

## **On Being “Blameless Among One’s Contemporaries”: Moral Ignorance and Widespread Wrongdoing**

**Nomy Arpaly**

In a much-disputed verse in Genesis, Noah is described as a righteous man and “blameless among his contemporaries” or, to use a different translation, “perfect in his generations”. The oddity is right there in the original Hebrew: the contrast between “perfect” or “blameless”, which sound like an absolute thing to be, and “among his contemporaries” or “in his generations”, which places Noah as someone whose merits are relative to those of the people of his time, supposedly a terrible set of people that brought a flood on themselves. Traditional interpreters of the Hebrew Bible have struggled to answer the question: was Noah in fact a righteous man or did he just live among such rotten people that he shone by comparison? There are hints in the biblical text to support both interpretations.

Perhaps “perfect in his generations” could be a useful phrase, as sometimes we talk in similarly ambiguous ways about people of previous generations. One says about a grandparent, or about a historical figure, that they were impressive. One uses adjectives that connote flat out, unmitigated praise. And yet, the person who praises the grandparent or the historical figure in that manner is ready, if reminded, to agree that

that the person in question regularly acted in such ways she would find far too sexist to ignore in a young colleague, or that he subjected his children to corporeal punishment, which she takes to be wrong. Does that mean that she takes back her conviction that he was a wonderful person, or modifies it by saying he was just a *relatively* wonderful person? That doesn't sound quite right. That sounds like too much of a demotion. He was perfect in his generations.

What is the more precise nature of this tendency we have to forget or condone the sins of a person as long as they were generation-typical sins? One of the first thoughts one could have on this topic is that *moral ignorance excuses* (henceforth MIE). Yes, your favorite founding father was sexist, but he didn't know that the things he was doing were wrong, and for that reason he was not blameworthy for them. Your grandfather punished his children physically, but people thought it was alright back then. If I give someone poison, but do so because the person asked for sugar and I non-culpably believe that the white stuff in the bowl is sugar, my ignorance excuses me. Why not say that the (non-culpable) belief that punishing children physically is morally permissible excuses your grandfather? Rosen (2003, 2004) and Zimmerman (2010) tell us that when it comes to their effect on blame, moral ignorance and factual ignorance are *on a par*.

MIE provides an attractive explanation for the way we treat the sins of our ancestors, but many disagree with it<sup>1</sup>. MIE is, indeed, not always a perfect fit for our intuitions. A graduate student of mine, upon hearing the view, declared that as a German, he cannot accept it; and indeed Nazi war criminals serve as a default example of evil for many, although it is often assumed that they were morally ignorant, as they thought what they were doing was right. Something similar is true for suicide bombers. In addition to these intuitive challenges to MIE, there exist more subtle ones. One occurs in what I would call “Progressive Cases”. These are cases in which a person, the Progressive, believes that something that most of her *contemporaries* do is wrong, and hopes that someday in the future it will be treated the way we treat murder or theft. A puzzle about the Progressive emerges from the fact that usually, she treats those who commit the relevant sin in a way that is quite different from the way she treats people who commit murder or theft. What enables her to do it?

On the surface, it seems like an easy catch for those who support MIE. Surely the progressive takes her contemporaries to be morally ignorant, and so she excuses their actions. The interesting thing, however, is that sometimes the progressive seems to

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Harman (2011), Mason (2015) Weatherson (2019).

excuse his contemporaries *without attributing ignorance to them* – not moral ignorance and not any other sort<sup>2</sup>. Let us look at a case:

Vera the Vegan: Vera believes that one should be vegan and she is herself a vegan. Yet, she does not treat the omnivores she meets the way she would treat people who commit murder, assault, robbery, white-collar crimes, or acts displaying racism or sexism. She has plenty of friends and friendly acquaintances who are omnivores or ovo-lacto-vegetarians. She thinks some of them are great people. She does *not*, by and large, take them to be morally *ignorant*. Perhaps a few of them, she thinks doubtfully, act out of moral ignorance, but most of them –who live, as she does, in a liberal social environment - are not acting out of ignorance at all. They know by now that morally speaking, they should be vegan, or at least that they should not eat meat, or at least that they should not eat mammals and birds, but they are simply unwilling to give up their favorite foods. She sighs, and yet her actions – socializing with these people without unusual difficulty - and her emotions – the absence of anger, as long as they are willing to go to the right restaurant with her –seem to suggest that she does not blame them very much for their acts.

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<sup>2</sup> I must thank Max Hayward for pointing this out.

Vera's case does not in any way refute MIE, but if something other than presuming ignorance makes it possible for Vera to excuse her peers, it is less certain than it first seemed that it is ignorance that does the work when we excuse our contemporaries - or predecessors. I will return to Vera later in the chapter.

Among those who are opposed to MIE, many seem to oppose it because they think moral ignorance is never honest. Ignorance is honest – my term, inspired by the colloquial term “honest mistake” – if it is not the result of a culpable course of action, self-deception, or some motivated irrationality (I like to refer to all of these as “shenanigans”). Though Barnett (2020) would have used the term “rational ignorance”, I prefer to use “honest ignorance”, to accommodate cases in which the ignorant person's false belief is not rational but is also not the result of any action or motivation (e.g. it is the result of the gambler's fallacy, or of some morally neutral mental condition such as schizophrenia). Some opponents of MIE maintain that people with grossly false moral beliefs “should have seen” the moral truth and so have something resembling moral responsibility towards their beliefs<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps the racist, for example, is motivated by some kind of envy, or a desire to scapegoat, or simply by some kind of hatred, and as these are bad things, she is not excused by the resulting ignorance.

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<sup>3</sup> This has been argued famously by Harman (2011). For related discussion see Guerrero (2007), McGrath (2009), Miller (2021) Sliwa (2012). Wedgewood (2019) and Wieland (2015).

I do not wish to take this route, as I think – perhaps along with Rosen (2003 and 2004) - that the burden of proof is on anyone who wishes to argue that no false moral belief is honest.

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Granted, some of the believers that first come to our minds as examples of moral ignorance lend themselves relatively easily to the accusation of dishonesty. There are, of course, the Nazis. The people who committed war crimes in the name of Hitler did not usually “grow up” Nazi. As children, most of them went to church every Sunday, studied Kant in school, and otherwise had the same education as many peers who didn’t become Nazis. Most came to their Nazism as teenagers or adults. Many of them were exposed to a variety of political views and engaged in fierce disagreements, and at least some of their Nazi beliefs were challenged as they were formed. The formation of Nazi beliefs in “ordinary Germans” was also quite often accompanied by strong emotion, lending some credibility to hypotheses along the line of “German youth were excited to be told that they will be the builders of a better nation” or “downtrodden German workers had to take their anger somewhere” – in other words, hypotheses involving motivated irrationality. Where there are emotions and desires, it’s easy to speculate that with a better quality of will, people would not have been fooled by Hitler into bad beliefs.

But consider instead beliefs, near-universal in their time and place, which their holders have *never heard opposed* or even cast into doubt, or which they have heard endorsed unanimously by respected “experts”. Quite a few false moral beliefs were like that at some point, and of their holders, I think the burden of proof is on the optimist who think that the truth was “accessible” to them somehow - so much that their departure from truth clearly involved shenanigans. An extreme example would be the belief that masturbation is wrong – an easy belief to make fun of but which resulted in cruelty to children. The belief in the wrongness of masturbation is a belief that was nearly universal in many places and famously shared by Immanuel Kant, who regarded masturbation as even worse than suicide, which he regarded in turn as a severe offense against the moral law. It is simply hard to imagine what kind of motivation – an interest, a fear, a wish, anything else – most individuals had to hold that belief. For most individuals who had that belief, Kant perhaps included, the most straightforward explanation for their holding it was that they were taught it and never encountered skepticism about it. This had better not be a such bad reason, as it is the main reason people of average rationality hold a great many of their factual beliefs. In other words, for many individuals, the belief that masturbation is morally wrong was an honest mistake – as honest as their mistakes pertaining to medicine, say.

Am I denying that morality is known a-priori? Not necessarily. All truths of mathematics are known a-priori, and yet most of us get the Monty Hall problem all wrong. Most of us would make plenty of honest mistakes in calculus as well. That is true for desperate college students deeply motivated to do well on a test and for true lovers of knowledge vying for a deeper understanding of the cosmos: quality of will won't cut it if talent or good instruction is lacking. Contra epistemologists, I am not sure being bad at calculus is an irrationality, as opposed to a lack of smarts or lack of a talent, but even if we were to regard people who make mistakes in calculus as irrational, their irrationality would not be the sort induced by motivation (or lack of motivation). Most of them do *not* secretly wish to fail the exam nor are otherwise inclined to turn their back on evidence. They honestly find the material too difficult.

*If there are innocently mistaken moral beliefs, do they excuse?* This is the question I would like to tackle in this chapter. I will argue not just against MIE but against the more widely accepted HMIE – Honest Moral Ignorance Excuses (in other words, I'll argue that *even honest* moral ignorance fails to excuse). My argument against HMIE will draw on my previous work on Inverse Akrasia. Following it, I will broadly sketch a new alternative account, and point the way towards another possible account, of the way we tend to excuse generation-typical wrong actions. Each of these accounts has a different implication as to whether we are correct when we excuse them.



### **A Preemptory Clarification: False Morally Relevant Factual Beliefs**

Before we start, we must be careful to distinguish moral beliefs from morally relevant factual belief. Many false moral beliefs seem to be based on factual ignorance, as when beliefs about how some kinds of people should be treated are “underwritten” by theories about the abilities and wishes of the relevant people. Arguably some of the people casually imagined as morally ignorant, like many racists and other holders of allophobic prejudice, are better described as merely suffering from morally relevant ignorance, or having *false morally relevant factual beliefs*- beliefs like “black people don’t feel pain as much as whites do” “children benefit from corporeal punishment” and “women are too emotional to make mature decisions” are not moral beliefs but Morally Relevant Factual Beliefs. Do false MRFBs excuse?

Some of the MRFBs people cite as excuses for their actions – in fact, a very large number of them - do not excuse in the simple sense that *even if the beliefs were true*, their truth would not have justified the action. For example, a Spanish nationalist I have met defended with a first inexplicable vehemence the view, rejected by linguistics textbooks, that Catalan is not a language, but a dialect of Spanish. She seemed to assume that if Catalan is only a dialect, it is somehow wrong to encourage Catalan culture in Catalunya. Similarly, the view that homosexuality is a disease has been used as an

excuse by violent homophobes – even though they do not generally mistreat people with diseases. For that matter, the view that a Tzar was killed by a Jewish organization, if it were true, would not have justified the killing of a single child in a pogrom. In many such cases, it appears that there is another obvious sense in which the beliefs do not excuse the actions: the relevant agent's motivation to act does not in fact stem from these beliefs. The Spaniard nationalist, if somehow forced to give up the belief that Catalan is a dialect, would find *another* dubious reason to discourage Catalan culture, and this is when one sees that her erstwhile belief was, and her new one is, nothing but a cover for her true motive, a form of nationalist supremacism. The violent homophobe, disabused of the belief that homosexuality is a disease, will “find” something else wrong with gay people and continue to mistreat them, as the belief, again, has always been a red herring. Even *true* beliefs can be used this way - used as what we may call “cover beliefs” for unsavory or sinister motives. Take the belief that human reproduction normally requires a sexual act in which a penis enters a vagina. People cite this fact as a reason for hating gays and lesbians, and yet they do not, in their hatred, make exceptions for gays and lesbians who reproduce through modern technology, not to mention couples who share a gender identity but have different sexual organs. On the other end, they do not normally extend the reach of their cruelty and venom to include heteronormative couples who are for some biological reason unable to reproduce.

This is one way in which false MRFBs can fail to excuse. Another way in which they can fail to excuse is this: a false MRFB can explain an agent's action in a legitimate sense but be itself dishonest. Let me explain.

Sometimes people do seem to have false MRFBs that explain their actions in the sense that they would have arguably justified these actions if they were true. A person might avoid Jewish bankers because she believes they are predatory, and if they were in fact predatory, it would have made sense for her to avoid them, so the belief explains the course of action. Even such beliefs, though, often fail to excuse. On my view, such beliefs excuse only in so far as they are honest - either honest mistakes or honest illusions.

I have explained earlier that a belief is honest if it is not the result of culpable (in)action, self-deception, or other kinds of motivated irrationality. More deeply, a belief is *dishonest* in so far as, had the agent cared about the right things morally, she would have not had the belief – either because she would never come to have the belief or because she would have lost it. Dishonest beliefs do not excuse because they are the result of ill will or lack of good will. Some come from classical culpable ignorance – there is an action that the agent would have performed if she cared enough, an action

that involves evidence collection or double-checking. Note, however that in many cases of non-excusing false MRFBs no such action exists. A stark example I recall involves a man declaring that he does not believe that women are upset by catcalls because “there is no study that shows it”. The man was asked by another man if we need a study to show that men are upset by being punched in the face. Here the problem with the sexist man’s (dis)belief is not that he failed to do some kind of research or double-checking. Had he not been so eager to catcall, or had he had enough concern for the wellbeing of women to keep that tendency in check, he would already have noticed the glaring evidence we all have, the same way as with the punching case - no research, double-checking or even deliberation would have been needed.

In a previous work (2003) I have introduced Solomon, who grows up in a remote farming community in which he never has an opportunity to read a book written by a woman or to discuss science, math or philosophy with a woman. Solomon can at this point believe as an honest mistake that women are worse than men at abstract thinking. On the other hand, after Solomon is transplanted to an up-to-date university in a developed country, meeting as he does female professors and students, it is only a matter of time before, if he continues to hold his old belief, that belief is no longer an honest mistake – it is prejudice<sup>4</sup>. With real life Solomons, chances are that if they stick to

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<sup>4</sup> This example was further used by Fricker (2007).

their belief despite the exposure to evidence, their belief is not an honest mistake – it is motivated, for example, by some kind of unsavory desire to “keep women in their place”<sup>5</sup>. Prejudice, I have argued, does not excuse<sup>6</sup>.

Can a false MRFB ever be an honest mistake? It seems so. A person might do her best to prevent her child from “growing up” gay, while trying to avoid inflicting needless pain on him, because medical consensus in her time and place is that homosexuality is a terrible illness which will make him suffer. She might, with some regrets, try to prevent her daughter from developing too much interest in abstract topics because a reputable physician of her acquaintance had told her that such education could cause irreparable damage to the daughter’s reproductive organs<sup>7</sup> and she also believes that her daughter would, of course, want children most of all, as she herself has. Perhaps, on a large scale, the emergence of the belief that homosexuality is a disease and the belief that education is unhealthy for girls cannot be explained without a reference to the status of women and queer people in society and to the interests of those who wish to oppress them. Perhaps they are even collective cover-beliefs of sorts, hiding unsavory motivations besetting societies. However, even if this is true, it simply does not follow that every

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<sup>5</sup> Or other kinds of dubious motivations – see Arpaly 2003).

<sup>6</sup> The idea that bigoted beliefs are irrational is an old one (see Appiah 1990) Some recent work argues that this kind of mistaken beliefs is not, after all, as irrational as all that or at least does not require motivation (see Begby (2021), Levi (2021).

<sup>7</sup> Alas, I am not making this up. See Showalter (1986).

*individual* who had one of these beliefs – some of which individuals were women or queers themselves - was intent on oppressing someone. Humanity's experience suggests that some of these individuals held the beliefs simply because they were very common and seemed backed up by expertise, and to that extent were innocently mistaken. To the extent that her actions were based in a commonsensical way on honest mistakes, such an agent is excused.

In addition to honest mistakes, I have mentioned honest illusions. By honest illusions I refer to beliefs that are irrational – and so, in a way, are not “simply” mistakes – but of which it is still false that, had the agent cared about the important morally relevant things, she would not have ended up with them. It might be weird to say that the Schizophrenic who, during a psychotic episode, attacks her professor whom she takes to be the devil is making an honest mistake, but her belief that her professor is the devil is not the result of culpable ignorance, self-deception or motivated irrationality. We do not know exactly how Schizophrenia affects your beliefs, but it seems likely that had she cared as much for morality, *de dicto* or *de re*, as a saint would, it would not have made her less likely to have the belief. Similarly, if a person who hasn't heard of the gambler's fallacy commits it she might be irrational, but her irrationality implies nothing about her cares and concerns, including the moral ones. The same is

presumably true about many mistakes made as the result of such factors as sleep deprivation.

There is more to be said about false MRFBs, but I will now turn to purely moral ignorance. I will argue that it does not excuse, and then, in the next section, explore the question of what else might excuse the Noahs of the world.

### **Even *Honest* Moral Ignorance Does Not Excuse: The Argument from Inverse Akrasia**

In previous work (2015) ,(2003) I have used the example of Huck Finn, first discussed in philosophy by Jonathan Bennet (1974). Disagreeing with Bennet about Huck, I labelled Huck an inverse akratic. Here is what I said:

(...) Huck, who is white, helps Jim, a black slave, escape. As they float together on a raft on the river, Huck experience what he thinks of as pangs of conscience. He wonders if he is doing something wrong – stealing from Jim’s owner, whom he calls Miss Watson. Upon deliberation, Huck is forced to conclude that helping Jim is wrong and resolves to turn him in. However, when a golden opportunity appears to turn Jim in, Huck finds himself psychologically unable to do it (....) Huck is praiseworthy for his inverse akratic action of helping Jim (or, if you wish, for his inaction when he refrains from turning Jim in).

To be more precise (...) Huckleberry Finn is praiseworthy for his action given one possible story about his motivation (...) [suppose] we imagine that Huckleberry Finn, during his time with Jim, slowly begins to register the fact that Jim is just like him, and like the rest of his friends. Huck, not a sophisticated

deliberator, does not draw the conclusion so clear to the contemporary reader – that he morally ought to help Jim just as he would help any other friend, perhaps any innocent person - but when he cannot bear to turn Jim in, it is at least partially a response to Jim’s humanity (...) if it is true that Huck’s reason for action when he fails to turn Jim in consist of something like the fact of Jim’s humanity, then Huck acts for moral reasons. He just does not *know* that they are moral reasons. To use phrases coined by Michael Smith (1994), he responds to the moral *de re*, even as he fails to respond to the moral *de dicto*. And (...) it is true, in a somewhat Kantian spirit, that a person who does the right thing for the right reasons – for the reasons that make it right - is praiseworthy.<sup>8</sup>

Huck responds to Jim’s humanity, but he does not convert to the view that the moral thing to do in the kind of situation he is in is to respect persons, *all* persons. Thus, even when he no longer believes - to the extent he ever did<sup>9</sup> - that Jim is subhuman somehow, he is till ignorant as to the moral question of how humans should be treated in the situation he’s in. It does not matter if I am interpreting the novel correctly: all I’m committed to is the view that *if Huck is the way I describe him*, he is worthy of esteem<sup>10</sup> for helping Jim.

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<sup>8</sup> Arpaly 2015. The references to Bennett are to his take it that Twain counts on his readers to experience Huck as “good”, albeit funny. There has been a study showing Huck-like characters are regarded as quite praiseworthy, though imperfect - see Faraci and Shoemaker (2014). The study, despite having Huck cases in it, is more about twisted formative circumstances than about moral ignorance – a different kind of putative excuse.

<sup>9</sup> Twain makes it very hard for Huck to see himself as smarter than Jim or as otherwise having superior capacities, as they speak similar English, have a lot of shared beliefs, are both uneducated, and so on. Huck does not need to penetrate through layers of enculturation to see how similar they are.

<sup>10</sup> I decided to use “esteem” and not “praise” following Kant’s contentment that some agents deserve “praise and encouragement” but not “esteem”, as the latter requires moral worth. Huck deserves esteem – it is not simply the case that it’s good to praise him.



Let us look at another type of case. The way I have come to see them, cases of Inverse Akrasia, for my purposes, do not have to be as dramatic as Mark Twain's tale, and, strictly speaking, they do not even have to involve akrasia or weakness of will at all, as long as they involve *an action that the agent takes to be wrong*, and such actions are common. Some people use the term "Jack-Mormon" for a person who believes all that Mormons are supposed to believe (including normative things) but does not, in her actions, follow the strictures of that church<sup>11</sup>. Practically any system of normative beliefs, true or false or mixed, has its "Jacks", who take courses of action they believe are wrong, and sometimes that belief is false: just like there are Christians who do *not* love their neighbors, there are Ayn Rand fans who *do*.

So imagine Ted, who says the following: "you know, I don't care that much about morality. I drink, I smoke, I gamble, I have sex. My brother is gay and I can't bring myself to mind it. Maybe I'm just not a moral kinda guy. What *do* I care about? Good question. I suppose I want people to not to be miserable. I want my mom to be happy, and my friends, and otherwise, you know, live and let live". Due to his upbringing, Ted believes that it is morally wrong to drink, smoke, gamble, and have non-marital sex. Some of his moral beliefs are true. He does believe, for example, that murder is wrong – but, not unlike many historical philosophers, he takes some kinds of consensual sex as

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to thank David Dick for bringing the concept to my attention.

equally paradigmatic of wrong action. He is moved but not strongly moved by many strictures he thinks are moral strictures and so he thinks of himself as somewhat “bad”, with the occasional guilt and the occasional deviant pride attached. He does, however, have wide swaths of decent moral (*de re!*) concerns. To start, he wants people not to suffer and to live and let live. He wants his friends and his mother to be happy. He also keeps promises as much as you and me. Imagine that on a particular occasion the right thing for Ted to do is to buy his friend Clarissa a drink, and the reason for which it is right is that it would cheer her up and allow her to have an open conversation with Ted that would help her get over a serious emotional crisis she is having. Imagine that Ted buys Clarissa a drink *for this reason*, perhaps feeling guilty as he does it, as he believes consuming or buying alcohol is immoral. He is being a “Jack” to his moral beliefs, doing something he takes to be wrong. Ted is esteem-worthy for his action, even if he does not know that. Whether they are truly akratic or “Jack” cases, we esteem many inverse akratics for their actions. We also regard them as good people (or just OK, decent people, or wonderful people – depending on the details) who are not good at *thinking about ethics*. One needs not be a good ethicist to be ethical, as one need not be (particularly) smart to be good.

There is no space in this chapter to repeat all my arguments in favor of people who do the right thing for the reasons that make it right but believe what they do to be wrong.

Let us take for granted that such people are, at least sometimes, worthy of esteem for the right action they did, (and if their concern for the morally important things *de re* is pervasive, they are to that extent good people). Let it be a premise.

The trouble for HMIE (Honest Moral Ignorance Excuses) is that it implies that these people are not esteem-worthy for their actions. This implication is acknowledged by Zimmerman, who goes as far as to say that Huck Finn is *blameworthy*<sup>12</sup>, though others are loyal to the assumption, almost universal in the free will literature, that for anyone to be blameworthy they need to have done something *wrong* which they are blameworthy for, and Huck doesn't do any wrong. With them, I do not mean to say that Huck or Ted are implied by HMIE to be blameworthy, but they cannot be esteem-worthy if HMIE is true. Let me explain.

If honest moral ignorance excuses, it presumably excuses in the same way honest factual ignorance excuse; they are on a par, after all. Honest factual ignorance excuses symmetrically from blame and from esteem. If I buy a trinket honestly not knowing that the seller will forward the money to a terrorist organization, I am not blameworthy for buying the trinket or for contributing to human suffering. Similarly, if I buy a trinket honestly not knowing that my money will be donated to a fine charity, I am not esteem-

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<sup>12</sup> See Zimmerman (2010) p 201.

worthy for buying the trinket or for reducing human suffering. Honest factual ignorance is symmetrical that way – excuses from both blame and esteem – and if honest moral ignorance is in fact “on a par” with it, it needs to be the same way. One is not blameworthy for poisoning if one honestly believes one is giving vitamins – and not esteem worthy for giving helpful vitamins if one believes they are poison. A person who does right but thinks she’s doing wrong is, under HMIE, analogous to the person who gives helpful vitamins while thinking they are poison. Therefore, if honest moral ignorance excuses (from blame) the honest Nazi who does the wrong she believes to be right, it also “excuses” (from esteem) the honest Huck Finn type who does the right that she takes to be wrong.

One object to the dramatic way I put the last sentence and point out that the honest Nazi aims at (what she thinks is) the right when he does wrong but Huck Finn and Ted do not actually aim at (what they think is) the wrong when they do right. That does not matter a great deal. If honest moral ignorance excuses the Nazi who kills a Jew because he honestly believes it to be *required*, it also excuses the Nazi who takes a watch from a prisoner because he honestly believes it to be *permissible*. Huck believes what he does is impermissible, and if honest moral ignorance excuses, he is excused simply because he believes his action not to be right.

So if we agree that Huck, Ted, and other inverse akratics can be worthy of esteem for their actions, we have to reject HMIE.

Though this is not my focus in this chapter, it is worth pointing out that there is a related argument, which I make elsewhere, against the view that concern for morality de dicto grants moral worth. If the will to do what is right, under that description, grants moral worth, then an honest false belief as to what the right thing to do is must excuse, and so the view that concern for morality de dicto grants moral worth is intimately related to HMIE, and is false if HMIE is false (unpublished). In the same paper I argue that one cannot accept both the view that concern for morality de dicto grants moral worth and the view that concern for morality de re does so, because one implies that Huck Finn is not esteem worthy and the other implies he is.

### **Other Excuses: When “Everyone Does It”, but not Out of Ignorance.**

Suppose moral ignorance, even the honest kind, does not excuse, why do we seem so lenient towards agents who “only” did what the rest of their generation has done? And are we right when we do this? The rest of this chapter will be devoted to these questions.

First, people tend to do what “one does”. Experiment after experiment document the degree to which we take cues from each other on how to behave: if the group of people around you does nothing, you, too, are likely to say and do anything about the alarming smoke coming from the door to the other room<sup>13</sup>. The psychological power of seeing “everyone” act in a certain way should probably be part of a full account of the extent to which “but everyone did it back then!” can be an excuse or a partial excuse for having beaten one’s children. I will not do this work here, though someone ought to do it, but I’ll do work that might be complementary, and which examines not the psychology of the excused and the blamed but that of the excusers and blamers.

Recall Vera the Vegan. Vera believes one should be vegan but does not treat omnivores the way she treats murderers or even tax offenders. Vera, we said, thinks the omnivores are self-indulgent rather than ignorant. What’s going on here? Clearly, Vera has practical reasons not to treat the omnivores as criminals. Vera will not have a lot of friends if she refuses to talk with non-vegans and she might have a better chance of converting people if she shows patience. This, however, does not fully answer the Progressive Puzzle. The way things often are, Vera doesn’t feel like someone forced to get along with a group of villains. She is not constantly suppressing anger or disgust.

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<sup>13</sup> See Latane, & Darley 1969

As she does not attribute moral ignorance to her peers, what explains her lenient attitude towards them?

I used to think that when it comes to allocating moral praise and blame, as well as character evaluations such as “good person”, we often “grade on a curve”. That seemed true even if our idea of a right or wrong action is constant (the right answer to every question is indifferent to how many students produced that answer, but the exam is still be graded on a curve). A more apt metaphor comes from baseball – Value Over Replacement Player (VORP) as they said once, or Wins Above Replacement (WAR) as they say now<sup>14</sup>. These are statistical measures meant to tell a team how much utility, in terms of winning games, it is likely to get from hiring a certain player by comparison to how much it would get from hiring someone who plays at “replacement level” – one of the many available “talents” who would work for minimal pay. Blaming people for actions, crediting people for actions, and evaluating people’s characters is often sensitive to the evaluated person’s “value over replacement moral agent” (VORMA). Thus, a modest person who is praised for an action she performed would often reply that “anyone would have done the same thing”. A defensive person who is blamed for an action would often say something like “I’m as good as the next person”. Perhaps, then, we could look at the “everyone” in “everyone does it” (or “everyone did it back

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<sup>14</sup> I thank Timothy Schroeder for the analogy.

then”) as roughly analogous to the “replacement player”. If one believes eating meat is wrong, one can still hold that a meat eater can have a very good VORMA. Perhaps one way to use the expression “perfect in his generations” (or “blameless among his contemporaries”) is to use it to refer a person who isn’t simply morally impressive in comparison to his contemporaries but of a person with virtues of whom it’s true that all of his sins are the sins typical of a person of his generation. The otherwise admirable grandparent who subjected his children to corporeal punishment, the heroic historical figure who had some slaves, could have been “perfect in their generations” – though this, of course, is a rare enough form of perfection. With higher probability, a past person could have average or better-than-average VORMA even though someone who did the bad thing they had done today, or in a different location, would ipso facto have negative VORMA.

Once we understand that at least some day-to-day talk of moral credit, blame and character is talk of VORMA, it can explain many things. For example, suppose I agree with Rosen (2014) that a person can act under duress and still act wrongly. A person might commit a crime because someone threatened to kill him if he does not, for example, and that opens the question of why we often excuse such people from blame. The threatened person need not have been in a state of mind which somehow precludes or diminishes agency: it is easy to imagine that she chose, with a sound mind, to



perform the wrong action she performed. The person also need not be morally ignorant: she might know perfectly well that she is doing wrong. Whence the excuse? My answer, not altogether that far from Rosen's own, is that in many cases, doing wrong in order to avoid death does not subtract from a person's VORMA (while preferring death to doing wrong can increase it dramatically). Elsewhere, I have argued that blameworthiness has to do with lack of moral concern or good will (Arpaly 2003, Arpaly and Schroeder 2014). Very few people are morally concerned or good-willed enough to prefer death to committing a crime. In a society in which willingness to die rather than do wrong was more common – an idealized army, say – we would be more inclined to blame the person motivated by fear of death or accuse her of cowardliness. In the Harry Potter world, when the wrongdoer Pettigrew tells the main characters credibly that he committed a crime under a threat of death, the children don't lose a second before they tell him matter-of-factly that he should have allowed himself to be killed instead. They can be this harsh because, like their literary ancestors in Medieval tales of knighthood, they are part of a fictional group of people for whom dying to avoid doing wrong is hardly over "replacement level" – your average member of Gryffindor would not think twice before risking her life for the good. As Foot suggested, if all humans were like this, there would have been no talk of the virtue of courage (Foot 1978). Dying to avoid doing serious wrong would just be common decency, and failing to do so would be simply and unequivocally blameworthy and vicious – an instance of cowardice.

I think it is true that, in ordinary life, talk of “a good person” is more often talk of a person with good VORMA than it is a talk of someone who always does the right thing the right way in the right circumstances, Neo-Aristotelian fashion, just like “great baseball player” usually refers to someone who still fails 2 thirds of the time. However, one can ask an obvious question: are VORMA judgments built into judgments of blameworthiness in such a way by as to imply that a homophobe, for example, would truly be less bad, or less blameworthy for her homophobic actions if she lived in a world more crowded with similar homophobes?

One complication to do with answering “yes” has to do with contrast class. Who is the “everyone” who “does it”? In baseball, when assessing Wins Above Replacement, it is clear who the Replacement Player is. Performance at “replacement level” is to be found somewhere quite concrete: in second tier baseball teams. Where, however, do we find the “Replacement Moral Agent”? Imagine a father who takes a larger part than other fathers do in the less-fun parts of childrearing, but still burdens his wife with a significantly more of that work. Should he be compared to a “replacement” father (to whom he compares pretty well, alas) or to a “replacement” parent (to whom he compares badly)? Or perhaps a “replacement” father from the country he lives in? It

seems that to the extent that moral credit, blame and character talk is talk of VORMA, it can be messy and context-dependent.

Perhaps one way to try and account for the intuitions available would be to accept a view inspired by John Broome. Broome argues that there is, strictly speaking, no good or bad but only better or worse (Broome 1993). “Good” is comparative, like “tall”.

Perhaps calling a person “good” has a lot in common with calling a person “tall”: it is comparative in nature. If a view like Broome’s is true, perhaps saying that someone is a homophobe (and so, in one respect, a bad person) *relative to San Francisco* is somewhere in the neighborhood of saying that someone is short *for a basketball player*. It might be a little trickier to apply such a view to blameworthiness, but it is possible. For example, from a quality of will account, one might say that one is more blameworthy for an action, given its wrongness and perhaps the severity of the wrongness, if her action shows more ill will or a deeper indifference to morality than a “replacement person” has. Timothy Schroeder and I gesture at a somewhat similar view of moral credit and blame (2014). There is no space in this already oversized chapter to defend our view, much less Broome’s.

If one is unconvinced by Broome’s view, or by a Broome-friendly view of character, praise and blame, an alternative route would be to point out that on top of any excuse

that “everyone does it” or “everyone did it” provides, there is a fact about human psychology that makes it very hard to feel righteous anger at people who do what everyone does or did what everyone is known to have done at a certain period. As blaming normally comes with a disposition for anger, this psychological fact can create the impression, perhaps the *illusion* that such people are not blameworthy, or are less so than others who do the same wrong when and where it is more surprising.

Let us go back to Vera the Vegan, who believes everyone should avoid meat but gets along with people who do not. A lot of this “getting along” consists in Vera not feeling *angry* at her peers, and not performing actions associated with anger. If, prompted by an agitating activist, she tries to *drum up* anger at the carnivores, she would likely find it hard, and if she manages to drum up such anger – say, by watching clips about cruelty to non-human animals before meeting them - it would probably be hard for her to make it last. That’s because the very nature of anger makes it a hard emotion to feel towards people who do what one viscerally (though not necessarily “cerebrally”) takes for absolutely granted that they will do.

Let me explain. Anger is by and large an emotion involving displeasure while positive forms of moral appreciation typically involve pleasure, and both pleasure and displeasure depend on the subject’s visceral expectations – in other words, on *what she is*

*used to*. Imagine that two people, Shirin and Nassarin, stay at the Boring Inn at Slippery Rock Airport. Shirin greatly enjoys her bed while Nassarin finds hers uncomfortable. If Nassarin, being rich, is used to top-of-the-line furniture and high thread-count bedding while Shirin, being poor, has been sleeping on too small a bed for a long time, the difference between their experiences is to be expected. Other things being equal, if the two of them desire roughly the same things in a bed but one of them is used to having her desires well-satisfied whereas the other is used to deprivation, *of course* one of them will feel displeased and the other one - pleased. Pleasure is not simply a response to something being “good” in some way – like a comfortable mattress - but a response to something being *markedly* good – a mattress that is more comfortable than you have come to viscerally expect every night. Similarly, you would normally be displeased with a mattress that is *markedly* bad, not with the same old bad<sup>15</sup>.

Of course, things are hardly ever equal. People have different dispositions when it comes to viscerally expecting things. Some people are never hardened to some kinds of bad, some people are lucky enough not to be easily jaded by some kinds of good, some people have some moods – depression, say, or euphoric hypomania – in which they are biased towards expecting some things and not others. For the purpose of this chapter, it is enough to agree that pleasure and displeasure are generally “comparative” in this

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<sup>15</sup> See Schroeder 2004, Chapter 3.

way, relative to what one is used to. Anger, which contains displeasure, is also “comparative” in this way. When agitators have a hard time getting people to protest regularly it is not only laziness in their audience that they need to contend with but also this basic pattern built into anger.

We have said before that Vera the Vegan does not seem to blame the non-Vegans she regularly interacts with for their behavior, but could she instead simply not be angry at them? Fear is often what we feel when we think something is dangerous, but sometimes our minds work in the other direction and we assume something to be dangerous *because* we fear it, or un-dangerous because we do not. My suggestion is that while being angry at someone and blaming her are not the same thing, patterns of anger can be mistaken by both angry (or non-angry) subjects and their observers for facts about blameworthiness. An agent with highly negative VORMA is other things being equal easier to be angry at, because casual judgments of VORMA put the Replacement Level around the level at which one *expects* the agent to act.

What would such a view predict about our attitudes to *past* generations? Even if you don’t regularly hang out with homophobes, you might fully *expect* heterosexual people above a certain age who live in certain places to be homophobes – to the point that if it turns out they are not it is a pleasant surprise. Furthermore, when it comes to people

who have died, it is generally harder, other things being equal, to have strong angry feelings about things *the longer ago they happened*. Things are not always equal. As a feminist, I get angry at Aristotle now and then. In Israel, when I was a child, intense propaganda efforts at preschool managed to make my fellow Jewish children actively furious at anyone who ever harmed the Jewish people, including ancient Middle Eastern slaveholders. A good novel or movie can make a person feel indignation towards long gone historical figures, in the same way that it can make one feel compassion for Hecuba. By and large, though, immoral behavior that is “no news” to us does not makes us angry the way “news” does. That’s why, Gideon Rosen’s vivid examples notwithstanding, it is usually my experience that among those who are on the fence about whether moral ignorance excuses, intuition tends more towards “no” the more vivid and detailed – *freshly* vivid and detailed - the description of the relevant evil is.

So, keeping in mind that there might be more ways to explain the phenomena in question, I offer two possibilities: perhaps there is no blameworthiness at all besides “blameworthiness among one’s contemporaries”, or perhaps our emotions are set up to make us lenient towards people who act like their contemporaries do.

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