

Ethics is Hard! What Follows?

On Moral Ignorance and Blame

by Elizabeth Harman

1. *Ethics is Hard*

Ethics is hard. It's hard to know what our moral obligations are. It's hard to know whether what we are inclined to do is morally permissible. It's hard to know what we owe to those we love, and how much we ought to do for strangers. It's hard to know what we owe to animals. It's hard to know how we should treat others when they behave badly. Smart, thoughtful people go wrong on moral questions. People who are trying to live morally go wrong. Sometimes people are trying to act as they should, but they are wrong about how they should act, and they do morally wrong things. What follows from the fact that ethics is hard? There are many different implications we could examine. In this paper, I will focus on the implications for blameworthiness. When someone acts morally wrongly because she is caught in the grip of a false moral view, although she has thought a reasonable amount about morality, is she thereby blameless for so acting? Recently, a number of philosophers have embraced the view that moral ignorance does exculpate in such cases.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I will outline an

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<sup>1</sup> The claim that moral ignorance exculpates is made or suggested in Susan Wolf's 'Moral Saints,' *Journal of Philosophy* 79 (1982), 419–439; Sarah Buss's 'Justified Wrongdoing,' *Nous* 31 (1997), 337–369; Michael Zimmerman's 'Moral Responsibility and Ignorance,' *Ethics* 107 (1997), 410–426; Gideon Rosen's 'Culpability and Ignorance,' *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 2003; Gideon Rosen's 'Skepticism about Moral Responsibility,' *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004); Michael Smith's 'Moore on the Right, the Good, and Uncertainty,' in *Metaethics After Moore*, Terence Hogan and Mark Timmons, eds., Oxford: Oxford University Press (2006), 133–148; and Michael Zimmerman's *Living with Uncertainty: The Moral Significance of Ignorance*, Cambridge University Press (2010). The claim that moral ignorance exculpates is assumed (but not focused on) in Jeff McMahan's *Killing in War*, Oxford University Press (2009); and Holly Smith's 'The Subjective Moral Duty to Inform Oneself Before Acting,' *Ethics* 125 (2014), 11–38.

attractive line of thought according to which moral ignorance exculpates. I will then argue that this line of thought is mistaken: being caught in the grip of a false moral view is not exculpatory. Ethics is hard, that's true. But this doesn't have the implications for blameworthiness that some people think it does.

## 2. *Our question*

It is clear that ignorance is sometimes exculpatory. In particular, non-moral ignorance can be exculpatory. Consider Anne, whose husband Bert is ill. She gives Bert what she has every reason to believe is the cure to his illness; in fact, it is poison. Anne does something morally wrong: she poisons her husband. Is she blameworthy? It seems not. At least, she is not blameworthy if she was responsible in managing her beliefs. The following seems true:

Anne is blameworthy for poisoning Bert only if she has violated a *procedural moral obligation* regarding the management of her beliefs (only if she has failed to adequately investigate or to take evidence seriously).<sup>2</sup>

Anne's case is one example of the following phenomenon: non-moral ignorance can exculpate. Our question is whether moral ignorance can similarly exculpate.

Let's consider two cases of agents who do not know the moral truth about their situations. These agents act morally wrongly while caught in the grip of false moral views. I

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<sup>2</sup> Perhaps the consequent of this conditional should be amended to include other ways one can be morally responsible for one's non-moral ignorance, and thereby blameworthy for a morally wrong action. For example, perhaps it should read "only if: [she has violated a *procedural moral obligation* regarding the management of her beliefs (that is, she has failed to adequately investigate or to take evidence seriously)] or [her belief is a result of motivated ignorance]." A person's belief is a result of motivated ignorance when the true psychological explanation of why she has the belief is that she wanted it to be true, it was better for her that it be true, or she didn't want to face its falsity. Michele Moody-Adams has argued compellingly that motivated ignorance can be a source of blameworthiness for morally wrong action. See Michelle Moody-Adams's "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," *Ethics* 104 (1994), 291-309.

If the consequent of this conditional should be amended in this way (or in other ways) to include additional ways that one can be morally responsible for one's non-moral ignorance, then the corresponding revisions should be made to the three principles discussed on pages 5 and 8, and further stipulations need to be made regarding the central cases of moral ignorance I discuss in the paper: the moral ignorance must be stipulated to not be the result of motivated ignorance. "Our question," stated on page 3, also has to be revised to include this further stipulation. See footnotes 2, 5, 10, and 12.

These revisions would not affect the arguments of the paper. We can take what I have in the main text here, and throughout, as a placeholder for a complete theory of moral responsibility for non-moral ignorance, which is an interesting topic in its own right. (For discussion of that topic, see Holly Smith, "Culpable Ignorance," *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983), 543-571; and others.)

stipulate that each agent genuinely believes that what he is doing is morally permissible, that each agent has fulfilled all his procedural moral obligations regarding the management of his beliefs, and that neither agent has any false non-moral beliefs about his situation.

An ancient slaveholder keeps some slaves. He does not believe slaveholding is morally wrong; it has never occurred to him that it might be wrong.

A man advocates against the legalization of gay marriage.

These are actual cases. There were ancient slaveholders who never doubted the moral permissibility of slavery; and there are opponents of gay marriage who are sure they are acting morally rightly in trying to prevent it. Ethics is hard; even people who have thought a reasonable amount about morality, and who want to figure out what their moral obligations are, can get it wrong.

One might ask: how could these agents, who know the non-moral truths regarding their situations, really have thought a reasonable amount about morality, and reasoned about morality in good faith? But while their mistakes may be obvious to us, they are not obvious to them. Ancient slavery was based on who conquered whom, not on racial prejudice. The slaveholder knows it is horrible to be a slave. He thinks he is *lucky* to not be a slave, but that if he had been captured, it would have been morally permissible for his captors to keep him as a slave. The advocate against gay marriage knows that many people disagree with him; but he believes he understands what basic moral mistakes they are making which lead them astray.

Non-moral ignorance exculpates. Our question will be: does moral ignorance exculpate too? More precisely, this is our question:

If someone does something morally wrong while caught in the grip of a false moral view (according to which what she does is morally permissible or even morally

good), and if she has not violated any of her procedural moral obligations regarding the management of her beliefs<sup>3</sup>, is she thereby blameless?

Procedural moral obligations regarding the management of one's beliefs are obligations to do certain things a person can do intentionally, such as thinking about a moral question or considering a particular objection or argument.<sup>4</sup> (I will speak of those who hold false moral views as "caught in the grip" of those views, but I do not mean to suggest that they could not believe differently; rather, they are "caught" in that it is a bad state to be in, and they are "in the grip" in that they genuinely believe their false moral views.)

There are two methods we might use to answer our question. First, we might ask whether the fact that non-moral ignorance exculpates shows that moral ignorance must exculpate too. Second, we might look directly at cases of wrongdoing by agents caught in the grip of false moral views and ask whether the agents are blameworthy. Let's pursue the first method and see whether it is fruitful.

### 3. *What do we really learn from cases of non-moral ignorance?*

The idea that if non-moral ignorance exculpates, then moral ignorance must also exculpate, has been advanced by several philosophers.<sup>5</sup> But I will argue that it is misguided.

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<sup>3</sup> Perhaps we should add "and her belief is not a result of motivated ignorance"; see footnote 2.

<sup>4</sup> The obligation to believe only those moral claims that are warranted by one's evidence is not a *procedural* obligation but is rather a *substantive* obligation, so it is not among one's procedural moral obligations regarding the management of one's beliefs. A person may fulfill these procedural moral obligations because she tries to get a moral question right, while ending up with a belief that is not warranted by her evidence. (A separate issue is whether this obligation (to believe only those moral claims that are warranted by one's evidence) is a moral obligation at all, or merely an epistemic obligation.)

<sup>5</sup> See the citations in footnote 1. I discuss the view that moral ignorance exculpates, focusing on Rosen's 2004 argument, in my "Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?" (*Ratio* 2011). Rosen 2004 argues for the conclusion that an agent who acts wrongfully while *ignorant* that she is acting morally wrongly is blameworthy only if her action results from an earlier knowing (akratic) violation of her procedural moral duties in the management of her moral beliefs. In my 2011 sections 1-3, I discuss a number of objections to his view, some of which appear in or are inspired by points in Moody-Adams (1994); Alexander Guerrero's "Don't Know, Don't Kill: Moral Ignorance, Culpability, and Caution," *Philosophical Studies* 136 (2007), 59-97; and William FitzPatrick's "Moral Responsibility and Normative Ignorance: Answering a New Skeptical Challenge," *Ethics* 118 (2008), 589-613. I argue that these objections show that it is not ignorance but false belief that has any chance of exculpating and that even non-akratic violations of these procedural moral duties may be a source of blameworthiness. I conclude that these objections do not touch a narrower thesis Rosen might hold: that false moral belief exculpates in cases in which an agent has not violated her procedural moral duties in the management of her beliefs. It is that narrower thesis that concerns me in this paper.

Recall Anne, who poisons Bert thinking she is giving him the cure to his illness. Anne is blameless. What explains this? Here are two possible explanations:

Anne didn't know she was poisoning Bert.

Anne didn't know she was doing something morally wrong.

These are two different things that someone might say by way of explanation of Anne's blamelessness. Which one offers the correct explanation?

The two possible explanations of Anne's blamelessness correspond to two general principles:

**Blameworthiness Requires Some Psychological Ground:**

A person is blameworthy for behaving in a certain way only if *either* there is a way of behaving such that (a) she believed she was behaving in that way and (b) behaving in that way is morally wrong, *or* she violated some procedural moral obligations regarding the management of her beliefs.

**Blameworthiness Requires Moral Knowledge:**

A person is blameworthy for behaving in a certain way only if *either* there is some way of behaving such that (c) she believed she was behaving in that way and (d) she knew that behaving in that way is morally wrong, *or* she violated some procedural moral obligations regarding the management of her beliefs.<sup>6</sup>

The first principle implies that Anne is blameless because, while she knew she was giving Bert what she believed to be the cure to his illness, it is not morally wrong to give someone what you believe to be the cure to his illness; and while it is morally wrong to poison someone, she

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<sup>6</sup> Perhaps we should add at the end of each of these principles "or her belief is a result of motivated ignorance"; see footnote 2.

didn't believe she was doing that.<sup>7</sup> The second principle thus also implies that Anne is blameless; it simply strengthens the conditions required for blame by including not only that the behavior one believed oneself to be engaged in *is wrong* but that *one knows* it is wrong.

Note that ignorance does not always exculpate, and neither of the principles above gets this case wrong:

Carla spoons something into Daniel's coffee. She does not know whether it is poison or sugar. She is 50% confident it is poison, and 50% confident it is sugar. In fact it is poison, and it kills Daniel.

Carla is blameworthy for poisoning Daniel. One might worry that a view according to which *ignorance* exculpates might hold that she is blameless: after all, she didn't *know* she was poisoning Daniel. But Carla did know that she was taking a 50% chance of poisoning Daniel, and that this is wrong. So neither principle above implies that Carla is blameless – she knows she is taking that 50% risk, it is wrong to take that risk, and she knows this is wrong.

Which of the two general principles does a better job of explaining Anne's blamelessness? The first principle does a better job. The first principle, which is a weaker principle, is all we need to explain blamelessness due to non-moral false belief like Anne's. Once we see that she did not know about certain non-moral features of her action, which make it wrong (and that she did not mismanage her beliefs), we see that she is blameless. We need not add the further condition that she did not know she was doing something wrong. Cases of non-moral ignorance like Anne's provide no motivation for the second principle.

It might have seemed that the fact that non-moral ignorance exculpates could support the claim that moral ignorance exculpates. But it turns out that cases of non-moral ignorance

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<sup>7</sup> Note that we must restrict ourselves to quantifying over *certain kinds* of knowledge about what one is doing: knowledge of what one is doing, *qualitatively described*. Anne knows that she is giving *this stuff* to Bert, and it is in fact morally wrong to give *this stuff* to Bert.

do not support the second principle above. The second principle above does imply that moral ignorance exculpates. But to embrace that principle, we would need independent reasons; consideration of exculpation due to non-moral ignorance does not support it.<sup>8</sup>

#### 4. *Subjective Wrongness and Blameworthiness*

Anne's case is one in which a person caught in the grip of *false* non-moral views is blameless for a wrongful action she did not know she was performing. But other credal states besides *false belief* can also be exculpatory: an agent's particular state of *uncertainty* might be exculpatory. Consider the following case.<sup>9</sup>

Evan is a doctor whose patient is suffering from a life-threatening condition. Evan knows that medicine A will cure the patient with an unpleasant side effect, and that one of B and C will completely cure the patient with no side effects, while the other will kill the patient. Evan does not know which of B and C is which. Evan gives his patient medicine A.

It is clear that Evan does what he should do. But in saying this, we are making a *subjective* normative claim: given his epistemic state, Evan should prescribe medicine A. Similarly, given Anne's mental state, she should give her husband what she gives him. When discussing Anne, we noted that she *poisoned* her husband, which one should not do. Anne did something objectively morally wrong, though subjectively morally permissible. The same is true of Evan. He does something objectively morally wrong: he gives his patient a cure with a nasty side effect rather than a cure without any side effect. Evan does something objectively morally

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<sup>8</sup> My point here does not depend on how the second principle is worded. We might instead consider the view that a person is blameworthy for acting in a particular way only if she *knew* she was acting wrongly. This principle is more concise than the second principle I state; but my objection to the second principle is not that it is too complicated, or that it *adds* a needless further condition, but simply that it is unmotivated by consideration of non-moral ignorance exculpating. (Paulina Sliwa (in "Moral Worth and Moral Knowledge," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 91 (2015)) holds that moral knowledge is necessary for praiseworthiness; but I don't think she would endorse the claim that moral knowledge is necessary for blameworthiness.)

<sup>9</sup> Frank Jackson famously introduced a case like this in "Deontic-theoretic consequentialism and the nearest-dearest objection," *Ethics* 101 (1991), 461-482.

wrong, but subjectively morally permissible. (Indeed, what Evan does is subjectively morally *required*.) It is natural to think that this is *why* Evan is blameless for acting morally wrongly.

Notice that neither of the two general principles we discussed above give the result that Evan is blameless. Anne doesn't know she is doing something objectively morally wrong; but Evan does! He knows he is giving a less good medicine rather than a better medicine; he knows it's objectively wrong to do that. (The two principles don't imply that Evan is blameworthy; they are simply silent on his case.) Still Evan is blameless. The following seems to provide the right explanation:

Blameworthy Only If Subjectively Wrong:

An agent is blameworthy for behaving in a particular way only if she behaves subjectively morally wrongly—thus, only if she behaves as she should not behave, given her whole epistemic state<sup>10</sup>—or if she has violated some procedural moral obligations regarding the management of her beliefs.<sup>11</sup>

This principle is more general than the two principles discussed in the last section. It explains cases such as Evan's, in which an agent is blameless due to his particular state of uncertainty, although he knows he is doing something objectively morally wrong. And this principle seems to offer an even better explanation of Anne's blamelessness than the principles in that section: Anne is blameless simply because she does not act subjectively wrongly. She does not act in a way she should not act, given her whole epistemic state (and she has not mismanaged her beliefs). I claim that this principle gives the true explanation of Anne's blamelessness.

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<sup>10</sup> Here I am emphasizing that whether a person behaves subjectively morally wrongly depends on her *whole epistemic state*. To clarify, whether a person behaves subjectively wrongly is not *the same question* as whether she behaves as she should not behave, given her whole epistemic state. I am assuming that moral requirement is overriding, and thus that if some behavior is morally wrong, then one should not engage in it, all things considered. But the converse does not follow. Sometimes one should not do something, all things considered, but it is not morally wrong to do it.

<sup>11</sup> Perhaps we should add, at the end of this principle, "or her belief is a result of motivated ignorance"; see footnote 2.

Someone might now offer a new argument for the claim that moral ignorance exculpates:

1. Blameworthy Only If Subjectively Wrong: An agent is blameworthy for behaving in a particular way only if she behaves subjectively morally wrongly—thus, only if she behaves as she should not behave, given her whole epistemic state—or if she has violated some procedural moral obligations regarding the management of her beliefs.
2. Behaving in a way one believes to be morally permissible is never subjectively morally wrong.

Therefore:

3. One is never blameworthy for doing what one believes to be morally permissible, if one has not violated any procedural moral obligations regarding the management of one's beliefs.

This argument is, in my view, unsound. But at this point what I want to point out is that it is a question-begging argument in a discussion of whether its conclusion is true. Taking claim 1 to be true (and to clarify the sense of “subjectively wrong” at use in claim 2), claim 2 is simply *what is at issue* between those who endorse claim 3 and those (like me) who deny it.

Note that *what is subjectively morally wrong* depends on one's epistemic state. The question is what role various parts of one's epistemic state play in determining what is subjectively morally wrong. Do one's moral beliefs (and credences) *alone determine* what is subjectively morally wrong for one to do? If they do, then it may seem that it is never subjectively morally wrong to do what one is sure is morally permissible.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> It might sometimes be subjectively morally wrong to do something one *believes* is morally permissible, even if one's moral beliefs (and credences) alone determine what is subjectively morally wrong for one to do, if one is not *sure* that it is morally permissible. One might believe that  $\phi$ ing is morally permissible while having a small credence that  $\phi$ ing is deeply morally

It is clear that one's moral beliefs *are sometimes relevant* to what is subjectively morally wrong for one to do. Consider this case:

Fred doesn't know what the red button does. His trusted friend Georgia says, "Be careful! Pushing the red button is deeply morally wrong." He believes her, yet he pushes the button anyway.

Fred does something subjectively morally wrong in this case. It is his moral belief, acquired on the basis of testimony, that makes what he does subjectively morally wrong. This case shows that *sometimes* one's moral beliefs are relevant to what is subjectively morally wrong for one to do. But it doesn't show that, in general, one's moral beliefs *alone determine* what is subjectively morally wrong for one to do. In fact, it doesn't show that one's moral beliefs play any role in determining what is subjectively morally wrong for one to do *over and above providing evidence for non-moral beliefs*. In this case, Fred would be reasonable in inferring that pushing the red button may well hurt someone. This non-moral belief would be sufficient to make it subjectively morally wrong to push the button.

In the next section I will develop a view on which one's non-moral beliefs determine what it is subjectively morally wrong for one to do. (On the view I will develop, one's moral beliefs are irrelevant to what it is subjectively wrong for one to do – unless they provide grounds for further non-moral beliefs.)

##### 5. *A view on which being caught in the grip of a false moral view is not exculpatory*

Let's take stock. The central question we are investigating in this paper is this:

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wrong. It has been argued that in such a case, one should not  $\phi$ . (See Jacob Ross's "Rejecting Ethical Deflationism" *Ethics* 116 (2006), 742-768; Alexander Guerrero's 2007; Andrew Sepielli's "What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do" *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 2008; Dan Moller's "Abortion and Moral Risk" *Philosophy* 86 (2011), 425-443; and William MacAskill's "Moral Recklessness and Moral Caution" (manuscript).) If these arguments are correct, it is subjectively morally wrong to  $\phi$  in such a case. I will set such cases aside. Assume that all the agents I discuss who are caught in the grip of false moral views do not just *believe* those moral views but are *sure* those moral views are true. See section 9 below, and my paper "The Irrelevance of Moral Uncertainty" (*Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 10 (2015): 53-79) for my argument that these authors' views of moral uncertainty are false.

If someone does something morally wrong while caught in the grip of a false moral view (according to which what she does is morally permissible or even morally good), and if she has not violated any of her procedural moral obligations regarding the management of her beliefs, is she thereby blameless?

As I said earlier, there are two methods we might use to answer our question. First, we might ask whether the fact that non-moral ignorance exculpates shows that moral ignorance must exculpate too. Second, we might look at the cases directly and ask whether the agents are blameworthy. We looked into the first method, and it did not prove fruitful. It turns out that the fact that non-moral ignorance exculpates gives us no reason to think that moral ignorance exculpates. Let's turn now to the second method.

We already considered two cases of agents who act morally wrongly while caught in the grip of false moral views: the ancient slaveholder and the opponent of gay marriage. Let's consider two more cases now. In each case, I stipulate that the agents have thought a reasonable amount about morality, have fulfilled all procedural moral duties regarding the management of their moral beliefs, genuinely believe that what they are doing is not just morally permissible, but is morally required, and have no false non-moral beliefs about their actions:<sup>13</sup>

A gang member kills a member of an opposing gang out of revenge. Someone in the opposing gang previously killed his friend (and fellow gang member), but he kills someone who didn't participate in the murder. He believes he is doing the right thing.

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<sup>13</sup> Perhaps I should add the stipulation that their false moral beliefs are not the result of motivated ignorance; see footnote 2.

A Mafia “family” member kills a shop owner who refuses to pay a weekly extortion fee. (The Mafia demands a weekly payment for “protection”; otherwise they threaten violence.) He believes he is doing the right thing.

I claim that in these cases, the agents are blameworthy for their wrongful actions. They know they are killing innocent people (in one case, out of revenge over something the person did not do; in the other case, for financial gain). Indeed, I claim that these are clear cases of blameworthy agents.

One might ask: how could these agents really have thought a reasonable amount about morality, and reasoned about morality in good faith? To see how they could have, let’s spell out each agent’s moral view a bit more. The gang member understands that he himself might be killed one day by a rival gang member; he does not think that the gang member would be acting morally wrongly. The gang member and the Mafia family member, unlike the ancient slaveholder, know that there are people who think their behavior is morally wrong. But they think that others have been suckered into a false touchy-feely moral view of loving everyone; and that others do not adequately appreciate each person’s moral duties to take care of her own.

I claim that these agents are blameworthy for their killings, and that what they do is subjectively morally wrong. What makes their actions something they should not do, in light of their whole epistemic states? It is their knowledge of what they are doing that makes their actions morally wrong: it is subjectively morally wrong to kill someone for one’s own group’s financial gain, or out of revenge at another person’s action. Their moral beliefs, in the absence of any non-moral knowledge (such as in the button-pushing case) might have made their actions subjectively morally permissible (by supporting certain further non-moral beliefs); but

given that they know *what* they are doing, their false moral beliefs cannot turn a subjectively morally wrong action into a subjectively morally permissible action.

I will now outline a view on which being caught in the grip of false moral views is not exculpatory. My opponent offers the following two plausible claims:

- A. Someone who does something morally wrong while caught in the grip of a false moral view (according to which the behavior is morally permissible) is blameworthy for her behavior *only if and only because* she is blameworthy for her false moral beliefs.
- B. Someone is blameworthy for her false moral beliefs only if she violated some procedural moral obligations regarding the management of her beliefs.

These two plausible claims together imply that being caught in the grip of a false moral view *is* exculpatory; they imply my opponent's answer to the central question we are discussing.

I deny both of these plausible claims, but I endorse both of the following variants of claim A:

- A\*. Someone who does something objectively morally wrong but subjectively morally permissible is blameworthy for her behavior *only if and only because* she is blameworthy for being in the epistemic state that makes her behavior subjectively permissible.
- A\*\*. Someone who does something morally wrong while caught in the grip of a false moral view (according to which what she does is morally permissible) is blameworthy for her behavior only if she is blameworthy for her false moral beliefs.

I grant claim A\*, and it is a claim on which my opponent and I can agree. We disagree about the implications of claim A\*. My opponent thinks that if one is caught in the grip of a false

moral view, then the actions one believes to be morally permissible are thereby not subjectively morally wrong; I disagree. In granting claim A\*\*, I grant the *only if* part of claim A, while disputing the *and only because* part. In my view, agents who act morally wrongly while caught in the grip of false moral views are indeed blameworthy for their false moral views. But their blameworthiness for their moral beliefs does not explain their blameworthiness for their actions; they are not blameworthy for their actions merely because they are blameworthy for their beliefs; rather, their actions and their beliefs are blameworthy for similar reasons.

I adopt this view of blameworthiness for behavior:

Behaving in a certain way is blameworthy just in case (and to the degree that<sup>14</sup>) the behavior results from the agent's caring inadequately about what is morally significant – where this is not a matter of *de dicto* caring about morality but *de re* caring about what is in fact morally significant.<sup>15</sup>

An agent cares *de dicto* about morality if the agent wants *to act morally*. An agent cares *de re* about what is in fact morally significant if the agent cares about the features of her actions that actually do matter morally. For example, an agent who wants to keep her promises and to avoid hurting others, thereby cares *de re* about some things that are in fact morally significant.<sup>16</sup>

Here is my view about the blameworthiness of beliefs<sup>17</sup>:

Beliefs (and failures to believe) are blameworthy if they involve inadequately caring about what is morally significant. Believing a certain kind of behavior

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<sup>14</sup> A person's degree of blameworthiness depends on several factors, including both the extent to which she cares inadequately about what is morally significant and the extent to which what she is doing is a morally wrong or bad thing to do. (For example, killing someone is more blameworthy than telling a small wrongful lie, even if both actions result from *equally complete indifference* to what is morally significant in each case.)

<sup>15</sup> This view has been argued for by Nomy Arpaly, in *Unprincipled Virtue* (2003); see also Julia Markovits, "Acting for the Right Reasons," *Philosophical Review* (2010) 119: 2: 201-242, which develops a view similar to Arpaly's, but focuses on the moral worth of morally good actions.

<sup>16</sup> A consequentialist would deny that promise keeping actually matters morally.

<sup>17</sup> This part of my view goes beyond the views in Arpaly 2003 and Markovits 2010.

is wrong on the basis of a certain consideration is a way of caring about that consideration.

Some failures to believe moral truths relevant to one's behavior are not blameworthy. For example, if one blamelessly falsely believes a non-moral claim, and this leads to one's false moral belief, then one's false moral belief does not involve inadequately caring about what is morally significant.

Let's consider the Mafia family member to illustrate my view. The Mafia family member knows he is killing an innocent person in order to secure financial gain for his family. He is inadequately moved by the fact that his action kills an innocent person. He acts as he does because he does not have a strong enough desire not to kill innocent persons – he does not care enough about not killing innocent persons. This is why he is blameworthy for the killing. But on my view, the Mafia family member is *also* blameworthy for his moral beliefs. His belief that it is morally right to kill the shop owner is a way of having a morally objectionable attitude to the shop owner – holding it is to hold that the shop owner's life is cheap and can permissibly be sacrificed to his family's own goals. This attitude itself is blameworthy, on my view.

Another interesting case to consider is the much-discussed case of Huckleberry Finn, who travels with Jim, an escaped slave.<sup>18</sup> Huck believes that he is morally required to turn Jim in, but at a crucial moment when he could easily do so, Huck does not. He “resolves to be bad” instead. One version of the case is this: Huck does genuinely believe that it is morally required to turn Jim in, but despite this he is moved by Jim's humanity, and this is why he refrains from turning Jim in. It has been asked: is Huck praiseworthy for acting? I

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<sup>18</sup> Huckleberry Finn and Jim are characters in the novel *Huckleberry Finn* by Mark Twain, originally published in 1884. Discussions of Huck Finn and whether he is praiseworthy, blameworthy, or neither occur in Jonathan Bennett's “The Conscience of Huckleberry Finn” (*Philosophy* 187 (1974): 123-34), Arpaly 2003, Markovits 2010, Sliwa 2015, and others.

have not offered an account of praiseworthiness, but the following sits nicely with the view I have proposed:

An agent is praiseworthy for a morally good action just in case the agent's action resulted from caring about the features of the situation that make the action a morally good action.<sup>19</sup>

On this view, Huck *is* praiseworthy for refraining from turning Jim in. This is a conclusion that I can happily embrace. But on my view, Huck is also blameworthy for something: his moral belief that he should turn Jim in. Huck's psychology, in my view, involves his both caring about Jim's humanity – it moves him to refrain from turning Jim in – yet also not adequately caring about Jim's humanity – it does not move him to *believe* that Jim deserves to not be a slave; it does not prevent his false moral belief. There are two ways we could understand Huck's psychology, in both of which he is somewhat blameworthy on my view. One possibility is that Huck does care about Jim's humanity, but not *fully*. The other possibility is that Huck simultaneously has two conflicting attitudes, two conflicting levels of care toward Jim's humanity: he cares about it fully, but he also cares very little about it. (Compare the way that a person might have two conflicting beliefs: I believe I will be off campus on Tuesday, and I also believe I'll have lunch in the cafeteria with Adam on Tuesday.)

On my view, Huck is *both* praiseworthy for refraining from turning Jim in and blameworthy for his moral view about Jim. I think this is the right thing to say about Huck, but I realize that those who have been at pains to point out that Huck is praiseworthy might want to say that his praiseworthiness for acting is the whole story.

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<sup>19</sup> This is the view in Arpaly 2003; a similar view is developed in Markovits 2010 (Markovits focuses on an agent's motivating reasons, rather than what the agent cares about). I raise a worry about how Arpaly's view should be developed in my "Discussion of Nomy Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue*" *Philosophical Studies* 2007.

Note that “inadequately caring” about what matters morally may be a matter of having a certain caring attitude (or set of attitudes); it may not merely be the *absence* of a certain caring attitude (or set of attitudes). We see this in the version of Huck in which he both fully cares about Jim but also inadequately cares; he has two conflicting attitudes of care.

The view I have offered in this section has three aspects that we might distinguish. There is (a) my view that being caught in the grip of a false moral view is not exculpatory; and there is my account of why this is true, which is (b) my view about blameworthiness for action; I have also offered (c) my view about blameworthiness for belief. In the next three sections, I will explore each of these three aspects of my view, clarifying my view and responding to objections.

6. *Objections to my view that being caught in the grip of a false moral view is not exculpatory*

In this section, I will consider two objections to my view that being caught in the grip of a false moral view is not exculpatory.

Someone might object as follows:

It’s a matter of luck what kind of moral community one is born into, and what kind of moral views one is taught. As a matter of luck, one might end up caught in the grip of false moral views. But one can’t be blameworthy simply because one experienced bad luck, so being caught in the grip of a false moral view must exculpate.

This objection fails because one *can* be blameworthy as a result of experiencing bad luck. For example, one might experience bad luck in the situations one faces. Two people may have very similar dispositions. One may be faced with a difficult moral choice between doing the right thing at great cost to himself and doing the selfish, wrong thing. If he chooses the wrong thing, he is morally unlucky compared to the other person, who might well have also chosen

the wrong thing in this situation but never faced this choice and so is not blameworthy in this way. This kind of moral luck exists; but there are also other kinds of moral luck. There is moral luck in the consequences of one's action: a person who has one glass of wine too many, drives, and kills a child as a result is *more blameworthy* than a person who acts similarly but is lucky not to encounter a child in his path. The first person is blameworthy *for killing this child* and that family's resentment of him is appropriate. These are ways that he is blameworthy that have no correlate for the other luckier drunk driver. Similarly, I claim, there is moral luck in one's constitution: one may be unlucky to have become a bad person, and people caught in the grip of false moral views are unlucky to have been constituted as bad people. They are blameworthy for their actions, and unlucky to be blameworthy in this way.<sup>20</sup>

Another objector might say the following:

Perhaps people caught in the grip of false moral views are blameworthy for their wrongful actions when they know the features of the actions that in fact make them wrong. But surely someone who acts wrongly *while knowing she is acting wrongly* is *more blameworthy* than someone who does not know she is acting wrongly.

This is a natural thought. But we can see that it is mistaken by considering the following case:

Kurt believes that homosexuality is morally wrong and that the government should not endorse these morally wrongful unions by allowing same sex couples to legally marry. He works hard to prevent same sex marriage from being legal in his state; he is a prominent public intellectual whose advocacy has a real effect. (Kurt is a sophisticated contemporary opponent of same-sex marriage who has no false non-

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<sup>20</sup> See Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press 1979, which is more ambivalent about the phenomenon of moral luck than I am. In my view, moral luck is simply a real phenomenon. (Note that one might endorse my view that false moral belief is not exculpatory, and thus endorse the existence of moral luck in one's *constitution*, without endorsing the independent claim that luck in the *consequences* of one's actions can affect how blameworthy one is.)

moral beliefs about homosexuals and homosexuality.<sup>21</sup>) Louis believes that homosexual love is no different from heterosexual love and that same sex couples should be legally entitled to marriage. But Louis is a talented political operative who sells his services to the highest bidder. An anti-same-sex-marriage group hires him, and he devotes himself tirelessly to preventing same sex marriage from being legal. He knows it's morally wrong to do this kind of work just for a lot of money, but he does it anyway. The efforts of Kurt, Louis, and others prevent same sex marriage from becoming legal in Mark's state of residence. This places a variety of burdens on Mark and his same-sex partner.

What attitudes should Mark have toward Kurt and Louis? In particular, what kinds of resentment is it appropriate for Mark to feel toward them? Both agents behave morally wrongly in a way that is bad for Mark. Both contribute to the denial of basic rights to Mark. If the objector were correct, then Mark would be licensed in being more resentful of Louis than of Kurt. Unlike Kurt, Louis *knows* that what he is doing is morally wrong.

But Mark may appropriately feel more resentful of Kurt than Louis; indeed, there are two kinds of resentment that Mark could reasonably feel toward Kurt, though he could reasonably feel only one kind toward Louis. Mark could appropriately and reasonably resent both Kurt and Louis for working hard to deny his rights, knowing that they were working hard to deny certain rights to him simply because his life partner is a man and not a woman: Mark can resent each of them for failing to take the impact on him (and others like him) as sufficient reason to refrain from acting. Mark could *also* appropriately resent Kurt for taking Mark's relationship to be less morally valuable than a heterosexual relationship: Mark could appropriately resent the moral attitude Kurt takes toward Mark's relationship in Kurt's *moral*

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<sup>21</sup> Some of these do exist.

*beliefs* about Mark and his relationship. But this second kind of resentment is not one that Mark could appropriately have toward Louis. Louis does not take this further morally objectionable attitude toward Mark.

Because there is a close connection between how much resentment would be appropriate from the victim of a wrongful action, and how blameworthy the agent of the wrongful action is, I conclude that Kurt is more blameworthy than Louis, and that the objector's assertion is false.<sup>22</sup>

### 7. *My view of blameworthiness for behavior*

In this section, I will say a bit more about the part of my view that concerns blameworthiness for behavior. When a person acts wrongly, this is either because she cares inadequately about the features of her situation that make her action morally wrong, or because while she cares adequately about those features, something has interfered with her action's manifesting what she cares about. If she has false non-moral views about her situation, then her action may not manifest inadequate caring about the features that make her action wrong, because she may not know about these features. This is why non-moral ignorance can exculpate. If a person has a psychological condition that involves *delusion*, her psychological condition may exculpate; this is an example of non-moral ignorance exculpating.

But even a person who knows her non-moral situation may still act in a way that does not reflect what she really cares about; a psychological condition such as *depression* may interfere with her action's manifesting what she really cares about. The view I am proposing allows that psychological conditions can exculpate (or can mitigate blame) when they interfere with

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<sup>22</sup> Note that I don't need to rely on the claim that two kinds of resentment must constitute *more resentment* than one kind. Rather, I want to point out that Kurt's moral belief is the appropriate basis for a *great deal* of resentment, in support of the claim that it is appropriate to feel more resentment of Kurt than of Louis.

an action's manifesting what an agent really cares about.<sup>23</sup> Note that this view takes there to be a psychologically real phenomenon of *caring about* certain features of one's action, which is not simply identical to *believing* that those features matter morally: sometimes caring about a feature and believing it matters go together; sometimes they come apart.<sup>24</sup> Huck, for example, cares about Jim's humanity but does not believe that Jim's humanity matters morally in the same way that a white person's does.

One psychological condition is a bit different: psychopathy. Let's consider an idealized version of the condition in which the agent knows what his non-moral situation is, knows what morality requires, but is simply unmoved by any concern for other agents. This is an agent who genuinely does not care about others; it is not the case that his psychological condition *interferes* with his actions' expressing his caring. The view I am developing might hold that psychopaths are morally responsible for their morally wrong actions. Or it might hold that there is an additional condition necessary for moral responsibility – the ability to be moved by any moral considerations at all. While it might seem that psychopaths are clearly not responsible for their actions, I am not so sure. What's clear is that psychopaths are very different from other people, and that feeling and expressing the reactive attitudes toward them has a different meaning and efficacy than with ordinary persons. Psychopaths are beyond hope. That may affect how it is reasonable to interact with them, even while it may be true that they are fully blameworthy for their actions.

Compare two cases in which an insane person murders someone, and the murdered person's loved ones feel real *resentment* toward the insane person. In the first case, the insane person was suffering from a full-blown delusion in which he thought his victim was actively

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<sup>23</sup> My view agrees with Arpaly 2003 on this point.

<sup>24</sup> In my view, believing a feature matters morally is one way of caring about a feature, but not the only way.

trying to kill him and that killing her was his only hope of surviving. In the second case, the insane person was a psychopath who simply does not care at all about other people, though knows that they can suffer like he does. In this pair of cases, the resentment of the first family is inappropriate while the resentment of the family in the second case is not. While it is understandable that the first family feels resentment toward someone who murdered their loved one, in fact the agent did not show any disrespect toward the victim, nor any failure to value her life; the agent simply had a false view of what was happening in the situation. By contrast, the psychopath understood his situation perfectly, and did fail to care about the life he was ending. That the second family's resentment is appropriate suggests that psychopaths really are blameworthy.<sup>25</sup>

#### 8. *My view of blameworthiness for beliefs*

In this section, I will consider three objections to my view that agents are blameworthy for false moral beliefs that are relevant to their actions.

Here is the first objection:

Someone who has fulfilled her procedural moral obligations regarding the management of her beliefs and is caught in the grip of a false moral view is epistemically *justified* in believing the false moral view and would be epistemically *unjustified* in believing the true moral view. But one can't be blameworthy for having beliefs that are justified, and one can't be blameworthy for failing to believe in an unjustified way.

I will make three points in response to this objection.

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<sup>25</sup> The question of whether psychopaths are moral responsibility for their actions is discussed in Matthew Talbert, "Blame and Responsiveness to Moral Reasons: Are Psychopaths Blameworthy?" *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 89 (2008): 516-35; Gary Watson, "The Trouble with Psychopaths," in *Reasons and Recognition: Essays in Honor of T. M. Scanlon*, ed. R. J. Wallace, R. Kumar, and S. Freeman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 307-31; David Shoemaker, "Attributability, Answerability, and Accountability: Toward a Wider Theory of Moral Responsibility," *Ethics* 121 (2011): 602-32; and Dana Kay Nelkin, "Psychopaths, Incurable Racists, and the Faces of Responsibility," *Ethics* 125 (2015): 357-390.

First, it may well be that some epistemically justified beliefs are nevertheless blameworthy. Consider the view that we owe our friends the benefit of the doubt. We may well owe it to our friends to refrain from believing ill of them even in the face of sufficient evidence to epistemically justify such beliefs.<sup>26</sup> In such a case, an epistemically justified belief would be blameworthy. (This view is compatible with the claim that we don't owe it to our friends to refrain from thinking ill of them in the face of *overwhelming* evidence.)

For my second point in response, I will grant that some people caught in the grip of false moral beliefs are epistemically justified in these beliefs, on the basis of testimony. Nevertheless, it does not follow that they are not in a position to be epistemically justified in believing the moral truth. Consider the following case. My college friend Nora and I studied math together. She likes to talk to me about math, though it has been years since I studied it. She tells me that a certain mathematical claim is true; I believe her. In fact, that claim is false, and if I thought about it I might figure that out – I remember enough math to figure it out. In this case, I am epistemically justified in believing the claim though I am also capable of becoming epistemically justified in believing it is false. Similarly, a person could be epistemically justified in holding a false moral view, while she is nevertheless in a position to become epistemically justified in believing the moral truth.

Third and finally, it is not at all clear to me that those caught in the grip of false moral views ever have epistemically justified beliefs. One's total evidence is relevant to whether one's beliefs are justified. Mere testimonial evidence cannot make one justified in believing something when one has adequate evidence to the contrary. Every ordinary

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<sup>26</sup> Sarah Stroud and Simon Keller have both argued for such a view; Jennifer Lackey has argued they are wrong. See Keller's "Friendship and Belief" *Philosophical Papers* 33 (2004), 329-351; Stroud's "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship" *Ethics* 116 (2006), 498-524; and Lackey, "Why There is No Epistemic Partiality in Friendship" (manuscript).

person's life experience gives her a great deal of evidence that is relevant to what is morally required and permissible.<sup>27</sup>

Here is another objection:

If someone couldn't have done something, she is not blameworthy for failing to do it. People who have fulfilled their procedural epistemic moral obligations but are caught in the grip of false moral beliefs could not have believed otherwise.

My response to this objection echoes my third point in response to the last objection. In fact, each of us has a great deal of moral evidence which makes it possible for us to realize the moral truth. That we do not all succeed when we try does not mean that for some of us, realizing the moral truth is impossible.<sup>28,29</sup>

Finally, consider this objection:

An ordinary person fails to believe lots of moral truths, because she hasn't thought about those issues at all. Is she thereby blameworthy?

This objection invites me to clarify my view. *Inadequately* caring about what is morally significant occurs if one forms a specific belief about the issue (even if one merely has an implicit belief) or if the issue is relevant to one's behavior. But caring adequately about what is morally significant does not require believing all moral truths (not even implicitly).

### 9. *A Moderate Position?*

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<sup>27</sup> I spell out the suggestion in this paragraph in my "Moral Testimony Goes Only So Far," *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility* (forthcoming). To clarify, my view is that we all have a lot of evidence that makes realizing the moral truth possible for us. My view is not that we have so much evidence that if we try to realize the moral truth, we will do so; obviously this is not true, as many people do try, and get it horribly wrong.

<sup>28</sup> As I mentioned in section 1, my locution "caught in the grip" may suggest that a person is *stuck* and *cannot escape* her false moral view, but I do not intend to say that about people who are caught in the grip of false moral views. (It is not true of them.) Rather, they are "caught" in that this is a *bad* rather than a *good* situation to be in, and they are "in the grip" in that they *genuinely believe* their false moral views.

<sup>29</sup> Note that I do not hold that a person is blameworthy for her false moral views *because* she could have believed differently. Rather, she is blameworthy for her false moral views simply in virtue of holding them; they are themselves attitudes of inadequately caring about what matters morally.

While I do claim that each person could realize the moral truth, that claim is not crucial for my view. We can be blameworthy for features of ourselves that are beyond our control; for a recent defense of this claim, see Pamela Hieronymi, "Reflection and Responsibility," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (2014) 42: 1: 3-41.

My opponent thinks that false moral belief is exculpatory if a wrongdoer has *tried* to figure out the moral truth, but then gotten it wrong. I hold that false moral belief is never exculpatory. We might consider an intermediate, moderate position according to which false moral belief is exculpatory just in case a wrongdoer has tried to a reasonable degree to figure out the moral truth (has met her procedural obligations) *and* she has formed an *epistemically justified* false moral belief. On this view, unjustified false moral belief is never exculpatory, but justified false moral belief can be exculpatory.<sup>30</sup> Let's consider the version of this view on which it is non-trivial: according to the moderate view, some people caught in the grip of false moral views are epistemically justified.

I want to make two points about this view.

First, it is not clear that this view is intuitively supported by an analogy with the exculpatory power of non-moral false belief. If I make an honest mistake of non-moral reasoning, end up with an unjustified false non-moral belief, and then hurt someone though I think I'm helping her, my honest mistake does tend to exculpate: I am blameless unless blameworthy for having ended up with this unjustified false belief. Some honest mistakes of non-moral reasoning are blameless, and in such cases I will be blameless for hurting the person I hurt. So this moderate view may be unmotivated: unjustified false non-moral beliefs can exculpate, so if some false moral beliefs can exculpate, why would it only be justified false moral beliefs that exculpate?

Second, and more importantly, my argument in this paper can be adapted to show that this view is false. A proponent of this view holds that people can be epistemically justified in holding false moral views. How would they become so justified? A proponent

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<sup>30</sup> Views along these lines are offered or suggested by Smith (2006), Guerrero (2007), MacAskill (manuscript), and Chelsea Rosenthal, "Ethics for Fallible People" (2019 dissertation, New York University).

of this view must hold that it is possible to become justified in believing false moral views through testimony, through being convinced by compelling but unsound arguments, or through either route. But then we can consider the versions of the Mafia family member and the gang member who are justified in their false moral views via one or both of these routes. These murderers are nevertheless blameworthy.

A proponent of the moderate view might try to block my argument by denying that the Mafia family member or the gang member could be justified in their false moral views. Indeed, there is a tendency among some philosophers to divide moral questions into *easy questions* and *hard questions*, supposing that one can be epistemically justified when getting the hard questions wrong, but one cannot be epistemically justified when getting the easy questions wrong.<sup>31</sup> But what is easy and what is hard varies greatly depending on where a person sits, in culture and in space. Some of what looks easy to us looked hard to our ancestors; and some of what looks hard to us will no doubt look easy to our descendants. No moral questions are *simply* easy or hard. If we instead hold that whether a question is easy or hard can vary with the person who is considering it, then we can consider versions of the Mafia family member and the gang member for whom realizing the moral truth would be hard. Nevertheless, these agents know what they are doing (killing innocent people), and are blameworthy.

#### 10. *The Irrelevance of Moral Uncertainty*

I have offered a view on which being caught in the grip of false moral views is not exculpatory. On my view, someone who knows her non-moral situation, but has a false moral belief, subjectively should act as morality *actually* requires, and not as she believes she should act. A person's moral beliefs are often irrelevant to how she subjectively should act;

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<sup>31</sup> For two examples, see Fitzpatrick (2008) and MacAskill (manuscript).

they are relevant only when they provide information about her non-moral situation that she otherwise lacks. Fred, who is told by Georgia not to push the red button, thereby learns some non-moral information—that pushing the red button does something bad such as hurting someone and does not do something good such as making someone happy; this is why his moral belief is relevant to how he subjectively should act.

This view has implications for recent discussions of moral uncertainty. Some authors have argued that an agent should be morally cautious, refraining from doing something she believes is morally permissible if she has some credence that it might be morally wrong.<sup>32</sup> Other authors have argued for the stronger conclusion that agents should sometimes do what they believe is morally wrong if they have some credence that failing to do it might be much more morally wrong.<sup>33</sup> These views imply that agents caught in the grip of false moral views subjectively should act as their moral views dictate. These views thus have the underappreciated implication that being caught in the grip of false moral views is exculpatory. One implication of the view I have developed here is that this recent work on moral uncertainty, and the debates internal to it, are misguided. That work assumes that what an agent subjectively should do—in light of her *whole epistemic state*—depends solely on the agent’s normative credences; it does not recognize the role that an agent’s non-normative credences can play in determining how she subjectively should act.<sup>34</sup>

## 11. Conclusion

Because ethics is hard, some people who have been responsible in the management of their moral beliefs have nevertheless ended up with false moral views. This paper has

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<sup>32</sup> Views along these lines are offered by Guerrero 2007, Moller 2011, and MacAskill (manuscript); see footnote 12.

<sup>33</sup> Views along these lines are offered by Ross 2006 and Sepielli 2008; see footnote 12.

<sup>34</sup> I offer this argument in “The Irrelevance of Moral Uncertainty,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 10 (2015): 53-79. Other arguments that also challenge recent work on moral uncertainty are given in Brian Weatherson, “Running Risks Morally,” *Philosophical Studies* 167 (2014): 141-163; and in Brian Heddon, “Does MITE Make Right? On Decision Making Under Normative Uncertainty,” *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* 11 (2016): 102-128.

discussed the question: when these agents act morally wrongly, believing they are acting morally permissibly, are they blameworthy? I have argued that while non-moral ignorance does exculpate, moral ignorance does not, and I have developed a view of blameworthiness on which moral ignorance does not exculpate.<sup>35</sup>

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