

Ethics of ignorance

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Moral ignorance is ignorance about the permissibility of one's conduct. It involves both conceptual and normative issues. We could ask what it is, and we could ask when agents are culpable for it.

§1 distinguishes some main forms of moral ignorance. Agents could be ignorant of different things, for example that their conduct has a certain outcome, or that they could act otherwise. Moreover, agents may be ignorant in different ways. They might never have considered the issue, or they might have considered it, but be mistaken about it.

§2 asks when agents have duties to inform themselves better and remedy their ignorance, and what these duties prescribe. A duty to question all one's beliefs seems to provide poor advice, while a duty to reflect to some reasonable degree is insufficiently detailed and so unhelpful. Suggested duties of inquiry enable one to comply with other duties one has, such as the duty to maximize general welfare.

§3 concerns the follow-up question: if we should have informed ourselves better, then when are we culpable for failing to do so, and our ensuing ignorance? There are two rival views on this question. Volitionism says that we are culpable for our ignorance only if we were aware that we had to inform ourselves better, while attributionism says that we are culpable whenever our ignorance is due to a lack of moral concern.

§4 addresses two further issues concerning the ethics of ignorance. First issue: does culpability for ignorance come in degrees, and how? Second issue: if agents are culpable for their ignorance (or rather excused), then what does this mean, i.e. what kind of culpability is at issue?

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1. Forms of moral ignorance

Moral ignorance is ignorance about the permissibility of one's conduct, and it may take various forms (cf. Guerrero 2007, Peels 2014, Robichaud 2017).

Suppose Pol is the director of a factory. First, she may be ignorant that her factory is the biggest polluter of the country. Second, she might know that her factory is bad for the environment and the people in her country, but be ignorant of any alternative ways to run her business. Third, she might also know of more sustainable ways to run her business, but be ignorant that it is wrong to refuse to do so.

In these cases, the agent is ignorant of different things. In the first case, she is ignorant that her conduct (running her factory) has a certain consequence (pollution). In the second case, she does know that her conduct has a certain consequence, but she is ignorant of how she can avoid it. In the third case, she also knows how she can decrease the pollution, but she is ignorant that she *should* do so (assuming she indeed has such a moral duty). In each case, the agent is ignorant that her conduct is wrong, but only in the third case this ignorance is purely "moral", and not based on any further ignorance.

Not only might the facts about which agents are ignorant differ, the same holds for the *nature* of their ignorance. First, Pol might be deeply ignorant that her conduct is wrong in the sense that she simply never thought about environmental issues in the first place. Second, she might have considered the issue, and even discussed the issue with her colleagues, though mistakenly concluded that all was fine (and perhaps her colleagues agreed with her). Third, Pol might have been ignorant about the pollution, but still suspected that something was not as it should be, but decided to not look further into the issue, and to continue her business as before. (For such willful or strategic ignorance, cf. Sarch 2018.)

All these cases raise the following questions: should the agent have informed herself better (§2), is she culpable for her ignorance (§3), and in what sense and to what degree (§4)?

2. Duties of inquiry

Sometimes we think that ignorant agents "should have known better". Sometimes such claims are justified, and sometimes not. When should agents have informed themselves better, and have carried out certain inquiries?

Some candidate duties of inquiry are the following: one has a duty to question all one believes (cf. Clifford 1877); one has a duty to inform oneself, to a reasonable extent, concerning matters relevant to the permissibility of one's conduct (cf. Rosen 2003: 63); or one has a duty to be inquisitive, attentive, careful and thorough in inquiry, open-minded, and fair-minded (cf. Baehr 2011).

Smith (2018: 98-102) argues that duties like the foregoing raise similar worries: they provide either poor advice, or insufficiently detailed advice. First, should we really question all our beliefs, even beliefs that it is permissible to walk in one's own house, or to open a philosophy book (say)? That seems like poor advice. But, even if we should not question all our beliefs, but only a portion of them, the question remains what this duty involves exactly. Arguably, we should not only question beliefs we currently have, but inform ourselves more generally: look around, reflect, seek advice, read books, and so on. On the second proposal, we should do these things "to a reasonable extent", though this is still not very helpful.

More concrete proposals include the duty to think about the permissibility of one's conduct for at least 6 minutes a day, or to follow an introductory course in ethics at least once in one's life. Even though these duties appear detailed enough, one may wonder about their justification. Why would we have duties to reflect for 6 minutes, or to follow a course? Justifications may come from different moral theories.

According to a familiar form of consequentialism, we should maximize general welfare. Suppose that making her factory more sustainable would in fact maximize welfare in Pol's country. But, Pol does not know how to do this. In such a situation, she can only maximize general welfare if she would inform herself, and doing the latter is needed for doing the former. Generally, on this approach, Pol has a duty to inform herself whenever doing so will enable her to maximize general welfare.

According to a familiar form of deontology, we should keep our promises (among other things). Suppose that Pol does not know how to run her factory in a sustainable way, though she made a promise to do so. She can keep her promise only if she would inform herself, and doing the latter is needed for doing the former. Generally, on this approach, Pol has a duty to inform herself whenever doing so will enable her to keep her promises. (For details of these two justifications, cf. Smith 2018: ch. 5.)

The foregoing duties of inquiry are *objective*, namely in the sense that they apply to us whether or not we also know that they apply to us. Thus, it may happen that we do not know that we have to inform ourselves in a particular situation. Others have proposed more subjective duties such as: one has a duty to inform oneself better when the expected utility of doing so is higher than that of acting otherwise (cf. Jackson 1986), or when one suspects that the act one wants to perform may be impermissible, and one sees non-burdensome ways to check this (cf. Sarch 2019: ch. 4).

3. Culpable ignorance

Even when it is set when we have duties to inform ourselves, there is the further question of whether we are also culpable or blameworthy (these terms are taken to be equivalent) for not complying with these duties. When are we excused, and when are we not? In the literature, there are two main rival theories on this issue, namely "volitionism" and "attributionism", and these are considered in turn.

Typically these views are stated in terms of culpability for acts, rather than in terms of culpability for ignorance, though the conditions remain the same, and the two are related. On the one hand, if one is excused for one's ignorance, one may also be excused for one's subsequent ignorant conduct. On the other hand, if one is culpable for one's ignorance, and one has no further excuses for one's subsequent ignorant conduct, one may also be culpable for the latter. (For discussion of these connections, cf. Smith 1983.)

Volitionism. One is culpably ignorant if, and only if, one was aware that it was wrong to not inform oneself better.

Suppose Pol was aware that she had to inform herself better about the pollution of her factory. In the face of such awareness, though, she decided to not do anything, and went on as before. In that case, volitionism considers her ignorance culpable.

But, it may also be that Pol did not believe she was doing anything wrong. Perhaps she was suspicious that something was not as it should be, but she did not know exactly what. Or perhaps she knew what she had to do, but (mistakenly) thought that she had more important things on her mind. Or perhaps she was deeply ignorant, and just never considered whether anything might be worth looking into. In all such cases (and assuming that Pol really does not believe that, all-things-considered, she is doing anything wrong), volitionism excuses her.

Generally, on this view, excuses take the form "I'm excused because I didn't think I was acting impermissibly." Main proponents of this view include Rosen (2003, 2004), Levy (2009), and Zimmerman (2008: ch. 4). Why do they think that we are excused for our ignorance (as well as for subsequent ignorant conduct) when we did not think that we should have informed ourselves better?

The basic idea is as follows. Suppose Pol was unaware that she had to inform herself about the pollution, and did not think that she was doing anything wrong by failing to do so. In such a case, she could only have complied with her duty of inquiry on the basis of luck. For example, she could accidentally have heard about environmental concerns at her tennis club. Or environmental organizations could have sent her a report about the pollution. However, when she did not hear about any rumours at the club or receive any report, it is unfair or unreasonable to expect her to have known better. Only if Pol herself knew she had to inform themselves, she could have acted on that belief, and have started an investigation.

Many philosophers think this view is too lenient when it comes to the excuse by ignorance, i.e. that it excuses in too many cases. These philosophers say that Pol's ignorance may still be culpable, even if she did not believe she was doing anything wrong, namely if her ignorance is due to a lack of concern for environmental issues. In general terms, the rival view can be stated thus:

Attributionism. One is culpably ignorant if, and only if, one's ignorance is due to a lack of moral concern.

The locus classicus of this view is Arpaly (2003). On Arpaly's view, to have moral concern is to care and to be motivated by things that in fact matter morally. The factory's pollution matters morally (per hypothesis), for it harms the environment and it harms people. Pol is culpable for her ignorance that her conduct is impermissible, then, when she is inadequately concerned about this.

To determine people's moral concern, Arpaly (2003: 85-7) argues that we should not look at their reflective endorsements. Pol might think she cares a lot about morality when she discusses business with her colleagues, though this does not make her adequately concerned. Instead, Arpaly suggests that adequate concern involves certain cognitive (or perceptual), motivational, and emotional dispositions. First, if one has moral concern, one is disposed to notice things that matter morally (e.g. the pollution, the corresponding harms, and to have suspicions about their cause). Second, when one notices problems, one is disposed to work towards making things right (e.g. make one's business more sustainable). Third, one is disposed to be sad or frustrated if things fail.

If Pol fails to notice the problems with her business, then we might well say that her ignorance is due to indifference, and hence culpable. Importantly, though, this view does leave room for excuses. Excuses on this view take the form "I'm excused because it was too difficult to know better." Arpaly (2003: 103) offers the following example:

Solomon is a boy who lives in a small, isolated farming community in a poor country. He believes that women are not half as competent as men when it comes to abstract thinking. His evidence is that all the women in his community, despite his attempts to engage them in learned conversation, discuss nothing but gossip, family, and manual work, and the few people in his community who are interested in abstract thinking are all men.

In this case, Solomon's ignorance about the competency of women is due to the circumstances rather than indifference on his part. He might be disposed to notice things that matter morally, but in his community, the assumption is, there was not much to be discovered concerning the issue.

Volitionism and attributionism might agree about Solomon, though they diverge in other cases. Consider a variant of the case just cited: "Solomon gains a scholarship and finds himself a student in an excellent academic institution, where he proceeds to study his favorite abstract topic. In college, Solomon sits shoulder to shoulder with brilliant female students and is taught by brilliant female professors." (Arpaly 2003: 104) Suppose further that Solomon continues to believe that women are less competent abstract thinkers. In that case, his ignorance would be due to a lack of moral concern, and hence be culpable on attributionism. Even so, so long as Solomon is unaware that he should think about the matter more carefully, he is still excused on volitionism.

Generally, the views diverge in cases where agents are unaware that they are doing something wrong, but where morally concerned agents would have known better. There may be numerous such cases, real-life counterparts of

Pol being among them (cf. Smith 2005, FitzPatrick 2008, Sher 2009, Harman 2011, Wieland 2017b).

Which camp is right? There is something to say for both sides (cf. the contributions in Peels 2016, Robichaud & Wieland 2017). On behalf of volitionism, one may ask how agents can be expected to do better if they themselves are not aware that they should do so. On behalf of attributionism, one may stress that such unawareness might well be due to their own indifference. (For further overviews of this debate, cf. Talbert 2016: ch. 5, Wieland 2017a, Rudy-Hiller 2018.)

4. Degrees and kinds

If agents are culpable for their ignorance, then to what degree and in what sense are they culpable? To illustrate these two issues, contrast the following cases:

Case A. Pol does not know about the pollution of her factory, but still suspects that something may be wrong with the traditional way of doing things. Yet, she does not look further into the issue, and continues her business as before, because the factory has been in the family for ages, and the traditional way of running the factory is in her blood, so to speak.

Case B. This case is similar to case A, though this time Pol fails to inform herself for a different reason: she wants to maximize profit. She knows the traditional ways of doing things are quite cheap, and she is afraid that she might have to pay if she starts an inquiry about what is going on.

In case A, Pol's ignorance is motivated by a concern for her self-image. She has difficulties in facing potentially damaging information about her factory, and indeed about herself, given that she identifies herself with the family firm. In case B, in contrast, Pol is purely motivated by self-interest. She does not care about her self-image, but just want to make as much money as possible. It may be thought that the former agent is less culpable for her ignorance than the latter agent. (For the focus on motives behind one's ignorance, cf. Moody-Adams 1994.)

One account of such degrees, within the attributionist approach, is counterfactual: one's ignorance is culpable to the extent that one would still have been ignorant even if it had been easier to inform oneself. In case A, Pol fails to inform herself because she is afraid to receive bad news about the family firm. If things were easier for her (e.g. her family would tell her that it is fine to improve things in the firm), Pol might well inform herself. No such story carries over to case B. There, Pol wants to maximize profit and so long as the traditional way of running the factory is cheaper, she will refuse to inform herself even when doing the latter is easy. In this way, the counterfactual view explains that Pol's ignorance in case B is more culpable than in case A. (For defenses of this view, cf. Arpaly 2003: 84ff, Wieland 2019; for criticism, cf. Markovits 2010.)

The second issue concerns the kind of culpability. If we say that agents are culpable (or, again, blameworthy) for their ignorance, then what does this entail? Do we consider them bad agents, do they deserve to be resented, or could we have expected more and better of them?

In case A Pol's ignorance is motivated by self-protection, and this seems to reflect less badly on her than in case B where she is primarily concerned about money. In this sense, we may consider the former less culpable than the latter. Typically, though, there is more to culpability than only taking someone to be a bad person. If you are culpable for your ignorance, you can rightly be expected to have informed yourself better. Wieland (2017b) argues that, in this different sense, Pol is actually less culpable in case B than in case A. Agents motivated by self-protection may be expected to do better, but such expectations do not seem appropriate for purely self-interested agents.

This issue is also relevant to the dispute between volitionism and attributionism. For what do these views mean if they say that, under certain conditions, agents are culpable or rather excused for their ignorance (and subsequent ignorant conduct)?

According to Mason (2015, 2019), to some extent volitionism is right about "ordinary" culpability. We are ordinarily culpable only if we know, at some level at least, that our conduct is problematic, and can acknowledge our fault. We are not ordinarily culpable, in contrast, if we follow our own conscious, try to act well, and do not act impermissibly by our own lights. Even so, this might not excuse us from all kinds of culpability. Even if agents fail to see that their conduct is problematic, they might still be "detached" culpable. For example, Solomon, who continues to believe that women are less competent abstract thinkers, i.e. even after having met brilliant female students and professors, may not be ordinarily culpable for his ignorance, but still be culpable in a detached way. If Mason is right, volitionism and attributionism may talk about different kinds of culpability, and need not disagree.

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