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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## Difficulty & quality of will: implications for moral ignorance

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### ABSTRACT

Difficulty is often treated as blame-mitigating, and even exculpating. But on some occasions difficulty seems to have little or no bearing on our assessments of moral responsibility, and can even exacerbate it. In this paper, I argue that the relevance (and irrelevance) of difficulty with regard to assessments of moral responsibility is best understood via Quality of Will accounts. I look at various ways of characterising difficulty – including via sacrifice, effort, skill and ‘trying’ – and set out to demonstrate that these factors are only blame-mitigating where, and to the extent that, they complicate ascriptions of insufficient concern. Matters become more complex, however, when we turn to difficult circumstances that seem to *generate* such objectionable attitudes. This is arguably the case with epistemic difficulty and certain instances of moral ignorance. Here I argue that certain difficult circumstances diminish the sense in which false moral beliefs are genuinely revelatory of the agents who hold them. In particular, I draw on the distinction between *difficulty that generates objectionable attitudes*, and *objectionable attitudes that generate difficulty*. I argue that the former, but not the latter, can plausibly be viewed as blame mitigating, and that this would apply to (limited) cases of moral ignorance.

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## 1. Introduction

Difficulty is an important consideration in assessments of moral responsibility. When someone fails to do the right thing, but it would have been incredibly difficult for them to do it, we often think that the difficulty they faced is blame-mitigating, and in some cases even exculpating. A recent philosophical debate has sought to better understand how and why this is so.

The primary aim of this paper is to contribute to this ongoing debate by arguing that the relevance (and irrelevance) of difficulty with regard to responsibility is best understood via Quality of Will accounts. I will show that difficulty often gives us reason to think that a wrongdoing is not indicative of insufficient concern. Where difficulty fails to have this implication (because it emerges from insufficient concern *itself*, for instance) we do not find it exculpating.

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In Section 2, I will look at various ways of characterising difficulty – via sacrifice, effort and skill – and set out to demonstrate that these factors are only blame-mitigating where, and to the extent that, they complicate ascriptions of insufficient concern. (The conceptual debate regarding what constitutes difficulty will only be of tangential concern in this paper: in virtue of what something is difficult is a different question from in virtue of what difficulty mitigates or excuses blame). I will then introduce more complex cases, where difficulty does not easily come apart from quality of will; these cases seem to provide counterexamples to my position. With this challenge in place, I will proceed to the second part of the paper.

My second aim, which I pursue in Section 3, involves a separate but related debate concerning moral ignorance. Here I consider the notion of ‘difficulty trying’ which has particular resonance with epistemic difficulty. Again, I argue for the relevance (and irrelevance) of difficulty trying along Quality of Will lines. However here the account is required to make much more subtle distinctions. I argue that in certain epistemically difficult circumstances, false moral beliefs reveal little about the agents who hold them, and therefore complicate ascriptions of insufficient concern. I draw on the distinction between *difficulty that generates objectionable attitudes*, and *objectionable attitudes that generate difficulty* and argue that the former, but not the latter, can mitigate blameworthiness, and would underwrite the excuse of moral ignorance in limited cases. I further argue that it is an advantage of such an account that the moral ignorance excuse does not apply broadly.

My two aims are related, since the case for each strengthens the case for the other. The case for the Quality of Will account as an explanation of the relevance (and irrelevance) of difficulty to assessments of blameworthiness is strengthened by its ability to handle hard cases like that of moral epistemic difficulty, and attendant moral ignorance. While the case for the exculpatory power of (certain cases of) moral ignorance is generated by the significance of certain forms of difficulty to assessments of quality of will.

## 2. Difficulty & quality of will

We routinely consider the difficulty an agent faced when we morally appraise them for performing, or failing to perform, some right action. When it is very difficult to do the right thing, we often think that someone is all the more praiseworthy for having done it or that they are less blameworthy for having failed. Say I’d promised to attend a friend’s piano recital, but a massive snow-storm hit: it will be miserably cold out, and the trains will all be delayed. If I break my promise under these circumstances, my friend might consider me less blameworthy than if I’d failed to attend on a day that presented no such difficulties. On the other hand, if I attended the recital despite the conditions (leaving hours early to make it on time), my presence would be all the more meaningful.

On the face of it, the relevance of difficulty in such appraisals seems to have an affinity with Quality of Will accounts of moral responsibility. Such accounts are primarily concerned with what our actions and beliefs reveal about who we are, and our moral concerns.<sup>1</sup> Where someone acts with insufficient moral concern, they are blameworthy, and where someone acts with a high degree of moral concern, they are praiseworthy.

So in the example above: where I fail to attend in the absence of any difficulty, I demonstrate insufficient concern (for you, and with regard to the promise I made); but

in the face of substantial difficulty, as in the case of the snowstorm, it might be that my failure is nevertheless compatible with sufficient (if not impeccable) concern.

Here difficulty is mitigating, but it is easy to consider circumstances where difficulty *enhances* blameworthiness. If an agent overcomes great difficulty in order to do the *wrong* thing, it can seem to have an exacerbating rather than a mitigating effect. Imagine a case of a cheating wife, where not only did she cheat but she went wildly out of her way to do so (renting a car and driving halfway across the country, for instance, despite her usual fear on the roads). If her partner discovered these hurtful details, they would rightfully feel she was all the more blameworthy for her betrayal. In this case difficulty seems to make the wrongdoing all the more revelatory of insufficient concern, or even outright malice. Conversely, if the wife 'resisted temptation' under these difficult circumstances, she would seem to deserve less credit for her fidelity.

In broad terms: *overcoming* difficulty in order to achieve X seems to enhance the sense in which X is revelatory. Where X is some good thing, you are therefore more praiseworthy (i.e. attending the recital despite the snowstorm); where X is some bad thing, you are therefore more blameworthy (i.e. undertaking the affair despite the obstacles). However where you *fail to overcome* difficulty it seems to diminish the sense in which the failure is revelatory. Where X is some good thing, you are therefore less blameworthy (i.e. missing the recital during the snowstorm); where X is some bad thing, you are therefore less praiseworthy (i.e. remaining faithful when cheating was such a hassle).

One thought is that the relevance of difficulty in our moral evaluations is, in some respects, epistemic. When someone does something good despite it being difficult, it allows us to *know* how invested they were in the good act. As Dana Kay Nelkin puts it, while speculating about this interpretation:

in principle one could do something easy and do something difficult with the *same* high degree of moral concern and so be equally praiseworthy. But doing something good when it is difficult allows us to *see* how high one's moral concern is.<sup>2</sup>

To an omniscient observer, who could perfectly understand the intentions, motivations, concerns and commitments from which an action or omission is performed or omitted, the external impression of difficulty might be less relevant. To imperfect observers such as ourselves, however, it is highly revealing. And it is indeed telling what a great deal of energy we expend in our attempt to overcome these epistemic hurdles within our interpersonal moral relationships: in trying to glean whether someone truly cares or is only faking; if something was genuinely an accident or whether it was by design. We also spend a great deal of time demonstrating our own adequacy of concern: showing that we are not indifferent to other people (attending their recitals, and so on). Conceivably we make this effort to aid the epistemic task of others in evaluating us as agents: to show that we care where we should care, and as much as we should care, though no one could ever know this about us with certainty.

But the relevance of difficulty might be more than merely epistemic. Plausibly, the presence of difficulty genuinely alters how much moral concern can be manifested or expressed by a certain act (rather than merely altering our perception of that concern).<sup>3</sup> Imagine a husband who lovingly cares for his wife through a long and painful illness. His devotion through this ordeal might not only reveal the depths of his love for his wife, it could also in some respects *generate* those depths. Perhaps it is

only possible for him to care in that way because of the difficulty they face. (In this sense, there might sometimes be something interpersonally beautiful and significant about difficulty).

There is ongoing debate about these interpretations.<sup>4</sup> For my purposes, I need not take a side in this particular dispute, and indeed they are not necessarily mutually exclusive descriptions (difficulty could be both epistemically revelatory and sincerely generative). What is more important for me is what these two interpretations have in common: in both cases difficulty seems to provide a proxy for moral concern – either for concern that we are then able to perceive (in the more epistemic sense) or for concern that thereby comes into being (in the more generative sense).

Until now, I have been using the concept of difficulty quite informally. A series of recent papers have worked towards more formal conceptions of what we understand by difficulty, and how difficulty might be related to degrees of responsibility. Within this ongoing debate, difficulty has been prominently interpreted in terms of sacrifice, effort and skill.<sup>5</sup> I will look at each of these factors briefly: in each instance, I will consider a case where the relevant factor is intuitively blame-mitigating or exculpating, versus a case where the same factor does not make much difference to assessments of blameworthiness; I argue that Quality of Will accounts are the best way of interpreting this central inconsistency.

Much depends on what constitutes a ‘sufficiently good will.’ There will be inevitable vagueness here, but it is possible to make some broad claims. In the first instance, it seems clear that there is a considerable divergence between possessing a sufficiently good will and being a saint: we generally do not hold ourselves or others to saintly or super-human standards when it comes to the concern we are expected to show for one another; where such standards are required in order to do the right thing by them, we might decide that failing to do so is not blameworthy. Gideon Rosen has distinguished between four states of moral concern: insufficiently good will, basic decency, full moral decency (where a fully morally decent person would always choose to do the right thing, if known, no matter the personal cost) and finally, saintliness. Rosen holds, convincingly, that ‘basic decency and full moral decency can come apart.’<sup>6</sup> We see this quite clearly in life-threatening situations: a person who chooses to spare themselves instead of saving others might care adequately for the interests of those they condemn, even if they do not care enough to sacrifice their own life.<sup>7</sup>

Another feature of what qualifies as sufficient concern is that the qualifying level will be fundamentally dependent on particular relationships. We expect a certain minimal level of moral concern even from total strangers (at the very least, we expect them not to wish us ill). But of course, we rightly expect a great deal more from those close to us. With this in mind, let me introduce a case as a way of investigating the notion of difficulty-as-sacrifice, and exploring where and when sacrifice exculpates or mitigates blameworthiness.

## 2.1. *Difficulty as sacrifice*

*Cowardly Tomas*— Tomas is on a skiing holiday with his wife Ebba and their two young children. While they are having lunch one day, what was supposed to be a controlled avalanche goes wrong and snow begins hurtling towards the deck on which the family is seated. In this moment of panic Tomas flees, leaving his family in the wake of the oncoming danger, and leaving his wife alone in her attempt to protect their children. The snow misses them.

This is the opening of the Swedish film *Force Majeure*. The remainder of the film concerns the fallout from this incident and Ebba's resentment at Tomas for abandoning his family. In this case, we might imagine that there are grounds for her to feel that his fleeing (the triumph of his self-interest over their interests) represented insufficient concern, given their relationship. This remains the case even though what Tomas was called upon to do in the circumstances risked enormous sacrifice. Of course, however, Ebba would have no similar expectation (or certainly no similarly legitimate one) of any of the other patrons at the restaurant, whose fleeing would in no way represent insufficient concern for her, or a lapse of basic decency. If she expected, for instance, the waiter to risk his life to help her, this expectation would quite clearly be unfair.

To evoke Rosen's distinction: basic decency and full moral decency do not come apart as easily in Tomas's case, and for Tomas to care adequately under the circumstances might require that he care enough to threaten his own life. So in his case the grounds for blameworthiness are not fundamentally undermined by the required sacrifice (extreme though it is) as they are in the case of the waiter, whose basic decency is not imputed by his self-interest. It is true, however, that should Tomas have fled under less forbidding circumstances (leaving his young children to drown in stormy waters, for instance, even though he is an excellent swimmer) we would consider him all the more blameworthy.<sup>8</sup> But this too seems connected to our appraisals of the inadequacy of his concern: both how much is owed, with regards to the relationship, and how far he has fallen short.

There are many relationships – both personal and professional – in which extraordinary sacrifice seems like *a requirement of sufficient concern*. The relationship of parents to their young children is perhaps a quintessential dynamic of sacrifice. Yet should a parent neglect the welfare of their child, the fact that providing such welfare requires a huge sacrifice does not seem blame-mitigating, or certainly not in any straightforward way.

Certain professional roles also have implications for what constitutes sufficient concern, and might even require enormous sacrifice. In the Florida High School shooting, the police officer who waited outside instead of confronting the gunman was roundly condemned, even though this confrontation risked his life. Similarly, for the captain of the Costa Concordia, who rescued himself in a lifeboat while his ship went down with many on board.<sup>9</sup>

Some of us might sympathise with these anti-heroes (and even with a parent who neglects their child), but I think many will find these agents straightforwardly blameworthy despite what they were called upon to sacrifice. It seems clear that the relevance of sacrifice in our attributions of blameworthiness is highly variable: sometimes it is utterly exempting, but at other times it seems to offer only modest mitigation, if any at all. What we are actually concerned about when we consider the relevance of difficulty-as-sacrifice is deeper judgments about sufficient and insufficient regard, which depend in part on our personal and professional relationships and obligations.

## 2.2. Difficulty as effort

Let me move onto difficulty-as-effort. Gwen Bradford has put forward a detailed account of difficulty interpreted via effort. For Bradford these effort-requiring features include 'complexity, physical demandingness, taking place over a long span of time, involving

high-level skills, or a large amount of knowledge.’ She resists the notion of ‘different kinds of difficulty,’ and argues that all of these kinds can ultimately be subsumed under effort.<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that effort is often mitigating. Let’s say I know I ought to recycle, but I live in a small town where no recycling is offered. The nearest depot is some 30 kilometres away, and I don’t have a car; my only option is to cycle to the depot, which is difficult, since the journey is very steep in one direction. Under these circumstances, I am intuitively less blameworthy for neglecting to recycle than if it took little effort. When my recycling requires only a small effort, it seems that my failure to recycle straightforwardly evinces insufficient concern on my part, but this is much less clear when my recycling requires a great deal of effort. It might be that my limited and yet sufficient level of concern is compatible with my not making the effort in the latter case.

As opposed to Bradford’s unified account (which sees all varieties of difficulty as being ultimately subsumed under effort) others have argued that there are distinct types of difficulty. Von Kriegstein suggests, in particular, that effort can be seen as distinct from difficulty. He presents the following case:

*Difficult Wishes:* Little Peter is terminally ill. He has very little time left and his parents have promised him that they would fulfil any wish he might have. Peter has one wish for each of them. He wants Dad to chop down the tree that is blocking Peter’s window, make it into firewood, and build a great bonfire in the yard. Dad knows how to do this, but it is going to require a lot of intense effort [...] For Mom, Peter has a different task: he wants her to hit two homeruns in her weekend softball game that Peter is going to attend. This is not going to require any more effort than Mom would exert anyway, but it is still difficult. Hitting homeruns is not easy. Sadly, neither Mom nor Dad comes through for little Peter.<sup>11</sup>

Here von Kriegstein plausibly argues that Peter’s mother, but not his father, faced the sort of difficulty that diminishes moral responsibility. Let me begin with Peter’s father and the limited work that effort does in excusing him from not carrying out his dying son’s wish. As we’ve seen above, what qualifies as sufficient concern is often relative to certain relationships. In the first instance, then, we can see that the standard of sufficient concern is much higher in Peter’s father’s case than it would be for a mere acquaintance of Peter’s. Yet this higher standard is also true of Peter’s mother, who nevertheless seems intuitively blameless for failing her son in the softball match.

Instead, what seems relevant here is that, other things being equal, the only thing that could prevent Peter’s father from executing his task is his willingness to undertake it (despite the exertion involved). On the other hand, Peter’s mother’s failure could happen entirely independently of her will: perhaps she failed precisely because she was so desperate to succeed, and therefore choked on the pitch (indeed, this sorry tale seems only to compound her blamelessness).<sup>12</sup> The father’s failure, but not the mother’s, therefore seems clearly demonstrative of insufficient concern.

Separately, and importantly: when something requires a great deal of effort precisely *because* of one’s failure to care appropriately, it does not seem to be blame mitigating. Take my promise to attend my friend’s recital again. Say the night is balmy and bright, and it would have been very easy for me to travel over to the venue. Still, I find it very difficult to keep my promise because I find it such a drag to go to these efforts for the sake of my friends. In order to keep my promise, I would have to undertake an exhausting



performance of false sincerity and supportiveness. If, on account of this, I failed to attend, this form of effort-related difficulty would hardly seem blame-mitigating.<sup>13</sup>

Similarly, we sometimes see people who exert *less* effort to do the right thing as more praiseworthy. Imagine, unlike the case above, I can't wait to attend the recital: I want to support my friend, and no storms or delays would hamper my enthusiasm either (the duty of 'keeping the promise' never features into my considerations). In some respects, the fact that doing the right thing requires so little effort on my part seems to enhance my praiseworthiness rather than diminish it.

### 2.3. Difficulty as skill-related

The difficulty Peter's mother faces could be construed as 'skill-related' difficulty.<sup>14</sup> Perhaps Peter's mother is notoriously bad at softball, and hopelessly clumsy. This has been a source of constant embarrassment for him, which is precisely why he naïvely requests her triumph as his dying wish. Here we see the essential agent-relativity of difficulty: getting the home runs might be very difficult for Peter's mother, even if it would be a cinch for, say, Jennie Finch, who possesses the requisite skill.<sup>15</sup> But note that even in a situation where the task fell within Peter's mother's abilities, success remains outside of her control to a greater degree than it does in Peter's father's case. (There is a certain overlap, in the sense that coming to acquire a particular skill often involves a great deal of effort: but insofar as she exerted this energy, the outcome of her efforts still seem less related to her concerns and motivations than in Peter's father's case, where luck and chance play a far smaller role).

Alexander Guerrero suggests that skill-related difficulty often mitigates responsibility, on both agential control and agential revelation views (such as Quality of Will accounts). 'On the agential revelation picture ... this kind of difficulty undermines seeing [an agent's] actions as revealing or constituting any kind of moral failure or lack of moral concern.'<sup>16</sup> But as above, in the case of effort, there are cases where skill fails to have this implication, and therefore does not mitigate blame. This is especially insofar as the relevant skill involves our moral motivations and moral concerns.

In the same way as some people are more creative, more athletic or more intelligent than others, some people have greater moral faculties than others: they may be more empathetic, caring and morally imaginative. Where someone lacks these skills – and is non-empathetic, uncaring, and selfish, and does not endeavour sufficiently to compensate for these shortcomings – we generally do not think of this absence of skill as blame mitigating.<sup>17</sup> And though our morally gifted agents might find it 'easier' to do the right thing, this does not seem to make them less praiseworthy for it either.

A central intuition backing Quality of Will accounts is that we are justified in expecting a certain level of moral concern from other agents. This is warranted in a more fundamental way than other expectations. Since blame is justified in response to insufficient concern, difficulty would not mitigate against blame insofar as the relevant difficulty stemmed from a lack of concern *itself*. It is only if the difficulty is imposed from *outside of* the relevant quality of the will – and can be plausibly thought of as impeding an adequate or accurate appraisal of that quality of will – that it can affect evaluations of blameworthiness.

But here is where matters get especially complex. For there are many cases – and in the next Section 1 will argue that certain cases of moral ignorance are paradigmatic examples



– where difficulty and quality of will *do not* neatly come apart, and yet we still think that there is potentially something morally significant and blame mitigating about the relevant difficulty. On the face of it, Quality of Will accounts cannot explain such cases, and they, therefore, seem to form counterexamples to the position, and to any claims that it can adequately explain the mercurial work that difficulty undertakes in our evaluations of blameworthiness.

In the next section, I will endeavour to make the case that Quality of Will accounts can excuse certain cases of moral ignorance on the basis of how difficult the moral truth would have been to know. I argue that this is possible *despite* the seemingly intractable relationship between moral ignorance and insufficient regard. Once I have made this case, I will explicitly return to the challenge that I have introduced here, and argue that the account is able to meet it.

### 3. Implications for moral ignorance

“You will look back at us with astonishment! You will wonder at passionate struggles that accomplished so little; at the, to you, obvious paths to attain our ends which we did not take; at the intolerable evils before which it will seem to you we sat down passive; at the great truths staring us in the face, which we failed to see; at the truths we grasped at, but could never quite get our fingers round.” – Olive Schreiner, addressing future generations in *Woman and Labour*

As we’ve seen in the previous section, difficulty has implications for assessments of quality of will, and often difficult circumstances can be blame-mitigating. Yet the relevance of difficulty seems altogether more complicated when it comes to the question of *beliefs* than when it comes to other forms of hardship. As Guerrero writes: ‘in a sense, it might seem easy to believe anything. In this way, it is not like lifting an elephant.’<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, epistemic difficulty makes a great deal of intuitive sense. Some things are simply harder to know (in some contexts) than others, and some beliefs can be very difficult to form. Guerrero continues:

“It can be very difficult or impossible to believe things in particular situations: when one has no evidence to support the belief that *p*, or when one has no reasons to believe that *p*, or, worse, when all of one’s evidence and reasons seems to require that one not believe that *p*.”

This difficulty obviously pertains to factual ignorance. For instance, it was much more difficult for Aristotle to know how the eye functions than it is for you or me. Without even trying, we are submerged in an epistemic context in which we take for granted certain facts about lenses and retinas, cones and rods, light and inversion so that, with little thought, almost anyone could come up with a more accurate description of the biological workings of sight than Aristotle managed in 350 BC. It certainly seems that our evaluations of agents in these cases – including evaluations of their intelligence, rationality and epistemic virtue – should be sensitive to this difficulty.

But can it also be difficult to understand certain *moral* truths? Might it be difficult, in certain circumstances, to realise that you are morally wrong? That the moral factors weigh up differently than you thought? That you do not have entitlements you have taken yourself to have, or that others deserve more than you have realised or acknowledged? And might epistemic difficulty also be blame-mitigating when it comes to evaluating morally ignorant beliefs?

Aristotle, for instance, also thought there were ‘natural slaves,’ and that some people were born for subordination. This strikes us now as heinously false. But once again – as in the case of the functioning of the eye above – we are helped along in this realisation by an epistemic context which takes a wide variety of considerations for granted: the moral equality of people, the innate dignity of all persons, and a (hard-won) established moral consensus that slavery is an inherent wrong for which there can be no justifications.

In some respects, the moral case seems to resemble the factual case. But in other respects, they appear to profoundly diverge. It is one thing to be mistaken about the importance of the ocular lens, and it is quite another to be mistaken about whether people can be rightly born to bondage. On the face of it, the former belief seems clearly innocent. But it is much harder to grant that one can ‘innocently’ hold a belief like natural slavery, nor is it clear that innocence could ever genuinely co-occur with such a belief.

For this reason, it is often supposed that morally ignorant beliefs cannot be grounds for exculpation on Quality of Will accounts of blameworthiness. The reason for this is that morally ignorant beliefs (as opposed to factually ignorant beliefs) seem to be *constitutive* of one’s moral concerns, in a way that would necessitate blameworthiness. Describing this ‘Constitutive Argument,’ Rosen writes: ‘An objectionable attitude towards others is often *constituted* by a form of moral ignorance: ignorance about the consideration due to others.’<sup>19</sup>

In many respects, I find this compelling. The relationship between morally ignorant beliefs and objectionable attitudes seems exceptionally strong. For the remainder of this paper, however, I will attempt to complicate this picture. I will argue that (under certain epistemically difficult circumstance) the objectionable attitudes that attend morally ignorant beliefs reveal little about the agents who hold them, and are insufficient for the deeper, person-specific sorts of assessment which underlie Quality of Will accounts.

To begin, let me introduce the final conception of difficulty that I will be considering, which has a particular resonance with epistemic difficulty, which can be hard to capture via concepts such as ‘effort,’ ‘sacrifice’ or even ‘skill.’

### 3.1. Difficulty in trying

Guerrero has reiterated something resembling the Constitutive Argument specifically with regard to the question of intellectual difficulty and blameworthiness. He intends this category of difficulty to apply to those things that ‘can be difficult to do, even though they are (if we try to do them) easy to do.’ This includes the difficulty in questioning prevailing ideologies and assumptions, or thinking about questions in novel and unique ways. Guerrero holds that this sort of difficulty cannot easily be separated from assessments of quality of will and is therefore not mitigating on agential revelation views.

Because difficulty in trying is a function of an agent’s attitudes, experiences, and character, it will often be the case that how difficult it is for an agent to try to come to believe the truth about some matter is revelatory of, and indeed a direct result of, the agent’s moral attitudes, concern, and character. So, many instances in which it is difficult for an agent to try will not lessen moral responsibility or blameworthiness at all.<sup>20</sup>

Some philosophers have been happy to accept these implications, and to reject the relevance of epistemic difficulty when it comes to moral ignorance.<sup>21</sup> But others have

taken the Constitutive Argument to provide a serious challenge to Quality of Will accounts, and especially to their capacity to offer fair and deserved appraisals of blameworthiness.<sup>22</sup> If we accept the Constitutive Argument, after all, it might even be the case that morally ignorant agents in especially epistemically difficult circumstances (where their views were supposedly corroborated by a morally ignorant culture and society) are even *more blameworthy* than agents who held the same objectionable views without facing such difficulty. After all, the nature of their unchallenged views (in and of themselves) might well be more thoroughgoing and reprehensible.

But the circumstances in which objectionable beliefs form seem to make a difference, and sometimes a profound difference, to how we evaluate agents for holding those beliefs.<sup>23</sup> If Quality of Will accounts can make no allowances for this, no matter how difficult those circumstances are, the charge of unfairness is forceful. I, therefore, take it to be essential for the account to reject the Constitutive Argument: to explain why the circumstances in which beliefs are formed are relevant in our appraisal of the quality of the will revealed by those beliefs. I will argue that this accommodation is not only possible but persuasive. In particular, I will argue that we take epistemic difficulty as mattering to blame assessments precisely because we hold that certain moral beliefs reflect differently on the agents who hold them (and their relevant moral selves) depending on the circumstances in which their beliefs were formed; i.e. precisely because of concerns central to Quality of Will approaches to establishing moral responsibility.

With this in mind let us consider two different instances of ‘difficulty trying.’ As in Section 2, I would like to consider when and whether ‘difficulty trying’ provides a basis for mitigation. Again, I will argue that the relevance of difficulty is attached to what it reveals about quality of will. This time, however, I will have to cut more finely. In contrast to Guerrero, I will argue that difficulty trying can affect what a morally ignorant belief reveals about an agent depending on the source of the difficulty.

Consider two different agents who hold the morally ignorant belief that gay people are immoral and ought to be punished for their sexuality:

*Felix* is brought up in nineteenth century England. Within his society—enshrined in its laws, preached within its churches, and accepted by all so-called “decent” people—is the view that homosexuality is an immoral perversion that ought to be punished. Felix, despite being an otherwise kind and well-meaning person, comes to hold this morally ignorant belief.<sup>24</sup>

*Sammy* is brought up in contemporary America. He is well aware of “gay rights,” but he finds it completely abhorrent. No matter which way he looks at the whole issue it disgusts him. He thinks society has undertaken a grotesque moral regression in tolerating (even celebrating!) these perverts. If he had his way all gay people would be locked up.

Grant that both Felix and Sammy experience difficulty trying, and they cannot think beyond their morally ignorant beliefs: Felix because he is so indoctrinated and insulated, and Sammy because he is so disdainful and arrogant. Even if both of these men experience difficulty to the same degree (and even if it is just as unlikely that Sammy will awake one day enlightened to the error of his ways as it is that Felix will), it nevertheless seems plain that while ‘difficulty trying’ is plausibly mitigating with regard to Felix, it has no such effect with regard to Sammy.

The source of the difficulty is of fundamental importance. In the case of Sammy, his difficulty seems to ultimately stem from his ill will and malice *itself* (and from stable

features of his moral character and outlook). On the other hand, Felix's difficulty is generated by forces outside of himself: by the nature of his society and formative circumstances. For Felix, insofar as the views that are thereby generated are constitutive of objectionable attitudes, this seems to be a case where *difficulty generates objectionable attitudes*. On the other hand, for the likes of Samuel, the situation is inverted: it is his *objectionable attitudes that generate difficulty*.

I contend that the former but not the latter sort of difficulty can complicate ascriptions of blameworthiness for moral ignorance. Often a person's moral beliefs reveal something significant about them, but sometimes they merely reveal the world around them, and offer little that is genuinely revelatory of a particular agent. Certain false moral beliefs, therefore, offer only a shallow reflection of the author's moral self, and may in fact give a misleading impression of that moral self in cases where there was significant difficulty in coming to hold the correct moral beliefs.

A spectrum emerges, which tracks the degree of moral epistemic difficulty. Where a particular belief was all but impossible to arrive at, in a given context, the failure to do so seems to reveal very little about any particular agent. But things are most often far more complicated than that: instances where the right thought was not quite so impossible to have, where it was sufficiently available that the best among us would have come to believe it, or easier still. And so the shades on the spectrum progress, until at last the right thought is so readily available, that the failure to have it seems to plainly implicate the agent's moral personality in some way: to demonstrate some sort of sinister motivation, lack or moral concern, or deep moral inadequacy on their part.

Implicit in the tale of Felix above is the idea that should he have lived in a different context (and potentially even a marginally more enlightened context) he would not have come to hold the morally ignorant beliefs which he endorsed when they were so prevalent and unquestioned within his society.<sup>25</sup> An intriguing question is whether this counterfactual also works in reverse; whether certain *good* beliefs do not necessarily reveal genuine moral decency or a good will (in the same way that I am suggesting certain bad beliefs do not necessarily reveal genuine moral indecency or ill will).<sup>26</sup>

I think this reverse counterfactual holds. Where a morally good belief is prevalent and predominant within a society, holding that belief seems to reveal much less of moral interest about a person than it would for someone who came to the same belief in a far more difficult context.

Take the South African example of Beyers Naudé (1915–2004). His father was a founding member of the Afrikaans supremacist organisation, the Broederbond, and he was raised in the very heart of South Africa's racist ideology. 'What is striking about Beyers Naudé's formative years is not the indoctrination he received but his complete insultation,' Joseph Lelyveld wrote of him. 'All of this went without saying, all of it was there to be absorbed by osmosis.'<sup>27</sup> Unlike almost everyone in his circumstances, however, Naudé gradually came to unlearn everything he had been taught and eventually became one of the most radical advocates for black liberation in the country at the time (championing far more profound social and political transformation than what was then popular amongst white liberals and progressives). At this time Desmond Tutu referred to Naudé as 'the most resplendent sign of hope,' in what he revealed of how far the human soul is capable of travelling.

Naudé's hard-won moral beliefs seem to reveal something extraordinary about the man. But the content of many of these beliefs are now commonplace; you don't have to look far in 2021 to find someone who thinks apartheid was morally indefensible. But it seems true, as the reverse counterfactual would suggest, that it is much less significant or morally revelatory to hold such a belief now, in a context which makes it so accessible, than it was for Naudé. And anyone who thinks nowadays that it is an extraordinary moral credit to them, or reveals something significant about their moral personality, that they are 'anti-apartheid' would seem guilty of a bizarre sort of self-aggrandisement. As considered in Section 2, when doing the right thing is easy, it plausibly places a limit on how much moral concern can thereby be expressed; this seems true of holding the right beliefs too. While Naudé could express extraordinary concern and honourable motivation in his moral clarity, no equivalent concern can be expressed by those of us who hold similar views in far less difficult circumstances.

But for all, I've said about the essential significance of context, and the sense in which epistemic difficulty can mitigate against blameworthiness even for morally ignorant beliefs, there remains a riposte from champions of the Constitutive Argument. Someone like Felix, they may argue, is very unlucky have become a bad person – to have been morally disfigured by their times – but that does not make them any less blameworthy; it only makes them unlucky to be blameworthy.<sup>28</sup> Their morally ignorant beliefs, and attendant objectionable attitudes, were difficult to avoid, yes, but these attitudes remain the essential foundation for their blameworthiness. Relatedly, one could contend that while epistemic difficulty might undermine responsibility for *acquiring* morally ignorant beliefs, it does not undermine responsibility for *holding* these beliefs, especially if we understand responsibility for holding beliefs to be established by the content of the attitudes the believer inhabits, rather than any control they had over the formation or acquisition of their beliefs.<sup>29</sup> Perhaps, on account of his context, Felix is less responsible for becoming a homophobe than Sammy is, but he is nevertheless responsible for being one.<sup>30</sup>

To respond to this challenge, it is necessary to further interrogate the relationship between moral belief and quality of will, and to draw out the distinction between the two. While the aspects of self most relevant to assessments of sufficient and insufficient moral concern are often cashed out in terms of moral belief, this need not always be the case. This is especially so when we focus on the motivational forces which attend (and reinforce) moral belief. What we are truly interested in, and searching for, in our moral appraisals of one another on quality of will grounds, can sometimes be separate from and deeper than mere moral belief. To stop the search at moral belief alone will sometimes be a far shallower appraisal than the account potentially allows.

To drive this home, let me add another agent who believes that gay people are immoral and ought to be punished for their sexuality.

Oscar lives in nineteenth century England. He believes that homosexuality is perverse and deeply immoral. To his great shame, however, Oscar has only ever been attracted to other men. These forbidden desires are a constant torment to him. He finds a practitioner, ahead of his time, who views his condition in not only moral but also medical terms. Filled with hope, he secretly undergoes a range of excruciating conversion therapies in an effort to rid himself of his perversion, none of which succeed. He firmly believes that should he be discovered he would deserve to be punished.

When it is plain that someone has no sinister desires, motivations, vices, or cruelties guiding the formation of their morally ignorant beliefs (and self-injurious beliefs such as Oscar's form a particularly stark example of such cases) then the claim that moral belief alone is sufficiently revelatory of the relevant aspects of quality of will seems to lose its strength.<sup>31</sup> Faced with such cases, we find that it is, after all, these other factors, besides moral belief that have the greater force in establishing blameworthiness.

Indeed, we even prickle with suspicion when we feel like someone champions the *right* moral beliefs for the wrong motivations: because it is politically expedient for them to do so, for instance, or because it has suddenly become beneficial for them otherwise. Where we hold such suspicions, we hardly feel that the espoused moral beliefs of these individuals are the end of the story when it comes to evaluating their moral praiseworthiness for advancing these worthy views, or as adequate evidence of their moral concerns. Our deeper interest, as in cases of blameworthiness, is the confluence of these moral beliefs with other aspects of themselves which we find altogether more significant in our moral evaluations.

In this sense, context can be relevant to our appraisal not only of someone's responsibility for acquiring certain false beliefs, but also their responsibility for holding them. If our interest is the sense in which these beliefs belong to, or meaningfully reveal, the people who hold them, and if we grant that beliefs (and their attendant attitudes) can belong to agents to different degrees, then we can argue that the relevance of epistemically difficult contexts has bearing not only on an agent's blameworthiness for acquiring ignorant beliefs, but also for holding them. These contexts, after all, are relevant to deeper evaluations of the nature and content of the attendant attitudes, and their relationship to the motivational forces which have enabled not only the acquisition of these beliefs, but also their retention.

Earlier I considered the critique that Felix was merely morally unlucky (but no less blameworthy). Note that the bigoted Sammy is also constitutively morally unlucky: he is unlucky to be so disdainful and arrogant. But we can meaningfully distinguish between Sammy and Felix (despite their shared moral beliefs), as well as distinguishing between these two forms of moral unluckiness. To emphasise this let me consider a final sort of case:

*Samson*, like Felix, lives in nineteenth century England. Like Felix he believes that gay people are immoral and ought to be punished. But unlike Felix, Samson is a markedly cruel and belittling man. He channels many of these bullying traits into his anti-gay crusades. He is fortunate, in a sense, to have such a socially condoned outlet for his vindictiveness and innate sense of superiority, and his beliefs and behaviour are thought perfectly acceptable in his time.

In the case of Felix, I imagine many of us have the disconcerting worry that, under the same circumstances, we too would have come to hold such morally ignorant beliefs. When we reflect on how pervasive these errant views were in their time and place, we recognise that the great moral variation of individuals did little to impress itself upon the perversity of the belief; why would we have been the exception? But I doubt many of us have the same worry with regard to Samson that we do with regard to Felix; we do not so easily think 'that could have been me.' We cannot imagine ourselves having the sort of motivations, cruelty, and delight as he does. Those aspects of Samson seem to reveal his moral personality, specifically, in a manner we cannot easily imagine

inhabiting, no matter the difficulties presented by our circumstances. In order to honour the meaningful distinction between the likes of Felix and the likes of Samson, it is crucial that our central focus be on their quality of will, rather than their circumstances, even if the latter can have bearing on what is revealed about the former.<sup>32</sup>

#### 4. Returning to difficulty and degrees of blameworthiness

With this sketched out, let me return to our initial focus, concerning difficulty and degrees of responsibility. In particular, let me consider an important challenge to the position I have sketched, and see whether I am now in a position to answer it. In her paper, Nelkin offers a critique of Quality of Will accounts as an explanation for the blame-mitigating nature of difficulty (she focuses particularly on Arpaly's account, and the question of how much good or ill will an action *manifests*).<sup>33</sup> Although Nelkin concedes that concern is a scalar notion, and therefore could underwrite degrees of blameworthiness, she contends that the account faces a 'serious challenge,' since there are cases where 'degree of difficulty for doing the right thing simply comes apart from degree of ill will manifested.'<sup>34</sup>

Nelkin provides the case of someone who 'gleefully and loudly shares a scandalous secret' while blamelessly drunk at a party.<sup>35</sup> She would not have done this while sober, but nevertheless she 'harbours an intrinsic desire for the other guest to suffer embarrassment.' In this case, the action manifests ill will (her normally countervailing good will is suppressed by drunkenness), but the increased difficulty in not performing the action, brought on by her drunkenness, does not seem to mitigate the extent to which it is a reflection of her ill will. 'Intuitively, it seems that the action manifests ill will to the same extent as it would were she sober, and yet it is more difficult (maybe impossible) for her to do the right thing with good motivations instead.'

Explored in more general terms, Nelkin takes this case to indicate that

one can manifest considerable quantities of ill will while being *excused*, or having one's blameworthiness mitigated either partially or fully, precisely because one couldn't help it or because it would have been hard, say [...] So the difficulty does not decrease the expression of ill will, but it does mitigate blameworthiness in the accountability sense. Thus insofar as difficulty has an effect on degree of blameworthiness in the accountability sense, it does not proceed *via* the degree of ill will.<sup>36</sup>

I think the analysis I have explored so far can be applied to this case in a manner that generates plausible results, and assessments that seem fair and deserved. To the extent that the drunk gossip's own malicious desires generated her difficulty in remaining silent, the difficulty she faced is not mitigating (here *objectionable attitudes generate difficulty*). On the other hand, to the extent that difficulty was generated by her blameless buzz, and the suppression of her countervailing good nature and good sense, then she is partially mitigated; what would have been only a small feature of her moral personality has been unduly amplified by circumstances (here *difficulty generates objectionable attitudes* and is potentially mitigating).

The account can therefore offer some allowance for the drunken gossip, but it is true that this mitigation is not proportional to the degree of difficulty she faced, insofar as a portion of that difficulty arose from her deficiencies of character, and her desire to see someone exposed to embarrassment. But the fact that the account does not mitigate for difficulty of this sort seems, in many respects, like a benefit rather than a limitation



of the position. What's more, I think this resembles some of the complexity that we bring to cases like this in our actual lives: where we think both 'in vino veritas' and also 'it was only the wine.'<sup>37</sup> (We recognise that something morally significant about the person has been revealed, but we also recognise that it may well have been amplified or otherwise distorted).

## 5. Conclusion

I venture, therefore, that the significance (and insignificance) of difficulty to assessments of blameworthiness is well-captured by quality of will considerations. I set out to establish that whether we construe difficulty as effort, sacrifice, skill, or difficulty trying (or, indeed, combinations of these factors) the significance of the relevant difficulty to the mitigation of blameworthiness is only plausible insofar as it has bearing on assessments of moral concern. Where difficulty does not have this relevance – for instance, where difficulty emerges from insufficient concern itself – then it fails to be mitigating.

I further suggested that the subtle workings of difficulty within Quality of Will accounts allows for more nuanced, fairer, and more context-dependent evaluations than such accounts are often credited with, including with regard to certain cases of moral ignorance. This is significant, especially given that many philosophers have rejected such accounts due to concerns about desert and fairness, borne from the worry that the account divorces blameworthiness from reasonable expectation.

The restrictions established by situating the moral ignorance excuse in Quality of Will accounts are also important. It allows us to explain why many forms of moral ignorance would not qualify. It also allows us to recognise the profound moral difference between people who act in unmotivated ignorance, and those that act in motivated ignorance, or ignorance formed in conjunction with ill will or insufficient concern. This distinction remains morally significant even between agents in shared circumstances.

Recognising where one sort of (exculpatory) difficulty ends and the other sort of (inculpatory) difficulty begins is not a straightforward task, nor one we have any guarantee of succeeding at. And yet we regularly endeavour to make these complex distinctions, and undertake this fine slicing, even when it comes to morally ignorant agents. We try to apprehend a person's role in their ignorance, including the most nefarious forms of ignorance. 'It's just how she grew up,' we'll sometimes say, or 'it's all he knows.' On other occasions – particularly in the face of wilful or durable ignorance – we'll suspect far more complicity. What's more, I think the subtle distinctions we are undertaking in these mitigations are guided precisely by our sense of whether, and to what extent, an objectionable belief is revelatory of the insufficient concern or ill will which is our more fundamental concern in assessments of blameworthiness.

## Notes

1. There have been various ways of construing what qualifies as the relevant quality of will (Cf. Schoemaker 2013).
2. Nelkin (2016, 361).

3. Nelkin (2016, 361 & 362).
4. Cf. Guerrero (2017, 207); Nelkin (2016, 361–362).
5. Cf. Nelkin (2016); Bradford (2015, 2017); Guerrero (2017); von Kriegstein (2019); Tierney (2019).
6. Rosen (2014, 84).
7. Rosen (2014, 84).
8. My gratitude to a reviewer at *Philosophical Explorations* for both this point and this example.
9. These roles needn't always be acquired voluntarily. Take, for instance, the relationship of adult children and their elderly parents, or what we owe as an expression of sufficient concern in rescue cases such as the child drowning in the pond.
10. Bradford (2017, 184).
11. von Kriegstein (2019, 54).
12. Note that she *could have* cared even less than Peter's father, but unlike that case her failure doesn't provide us with evidence of this lack of concern, we are therefore more inclined to give her the benefit of the doubt.
13. On Bradford's account difficulty (understood as effort) mitigates responsibility because of the opportunity costs involved. Where the effort-requiring features "involve something such as a character trait that *reflects badly* ... on the agent," she sets the threshold for the efforts necessary to mitigate blameworthiness at a higher level, in a way which "resonates with some versions of quality of will accounts." Cf. Bradford (2017, 186) (note 8). See also the discussion on Abby and Bella in Nelkin (2016, 368).
14. Guerrero has suggested that Bradford's effort view should be supplemented with the notion of skill-based difficulty. (I will return to Guerrero specifically on epistemic difficulty, and "difficulty trying" in the following section).
15. The agent-relativity of difficulty is a central feature of Bradford's account. Von Kriegstein argued that this should be supplemented by an agent neutral account of difficulty (his focus, however, mostly concerns difficulty in relation to achievement, rather than in relation to moral responsibility). Cf. Bradford (2017, 185) and von Kriegstein (2019).
16. Guerrero (2017, 209).
17. Provided the relevant incapacitation does not generate exemption on the basis of non-agency, as in the case of young children.
18. Guerrero (2017, 201).
19. Rosen (2003, 72); Rosen's Italics.
20. Guerrero (2017, 212).
21. Cf. Harman (2011, 2022); Arpaly (2003, 2015); Talbert (2013).
22. Cf. FitzPatrick (2017, 33); Rosen (2003, 73); Rudy-Hiller (2018, 29).
23. This seems to be corroborated by experimental work. Cf. Faraci and Shoemaker (2014, 2019).
24. Felix resembles Arpaly's case of "Edward" (Arpaly 2015, 153).
25. Jan Willem Wieland has also suggested that cases like Samuel provide counterexamples to the Constitutive Argument, indicating that you can "have a good will and yet still act from moral ignorance" (Cf. Wieland 2017). Although Wieland does not draw on difficulty explicitly in making his case, it seems related to his position that morally ignorant agents are potentially exculpated where "the moral truth is not accessible enough."
26. Many thanks to Christopher Bennett for suggesting this point.
27. Lelyveld (1986, 304).
28. Cf. Harman (2011, 2022).
29. Thank you to a reviewer at *Philosophical Explorations* for raising this point.
30. Cf. Smith (2005).
31. I have explored the implications of such cases at greater length elsewhere (Hartford 2019).
32. A Quality of Opportunity position (such as the one Nelkin advances) cannot distinguish between Felix and Samson (who, after all, had the same opportunities). Nelkin, however, briefly considers whether her position can dovetail with Quality of Will accounts: "the quality of will one manifests in a given situation is itself determined by what one does and why, *given one's opportunities*. While this is very different from an understanding of quality of will simply in terms of the strength of the desire on which one acts, say, it also seems

to me not wildly out of place to think that there is a notion of quality of will that is measured in these terms. At the same time, it suggests that it can't be understood independently of opportunity." (372–373). I think there is intersection with my objectives here, given my insistence that circumstances have bearing on what is revealed about quality of will.

33. Nelkin (2016, 360) citing Arpaly (2003) and Arpaly and Schroeder (2014).
34. Nelkin (2016, 360–363).
35. Nelkin (2016, 363).
36. Nelkin (2016, 364).
37. Cf. Arpaly and Schroeder (1999, 171): "When a person behaves unusually under the influence of alcohol, one may think that she is not herself, but one may equally think that her true self is revealed at the fall of her inhibitions."

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