

Ethics is Hard! What Follows?

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? There is an attractive line of thought according to which she is thereby blameless. In this paper, I will argue that she is not. I will argue that 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).

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 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, 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.¹

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

¹ 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.)

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 if 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.² But I will argue that it is misguided.

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,

² 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; and Gideon Rosen's 'Skepticism about Moral Responsibility,' *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004). I discuss this view, focusing on Rosen's argument, in my "Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?" (*Ratio* 2011), available on my webpage.

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 Michelle Moody-Adams's "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," *Ethics* 104 (1994), 291–309; 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. Sections 4-7 of the earlier paper present, much more briefly, some of the material in this paper.

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.

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 didn't believe she was doing that. 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 Douglas'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 Douglas.

Carla is blameworthy for poisoning Douglas. 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 Douglas. But Carla did know that she was taking a 50% chance of poisoning Douglas, 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 explains Anne's blamelessness? The first principle explains Anne's blamelessness. 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, 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 the non-moral ignorance exculpates could support the claim that moral ignorance exculpates. But it turns out that cases of non-moral ignorance 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.

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.³

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

³ Frank Jackson famously introduced a case like this in "Deontic-theoretic consequentialism and the nearest-dearest objection," *Ethics* 101 (1991), 461-482.

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 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.⁴

⁴ 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

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.

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.
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.

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.

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.

Note that *what is subjectively morally wrong* depends on one's epistemic situation. The question is what role various parts of one's epistemic situation 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.⁵

It is clear that one's moral beliefs *sometimes determine* 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 determine 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. A person's whole epistemic state includes a great deal beyond her moral beliefs; it also includes her non-moral beliefs. In the next section I will develop a view on which one's non-moral beliefs play the primary role in determining what it is subjectively morally wrong for one to do.

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

⁵ 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 ϕ ing is morally permissible while having a small credence that ϕ ing is deeply morally wrong. It has been argued that in such a case, one should not ϕ . (See Jacob Ross's "Rejecting Ethical Deflationism" *Ethics* 116 (2006), 742-768; Alexander Guerrero's 2007; Andrew Seppielli'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 ϕ 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" (forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* pending final review; available by email) for my argument that these authors' views of moral uncertainty are false.

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

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 epistemic 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:

A gang member kills a member of an opposing gang who killed his friend (and fellow gang member). He believes he is doing the right thing.

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; 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:

1. 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.
2. Someone is blameworthy for her false moral beliefs only if she violated some procedural epistemic 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 1:

- 1*. 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.
- 1**. 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 1*, and it is a claim on which my opponent and I can agree. We disagree about the implications of claim 1*. 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 1**, I grant the *only if* part of claim 1, 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) 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.⁶

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.⁷

Here is my view about the blameworthiness of beliefs⁸:

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

⁶ 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.

⁷ A consequentialist would deny that promise keeping actually matters morally.

⁸ This part of my view goes beyond the views in Arpaly 2003 and Markovits 2010.

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. 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 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.⁹

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.

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; this is a view that emerges from my more specific commitments to (b) my view about

⁹ This is the view in Arpaly 2003. I raise a worry about how the view should be developed in my "Discussion of Nomy Arpaly's *Unprincipled Virtue*" *Philosophical Studies* 2007.

blameworthiness for action, and (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. I believe not only in this kind of moral luck but also in moral luck in the consequences of one's action: in my view, 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.¹⁰

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:

Edgar 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. (Edgar is a sophisticated contemporary opponent of same-sex marriage who has no false non-moral beliefs about homosexuals and homosexuality.¹¹) Frank believes that homosexual love is no different from heterosexual love and that same sex couples should be legally entitled to marriage. But Frank 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

¹⁰ See Thomas Nagel, "Moral Luck," in *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press 1979, which is more ambivalent about the phenomenon of moral luck that I am. In my view, moral luck is simply a real phenomenon.

¹¹ Some of these do exist.

does it anyway. The efforts of Edgar, Frank, and others prevent same sex marriage from becoming legal in Gary's state of residence. This places a variety of burdens on Gary and his same-sex partner.

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

But Gary may appropriately feel more resentful of Edgar than Frank; indeed, there are two kinds of resentment that Gary could reasonably feel toward Edgar, though he could reasonably feel only one kind toward Frank. Gary could appropriately and reasonably resent both Edgar and Frank 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: Gary can resent each of them for failing to take the impact on him (and others like him) as sufficient reason to refrain from acting. Gary could *also* appropriately resent Edgar for taking Gary's relationship to be less morally valuable than a heterosexual relationship: Gary could appropriately resent the moral attitude Edgar takes toward Gary's relationship in Edgar's *moral beliefs* about Gary and his relationship. But this second kind of resentment is not one that Gary could appropriately have toward Frank. Frank does not take this further morally objectionable attitude toward Gary.

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 Edgar is more blameworthy than Frank, and that the objector's assertion is false.

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 about those features, something has interfered with her action's manifesting what she cares about. If she had 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 an action's manifesting what an agent really cares about. Note that this view takes there to be a psychologically real phenomenon of *caring about* certain features of one's action, which is not identical to *believing* that those features matter morally; sometimes caring about a feature and believing it matters go together; sometimes they come apart. 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.¹² 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 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. This suggests that psychopaths really are blameworthy.

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:

¹² Jada Twedt Strabbing offers a view along these lines, according to which blameworthiness requires both attributability and accountability, and psychopaths are not accountable for their actions; see Strabbing's "Understanding Accountability" (manuscript).

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.

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.¹³ 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 Moon 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.

¹³ 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).

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 person's life experience gives her a great deal of evidence that is relevant to what is morally required and permissible.¹⁴

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.

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 the requirement to care adequately about what is morally significant does not require believing all moral truths (not even implicitly).

¹⁴ 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.

9. *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; 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.¹⁵ 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.¹⁶ 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 situation*—depends solely

¹⁵ Views along these lines are offered by Guerrero 2007, Moller 2011, and MacAskill (manuscript); see footnote 5.

¹⁶ Views along these lines are offered by Ross 2006 and Sepielli 2008; see footnote 5.

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.¹⁷

10. *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 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.

¹⁷ I offer this argument in "The Irrelevance of Moral Uncertainty" (forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics* pending final revision; available by email).