



Moral and Factual Ignorance: a Quality of Will Parity

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Abstract

Within debates concerning responsibility for ignorance the distinction between moral and factual ignorance is often treated as crucial. Many prominent accounts hold that while factual ignorance routinely exculpates, moral ignorance never does so. The view that there is an in-principle distinction between moral and factual ignorance has been referred to as the “Asymmetry Thesis.” This view stands in opposition to the “Parity Thesis,” which holds that moral and factual ignorance are in-principle similar. The Parity Thesis has been closely aligned with volitionist accounts of moral responsibility, whereas the Asymmetry Thesis has been closely aligned with Quality of Will accounts. Two central questions are at work here: how ignorance excuses (when it does), and whether it excuses in the same way for both moral and factual ignorance. I will argue that these questions have often been confused in the present debate, and once we have distinguished more clearly between them, it seems that Quality of Will accounts are compatible with the Parity Thesis. And more generally: that the distinction between moral and factual ignorance is far less important in debates about responsibility for ignorance than it has often appeared.

Keywords Moral ignorance · Factual ignorance · Parity thesis · Asymmetry thesis · Volitionism · Quality of will

Within debates concerning responsibility for ignorance a stark distinction is often drawn between moral and factual ignorance. Moral ignorance, in contrast to factual ignorance, revolves around norms themselves. Even when we are aware of the relevant facts pertaining to an action, we can still falsely believe that the action is permissible when it is not. In Gideon Rosen’s articulation: “One can fail to know what one ought to do in some particular case; one can fail to know a general moral rule. One can fail to know that people have certain rights, or

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that one has certain duties. One can fail to know that a certain act would be cruel or abusive, and so on” (2003, 64).

Take the following example: imagine Ned is traveling in a foreign land in which the service staff assisting him rely on tips for their livelihood. Despite excellent service, Ned never tips (let’s grant, for the sake of argument, that this is wrong). Now imagine, in one case, that Ned fails to tip out of *factual* ignorance: he is unaware of the tipping custom and its repercussions in the country he is visiting (indeed he has only ever lived in a country where such a gesture would be interpreted as an affront). In another case we can imagine that Ned fails to tip out of *moral* ignorance: he’s perfectly aware of the relevant factual information, but despite this he takes himself to have no moral reason to oblige; it seems obvious to him that it is permissible for him to keep the money he would otherwise have spent on tips (it is in this sense that tipping is optional, after all) and he thinks of himself as shrewd, rather than disrespectful or selfish, as a result.

Many prominent accounts of responsibility hold that while factual ignorance routinely exculpates, moral ignorance never does so. So while there could easily be a story that would render factually-ignorant Ned blameless, no such story is available for morally-ignorant Ned. The view that there is an in-principle distinction between moral and factual ignorance has been referred to as the “Asymmetry Thesis” (Alvarez & Littlejohn 2017). This view stands in opposition to the “Parity Thesis,” which holds that moral and factual ignorance are in-principle similar, and that moral ignorance should excuse for the same reasons as factual ignorance (Rosen 2003).

In particular, and in ways I will soon elaborate on, the Parity Thesis has been closely aligned with volitionist accounts of responsibility, whereas the Asymmetry Thesis has been closely aligned with Quality of Will (QW) accounts; indeed, the Asymmetry Thesis has sometimes been viewed as a defining feature of QW positions. My purpose in this paper is to argue that this is a mistake. To do so, I will delineate two central questions within this debate: firstly, how ignorance excuses (when it does), and secondly, whether it excuses in the same way for both moral and factual ignorance. I will argue that these questions have often been confused, and once we have distinguished more clearly between them, it seems that QW accounts are in fact compatible with the Parity Thesis (i.e. the view that moral and factual ignorance excuse in the same way), and more generally: that the distinction between moral and factual ignorance is far less important in debates about responsibility for ignorance than it has often appeared.

In making this case I will engage in particular with Gideon Rosen’s volitionist argument for the Parity Thesis (2003), and Nomy Arpaly’s Quality of Will argument for the Asymmetry Thesis (2015). Although I have focused on the disagreement as it has played out between these two philosophers, my points have a broader relevance and would pertain to all positions, on both sides of the debate, which have endorsed the view that QW accounts rely on the Asymmetry Thesis.¹

Two prominent claims have been used to establish a fundamental distinction between moral and factual ignorance on QW accounts. Firstly: the claim that the excuse operates differently in each case, and in particular that while factual ignorance excuses based on epistemic non-culpability, moral ignorance does not. Secondly (and separately), the claim that even if the excuse operates in the same way in both cases, the conditions for the excuse would never apply in the case of moral ignorance. I will argue against both of these claims. Regarding the first: I will argue that moral and factual ignorance excuse in the same way on QW accounts, and in

¹ Including, among others, Gideon Rosen, Michael J. Zimmerman and Neil Levy on the one hand, and Nomy Arpaly, Elizabeth Harman, and Maria Alvarez & Clayton Littlejohn on the other.

neither case does this fundamentally concern epistemic non-culpability. Regarding the second: I will argue that QW accounts need not imply that moral ignorance never excuses. I will argue that Arpaly's QW account is able to accommodate the moral ignorance excuse in a way that is in-principle similar to the factual ignorance excuse on her view. In particular, I will draw on cases of internalised oppression to argue that morally ignorant beliefs need not arise from sinister motivation, or even callous indifference. Separately, I suggest that avoiding a substantive or in-principle distinction between moral and factual ignorance is preferable, given how deeply intertwined the two forms of ignorance often are, the prevalence of both maliciously-motivated factual ignorance and (supposedly) factually-corroborated moral ignorance, and the significant grey area between the two varieties of ignorance.

1 Volitionist Accounts & the Parity Thesis

It is clear that ignorance sometimes excuses; the fact that someone “didn't know” or “didn't realise” is often of central importance in determining their blameworthiness. Return to Ned: imagine that he came from a small rural town and he had never travelled to another country, nor known anyone else who had, so that tipping didn't even occur to him as something he ought to investigate. It seems clear that (at least initially) Ned is blameless for his ignorance and for unwittingly snubbing the people who assist him on his travels. But why is he blameless?

One interpretation is that Ned is blameless because his ignorance is itself non-culpable. In order to be blameworthy for something done from ignorance, you need to be blameworthy for the ignorance itself. And in order to be blameworthy for the ignorance, it needs to have arisen from some sort of deliberate misconduct or negligence in the formation of the ignorant belief. This describes the volitionist position. The qualification about *deliberate* misconduct is significant (and significantly contested).² Volitionists endorse doxastic involuntarism, according to which we do not exercise direct control over our beliefs; in turn culpability for ignorance arises only insofar as we *do* exercise control, and therefore only insofar as we consciously manage our epistemic obligations.³ So if Ned had thought to himself “I really ought to check the payment customs in this country,” then his failure to do so might be blameworthy in itself (given that the etiology of his ignorance involved the conscious mismanagement of his beliefs). But if no such thought occurred to him—perhaps precisely on account of how foreign the practice was to him—then his ignorance, and his subsequent wrongdoing, are both non-culpable.

That *factual* ignorance excuses in this way Rosen refers to as “relatively familiar” (2003, 64). Insofar as this is granted, the controversy only arises in determining whether or not *moral* ignorance also excuses in this way. The Parity Thesis is the claim that there is an in-principle similarity between factual and moral ignorance. On a volitionist conception this would therefore mean that moral ignorance, like factual ignorance, excuses whenever it has not arisen from the conscious mismanagement of an agent's epistemic obligations.

² Volitionists hold that clear-eyed akrasia is necessary for blameworthiness, and therefore that an agent would have to *knowingly* renege on their epistemic obligations in order to be culpable for their epistemic failure. A large part of the debate concerning volitionism has revolved around this akrasia requirement. (I address this debate elsewhere: Hartford 2020).

³ These are explicitly not purely epistemic obligations, but rather “*moral* obligations governing the epistemic aspects of deliberation.” (Rosen 2003, 63, note 5). Despite this nuance, I will often use “epistemic culpability” and “epistemic non-culpability” as a shorthand to describe the conditions for responsibility for ignorance on Rosen's account.

The Parity Thesis has been endorsed by a range of volitionist philosophers, and defended at length by Rosen (2003; see also: Levy 2011, 118–9; Zimmerman 2008, 192). He argues for it via a series of examples, which present a *prima facie* case for parity: demonstrating that moral ignorance is plausibly excused under the same circumstances as factual ignorance. His most prominent example concerns the ancient slavery of the Biblical period. He suggests that the practice was “simply taken for granted,” and that it was not objected to on moral or religious principle. Given this, we are asked to imagine an ordinary Hittite lord: “He buys and sells human beings, forces labor without compensation, and separates families to suit his purposes. Needless to say, what he does is wrong. The landlord is not entitled to do these things. But of course he thinks he is. Moreover, we may imagine that if he had thought otherwise he would have acted differently” (2003, 64).

In another prominent example Rosen considers a “run-of-the-mill American sexist circa (say) 1952.” He plans to send his sons to college, but has no equivalent ambitions for his daughters. The appropriateness of this differential treatment is self-evident to Smith: “He finds it obvious because he was raised to find it obvious, and because the people he takes seriously find it obvious. The idea that gender matters in this way thus functions for him as an undefended axiom of moral common sense” (2003, 67). In this case, Rosen imagines that Smith is aware of objections to his position, but he notes: “awareness of such a sensibility — even vivid such awareness — need not suffice to dislodge his own sense of what is evidently correct.”

As we saw above, volitionists hold that factual ignorance excuses insofar as it does not arise from some sort of deliberate epistemic failure. According to the volitionist interpretation of the Parity Thesis, moral ignorance ought to excuse in the same way. Now, according to Rosen, neither the slaveholder nor the sexist was reckless or negligent in the formation of their false beliefs; they believed what they did precisely because such beliefs were so prevalent and seemingly well-supported within their epistemic contexts. Rosen suggests what he considers a plausible epistemic standard that “one is normally under no obligation to rethink the uncontroversial normative principles that form the framework for social life” (2003, 65). Having not reflected on these principles, the slaveholder and the sexist believe they are entitled to act as they do. In turn, he considers them blameless.⁴

2 Quality of Will Accounts & the Asymmetry Thesis

Quality of Will accounts have been viewed as fundamentally incompatible with the Parity Thesis. In turn, the Parity Thesis itself— and the relationship between moral and factual ignorance— has been an important point of contestation within debates about culpability for ignorance. Rosen states that if QW accounts are correct “the Parity Thesis is problematic” (2003, 72). He believes his cases therefore constitute counterexamples to such accounts, and that anyone who is moved by the blamelessness of his morally ignorant agents would therefore have cause to reject QW accounts. Despite the divergence in their views, Arpaly (2015) is in agreement with Rosen that the Parity Thesis is incompatible with QW accounts.

⁴ For Rosen the ultimate implications of the Parity Thesis are completely revisionary: any agent who genuinely feels entitled to do what they are doing (and comes up with nothing when they deliberate about whether their actions are wrong) would be considered blameless; this revisionist position is also advanced by Zimmerman and Levy.

The reason for this apparent incompatibility is that while the Parity Thesis hypothesises an in-principle similarity between moral and factual ignorance, QW accounts appear to offer a vivid way of distinguishing between them. Per QW accounts, the most important consideration in ascribing blameworthiness is determining the pattern of moral concern with which a person acted, where blame is an appropriate response to insufficient moral concern. Factual ignorance often reveals something crucial about the attitudes of the transgressor: if I reversed over a cat because I didn't realise it was there, my wrong action doesn't necessarily express insufficient moral concern (or certainly not as much as if I'd run over the cat *because* it was there). But the case is much less clear when it comes to moral ignorance. Morally ignorant beliefs seem to be *constitutive* of malicious attitudes. Perhaps I reversed over a cat not because I didn't see it, but because I don't think animal lives have moral value, and it was in my direct path. This form of ignorance does not disrupt the sense in which I express insufficient concern in my wrongdoing; on the contrary, it seems to affirm it. Rosen writes that in cases of moral ignorance on QW accounts: "there will typically be no basis for concluding, from that fact that the agent acted from blameless ignorance, that his action does not express one of the underlying attitudes that makes blame appropriate."⁵

I began by pointing out two prominent claims that have been used to establish a fundamental distinction between moral and factual ignorance. The first was the claim that factual ignorance excuses for different reasons, and under different conditions, than moral ignorance. The second was that even if the excuse operated in the same way in both cases, the conditions for the excuse would never apply in the case of moral ignorance. Over the next two sections I will respond to each of these claims. In Section 4 I will explore the conditions under which factual ignorance is exculpatory on QW accounts and establish that—despite the way in which the Asymmetry Thesis has sometimes been framed—these are fundamentally the same conditions under which moral ignorance would be exculpatory. In Section 5, I make the case that the QW account is compatible with the moral ignorance excuse under certain circumstances, and the conditions under which factual ignorance is exculpating on QW accounts are sometimes met with regard to moral ignorance. Quality of Will accounts would therefore be compatible with the view that there is an in-principle similarity between moral and factual ignorance.

3 Quality of Will & Factual Ignorance

The claim that factual ignorance excuses for different reasons, and under different conditions, than moral ignorance has been made by various philosophers arguing for the Asymmetry Thesis. These philosophers seem to agree that epistemically non-culpable factual ignorance is blameless (i.e. Rosen's starting point), but deny that moral ignorance is blameless under the same circumstances (i.e. the implications of Rosen's Parity Thesis). Maria Alvarez and Clayton Littlejohn, for instance, describe the Asymmetry Thesis as "the thesis that epistemically non-culpable factual ignorance and mistake will excuse in a way that moral ignorance and mistake will not" (2017, 65). Or more particularly that "the exculpatory power of our epistemic imperfections depends, in part, upon whether our ignorance or mistaken belief is moral or non-moral." In other words: while executing our procedural epistemic obligations might excuse us from (wrongs committed in) factual ignorance, it will not have a similar effect on moral ignorance. Elizabeth Harman (2014) similarly asserts that "non-moral ignorance

⁵ Here "blameless" refers to the execution of epistemic obligations.

exculpates,” and therefore that “our question will be: does moral ignorance exculpate too?” She expands: “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?” Finally Arpaly writes, along similar lines: “consider the thought that moral ignorance plays the same role in blaming and crediting as ordinary ignorance. The idea is simple: I am not blameworthy for poisoning someone if I innocently thought I was giving her vitamin C (“innocently” meaning that I have not failed at some information-gathering duty or deceived myself somehow) ... Why not say, then, that I am not blameworthy for poisoning someone if I innocently thought it *was not wrong*?” (2015, 146–7).

These philosophers appear to endorse the view that epistemically non-culpable factual ignorance excuses, while denying that epistemically non-culpable moral ignorance excuses; it is in this sense that the excuse operates differently in each case, and an asymmetry is generated. But this apparent endorsement with regard to the factual ignorance excuse is confusing, given that QW accounts have a very different understanding of how the ignorance excuse works. On QW accounts ignorance excuses when it disrupts the link between wrongful action and insufficient moral concern. Questions of moral concern might overlap significantly with questions of epistemic culpability and non-culpability, especially with regard to factual ignorance, but they are *fundamentally distinct foundations for blameworthiness*.⁶

Let’s return to blameless Ned, who is unaware of the custom of tipping. Earlier I considered an interpretation of Ned’s blamelessness which emerged from his epistemic non-culpability: he was not at fault for the ignorance itself, and therefore he was not at fault for the wrongdoings which arose from it. But we could describe the foundation of Ned’s blamelessness differently. Ned doesn’t tip, which superficially seems to indicate that he is rude and inconsiderate. But Ned’s ignorance disrupts the attribution of these attitudes to him: we understand that he has unwittingly been rude while endeavouring only to treat everyone with courtesy and respect. His ignorance therefore undermines the sense in which his wrongful action expresses insufficient concern. This would be the Quality of Will interpretation of Ned’s blamelessness.

From within a QW framework, there is no reason to think that factual ignorance excuses on the basis of epistemic non-culpability; rather, factual ignorance excuses when it has not involved caring insufficiently about what is morally significant. In this sense, factual ignorance would excuse in the same way as moral ignorance, and this avenue for the Asymmetry Thesis would be undermined. This does not preclude the second avenue for the Asymmetry Thesis, which I will consider in more detail in the next section: i.e. the possibility that the conditions for the excuse would never apply in the case of moral ignorance.

Perhaps it is ultimately with this second notion in mind that the Asymmetry Thesis advocates I quote above seem to endorse the interpretation of the factual ignorance excuse that revolves around epistemic obligations. The idea might be that, with regard to factual ignorance alone, epistemic culpability and non-culpability track the relevant evaluations regarding moral concern. (On Arpaly’s account a false, but epistemically rational belief would be an “honest mistake,” that would not be indicative of an agent’s moral concerns in the manner necessary for blameworthiness (2003, 103)). If factually-ignorant Ned was

⁶ Furthermore, it is worth noting that the relationship between epistemic non-culpability and sufficient concern will diverge significantly where epistemic non-culpability is understood as requiring the conscious or deliberate mismanagement of one’s beliefs (as the volitionists argue it should).

epistemically culpable, then we can perhaps conclude that he also did not care sufficiently, but given that he was not epistemically-culpable, we can conclude that he did care sufficiently. On the other hand, no such relationship exists between epistemic non-culpability and *moral* ignorance: Ned's moral ignorance seems to confirm, rather than undermine, the sense in which he was being rude and selfish in not tipping.

I will soon return to this argument for the Asymmetry Thesis. For the time being, though, the crucial point is this: the claim that the ignorance excuse will play out differently in the moral and factual case is very different from the claim that the two excuses work in different ways. One can maintain that factual ignorance will often exculpate and that moral ignorance will never exculpate on QW accounts even while maintaining that the excuse ultimately has the same foundation in each case, and in neither case does this foundation concern epistemic non-culpability.

When we bear this in mind, the Parity Thesis does not seem to be susceptible to one line of attack that has been put forward by Arpaly in defence of the Asymmetry Thesis. Arpaly and Timothy Schroeder (1999) coined the term "inverse akrasia" for akratic "rightdoing": i.e. an agent who knowingly acts against their better judgment to commit (what turns out to be) a right act. Their primary example is Huckleberry Finn who could not bring himself to turn in Jim despite his conviction that this is what he ought to do. Arpaly and Schroeder's contention is that, at least occasionally, inverse akratics are praiseworthy, not merely because they have done the right thing, but also because they have done it for the right reasons. More recently, Arpaly (2015) has used the notion of inverse akrasia to offer an explicit response to Rosen's Parity Thesis. Returning to the Finn example, she notes that Finn acts in moral ignorance of the fact that helping Jim is the right thing to do. Arpaly's contention is that anyone who accepts the Parity Thesis cannot consider Finn praiseworthy, and might indeed need to consider him blameworthy: "if moral ignorance is exculpating in the same way as factual ignorance, then Huck is like someone who gives someone vitamin C but believes it to be poison, or aims a realistic toy gun with murderous intention. He is definitely not praiseworthy" (147). This seems wrongheaded, of course, which leads Arpaly to conclude that moral ignorance cannot exculpate in the same way as factual ignorance.

But Finn's blameworthiness would only result from the Parity Thesis insofar as we understood the factual ignorance excuse as operating along volitionist lines, concerning epistemic non-culpability. But as I have emphasised, QW advocates have no reason to accept this conception of the factual ignorance excuse. And when we view the factual ignorance excuse as operating along QW lines, then no asymmetry emerges in the case of Huckleberry Finn and we can again see a parity between moral and factual ignorance. Let me look at a different case of inverse akrasia, this time involving factual ignorance, and not moral ignorance (as in the case of Finn). I will adapt Rosen's Smith case for this purpose:

Smith believes that women are happier in the home, and better off as wives (he's read some convincing data on the subject, prepared by doctors and the like). For this reason he thinks he ought to make his daughters go into homemaking, rather than pursue college degrees. But when they reveal ambitions toward tertiary education, Smith feels so troubled by not allowing his daughters what he allowed his sons that he acts against his "better (factual) judgment" and pays for their college tuition too (concerned all the while that he has thereby condemned them to lives of anxiety and misery).

As with the Finn case, it seems that Smith is (at least plausibly) praiseworthy for this decision. His resolve to treat his daughters equally, despite his "better judgment," stems from the right-making features of the act. In this sense it is nothing like giving someone vitamin C while believing it to be

poison. If we do not endorse a conception of the factual ignorance excuse which revolves around epistemic obligations—which QW proponents have no reason to endorse—then the factual case involving Smith is symmetrical to the moral case involving Finn.

There is sometimes a tendency within this debate to present anodyne examples of factual ignorance (Rosen gives the case of a hiker who inadvertently trespasses on unmarked woodlands, while Elinor Mason provides the case of Jake who “waited at the bus stop in ignorance of the fact that the bus drivers were on strike” (2015, 3045)) that are compared to cases of moral ignorance where the stakes are very high (such as the sexist and, much more so, the Hittite lord). When the cases under consideration are as far apart as this, of course any attempt to perceive an equivalence between moral and factual ignorance seems misguided. But this is not an innate feature of either moral or factual ignorance: one can have morally ignorant beliefs that are trivial, and have low stakes, and one can have factually ignorant beliefs that involve very serious wrongdoings. On the trivial morally-ignorant side: imagine someone who streams pirated music online without so much as thinking of the moral questions involved. Or a person who reneges on a minor promise—like returning a dish—in the false belief that it doesn’t really matter either way. On the other hand—as I will now explore—we can easily think of examples of factual ignorance that have profoundly serious moral ramifications.

Interestingly, considering her opposition to the Parity Thesis, Arpaly often invokes serious examples of factual ignorance. She describes the case of a “run-of-the-mill anti-Semite” who justifies her treatment of Jews with “her belief that Jews are subhumans who are trying to conquer the world and that treating them badly may improve the state of the world by letting them know that they are not likely to conquer it in the near future” (2003, 102). She writes: “It seems as if all this person gets wrong is the facts: she does not have false beliefs about morality but simply false beliefs about Jews.” Similarly, we could summon cases of factual ignorance to accompany Rosen’s cases of moral ignorance: the slaveholder who believes that his slaves do not feel pain in the way that he does, or that ending slavery would cause socio-economic collapse (which, he believes, makes it all-things-considered permissible). If these factually ignorant beliefs emerge out of insufficient moral concern or sinister motivation, then these agents are plausibly blameworthy on QW accounts for the same reasons as the morally-ignorant slaveholder and sexist are potentially blameworthy.⁷ Even if we stipulate that the factually ignorant anti-Semite, sexist or slaveholder had executed their epistemic obligations, this by no means resolves the question of their blamelessness. Rather, we would need to know whether these factually ignorant beliefs emerged innocently or whether they emerged in conjunction with prejudice, self-interest, ill will, or moral indifference. If a sinister motivation, or even callous indifference, motivated the formation of a factually ignorant belief, this would be sufficient for blameworthiness irrespective of epistemic culpability.⁸

⁷ Provided their morally-ignorant beliefs emerged from insufficient concern; I will engage with this further in Section 5.

⁸ As I remarked earlier, the idea might instead be that with regard to factual ignorance alone, epistemic culpability and non-culpability perfectly track the relevant evaluations regarding moral concern. But unless we subsume our notion of righteous motivation into our conception of epistemic non-culpability, then there will be times that these two evaluations come apart. (This will be especially so if epistemic culpability is interpreted as involving the *conscious* mismanagement of epistemic obligations, such as the volitionists espouse, but even on a broader conception of epistemic culpability there will be cases where people form false factual beliefs not only because of misleading evidence but also because they are motivated by various sinister interests and desires. I will return to this when I consider Arpaly’s case of Caius Fatuous in the next section).

As some of the cases above indicate, moral ignorance often exists in confluence with factual ignorance.⁹ Many of the most nefarious morally-ignorant beliefs seem to be of this mixed variety, and exist in collaboration with a wide array of seemingly-corroborating false factual beliefs. Furthermore, while factual and moral ignorance are often presented as clearly distinct, it seems that there are many ignorant beliefs that would sit in a grey area between the two. Some of the most nefarious forms of ignorance have involved the failure to recognise the moral status of other individuals. Early colonisers notoriously justified the practice of hunting and killing indigenous populations by denying that they were human. This is a factually ignorant belief, but it is simultaneously a morally ignorant belief; being “human,” after all, is a moral as well as a factual category. There have been centuries of ignorance, among some, regarding who “qualified” as human, or as rational; the denial of these inclusions arguably involved a confluence of moral and factual ignorance that is not easy to pick apart even at the level of a single belief. Similarly, one might well have hesitated over Arpaly’s categorization of the anti-Semite’s beliefs as only factually ignorant (“that Jews are subhumans who are trying to conquer the world and that treating them badly may improve the state of the world.”) Again, considering others “subhuman” cannot be straightforwardly factual. So, we might well think that not only does factual ignorance usually co-occur with moral ignorance, but also that there are ignorant beliefs that are not clearly either moral or factual. Given how interconnected moral and factual ignorance often are, there is perhaps something advantageous about not investing too much in an in-principle distinction, as far as responsibility is concerned, between the two. It might therefore constitute an advantage for QW accounts not to endorse the stark distinction between moral and factual ignorance which is routinely attributed to the view.

I have emphasised, therefore, that on QW accounts the factual ignorance excuse does not ultimately revolve around epistemic culpability or non-culpability. Rather, as with the moral case, factual ignorance is blameworthy insofar as it emerges from caring insufficiently about what is morally significant. The defenders of the Asymmetry Thesis who I quoted at the outset of this section therefore make a mistake in framing the factual ignorance excuse around epistemic culpability and non-culpability. But there is still another avenue for the Asymmetry Thesis: even if the basis for blame is the same for both moral and factual ignorance on QW accounts, an asymmetry of sorts could be established if the conditions for the excuse never applied in the case of moral ignorance. It is to this argument that I now turn.

4 Quality of Will & Moral Ignorance

As we have seen, factual ignorance can break attributions of insufficient moral concern. Many of our examples so far, like the oblivious Ned, have fallen into this category. The fact that he was unaware of the tipping custom has clear and profound implications regarding his quality of will. Less clear, however, is whether moral ignorance can break attributions of insufficient concern in the same way. Some philosophers have contended that moral ignorance *always* implies a lack of good will, and therefore that it never excuses. Jan Willem Wieland (2017) has referred to this position as “no excuse”. The proponents of the Asymmetry Thesis who I have engaged with all incline towards the “no excuse” position.

⁹ This is sometimes referred to as “impure” moral ignorance, as opposed to “pure” moral ignorance, which does not exist in confluence with factual ignorance. (I take this terminology from Wieland 2017, 150). The position that moral ignorance never exculpates is usually reserved for pure moral ignorance.

In this section, I aim to show that moral ignorance can sometimes excuse on QW accounts. If moral and factual ignorance excuse in the same way (as I argued in the previous section), and if these excusing conditions can be met with regard to both moral and factual ignorance, then I have established a case for the compatibility of the Parity Thesis with QW positions. Finally, I will conclude by gesturing to some of the advantages of this Quality of Will Parity; I suggest that it spares us from the daunting all-or-nothing positions which remain prominent within this debate: on the one side of which moral ignorance seems to excuse far too readily, and on the other side of which it does not seem to excuse readily enough (and would condemn all morally ignorant agents, regardless of the circumstances of their ignorance).

The full task of responding to the “no excuse” position is complex. Wieland (2017) has undertaken such a response, contesting both of the core claims that he takes “no excuse” to rely on: that moral ignorance always implies a lack of good will, and that moral truths are always accessible. Of these, the first claim is perhaps the hardest to dispute, given the intuitive sense in which moral ignorance seems to constitute a lack of good will (let’s call this the “constitutive argument”). Wieland argues that “morally ignorant agents might still be excused if the moral truth is not accessible enough” (151). I am partial to Wieland’s position, and think there are further avenues via which one can pressure “no excuse,” and the constitutive argument. Engaging with this debate adequately requires a dedicated paper. For the purposes of my present argument, which is focused on the parity or asymmetry between moral and factual ignorance, my aim is more modest: I will merely endeavour to demonstrate the plausibility of the Parity Thesis on QW views by arguing that Arpaly’s QW view accommodates the moral ignorance excuse to a much larger degree than she sometimes implies, and that such an account might even excuse in some of Rosen’s controversial cases of moral ignorance. In this sense I will call “no excuse” into question, and establish that the conditions that excuse factual ignorance on QW grounds can plausibly also be met in cases of moral ignorance (and not only hypothetically or theoretically, but with some regularity).

Importantly, Arpaly aligns quality of will with reasons-responsiveness: to care appropriately is to respond to the (morally) right reasons. Arpaly has drawn attention to the distinction between *de re* and *de dicto* responsiveness, where good will is understood in terms of *de re* responsiveness: i.e. responsiveness to what are in fact the moral reasons, rather than responsiveness to what one takes to be the moral reasons.¹⁰ Someone who does not respond to the right reasons is therefore also failing to care appropriately. The exceptions, where the ignorance excuse would apply, would be where one’s false belief was nevertheless an epistemically rational belief to form (2003, 103). Arpaly seems to believe that morally ignorant beliefs would never qualify as epistemically rational in the relevant sense. Indeed, some have read Arpaly as offering an identity relation between responding to the (objectively) right moral reasons, and having sufficient moral concern. She writes that the morally ignorant are always either acting for sinister reasons, or at the very least “out of indifference to (what in fact is) morality” (2003, 101).

If this identity interpretation is correct, then Arpaly’s position would be opposed to the moral ignorance excuse in every case since, by definition, the morally ignorant are failing to respond to the right moral reasons. We would then have grounds for the Asymmetry Thesis because while factual ignorance could exculpate, moral ignorance could never do so.

For the remainder of this paper, I wish to challenge this view. While morally ignorant beliefs are necessarily constitutive of a failure to respond to the right moral reasons (that much

¹⁰ Harman (2011) and Alvarez & Littlejohn (2017) explicitly follow Arpaly in this conception.

is trivially true), the connection between this failure and the attitudes necessary for blame on QW accounts is more complicated than that. A failure to respond to the right moral reasons is not always indicative of the sinister motivations or callous indifference that make blame appropriate on a QW account such as Arpaly's. I will argue that instead, moral ignorance ought to admit of the same complexity that Arpaly allows factual ignorance on her view: it can be (and indeed might often be) indicative of insufficient concern, but it isn't always.

Let me begin by looking at this complexity as it pertains to factual ignorance. Arpaly concedes that "pure" ignorance (that is not formed in collaboration with sinister motives) is exculpatory, but she thinks such pure ignorance almost never arises where bigotry is concerned. She writes: "We do not take people to be bad if they hold bigoted beliefs out of pure ignorance, or mostly out of ignorance. This is hard to show, of course, because such cases of pure ignorance are extremely rare, but I would imagine that if an alien arrived on Earth with a used copy of a generally reliable Guide to the Solar System telling her that all black Earthlings are foolish and all pale Earthlings clever, she would be misled, not irrational, and she would not be bad simply for having made this mistake, even if she acted on it" (2003, 103).

This extra-terrestrial example implies that, in reality, such instances of pure ignorance are vanishingly unusual. However, when Arpaly goes on to offer what she calls a "more mundane" story of pure ignorance, it begins to seem more prevalent. Her example is of Solomon who "believes that women are not half as competent as men when it comes to abstract thinking" (2003, 103). His evidence for this belief includes the fact that the women in his community only discuss gossip, the library contains no abstract work by women, and "no one he knows of has ever doubted that women are worse abstract thinkers."

Given this, Arpaly concludes that Solomon's belief is "not *particularly* or *markedly* irrational," and that "the boy Solomon is more ignorant than irrational, and he is also, intuitively, more ignorant than vicious." In extending the case to show where marked irrationality would emerge, she asks us to imagine that Solomon has found himself in college, and is suddenly surrounded by brilliant female scholars. If he proceeded in his errant belief despite this "his belief would now be not only false but also irrational. He would no longer be simply mistaken, but *prejudiced*. At the point when we regard him as irrational, we also regard him as suffering from a serious moral flaw" (104).

A crucial question emerges: why would irrationality condemn one to blameworthiness? Is irrationality necessarily constitutive of poor quality of will? At other points, Arpaly makes it quite clear that she is not advancing such a blunt identity relation. "There is nothing morally vicious about irrationality per se. After all, there seems to be nothing morally vicious in believing... that Elvis Presley is still alive or that a lottery ticket is less likely to win if it carries the same number as the ticket that won last month" (104). So it is not irrationality itself that is genuinely morally significant; it is rather when irrationality is explained by morally sinister motives, or insufficient moral concern. This is reiterated: "my point is *not* that [...] the anti-Semite's *belief* is itself blameworthy, but that the anti-Semite's belief plays a rather superficial role in a drama in which a person is motivated by sinister desires." It is important to emphasise that this is a relationship of correlation, in which the irrationality of the belief is only correlated to the genuinely morally-relevant factor. Our confidence in what an ignorant belief reveals about moral concern, or sinister desires, is disrupted by certain epistemic situations, particularly where an ignorant belief was not irrational to form.

What is the possibility, then, of holding false *moral* beliefs that would not be epistemically irrational, or that are not motivated by sinister desires? Such morally ignorant beliefs might also be purely ignorant, or unmotivated, in the manner of young Solomon. If moral and factual

ignorance both excuse insofar as they do not arise from sinister motivation or insufficient concern, and if both moral and factual ignorance can have this character, then we have asserted an in-principle similarity between moral and factual ignorance on QW accounts, and the Asymmetry Thesis is undermined.

Let us return to Solomon: the case emerges in a conversation concerning *factual* ignorance.¹¹ It has, however, been variously interpreted within the debate: Mason (2015) has read Solomon as morally ignorant, Wieland (2017) as “impure” moral ignorance (i.e. mixed with factual ignorance), and Robichaud (2017) as factually ignorant. It is revealing that the case has been so multiply construed: this variety of interpretations seems to support my earlier claim that the two forms of ignorance are often hard to distinguish. Now if Arpaly were putting Solomon forward as a case of moral ignorance, then her endorsement of the Asymmetry Thesis would seem like an explicit contradiction, since Solomon’s moral ignorance would excuse in just the same way that factual ignorance would excuse on her account. But even if Solomon were not interpreted as morally ignorant, I still think the case allows us to pressure the Asymmetry Thesis on Arpaly’s view.

If Solomon can innocently believe (given the limitations of his epistemic situation) that women are inherently stupider, why can Smith not innocently believe that they are unworthy of educational opportunities? Taken in isolation, Solomon’s belief also seems constitutive of a blameworthy attitude, but understood within its context, it seems misguided to attribute the content of this attitude to Solomon as a moral agent. And if Solomon’s belief does not necessarily reflect his moral concerns in a manner which is adequate for blameworthiness, then why should Smith’s belief? Both agents are explicitly in epistemic contexts which encourage the formation of their ignorant beliefs. According to Arpaly, Solomon’s belief is not markedly irrational, in part because “no one he knows has ever doubted that women are worse abstract thinkers” (2003, 103). Similarly, in Rosen’s case, we are told that Smith holds his sexist belief because “he was raised to find it obvious, and because the people he takes seriously find it obvious” (2003, 67). The difference between Solomon’s sexist beliefs and Smith’s sexist beliefs seems to be one of degree, rather than one of kind.

In defence of the Asymmetry Thesis, it might be argued that—unlike factual truths, which can be complex and obscure—moral truths are always ultimately accessible, and that all moral agents possess the relevant acumen to discern such truths. In turn, failures to respond to moral truths could never be epistemically rational, in the manner in which failures to respond to factual truths could be. In this sense, moral ignorance would always be indicative of sinister motivations, or wilful ignorance. However, it seems quite obvious that moral truths are not merely patent in a manner that makes *all* moral ignorance wilful or motivated. As the volitionist Neil Levy writes: “This is surely false. Both global and much more localised moral ignorance are all too common, and all too explicable, facts of life” (2011, 118). Moreover, it’s hard to see what would be gained by supporting such a premise, aside from the perpetuation of “no excuse.” Rather, I suggest, there is no bright-line distinction to be drawn here: as with factual ignorance, it is possible to have morally ignorant beliefs that are not indicative of sinister motivations or insufficient concern.

¹¹ Solomon comes after the discussion on the anti-Semite (who, Arpaly says, only has false beliefs about Jews not false beliefs about morality) and the alien with the errant travel guide to earthlings. In this section she is explicitly addressing problem cases where “actions were based not on false moral beliefs but on false *factual* beliefs.” (Arpaly 2003, p. 103 & 104; her emphasis).

To put pressure on this, let me turn our attention from the perpetrators in these cases, to their victims. Throughout the moral churning of history, we see countless examples of people who were oppressed by certain false moral beliefs who have nevertheless accepted them. It is not implausible that the sexist's daughters shared similar views to their father: they might well have agreed that they had no business going to college. Perhaps they even scoffed at those women who held different views— finding them crass, naïve and even dangerous to society. For them the fact that gender matters in this way could also have been “an undefended axiom of moral common sense.” Yet we hesitate to call the daughters blameworthy for this ignorance, even if we might be eager to attribute blame to their father. The same difficulty applies in countless other cases: those who have supported a caste or class system which deems them inferior, or who have accepted racial hierarchies which are to their detriment, or have endorsed moral views which condemn their own sexual orientations. This phenomenon seems starkest in retrospect, but even in the present it is bizarrely familiar to find people who seem to vote against their own interests, or support policies which restrict their own rights and opportunities, or which poison the environments they live in and depend on.

One could perhaps argue that within a sexist society (to continue with the example above) it might be more beneficial for a woman to internalise sexist views than it is for her fight against them. In this case, the sexist views are still wilful or motivated, in some respects, even if they are simultaneously held against oneself. Within such a society, sexist beliefs might constitute a net benefit, even for women. But this could not account for every case. And we could easily imagine a situation where the internalised belief is still, all told, a net harm. There also seems to be an important difference between being motivated to hold a *particular belief* (i.e. a sexist or racist belief) and being motivated to hold whichever beliefs allow you to live in the greatest harmony with your society. If Smith's daughters only have this sort of motivation—a motivation to take the path of least resistance—this does not seem to amount to a motivation to be sexist, in particular, even if it ultimately results in them endorsing their society's prevalent sexist beliefs.

Alternatively, we might say that regardless of whether they are motivated to hold these morally ignorant beliefs or not, such beliefs still constitute insufficient concern (in this case, insufficient concern for themselves). But this seems like an inadequate, or overly blunt response. Although it is not impossible to say that you have insufficient concern for yourself, or show contempt towards yourself in a way that amounts to a moral failing, it seems like a deeply incomplete account (especially when it is invoked to explain something on the scale of internalised oppression). In these cases, it seems quite obvious that in blaming the person for their beliefs—in deeming these beliefs constitutive of an agent's moral concerns in a manner which is sufficient for blameworthiness— we are neglecting too much that is of significance. We are neglecting the epistemic context which generated these morally ignorant beliefs in people who otherwise had no motivation to believe them (who, in fact, had every motivation to oppose them).

Once this is acknowledged, it seems that there should also be room for moral ignorance that does not arise from sinister motives or even from blameworthy indifference, and which could therefore be blameless on a QW account such as Arpaly's.

In the previous section, I considered Arpaly's inverse akrasia argument against the Parity Thesis. She separately advances a *reductio* argument against Rosen's Parity Thesis: she introduces a case, similar to Rosen's ancient slaveholder, involving a citizen of ancient Rome named Caius Fatuous. He works in the circus, and chooses this work precisely because he has “an intrinsic desire that people suffer, and as a result he enjoys watching them suffer” (2015,

151). In this sense, he “performs his action roughly *for the reasons that make it wrong.*” But as with the Hittite lord, Caius Fatuous believes that he is entitled to do these things: he has not been compelled to reflect on the question much, but even if he did he would come to the conclusion that his actions are permissible. On Rosen’s view, even this sadist would have a legitimate excuse, and his wrongdoings would be blameless, since he manages his epistemic obligations appropriately by his own lights. “What intuitions *favor* the view that Caius Fatuous [...] should be excused from blame?” Arpaly asks, “I think the very powerful intuition that ‘one cannot be blamed for actions performed out of ignorance,’ coupled with the view that moral and ordinary ignorance are on par, provides a major contribution” (155). It seems absurd to excuse an evil agent like Caius Fatuous on account of his ignorance, so therefore the mechanism which excuses him must be errant, and we must reject any notion of parity between moral and factual ignorance. Arpaly proceeds, reiterating this asymmetry: “If moral ignorance does not preclude blameworthiness, then moral knowledge is not necessary for blameworthiness the way that ordinary knowledge (say, the knowledge that what you are giving me is poison) might be. Thus there can be blameworthiness in cases like Gideon Rosen’s celebrated case of the ancient slaveholder” (151).

But with the preceding discussion in mind, we can look at this standoff anew. Deeming Caius Fatuous blameless is of course fundamentally counter-intuitive. However, dismissing the moral ignorance excuse in the case of Caius Fatuous does not necessarily commit us to dismissing the possibility of exculpation in other cases of moral ignorance— including, potentially, some of Rosen’s cases. When we extrapolate the volitionist grounds for the ignorance excuse—regarding the conscious management of one’s epistemic obligations—Caius Fatuous is indeed exculpated, as in Rosen’s slaveholder example. Given their circumstances the Hittite Lord and Caius Fatuous are equally epistemically non-culpable for their ignorant beliefs, and if this was the fundamental basis on which they were excused, there would be no way to distinguish between them. But when we apply the Quality of Will interpretation of the excuse—in which epistemic culpability is only relevant in terms of what it reveals about moral concern—we have reason to view the cases very differently and, indeed, we might have grounds to hold Caius Fatuous blameworthy even while we exempt Rosen’s Hittite lord. (At the very least, we would have grounds to consider Caius Fatuous *more* blameworthy than the Hittite lord, whereas on the volitionist interpretation they are equivalently blameless).

Where Rosen presents a neutral character (motivations-wise), who “would have acted differently” if he’d known what he was doing was wrong, Arpaly presents a sadistic character, stipulated to be acting from a sinister motive. Given that we have this stipulation, in the case of Caius Fatuous, questions of his epistemic culpability are somewhat beside the point: his maliciousness is itself sufficient for his blameworthiness. In mounting the Caius Fatuous example against Rosen, Arpaly argues that if we find Rosen’s Hittite lord blameless, then we must concede the same for Caius Fatuous. This would be true if we accepted Rosen’s interpretation of the Parity Thesis, and his volitionist grounds for the ignorance excuse. Instead, if we take a QW approach to the ignorance excuse, then the differences between the two cases, insofar as blameworthiness is concerned, are immediately clear.

Returning to the example of Solomon: Arpaly grounds her understanding of Solomon’s belief from within his context. Given this, she holds that his belief is not markedly irrational. “It is not particularly irrational because Solomon is not exposed to striking counterevidence to it, and he is exposed to consensus and ‘expert’ opinion in its favor.” Solomon, we are led to imagine, harbours no innate prejudice against women that he is merely seeking to corroborate.

He is ignorant in the manner that any person in his position would be, provided they did not have extraordinary capacities for reasoning, and extraordinary insight and conviction. These traits: of neutrality, of mere ordinariness, seem to share much more in common, in spirit, with the Hittite lord and the 1950s sexist than they do with Caius Fatuous.

So even if we reject Rosen's mechanism for excusing the sexist and the Hittite lord, they may nevertheless be exculpated via a different mechanism: the view that their false moral beliefs were not necessarily motivated, nor formed in conjunction with prejudice or moral disregard; that despite their wrongs, they may be more ignorant than vicious.

5 Conclusion

I have endeavoured to show that the Parity Thesis is, after all, a false target within this debate, and that we do not have credible grounds to establish an asymmetry between moral and factual ignorance on QW accounts. In Section 4 I challenged the notion that epistemically non-culpable factual ignorance excuses while epistemically non-culpable moral ignorance does not (I argued that epistemic non-culpability is not the foundation for exculpation in either the moral or the factual case), and in Section 5 I argued against the view that moral ignorance can never be considered exculpatory. The conditions that excuse in cases of moral ignorance might only be rarely met on a QW account such as Arpaly's, but not so rarely as has often been supposed. What's more they are fundamentally the same conditions that excuse in cases of factual ignorance.

I have argued, therefore, that the Parity Thesis is not incompatible with QW views, and indeed that the account should see the two forms of ignorance as excusing in the same way. This itself is interesting, especially given how much has been made of the distinction. I have also suggested that making less of this distinction is preferable, given the immense complicity, intractability, and sometimes even overlap between moral and factual ignorance.

Finally, although this has only been gestured to, the recognition of a possible Quality of Will Parity allows us to see greater areas where intuitions overlap within this debate. Someone who is moved by certain of Rosen's cases of moral ignorance, and concerned that there might be something genuinely exculpatory within them, does not only have recourse to Rosen's reasons *why* this exculpation could occur. In this sense, his cases would not necessarily be counterexamples to Quality of Will accounts in the way that he supposes they are.

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