply concerned with what Clifford (1876) referred to as the duty to inquire. Hamlet, for example, does not immediately act when the ghost of his father informs him that his uncle Claudius had committed murderous treason, being unsure if the ghost is honest or a demon from hell. Fearing that acting upon the commands of the latter would lead to his own damnation, Hamlet recognizes his duty to inquire further and has the travelling players stage a re-enactment of the murder of his father just as the ghost had described it, and Claudius' guilt is confirmed in his furious response. However, when Shakespeare's other characters fail in their duty to inquire, they ensure their own downfall: Othello, despite demanding "ocular proof" from Iago as to the unfaithfulness of Desdemona, does not inquire into Iago's trustworthiness and instead accepts the fidelity of his advisor's insinuations, and views his wife's actions accordingly, dooming her (and himself) in the process (Mitova 2018). Macbeth accepts the witches' predictions at face value, never thinking to better ascertain their meaning. And Lear hears only what he wants or expects to hear from his daughters as to the nature of their love for him. In play after play, Shakespeare repeatedly shows us that unhesitating certainty and untested assumptions are the path to ruination.

Methods

This essay shall examine orthodox belief through an ethical doxastic lens by posing the following questions: based on the standards of Ethics of Belief theory, is this belief a praiseworthy or a blameworthy one? Is it maintained and defended in a manner conducive to discovering truth? What are its consequences? Can it be asserted in an ethical manner? Our focus however is not on the truth or falsity of the belief itself regarding the authorship as held by Stratfordians (i.e., the facts of Shakspere's life) but on the *nature of that belief state* and the *belief-maintenance strategies* necessary to support it.

A few caveats. The body of literature concerning the Ethics of Belief is rich, complex, and filled with controversies; therefore, no more than an introduction can be offered.

Second, we must be careful about situating the knowers in question. Shakespeare is universally loved and deeply interwoven into almost all aspects of world culture, such that virtually everyone of a certain age at least knows his name. We are therefore not concerned with authorship beliefs held by the average layperson, who may have read one of the plays in high school but has given Shakespeare little thought since. Instead, we are concerned with those *professionally obligated* to know about the life of the author: English literature and theater professors as well as other members of the academy and intelligentsia who have made the Shakespeare canon their particular study.

Another important element is that the belief in question does not involve a condition, concept or idea, but focuses on historical evidence, meaning that the ethical questions involved are not generic in nature but historiographic: e.g., what does it mean that there is a consensus among historians regarding a particular historical event, or for a person to hold false beliefs about the past (Tucker)? This is a point repeatedly made by Stratfordians, such as Edmondson and Wells, who argue that the "immorality" of anti-Stratfordians' theories relates to alleged abuses of historical evidence (*S. Bites Back*, 19), which then often involves invidious comparisons with Holocaust denial (Wildenthal 342–343 n56). However, historiography constitutes a different body of theory so its implications for the authorship question will need to be addressed in a future paper.

In addition, it is important to acknowledge that our analysis is limited to historiographic matters and not intended to represent a normative worldview. Empiricism and metaphysics need not be mutually exclusive: scientists of faith may see revealed in the world and stars around us the hand of the divine, and Indigenous peoples all over the world have for thousands of years integrated their empirical observations about their environment—and their place within it—with their spiritual beliefs (Turner). Nothing in this essay should be interpreted as undermining such worldviews. Similarly, while religious faith is not the focus here, the literature in question is adjacent to another vast body of literature concerning the philosophy of religious belief, so matters of faith versus reason will be addressed only briefly.

This article shall first review the literature of the Ethics of Belief starting with the writings of William Kingdon Clifford and William James before considering more recent perspectives and theories. An 11-point synthesis of these theories describing the conditions associated with ethical belief formation will then be applied to the propositional and ancillary beliefs articulated above. With this analysis, we shall then endeavor to reach conclusions regarding the praiseworthiness and ethicalness of this mainstream belief, as well as the implications for the future of the authorship question, and for the academy in general.

Theories of the Ethics of Belief

Origins: William Kingdon Clifford and William James

The nature of belief, the extent to which we have control over it, the connections and distinctions between reason and faith—as well as the moral obligations inherent in both—have long engaged philosophers. John Locke, in his 1690 work *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* wrote,

> He that believes without having any Reason for believing, may be in love with his own Fancies; but neither seeks Truth as he ought, nor pays the Obedience due to his Maker, who would have him use those discerning Faculties he has given him, to keep him out of Mistake and Errour (575).

David Hume, in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), would further observe that:

> the mind has authority over all its ideas, so that if…the mind could voluntarily join it to any fiction…it would be able to believe anything it chose to believe; and we find by daily experience that it cannot. We can in putting thoughts together join the head of a man to the body of a horse; but we can't choose to believe that such an animal has ever really existed (24).

However, the modern inquiry into the ethics of our beliefs properly begins with the work of English mathematician and philosopher William Kingdon Clifford (1845–1879) and his 1876 speech and essay entitled, *The Ethics of Belief*. Besides creating a controversy at the time, it served to inspire generations of philosophers to develop an entire branch of epistemology around it that would debate his ideas for decades to come. In the essay, Clifford argues in absolutist terms that we have a fundamental moral imperative to question all our beliefs and to ascertain that even the seemingly most inconsequential of them are based upon sufficient evidence.

He begins by presenting the tale of a shipowner who suppresses doubts regarding the seaworthiness of his vessel and assumes without evidence that it will arrive at its destination safely. In the end it sinks with all aboard, confirming the shipowner's guilt; yet even if his misplaced belief had not resulted in fatal consequences, Clifford finds the man culpable for having believed without evidence because "[h]e had acquired his belief not by honestly earning it in patient investigation, but by stifling his doubts" (25).

For Clifford, even those beliefs for which lives do not hang in the balance are still subject to this moral imperative, due to the consequences at stake for both the individual and society:

> No real belief, however trifling and fragmentary it may seem, is ever truly insignificant; it prepares us to receive more of its like, confirms those which resembled it before, and weakens others; and so gradually it lays a stealthy train in our inmost thoughts, which may some day explode into overt action, and leave its stamp upon our character for ever (26).

Because of these grave consequences, "we have no choice but to extend our judgment to all cases of belief whatever," a duty that excuses "no obscurity of station" nor tolerates beliefs held "for the solace and private pleasure of the believer" (27). Beliefs that are insufficiently founded on evidence but are instead held on unwarranted faith or "nourish[ed]…by suppressing doubts and avoiding investigation" (27) make fair and open inquiry impossible. This epistemological responsibility, he warns, is not just owed to our colleagues and contemporaries but is an intergenerational one, a "precious deposit and a sacred trust" to be passed to our descendants (27). Because of this view to posterity, Clifford's epistemology is an explicitly moral one: that it is the "sacred tradition of humanity" that we not simply accept "propositions or statements… on the authority of…tradition," or "to believe a thing true because everybody says so" (33), but that it is not just our responsibility but our moral duty to test our knowledge. He concludes,

> If a man, holding a belief which he was taught in childhood or persuaded of afterwards, keeps down and pushes away any doubts which arise about it in his mind, purposely avoids the reading of books and the company of men that call in question or discuss it, and regards as impious those questions which cannot easily be asked without disturbing it—the life of that man is one long sin against mankind (28).

He therefore finds it highly immoral—indeed a sin—for anyone to "stifle [their] own doubts, or to hamper the inquiry of others," (34) by "suppress[ing] those things which did not suit them, while…amplify[ying] such as [do] suit them" (36); and anyone who treats evidence in this way can produce "no true historical inference…but only unsatisfactory conjecture" (36), rendering them "guilty of a sacrilege which centuries shall never be able to blot out" (34).

For all this, Clifford does grant that, under some circumstances, we are not obligated to determine for ourselves the veracity of every one of our beliefs through investigation, but instead may rely on the testimony of others, but only if we have done our due diligence to ascertain "there are good grounds for believing that some one person at least has the means of knowing what is true, and is speaking the truth so far as he knows it" (33).

Following Clifford's publication of *The Ethics of Belief* a flurry of rejoinders was published—including pieces by Matthew Arnold and Thomas Huxley (Madigan)—but it would take another 20 years for a true companion piece to emerge in the form of William James' *The Will to Believe*.[2] For James, there were several circumstances—especially and including religious faith—where belief without evidence is desirable and, in fact, necessary. As a pragmatist, James argued that the merit of a belief may be gleaned not in its provenance but in its outcomes, as some things may not even be achievable at all without first being grounded in a belief that they are indeed possible. A scientist, for example, must at least believe enough in a hypothesis to devote months to testing it for its veracity, and a person may only be able to overcome their illness if they believe that they can. In addition, a belief that turns out to be true in the end—even one initially based on nothing more than a random guess—still constituted for James "real knowledge" (10).

In situations where evidence is ambiguous or uncertain, James allows that people may adopt beliefs without sufficient evidence, but only under specific conditions: that the hypothesis must be either "live" to a prospective believer rather than "dead," a state based not on its inherent factual qualities but in relation to the willingness of the believer to act upon it (2). This in turn depends on whether the decision is a "forced" one (i.e., a choice one way or another is needed and waiting for more evidence is not an option) and whether the choice is not trivial but "momentous" (2). However, while he argued for the role of volition—one's passions and personal goals—in belief-formation, he did not extend this to the exercise of the will—that is, the idea that we can simply choose to believe in something or not for non-epistemological reasons (16).[3]

Both Clifford and James continue to face criticism for their arguments. Madigan points out that, ironically, Clifford's argument that insufficiently supported beliefs have dire consequences is, itself, an "overbelief" that Clifford does not bother backing up with any evidence (178), while Amesbury counters that it would be irrational to question *all* of one's beliefs in the absence of reasonable doubts indicating otherwise. Moreover, he argues that what Clifford advocates is completely impractical and that even the acts of doubt and inquiry can only occur "against a backdrop of much for which evidence is not required" (30). For his part, James is criticized by Burger for his pragmatism, observing that "James…would rather make a bigoted and prejudiced guess than be intellectually honest and admit to himself that he does not really know." Yet, with *The Ethics of Belief* and *The Will to Believe*, both Clifford and James helped to establish most of the major elements of the debate over ethical belief.

What is "Belief?" Do We Have Control Over It?

To speak of an *ethics* of belief presupposes that our processes of belief acquisition are at least to some extent under our control: that our dispositions, intentions, and practices must have the capacity to influence the kinds of beliefs we hold and what we do with them (Chignell; Lindner). We are tasked as individuals "to align our will with what connects our belief to truth, i.e., evidence. This suggests that we can decide to believe in response to evidence" (Woldeyohannes 124) while at the same time recognizing that "the content of the belief is true is not settled by our believing…what makes a proposition or a belief true is the proposition's or the belief's connection with reality" (94).

Many of our beliefs are gained through perception of the world around us while others, beyond our ability to test through first-hand experience, are learned through education and socialization: for example, most of us must accept the scientific consensus that the Earth is, on average, 92 million miles from the Sun because we do not possess the knowledge or equipment to test this fact for ourselves (Amesbury 28). As far as is practicable, however, the exercise of one's will to arrive at a true belief is therefore reasonably limited to attempting an unbiased investigation not bound to a predetermined outcome, seeking evidence from multiple perspectives, and not manipulating one's evidence pool based on motivated belief to a particular point of view (Lindner 30).

Views on the role of evidence—specifically *sufficient* evidence to support any given proposition—dominate much of the literature in the Ethics of Belief. As an evidentialist, Clifford was anticipated in the work of earlier philosophers, such as John Locke and his famous argument that the extent of our beliefs should be proportionate to the evidence before us (553). At the opposite end of the scale is *fideism*, or the willingness to accept certain things on faith, whether owing to a lack of compelling evidence either way or because the believer doesn't feel the need for evidence at all (Chignell). This is clearly the case for religious faith, for which an insistence on evidence is seen by theologians to be contrary to the entire enterprise. Of course, Clifford and James parted company on the question of faith, with Clifford, rather problematically to modern eyes, critiquing the faith of a hypothetical Muslim in the hope that his audience would apply the same principles to their own Christianity (29–30), while James wrote *The Will to Believe* as a defence of belief in our connection to the eternal, for which science can offer no means of measurement.

While only a strict Cliffordian evidentialist would argue that religious faith of any kind is an unethical belief in general, we should make the distinction between belief formation practices associated with faith and metaphysical matters on the one hand, and those necessary for historiographic empiricism on the other. In other words, one cannot hold a fideistic belief about a knowable event where evidence is known to exist, and have it considered an ethical one (Chignell).

In short, our beliefs may be epistemic or non-epistemic, and how we arrive at them can be *voluntary* to the extent that our belief-formation processes may be influenced by our motivations, intentions, and passions—and so can shape how we seek and evaluate the available evidence (Woldeyohannes). This recognition raises a key theme for belief ethicists: *doxastic agency*, or our responsibility to "form, maintain and revise our beliefs…through conscious mental activity" (McHugh 134). Our beliefs are—or should be—under self-regulation and subject to reassessment and re-evaluation; and that we are evaluating our belief regulation processes with the goal of acquiring true beliefs rather than false ones.

The question of authority is also germane to this debate: the proposition that not all believers need be held to the same intellectual obligations. To cite Amesbury's example, as an interested layperson I should not be held responsible for not knowing the exact distances between Earth and the Sun at given points in our planet's orbit over the course of the year, but I would expect such knowledge from a professor of astronomy. Peel refers to this as the *influence account* "which distinguishes between epistemic, professional, and moral intellectual obligations" (81). For some knowers (doxastic agents), then, it is reasonable to expect that their beliefs and assertions are epistemically justified or *praiseworthy*, and if they are not, that these beliefs be held to be *blameworthy*.

What Makes a Belief Praiseworthy or Blameworthy?

If we are, to some extent, in control of our belief formation, it follows that we have *doxastic responsibility* and we may be judged as commendable or culpable for our beliefs, and the actions deriving from them (Montmarquet). Recall that William James was pragmatically satisfied if a knower happened upon a true belief through mere guesswork, such that even if their information-gathering process was improper, reaching the truth was all that mattered. Most modern theorists take a more holistic view: that to be truly praiseworthy, one's beliefs should emerge from a genuine process of inquiry.

There are different ways of viewing whether one can be commended for one's beliefs. Anne Meylan posits both a *final* version—in which one is praiseworthy for acquiring a true belief when one is responsible for that acquisition—and an *instrumental* version, in which, once a belief is acquired, its value is measured in its ability to lead the knower to *other* true beliefs (141). She emphasizes these interconnections, stating that:

> [i]t is definitely a desirable thing to understand propositions or to understand why a proposition p is true. But the reason why it is desirable is that the understanding of the truth of *p* consists in the acquisition of many true beliefs, which explain why *p* is true. To be sure, we will not say that I understand why *p* is true if my explanation appeals mainly to false beliefs (131).

To fail in this regard is to form blameworthy beliefs, which in Meylan's view are not blameworthy just because they are false, but because they lead the knower to other false beliefs. Jessica Brown adds that one's beliefs are blameworthy to the extent that one "dogmatically continu[es] to believe a claim even after receiving evidence which undermines it" and failing to "conform one's beliefs to the evidence," (3596) although she argues, unlike Clifford, it does not necessarily follow that such failures are *moral* ones.

Nottelmann argues that beliefs may be epistemically blameworthy if they are *undesirable* in meeting the following epistemic standards: lack of formation by a truth-conducive process (it is epistemically undesirable that a belief is not formed and causally sustained by a reliable process); inadequate basing (it is epistemically undesirable that a belief is not based on good basing reasons such as adequate evidence and adequate grounds); unreasonableness (it is epistemically undesirable that an agent holding a belief does not have good rationalizing reasons such as adequate grounds and adequate evidence for holding that belief) (70).

Epistemically blameworthy beliefs derived from an unreliable process, based on inadequate evidence and unreasonably maintained, are not just the private domain of the believer, but "have consequences for others, as well as for oneself" (Amesbury 27)—but which may be unknowable (Chignell). Belief ethicists also stress that our beliefs have consequences for others, especially when we translate our beliefs into assertions. Goldberg emphasizes this social, inter-personal and moral dimension by pointing out that making an assertion is a public act and implies a social contract between the speaker and listener—that the agent making the assertion of belief has the epistemic authority to do so, and that their assertions are responsive to robust epistemic norms (177).

Synthesis: Conditions for Ethical Belief

To summarize: We propose that empirical/secular/historical beliefs (those that are non-metaphysical/non-fideistic) may be judged to be ethical to the extent they correspond to the following Ethical Belief Formation Conditions:

- **Condition 1**: Evidence that may support the belief is known by the doxastic agent to exist and is available to them;
- **Condition 2**: The agent recognizes their duty to inquire.
- **Condition 3**: The agent is intellectually obligated to form and assert the belief;
- **Condition 4**: The agent recognizes their own motivations, passions and interests and does not allow these to unduly influence their use of available evidence;
- **Condition 5**: Said beliefs are acquired through honest and open inquiry with all available evidence;
- **Condition 6**: Where evidence is incomplete, ambiguous or uncertain, speculation, theorizing and guessing are permissible and necessary, but must be asserted with appropriate caution;

- **Condition 7**: Belief formation rests on epistemic foundations that align as closely as possible to reality, and therefore leads to further true beliefs;
- **Condition 8**: Doxastic agents are open to self-regulation and reassessment;
- **Condition 9**: Assertions made by agents regarding their beliefs conform with the available evidence and are proportionate to it;
- **Condition 10**: Agents do not dogmatically maintain beliefs in the face of conflicting evidence;
- **Condition 11**: Agents are to the best of their knowledge basing their beliefs on the arguments of knowledgeable others who are known to have adhered to these principles, and
- **Condition 12**: Beliefs emerging from these conditions may only be supported by similarly acquired, non-fideistic beliefs.

The first and third conditions are ontological pre-conditions that assume the existence of both a knowing, reflexive agent as well as external evidence, while the second represents an epistemological and ethical commitment on the part of the agent towards that evidence. The fourth is attitudinal and equips the agent to meet the fifth condition, which is methodological. The sixth condition acknowledges that information is often incomplete and that to advance their inquiry, a believer may need to hypothesize beyond the evidence at hand. The seventh condition encourages the knower to confirm some correspondence between their belief and with what is already known, while the eighth condition views the agent's belief practices over time. Conditions 9 through 11 are interpersonal, social, and intergenerational: the agent must be aware of the limits to their knowledge while communicating their beliefs to others; when encountering others' ideas (particularly as regards matters of controversy); and acknowledging that their own knowledge derives from the work of doxastic agents that preceded them. In brief, all these conditions are premised on the knower's scholarly humility and the recognition of human fallibility, both in themselves and in others. Finally, condition 12 ensures that what Thomas Kuhn referred to as our "constellation of group commitments" to sets of facts (181) are all ethically commensurate with one another.[4]

With these foundations in place, let us now turn to the task of determining the ethical dimensions of belief in the Stratfordian Shakespeare, and the ancillary beliefs associated with it.

Analysis

1) **Propositional belief** (*p*): William Shakspere of Stratford-Upon-Avon was the author William Shakespeare.

Condition 1: Evidence that may support the belief is known by the doxastic agent to exist and is available to them.

Despite repeated declarations on the part of scholars, institutions, and major media that Shakespeare's authorship is "beyond doubt," even Sir Stanley Wells concedes that "despite the mass of evidence that the works were written by a man named William Shakespeare, there is none that explicitly and incontrovertibly identifies him with Stratford-upon-Avon" (81). In 1962, Hugh R. Trevor-Roper, Regius Professor of History at Oxford University, stated that he found the lack of evidence concerning Shakespeare's life,

> exasperating and almost incredible…After all, he lived in the full daylight of the English Renaissance in the well documented reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James I and…since his death has been subjected to the greatest battery of organised research that has ever been directed upon a single person. And yet the greatest of all Englishmen, after this tremendous inquisition, still remains so close to a mystery that even his identity can still be doubted (Trevor-Roper 41).

Peter Holland—the author of the entry on "William Shakespeare" in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* no less—further observes that:

> [t]rying to read what the written and printed documentary evidence shows of Shakespeare's character is…a recipe for disaster. Even the evidence of what he was doing for substantial stretches of his life can be thin…The evidence says nothing of his character…there is little that connects the surviving dots into anything approximating a sequence of interconnectedness, a narrative that might be more than momentarily coherent, indeed, anything that might pass for a narrative at all (21).

Scholar of biographical literature William H. Epstein notes of Shakespeare that

> [i]f the name 'Shakespeare' (in its various spellings) cannot function except as signifying authorship (and a much disputed function at that), then 'Shakespeare' is a sign which can be filled only with the imputed authorship of literary texts. It cannot be filled with other discursive activities conventionally associated with biographical subjects. The inability to treat 'Shakespeare' as poly-functional, that is, as engaged in more than one discursive activity, is a fatal, silencing disruption of biographical recognition (291).

The consequences for Shakespearean biography have been centuries of doubt, for which Bruce Danner argues Shakespeare scholars are themselves to blame, owing to their inability to construct a viable life from the available evidence:

> As a profession we have failed to establish a clear and convincing portrait of Shakespeare, not merely to the popular audience, but to ourselves. Until we do, or can provide clear explanations for why we cannot, authorship conspiracy theories will persist, continuing to case the "dark shadow[s]" that haunt our claims to knowledge (157).

As may be seen, many mainstream orthodox scholars acknowledge that there is, in fact, no actual contemporary documentary evidence from the lifetime of the Stratford gentlemen connecting him to the writing of plays and poems, rendering all Shakespearean biography a highly problematic enterprise.

> Condition 1 is not fulfilled, nor is ever likely to. No direct evidence for *p* is known to exist.

Condition 2: The agent recognizes their duty to inquire.

At its most basic, the Stratfordian position rests on a foundation of unshakable confidence that the evidence at hand—quarto title pages, Green's *Groats-Worth of Wit*, the dedication to the Sonnets; the funerary monument at the Holy Trinity Church at Stratford-upon-Avon, and contemporary references and allusions to the poet-playwright Shakespeare—are all *prima facie* confirmation of Shakspere's authorship, and therefore do not necessitate any further investigation. This belief holds firm despite many leading Stratfordian scholars admitting that much of this evidence is "cryptic" (Ackroyd 2006, 148, 477; Callaghan 2006, 115; Wells 2013, 74, 79; Wells 2015, 19) and "thin" (Holland 21), such that the purported author himself is not just "elusive" (Ackroyd 2006, 148; Maguire & Smith 2013, 2) but actually "unknowable" (Duncan-Jones 1997, 9). It is difficult to conceive of biographical scholars concerned with a modern figure in any other field being content with such a state of affairs: surely the unsatisfactory and paltry nature of the evidence presented and the resultingly opaque portrait arising from it would swiftly occasion some basic questions as to the provenance and relevance of such evidence. All things being equal, the duty to inquire further would seem obvious. Yet in the case of Shakspere's partisans, if such doubts ever arise they are kept quiet; Stratfordians generally do not recognize—or in any case exercise—their duty to inquire.

Condition 3: The agent is intellectually obligated to form and assert the belief.

As belief ethicists point out, we are socially or through formal education enculturated into many of our beliefs, and this is certainly the case for most of humanity in terms of their knowledge of Shakespeare. However, that most people in the world accept that Shakespeare was born and died in Stratford-upon-Avon does not concern us here. The doxastic agents at whom this analysis is directed are those who are *professionally obligated* to know about the life of the poet-playwright, in particular, current leading scholars who have written or spoken on the matter, such as Jonathan Bate (currently teaching at Arizona State University and the University of Oxford), Paul Edmondson and Sir Stanley Wells (both with the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust), James Shapiro (Columbia University), Stephen Greenblatt (Harvard University) and Gary Taylor (Florida State University). In their many books and articles, they have not only made triumphal assertions about the life of the author, but have disparaged, belittled, and condemned anti-Stratfordians for their doubts. As well, we would include mainstream academicians who, following the lead of such scholars, have refused to admit this topic into their curricula, or to allow their students to pursue it (Dudley, "Swinish Phrase").

> Condition 3 is fulfilled: there is a substantial group of believers who are intellectually and professionally obligated to hold a belief about the authorship of the works of Shakespeare.

Condition 4: The agent recognizes their own motivations, passions and interests and does not allow these to unduly influence their use of available evidence.

Leading Stratfordian scholars are open in admitting that there is no attempt on their part at unbiased, even-handed evaluation of the evidence against their candidate and in favor of others, as even lending credence to doubt is seen as fundamentally irrational. As Samuel Schoenbaum put it in his 1970 book *Shakespeare's Lives*, doubters exhibit a "pattern of psychopathology… paranoid structures of thought…hallucinatory phenomena" which can result in a "descent, in a few cases, into actual madness" (608). By contrast, defence of the Shakespeare of tradition is eminently virtuous, with some going so far as to describe it as "championing freedom and democracy" (Edmondson and Leon 193).

> Condition 4 is not fulfilled: Leading Stratfordians are admittedly motivated believers.

Condition 5: Said beliefs are acquired through honest and open inquiry with all available evidence.

Stratfordian scholars are meticulous in their avoidance of evidence that contradicts the image they have constructed of their rustic, common-born businessman genius. For example, despite ten of the plays being set in Italy (with three more taking place in ancient Rome), Shakespeare scholars assumed for generations that he filled the details of these plays with second-hand information acquired from travelers, as there was no evidence Shakspere of Stratford ever left England. It took until the late 20th Century for an independent researcher—Richard Paul Roe—to visit many of the key locations mentioned in the Italian plays over several decades. He concluded that the descriptions and knowledge of local customs were so accurate that they could only have come from first-hand experience, i.e., that the author (whomever he was) had to have traveled throughout Italy (Roe).

Because research such as Roe's contradicts their mythology, most Stratfordian scholars are equally meticulous in not citing anti-Stratfordian publications. Edmondson and Wells sought with their 2013 anthology *Shakespeare Beyond Doubt* to refute the anti-Stratfordian position but did not cite most of the relevant authorship scholarship of the last half-century. Similarly, Joseph Rosenblum's chapter on the authorship question in his *Definitive Shakespeare Companion* also eschewed citing any anti-Stratfordian literature from the last thirty years, but instead depended on other, equally blinkered, orthodox sources. One of the exceptions in this regard is James Shapiro's 2010 book *Contested Will*, but this was concerned only with proposing unflattering psychological motivations behind anti-Stratfordians' beliefs, rather than with their actual arguments.

> Condition 5 is not fulfilled: Evidence-gathering in support of *p* is highly selective.

Condition 6: Where evidence is incomplete, ambiguous, or uncertain, then speculation, theorizing, and guessing are permissible and necessary, but must be asserted with appropriate caution.

Traditional biographies are replete with speculation, their prose littered with variations on "must have," "it is reasonable to assume," and "we can imagine" etc. For example, Stephen Greenblatt begins his 2004 book *Will in the World* by stating "Let us imagine…" (23), and then later writes that as a young man Shakespeare,

> *may have* been working in the glover's shop, perhaps, *or* making a bit of money as a teacher's or a lawyer's assistant. In his spare time he *must have* continued to write poetry, practice the lute, hone his skills as a fencer—that is, work on his ability to impersonate the lifestyle of a gentleman. His northern sojourn, *assuming he had one*, was behind him. *If* in Lancashire he had begun a career as a professional player, *he must*, for the moment at least, have put it aside. And *if* he had a brush with the dark world of Catholic conspiracy, sainthood, and martyrdom–the world that took Campion to the scaffold—he *must* still more decisively have turned away from it with a shudder (149, italics added).

With so little documentary evidence, none of which relates to a literary career, Shakespeare's biographers must resort to this sort of rampart speculation (Ellis; Gilvary *Fictional Lives*). However, this is not matched with any sort of caution, qualification, or scholarly humility—in fact the opposite: Stratfordians insist there is no question that "Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare," that it is a mark of scholarly respectability to adhere unquestioningly to this proposition, and that not to do so is fundamentally disqualifying. For example, Rosenblum states,

> On one point scholars agree: the William Shakespeare who wrote the plays and poems…was born in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1564, and died there fifty-two years later. Since the nineteenth century, various non-scholars have proposed dozens of alternative authors….(xiv)

> Condition 6 is not fulfilled: The evidence for *p* is highly uncertain, but mainstream Shakespeare scholars maintain a rhetoric of absolute certainty.

Condition 7: Belief formation rests on epistemic foundations that align as closely as possible to reality, and therefore leads to further true beliefs.

Even on its own terms, the life of the traditional Shakespeare as represented in Stratfordian scholarship is comprised almost entirely of irreconcilable contradictions or wildly unlikely assertions: though uneducated, he writes with unparalleled erudition; though common-born he consistently adopts an aristocratic perspective; he emerges fully formed as a brilliant writer without any juvenilia; having never left England he writes confidently and frequently about Italy; and unique among writers of the modern era he never includes autobiographical elements in his writing. Anti-Stratfordian scholarship has also revealed him to be a glaring exception compared with other contemporary writers in leaving behind no documentary trace of a literary life (Price), while the historical contexts related to his alleged biography (his unsatisfying last will and testament) are also strikingly at odds with the historical record (Cutting). Nothing about him fits with other historical contexts, what is known of other writers of the time, or with creative people in general.

> Condition 7 is not fulfilled: *p* does not comport with other known facts.

Condition 8: Doxastic agents are open to self-regulation and reassessment.

There has, to some extent, been a degree of reassessment in some quarters of the Shakespeare establishment. Bruce Danner acknowledges that Stratfordians mythmaking regarding the author is to blame for the enduring skepticism, and that they need a new approach to creating a compelling biography, while David Ellis believes there is no point in trying to write any more biographies of Shakespeare, as no further evidence is likely to be found. Revealing an awareness of the inadequacies of their candidate, the editors of the 2017 *New Oxford Shakespeare* proposed that significant portions of the canon were not by Shakespeare at all but by his "collaborators," and then used computer-aided stylistic analysis to detect these supposed other authors (Taylor & Egan). Yet the core lacunae arising from the possibility that centuries of scholarly and biographical attention have likely been directed at the wrong individual remains untouchable.

> Condition 8 is only partially fulfilled: some leading Stratfordians are willing to concede the evidentiary weakness for their candidate, but attempt to work around it through instrumentally different approaches rather than substantively reassess their assumptions and conclusions.

Condition 9: Assertions made by agents regarding their beliefs conform with the available evidence and are proportionate to it.

In addition to the ancillary beliefs referred to in the introduction, the standard Shakespeare "biography" is permeated with a host of assumptions that are consistently asserted as fact, e.g., that Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, was Shakespeare's "patron," and that Shakespeare was attacked by Robert Greene as an "upstart crow." In reality, no document has ever been found connecting Southampton to Shakspere of Stratford (Rubinstein 55), while some scholars believe it is far more likely that bombastic actor Edward Alleyn was Greene's target (Detobel). Despite being based entirely on inference and conjecture such as these, *p* is treated as irrefutable.

> Condition 9 is not fulfilled: Assertions in support of *p* are made with an absolute certainty disproportionate to the available evidence.

Condition 10: Agents do not dogmatically maintain beliefs in the face of conflicting evidence.

For nearly 200 years, anti-Stratfordians have been drawing attention to the fact that belief in the authorship of William Shakspere can only be maintained by ignoring a tremendous amount of readily accessible evidence which demonstrate that such a feat on his part would have been unlikely, if not impossible. To cite one example: orthodox scholars rely on dating schemes that arbitrarily arrange the plays and poems to fit the life of their preferred candidate (1564–1616) with his alleged career starting no earlier than approximately 1590. Yet Katherine Chiljan has demonstrated there are nearly 100 examples of contemporary references to Shakespeare that occur too early to refer to the man from Stratford, so are regularly overlooked by mainstream scholars as inconvenient. An unbiased examination of the textual evidence places the earliest version of many of the works decades earlier than is traditionally asserted, in fact during Shakspere's childhood (Gilvary, *Dating Shakespeare's Plays*). Even disregarding the possibility of other authorial candidates, evidence contradicting the case for *p* is voluminous and damning, but thoroughly and studiously ignored, excused, and denied (Chiljan; Ogburn; Price).

> Condition 10 is not fulfilled: Stratfordians rarely if ever engage with evidence contradicting *p*, but dogmatically insist on the veracity of *p*.

Condition 11: Agents are to the best of their knowledge basing their beliefs on the arguments of knowledgeable others who are known to have adhered to these principles.

The tradition that William Shakspere of Stratford-upon-Avon was Shakespeare is exactly that—a tradition—built up over centuries, with each generation of Stratfordian biographers depending unquestioningly on the work of those who preceded them, but without re-examining the foundations of their beliefs, or admitting the fallibility of their intellectual forbearers (Ogburn).

> Condition 11 is not fulfilled: the practice of Shakespearean biography is not now, nor has it ever been, based on what Nottelmann calls a truth-conducive process.

Condition 12: Beliefs emerging from these conditions may only be related to or supported by similarly acquired, non-fideistic beliefs.

To determine the extent to which this condition is fulfilled, we now turn to the ancillary beliefs identified above.

2) a **second-order belief** about that belief—that *p* is a certainty, beyond doubt and beyond questioning.

As illustrated above, the absolutism with which this belief is asserted simply cannot be justified epistemically by the existing evidence.

3) a host of varying **explanatory beliefs** each premised on faith and justifying *p* (e.g., the "lost years"; the "miracle of genius"; key documentary evidence being "now lost").

Any gaps in the evidence and the resulting gulf between the documented life of Shakspere and the works of Shakespeare are presumed to be accounted for with three major ancillary beliefs. One, that Shakspere must have learned the requisite knowledge during the so-called "lost years" for which we have no documented evidence but within which a host of fanciful scenarios are proposed (e.g., Honigmann). Two, that there must have been documented evidence which is "now lost" such as the wholly imagined inventory of books that must have been a part of his last will and testament (Shapiro 50). Third, it is universally held that Shakespeare was so blessed with "natural genius" that he could simply imagine everything he wrote about (see Dudley "By Nature Fram'd"). The first two assertions are pure sophistry, while the third is entirely fideistic in that "natural" has long been secular shorthand for an expression of God's "divine causality. . . manifested in the active powers…immanent in the fabric of nature" (Heimann 273). In any case, these beliefs are so conjectural and baseless that they cannot be said to epistemically justify the proposition.

4) a **reflexive belief** that believers in *p*—themselves—are authoritative and as such cannot be questioned about *p*.

As demonstrated above, there is no epistemic justification for this degree of declared confidence on the part of Stratfordians regarding their own epistemic praiseworthiness.

5) an **ethical belief** that questioning *p* is not just factually incorrect but immoral.

Given that there is no epistemic justification for the proposition that Shakespere was Shakespeare, the belief that skeptics of this proposition are guilty of epistemic vice is patently unjust.

6) a **juridical belief** that those who question *p* may justifiably be isolated, excluded, and marginalized by institutions of scholarship.

Finally, this belief is fundamentally unethical as it justifies corrective rhetorical and institutional action being taken against those who question the proposition—a proposition for which no positive evidence may be found. The effect is to normalize a grave and systemic violation of academic freedom (Dudley "Swinish Phrase").

> Condition 12 is not fulfilled: what should be an empirically-obtained belief based on historical documents is instead buttressed by feidistic beliefs.

Summary

That William Shakespeare the author was born and died in Stratford-upon-Avon where he was also a successful businessman is a centuries-old, mainstream belief affirmed in books beyond counting and repeated in educational institutions around the world; yet we have here just determined that *it meets virtually none of the conditions necessary for ethical belief*. There is only one positive correspondence—the existence of a stakeholder group intellectually and professionally obligated to formulate a grounded belief on the matter—and a very partial one in the recognition by a small group of published Stratfordians that there are evidentiary problems with that belief, even if they are not willing to relinquish it.

Based on this analysis, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Stratfordians are *profoundly* blameworthy in their insistence on the truthfulness of *p*. Despite centuries of effort, they have been unable to provide sufficient epistemic justification to warrant their belief, and their biographical scholarship premised on its foundations is, as a result, not in the least conducive to truth.

Does it follow, however, that Stratfordians are *morally* blameworthy?

Discussion: Blameworthy Belief About Shakespeare and its Consequences

One might be willing to take a generously Jamesian perspective on the issue and agree that belief in Will Shakspere as the author is very much a "live" hypothesis for Stratfordians, and that support for that belief could be justified for pragmatic (i.e., non-epistemic) reasons, first that their belief may make possible the procuring of as-yet-undiscovered confirmation of *p*. One could further argue that the belief has for centuries inspired countless artists, academics and performers to produce exquisite cultural productions and brilliant scholarship—and could conceivably continue to do so forever—helping to cement a universal love for the Shakespeare plays and poems. It surely is a momentous matter warranting come kind of a doxastic choice.

However, the belief in Shakspere as the author does not meet James' other essential standard when dealing with insufficient or ambiguous evidence: it is not a *forced* choice. There is no compelling reason or urgency for any believer to *have* to take a position on the identity of the author. Indeed, many anti-Stratfordians feel it is more important to articulate the nature of the authorship problem than it is to get behind any alternative authorial candidate. Therefore, the decision by leading Stratfordians to defend their malt merchant with such religiosity and to refuse to consider any counter evidence is an entirely voluntary one.

In his 1993 book *Kindly Inquisitors* Jonathan Rauch proposes two rules for reality-based knowledge production and debate: the *skeptical rule* and the *empirical rule*.[5] The first declares that anyone can be wrong—and must accept that possibility—and that nobody has the last word; as such, all claims must be considered in principle to be falsifiable and potentially debunkable. If, on the other hand, any party refuses to admit that their claims can be questioned, then they are not reality-based and have disqualified themselves from knowledge production. The second rule insists that no claimant has special personal authority based on who they are and the nature of their credentials; their claims must still be available for testing by third parties. These same rules apply to everyone. Again, if proponents do claim special authority and do not permit their claims to be subjected to examination, they are not reality-based and disqualify themselves from the production of knowledge. Taken together these rules set the foundations for an ongoing dialectic by ensuring that all parties engaged in any debate embrace intellectual humility, open to the possibility of correction or refutation (48–49).

As has been demonstrated above and in this author's previous work on Stratfordians' marginalizing rhetoric and scholarly practices (Dudley, "Swinish Phrase"), most mainstream Shakespeare biographers and other partisans of the Stratford case consistently and openly violate both rules by maintaining that their authority and their selected evidence are unimpeachable. Stratfordians proudly maintain their authority in the matter of the author's biography without any hint of intellectual humility and, as such, cannot be considered reality-based in Rauch's conception.

The knowledge practices identified above are fundamentally inconsistent with the conditions necessary for ethical belief. We cannot think of any other area of knowledge production in any field in the humanities and social sciences where evidentiary absence is regarded as sacred text, where inference is treated as unquestionable certainty, and doubt condemned. We are reminded of Locke's admonition that,

> men's sticking to their past judgment, and adhering firmly to conclusions formerly made, is often the cause of great obstinacy in error and mistake. But the fault is not that they rely on their memories for what they have before well judged, but because they judged before they had well examined…And yet these, of all men, hold their opinions with the greatest stiffness; those being generally the most fierce and firm in their tenets, who have least examined them (549).

What are the consequences of these belief formation practices? Given Shakespeare's ubiquity in global cultural productions and education systems it is difficult to overstate the implications of such deliberately institutionalized ignorance.

At the very least—and as Clifford suggested—one consequence of unjustified belief is that it encourages further credulity on the part of the believer. In this case, the public is asked to accept on faith that the experts in this field with their "complex…approach to the facts and historical evidence" being "informed by a deep knowledge in order to understand them" (Edmondson and Wells *S. Bites Back* 34) are beyond reproach and beyond questioning—a troublingly authoritarian way to view scholarship of any kind. It inappropriately and dangerously applies fideistic values to empirical inquiry and institutions of higher learning. To what extent does it encourage unthinking acceptance of other officially sanctioned assertions?

We also cannot begin to calculate the misallocated intellectual costs of this insufficiently supported belief. As of this writing, the WorldCat library catalogue lists 2,458 titles under the subject heading "Shakespeare, William, 1564 1616 Biography," the vast majority of which concern the traditional view. How many unknowable millions of hours have been spent over the centuries searching for records of any kind that might connect the life of the Stratford man to this timeless literature? How many more have been spent composing these "lives?" What historical discoveries and literary interpretations have been lost to us for want of a willingness to accept that these works were published pseudonymously, and that their author was empirically discoverable? While the impacts are also manifest in the epistemic injustice and oppression experienced by anti-Stratfordians in their exclusion from mainstream academic discourse and scholarly communications, Stratfordians are also forcing themselves to operate in an unforgiving epistemological prison with no recourse to genuine inquiry (Dudley "Swinish Phrase").

Perhaps the most tragic legacy of the tradition is pedagogical. Generation after generation of students have been taught an epistemologically unjustified myth, and it is now yielding dramatically diminishing returns. There are growing calls to de-emphasize or eliminate Shakespeare's works from the curriculum because so many students "express disdain, dislike and hatred for [Shakespeare]…Shakespeare…mak[es] them feel stupid rather than empowered" (Powell). How much of this antipathy is owed to the fact that students are taught about a cipher, a mirage with no real identity and no personality—nobody with whom they can empathize? The cost can also be measured in redirected, curtailed, or aborted academic careers: because the academy has cordoned off the authorship question from acceptable scholarly discourse—which some Stratfordians openly acknowledge (Shapiro)—no graduate student seeking a career in English literature will feel able to pursue it.

The Stratford faith is not just an undesirable belief on its own but leads to a host of other blameworthy beliefs regarding the literary, theatrical, and political histories of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods, to say nothing of the creative process in general. As Charles Beauclerk states, "if you get Shakespeare wrong, you get the Elizabethan age wrong" (16). From a theoretical perspective, Meylan affirms that,

> [i]t is definitely a desirable thing to understand propositions or to understand why a proposition p is true. But the reason why it is desirable is that the understanding of the truth of *p* consists in the acquisition of many true beliefs, which explain why *p* is true (131).

Such coherence cannot be obtained with the Stratford myth: its myriad absences, imaginings, and excuses do not connect convincingly with each other or with known historical contexts.

Yet the ramifications of this blameworthy mainstream belief extend beyond our misinterpretation of plays and poems or misunderstanding of centuries-old events. Unsupported and unexamined claims asserted by leading academics and institutions of higher learning can only fuel a growing mistrust in those institutions—a particularly worrying possibility given that universities in both the UK and the US face growing criticism for essentially giving up on the Enlightenment project of seeking truth (or even acknowledging its potential existence) in favor of homogenizing ideas and avoiding offence (Waiton 2020). At the same time, the political landscape across the globe is being increasingly—and dangerously—defined not by polarized political factions, but by fantasists living in fact-free "bubble" realities of their own creation in ever-more violent opposition to those committed to facts, reason, shared reality, and liberal institutions. Belief without evidence—especially regarding historical events—may start as a solitary and self-flattering fantasy but can just as easily end as the violent, resentful anger of the senseless mob. With our society facing these epistemological and institutional crises, to have Shakespeare academics continuing to perpetuate an evidence-free tradition while condemning critical inquiry is not merely unscholarly but exacerbates the "post-truth" climate they claim to abhor.

The costs of this belief are, in short, incalculable, cross-sectoral, and inter-generational. Surely Clifford would not hesitate to describe it as "one long sin against mankind" (28).

Conclusions

This paper has employed an external body of theory in the form of the Ethics of Belief to assess the integrity of the nearly universally accepted proposition (*p*) that William Shakespeare, poet and playwright, was the same person as the successful businessman known in the historical record as William Shakspere. It was not the purpose of this paper to determine if this belief is true or false, only if it is praiseworthy and ethical, or blameworthy and unethical. By the standards established in the theories as set out by William Kingdon Clifford, William James, and many other philosophers in the 20th and 21st Centuries, this belief is shown to be entirely blameworthy and unethical, having never been derived from truth-conducive processes, lacking a sufficient evidentiary foundation, and maintained through unreasonable means (Nottelmann).

Taken together, the main Stratfordian proposition and its five ancillary beliefs are, in essence, both fideistic and mythic, assuring both the secular sainthood of Shakespeare and the priestlike authority of those who defend it. What sway can historical facts have against such an interconnected and institutionalized belief system? Little, unless the belief system itself may be first recognized and undone.

To answer our original question: Edmondson and Wells are correct in asserting that an ethical perspective is a vital one for understanding the debate over the identity of Shakespeare. However, it is they and their Stratfordian colleagues who are guilty of denying historical evidence and fabricating stories about the past.

In view of these conclusions, we must ask: is an ethical belief in the traditional biography of Shakespeare still possible? A literary biography of a modern author like Shakespeare should not require an elite class of academics with, in the words of Edmondson and Wells, a "complex…approach to the facts and historical evidence…in order to understand" it (*S. Bites Back*, 34). As we have seen above, this "complex approach" consists not solely in belief in *p* but of five ancillary beliefs necessary to defend and maintain *p*, some of which are wholly fideistic. Indeed, we may now understand that belief in the Stratford Shakespeare is supported primarily by these ancillary beliefs, rather than by documentary evidence: take these away and all that remains to support this belief are inferences drawn from the similar-sounding names on title pages, the cryptic Stratford monument and *First Folio* dedicatory poems, and evidence of shareholding in theaters. Were leading Stratfordians to confine themselves *only* to these claims, and to assert them with appropriate caution and scholarly humility—admitting that their candidate was only one among others—then perhaps anti-Stratfordians could view these beliefs with more equanimity. Such is not, alas, the case.

As we've seen, there are some Stratfordians who are forthright in conceding the lack of documentary evidence confirming the Shakespeare of tradition; yet they appear to view this—publicly anyways—as a mere instrumental matter to be accommodated methodologically (e.g., stylometrics to identify "collaborators"). At some point, however, growing awareness of the cumulative effects of the blameworthy beliefs identified here—as well as the inability to maintain the collective self-deception necessary to defend them—may render the Stratfordian epistemology unsustainable. In the words of Australian journalist Richard Fernandez,

> If the costs of the lie exceed the energy necessary to sustain the illusion it inevitably collapses…. Normally the narrative will continue as before until the apologists suffer what amounts to a loss of faith. This happens to individuals but sometimes it occurs among entire populations. A loss of faith destabilizes the entire edifice of self-deception and can push it over the tipping point.

If efforts to prove the factual baselessness of the Stratford myth have not yet conclusively persuaded the general public, then demonstrating—as we have here—that this myth is premised on a profoundly unethical foundation for which its proponents are deeply blameworthy, may ultimately prove to be more compelling, and contribute to such a tipping point. Indeed, no liberal society could regard such a belief system as anything but hostile to—and incompatible with—reason, freedom of thought and a commitment to open inquiry and the discovery of truth.

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Endnotes

1. *The Portable Nietzsche*, 46.

2. It was William James's younger brother, novelist Henry James, who famously observed that "I am 'sort of' haunted by the conviction that the divine William is the biggest and most successful fraud ever practiced on a patient world" (James v. 1, 424).

3. Non-epistemological justification for belief is perhaps most popularly expressed as the thought-experiment known as "Pascal's Wager": that on balance a belief in God is preferable to non-belief because if God doesn't exist, then it doesn't matter to the believer either way but, if true, the believer gets into Heaven and the non-believer condemned (Hájek).

4. For example, it would be a violation of their intellectual and professional ethics for a geologist (no matter how spiritual or pious) to assert that earthquakes are caused by the movement of tectonic plates as the result of God's will.

5. In Rauch's 2021 book *The Constitution of Knowledge* he renames the skeptical rule as the *fallibilist rule* (88).

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