**Moral ignorance and the social nature of responsible agency**

Fernando Rudy-Hiller

rudy@filosoficas.unam.mx

The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published on September 19, 2019 and is available in *Inquiry* <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2019.1667871>. Please cite from published version.

**1. Introduction**

Moral ignorance is difficult to handle by theories of moral responsibility. On the one hand, it seems that people sometimes really are blamelessly ignorant in moral matters and, when they are, it seems callous to insist that they are nevertheless blameworthy for wrongdoing performed out of such ignorance. On the other hand, many philosophers have placed great confidence in the powers of moral reflection that ordinary human beings are supposed to have, powers that allegedly would make it possible for us to overcome the limitations of our particular circumstances and thus grasp the moral truth independently of those limitations. Moreover, since oftentimes morally ignorant wrongdoers exhibit egregious lack of regard toward their victims, pointing to their moral ignorance doesn’t seem to alleviate their blameworthiness at all.

There isn’t an easy solution to this tension. This is due in great measure to the difficulty of accommodating the victims’ perspective even if uncontroversial examples of blameless moral ignorance are to be found (what do you expect victims to do? Forgive the wrongdoer on account of her moral ignorance?) (Talbert 2012; Arpaly 2015, 154). However, irrespective of how we should respond to moral ignorance in practice, at the level of theory the position according to which moral ignorance doesn’t exculpate is on shaky ground. This is because, as I will argue at length here, there are good reasons for rejecting the idea that human beings possess a capacity for ‘moral transcendence’ of the sort that would make it generally appropriate to blame morally ignorant wrongdoers for failing to recognize and act on what we take to be the correct moral considerations. In particular, I will show that sustained reflection on the social nature of responsible agency makes it clear that moral cognition, responsibility-relevant capacities and fair opportunities to avoid wrongdoing are socially constituted. I will then argue that recognizing the social nature of responsible agency puts significant pressure on the idea that blameworthiness can be exclusively a function of the quality of will morally ignorant wrongdoers evince in their actions.

To make my argument, I’ll sketch a *socially situated account of responsible agency*. I’ll start from the widely held view according to which responsible agents are those that possess the cognitive and volitional powers that make them suitably responsive to moral considerations (Wolf 1990; Wallace 1994; Fischer and Ravizza 1998; Nelkin 2011; Vargas 2013). Focusing on responsibility for morally wrong actions, this picture of responsible agency is often associated with the view that blameworthiness requires that those who are held accountable possess a fair opportunity to avoid wrongdoing (Brink and Nelkin 2013; Franklin 2013). My socially situated account takes its cue from this position and endeavours to show that fair opportunities are to a large extent a function of the agent’s social context. Of course, the idea that fair opportunities to avoid wrongdoing are affected by social-contextual factors isn’t new. However, it’s often assumed that these factors impinge on fair opportunities merely by affecting how difficult it is for agents to exercise the moral capacities they already possess (e.g., Nelkin 2016, 372). By contrast, what is less often recognized, and what I will argue for here, is that fair opportunities are a function of the agent’s social context mainly because reasons-responsive capacities are themselves socially constituted. I will explain what this constitution relation consists in, identify some of the main social factors involved, and provide detailed examples of their functioning.

This is the plan of the paper. In section 2 I develop my socially situated account. In section 3 I show how the account can be put to use in the context of the debate about the exculpatory potential of moral ignorance. In particular, I’ll argue against two popular positions: the always culpable view of moral ignorance (3.1) and the irrelevance of moral ignorance view (3.2). Finally, in section 4 I conclude by outlining the position that my socially situated account recommends on the question about blameworthiness for morally ignorant wrongdoing.

**2. A socially situated account of responsible agency**

In this section I will articulate asocially situated account of responsible agency,according to which the characteristic features of the latter—in my view, reasons-responsive capacities and the ability to avoid wrongdoing—are partially[[1]](#footnote-1) constituted by the agent’s social context. I will develop two main and partially overlapping ideas: the social articulation of morality (2.1) and the social bases of responsible agency (2.2). Before proceeding, however, I will state explicitly how I understand the constitution relation that in my view holds between responsible agency and social factors.

As I mentioned at the outset, I adhere to the view that responsible agency must be understood in terms of certain cognitive and volitional capacities. While a usual strategy is to understand rational capacities in the model of *dispositions* (Smith 2004a; Vihvelin 2013), there are good reasons for conceptualizing these capacities—and particularly the capacities distinctive of responsible agency—in the model of *skills* instead (McGeer 2019). For present purposes, the key difference between dispositions and skills is that, while dispositions are relatively fixed features of an organism (or a thing) which are wholly constituted by some of its intrinsic characteristics (Smith 2004a, 122), skills are comparatively malleable features that can be trained up and whose nature isn’t exhausted by the organism’s intrinsic features. So while it’s true that most, perhaps all, of our skills partly depend on our common human endowment, they are for the most part dependent on our particular circumstances. In other words, what we are skilled at depends on a lot more than our skin-in characteristics; it depends largely on environmental factors which, in the case of human beings, encompass a host of social and cultural elements.

And what is true of skills in general is also true of our skills at detecting and responding to moral reasons. So while these skills partly depend on our common human endowment, which moral reasons we are skilled at detecting and reacting to has a lot to do with our particular social environments. This means that the *content* and *scope* of our moral reasons-responsive skills are context-dependent: which considerations we recognize as morally relevant and in what kinds of situations we do so, how much weight we accord to the different considerations we have recognized, how we respond to that recognition, etc., owes a great deal to specific social contexts.[[2]](#footnote-2) So my central claim that responsible agency is (partially) socially constituted is the claim that social factors partly determine the content and scope of our moral reasons-responsive skills. You may think this is hardly news; after all, who would deny that our reasons-responsive capacities are tightly linked to social factors? Well, wait until section 3.1 and you’ll see a representative sample of philosophers who think otherwise.

***2.1 The social articulation of morality***

To make my case for the social constitution thesis, I begin by focusing on a key aspect of responsible agency: moral cognition. By moral cognition I refer to a) an array of perceptual, emotional, and cognitive capacities that allow agents to detect and evaluate those features of their environment and actions that have moral significance and thus merit moral attention; and b) what results from the exercise of those capacities. I will be arguing that moral cognition is (partly) socially constituted because what moral cognition is *about*—morality—is itself socially constituted or, as I will say, socially articulated.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The idea of the social articulation of morality seeks to capture the fact that we don’t have an immediate relation with something called ‘moral considerations’ or ‘moral evidence’. On the contrary, that relation is always mediated by social practices and institutions that provide interpretations of abstract moral principles so that they are applicable to concrete situations, thus affecting what agents recognize as relevant moral considerations and pertinent moral evidence. The idea here is *not* to defend a form of cultural relativism; the social articulation of morality is compatible with the possibility of there being a single True Morality. Rather, the point is that, in order to be action-guiding, abstract moral principles have to be collectively interpreted in particular ways if they are to provide useful direction under specific social conditions. Dewey and Tufts made exactly this point a long ago:

Even if all men agreed sincerely to act upon the principle of the Golden Rule as the supreme law of conduct, we should still need inquiry and thought to arrive at even a passable conception of what the Rule means in terms of concrete practice under mixed and changing social conditions. (Dewey and Tufts 1932, 190)

A useful tool for explicating this process of inquiry and thought a bit further is Barbara Herman’s (1993) notion of ‘rules of moral salience’ (RMS).[[4]](#footnote-4) We can think of RMS as (usually implicit) socially constructed and socially transmitted guidelines for navigating those aspects of the social world that come to be regarded as morally significant. They ‘encode a *defeasible* solution’ (87) to certain foundational moral questions, such as who counts as a moral agent, what kinds of treatment evince respect (or lack thereof) for others, and what the requirements of equality of regard are. RMS also make available descriptive terms for capturing the morally salient features of situations and actions. We can therefore assign two different functions to them (Pauer-Studer and Velleman 2011, 335). On the one hand, RMS structure the moral sensibility of agents ‘so that what [they] perceive is a world with moral features’ (Herman 1993, 77). On the other, they offer an interpretation of basic moral concepts and principles such as ‘person’, ‘equal consideration’, and ‘respect for persons’. What is crucial for present purposes is to emphasize that RMS are socially constructed: developing a particular set of RMS is ‘a practical task for a community of moral agents’ (87), a task that is shaped by the community’s particular circumstances, including social and material conditions (83). Let’s call the process through which RMS are generated in a particular context, and the results of such process, the *social articulation of morality* in that context.

Despite not being the outcome of explicit legislation, talk of *rules* of moral salience is apt because it correctly conveys the idea that morality is a *structured* practice: people are socialized to recognize certain kinds of harms as morally significant but not others; to object to certain distributions of goods but not to others; to judge certain hierarchical differences as acceptable but not others; to include certain beings into (and exclude others from) the sphere of equal consideration; etc. It’s important to note that claiming that morality is socially articulated doesn’t imply that the domain of the moral is unrestrictedly open-ended. Plausibly, there are certain characteristic concerns that count as distinctively moral, such as avoidance of unjustifiable harm, equality of regard, and fairness of various forms (Herman 1993, 83-4). What is remarkable about morality is how these basic concerns admit of very different specifications, depending on how unjustifiable harm, equality, and fairness are understood.

Let’s connect the foregoing to moral cognition. If morality is socially articulated, two important things are true. First, moral reasoning isn’t mainly an individual process, as several philosophers who discuss the issue of culpability for moral ignorance and for morally ignorant wrongdoing mistakenly assume.[[5]](#footnote-5) On the contrary, and given the way it is shaped by the RMS that are prevalent in specific contexts, moral reasoning—how it is conducted and what its results are—owes a great deal to contingent features of that context. Second, moral evidence isn’t a ‘given’ out there existing independently of social practices and this has important consequences for the way agents process the available evidence. In the rest of this subsection I’ll focus on moral evidence and will return to moral reasoning later on (subsections 2.2 and 3.1).

Some philosophers think that the nature of moral evidence is such that every factually informed agent is in a position to reach the correct moral judgment about the case at hand (Harman 2011, 462; unpublished, 22; Smith 2004b, 203). This suggests that, in their view, moral evidence, and the capacity to adequately process it, are fundamentally insensitive to context. However, the fact that morality is socially articulated renders this position implausible. Recall that RMS not only give content to basic moral concepts and principles but also structure the moral sensibility of agents by making certain features of the world and of actions salient for the purpose of moral evaluation. So for an agent to be able to reach the correct moral judgment on particular occasions, it isn’t enough that she’s aware of the relevant facts on which the moral truth supervenes; it’s also required that she *perceives* those facts in certain ways. And moral perception is itself mediated by specific RMS.

For instance, knowing all the relevant facts about factory farming doesn’t entail that one has all it takes to conclude that this practice is morally impermissible. In addition, one needs to be able to regard those facts in a certain way, i.e., as involving *unjustified* suffering to morally significant beings. This may involve a gestalt-like shift in moral perception (DesAutels 1996), whereby one comes to regard non-human animals as beings with moral standing rather than as mere instruments. It’s improbable, however, that this shift will take place purely on the basis of individual reflection; it almost always requires, among other things, dissident criticisms of the practice making available an alternative set of RMS that can help to bring about the said shift.[[6]](#footnote-6)

To buttress this point about the dependence of moral evidence on specific social contexts, consider the following: at least in many cases, perceiving the pertinent facts in the morally relevant way requires the availability of certain concepts, without which the gestalt-like shift in moral perception is very unlikely to occur. Take the case of sexual harassment. It used to be an unremarkable feature of workplace dynamics that men in positions of power would make unwelcome advances to women as a not-so-implicit bargain for the latter to keep their jobs or simply as playful ‘flirting’. In these contexts, a woman’s signs of discomfort, or even her saying ‘No!’, were *not* taken as evidence that a serious moral wrong had occurred. Similarly, men routinely failed to see the obvious imbalances of power and authority as evidence that their conduct was anything but innocent flirting. Here one might be tempted to side with Moody-Adams (1994) and accuse those men of affecting ignorance, or side with Harman (2011) and claim that, since they were factually aware of what they were doing and of women’s responses to their conduct, they had all it took to realize that it was wrong.[[7]](#footnote-7) But at this point it’s crucial to remind ourselves that it actually was a cognitive (and ethical) collective *achievement* to coin the concept ‘sexual harassment’ in the first place (Fricker 2007, 148), and also of the essential role this concept played in reframing those practices as serious moral wrongs. In its absence, both men and women lacked ‘a proper understanding of what men were doing to women when they treated them like that’ (151). The important point illustrated by this example is that the RMS of a sexist culture helped to conceal, both from perpetrators and victims, vital moral evidence of the wrongness of these practices. So although it’s true that all the relevant facts were in plain view, the normative context created by sexist RMS failed to represent those facts as evidence of a moral wrong.

Now, what is the bearing of all this for the question whether harassers were *blameworthy* for their conduct? Unlike some extant views, mine is *not* that people can be held morally accountable only for wrongdoing which is condemned by the ‘routine moral thinking of the day’ (Fricker 2010, 166; see section 4 below). At the same time, however, if we accept that moral cognition is a central component of responsible agency, and accept as well the point developed in this subsection about the context-sensitivity of moral reasoning and moral evidence, we must conclude that questions about blameworthiness can’t be answered independently of social-contextual considerations. A key observation in this regard is this: the context-dependent nature of moral evidence and moral reasoning does *not* entail that morally ignorant agents (as we may suppose some harassers were) are necessarily blameless for their wrongdoing, for from the fact that they failed to grasp morally relevant considerations doesn’t follow that they lacked *a fair opportunity* to do so—even assuming that their actions were approved by mainstream moral views. People aren’t utterly passive regarding the RMS that articulate the demands of morality in a certain context; on the contrary, there’s usually *some* room for critically evaluating them and thus for overcoming their morally crippling effects (Herman 1993, 90; Fricker 2007, 104). But, crucially, critical assessment of prevalent RMS is itself a collective effort, an effort that is fruitful (or even exists) in some contexts but not in others. So in order to determine what it takes for the fair opportunity to overcome one’s moral ignorance—and, by extension, for the fair opportunity to avoid wrongdoing—to be present, we need to know more about how it is enhanced or thwarted by social-contextual factors. It is to this issue that I now turn.

***2.2 The social bases of responsible agency***

My objective in this subsection will be to show that fair opportunities to overcome moral ignorance and avoid wrongdoing are partially constituted by the agent’s social context. While it’s true that many philosophers endorse something close to this thesis (Rosen 2003; Levy 2003; FitzPatrick 2008, 2017; Wieland 2017), I will develop it in a distinctive way. I will argue that social factors not only affect the ease with which agents exercise the reasons-responsive capacities they *already* possess independently of those factors but also, and more importantly, that the latter partly constitute these capacities. To make my case, I’ll focus on how a certain class of social factors—encompassing social practices, cultural scripts, social roles, socially available self-conceptions, and political and legal institutions—structures reasons-responsive capacities by generating, sustaining, and enforcing expectations about acceptable behaviour. (I refer to this class as ‘expectations-generating social factors’). These capacities, in the capacities-as-skills view I endorse (see section 2 above), are partly a function of expectations: what we are capable of doing in the moral domain is partly dependent on what we are expected and trained to do. So moral reasons-responsive skills are socially constituted because their content and scope are bound up with the social expectations prevalent in specific social contexts.

I will illustrate this view by discussing at some length the case of the culture of honour in the US South, as documented by social psychologists Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen (1996). Nisbett and Cohen showed that a key explanation for the higher murder rates in the South as compared with the rest of the US had to do with what they called ‘a culture-of-honour ideology’, namely a set of private and public ‘representations’ (beliefs and other attitudes) concerning two basic things: honour and insult. Within a culture of honour, honour ‘is based not on good character but on a man’s strength and power to enforce his will on others’ and it’s also understood by everybody that violence is a legitimate means ‘to attain and protect this kind of honour’ (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 4-5). The central threat against which honour so conceived must be protected is the failure to respond appropriately to an insult, particularly if it’s directed at a female member of one’s family. If a man is thus insulted, he must extract a retraction from the aggressor and, if the latter refuses, ‘he must be punished—with violence or even death’ (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 5).

The chief contribution of Nisbett and Cohen’s study is that it offers empirical evidence of how this culture-of-honour ideology shapes the cognitive, emotional, behavioural, and even physiological responses of those who have been raised within it. One central piece of evidence comes from a series of laboratory experiments designed to compare how northern and southern college students would respond to an insult (being bumped by a confederate on a hallway and then being called an ‘asshole’). The results were striking on all the above dimensions: insulted southerners were much more likely than insulted northerners to provide a violent ending for a vignette of man suffering an affront, to react angrily to the bumping incident, to act in domineering and aggressive ways afterwards, and to show elevated cortisol and testosterone levels (associated with stress and aggression) in a saliva sample provided after the incident. Based on these results, Nisbett and Cohen concluded that

an insult simply has a fundamentally different meaning for northerners and southerners: For the southerner, the insult has something to do with himself and his reputation; for the northerner, the insult has something to do only with the person who delivered the insult … The insulted southerner feels his reputation threatened, he becomes angry, and he is cognitively and physiologically prepared for aggression. (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 52)

Translating Nisbett and Cohen’s findings into the language of this paper, we can say that the culture-of-honour ideology partially constitutes the reasons-responsive capacities of agents given the way it shapes both their content and scope. Members of a culture of honour become skilled at detecting even minor forms of disrespect and also at reacting to them in ways they perceive as appropriate. These ways often involve the use of violence but, importantly, this doesn’t entail that members of a culture of honour have a penchant for violence in general. Rather—and here’s where the point about scope is relevant—they take violence-related considerations as reason-giving only for certain socially approved ends, such as defending one’s property and responding to an insult (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 25).

Furthermore, the influence exerted by the culture of honour goes far beyond a cognitive disposition to treat certain considerations as reason-giving. A host of emotional and physiological dispositions are involved as well, and these plausibly play a central role in which considerations agents detect and respond to. For instance, the insulted southerners’ elevated cortisol and testosterone levels affect both the interpretations they give of certain situations and their reactions to them (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 48). Thus, their physiological state has a direct impact on which considerations they find salient and on the actions they regard as adequate in light of them. To the extent that these physiological reactions become deeply ingrained in agents raised within a culture of honour, it’s plausible to conclude that the latter’s effects on reasons-responsive capacities aren’t transient or superficial but that, on the contrary, it partially constitutes these capacities in the sense identified above. So Nisbett and Cohen’s evidence speaks in favour of the socially constituted conception of reasons-responsive capacities developed here.

This conclusion is reinforced if we focus on how the expectations-generating social factors mentioned above play out within a culture of honour. First, the culture-of-honour ideology is embodied in a series of *social practices*. For present purposes, we can understand social practices as normatively unified regularities of conduct whose primary function is to coordinate the behaviour of participants around certain resources, broadly conceived as something that is publicly recognized as having some kind of value (Haslanger 2018, 240). In our example, the relevant resource is, of course, honour, and the attendant practices—flaunting one’s capacity to enforce one’s will on others, being vigilant about signs of disrespect, responding to an insult by forcing retraction or exacting revenge—are ways of managing access to it. The key feature of social practices is that participants take them to have normative force in the following sense:

When encountering others who are similarly socialized, we implicitly begin with the assumption that they will do things in a particular way, taken to be the ‘right way’. We may be surprised or feel entitled to criticize them if they don’t. (Haslanger 2018, 240)

This point also applies to oneself: one can criticize oneself, and admit that criticism from others is warranted, for failing to conform one’s behaviour to what are taken to be legitimate social expectations. Thus, by creating and enforcing mutual expectations, social practices decisively shape agents’ perceptions about reasons and, in so doing, they partially constitute their reasons-responsive capacities.

Second, culture-of-honour practices incorporate a number of *cultural scripts*. These are norms and guidelines that regiment what is appropriate to think, say, feel, and do in particular contexts (Goddard and Wierzbicka 2004,157). In our example, relevant scripts prescribe templates for acting, thinking, and feeling when it comes to protecting one’s honour. But, again, the key point is that these scripts don’t present themselves as establishing merely a possible way among others of reacting to an insult but, rather, they purport to offer *the right way* to do so. Nisbett and Cohen (1996, 32, italics added) recognize this when they write that ‘southerners are more likely than nonsoutherners to view violence as a *legitimate* response to insult, as an *appropriate* means of self-protection, and as a *justifiable* tool for restoring order’. The italicised words clearly convey the idea that the culture of honour and its attendant scripts shape what southerners see as normative (and indeed decisive) reasons for employing violence. Thus, the influence these scripts exert on the behaviour of agents goes through systematically moulding their perceptions about reasons.

Third, the same mechanism is apparent in the basic *social roles* of the culture-of-honour ideology. Here I focus on ‘covert’ social roles, that is, roles that are taken to be naturally given (i.e., natural kinds) rather than socially constructed, for instance those related to gender and race. A person occupies a social role in this sense in virtue of being the target of a set of representations that are common knowledge in a given community (Mallon 2016, 58). These representations include labels, conditions of ascription, essential features and, crucially, evaluations and norms. In our example, the relevant social role is that of man and the pertinent evaluations and norms are those concerned with what men ought to do in the face of an insult. Oftentimes, these role-related norms are couched in terms of what ‘a true’ member of a certain category is supposed to do in certain situations (Mallon 2016, 59). This is borne out in the case of the culture honour, since a common response from southerners is that an affronted man ‘would not be much of a man’ if he failed to take appropriate retributive action (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 32).

Being thus linked to evaluations and norms, social roles contribute shaping what both role occupants *and* onlookers take to be reasons for role-related actions. For instance, as it was pointed about above, southern men are particularly skilled at detecting even minor forms of disrespect and tend to find these as giving them reasons for performing actions that conform to the role they occupy (e.g., ‘I must force retraction lest I’m seen as a weakling’). And the currency of this role in a given community also has an impact on *women’s* perceptions about reasons, since women play a central part in teaching, enforcing, and even participating in the patterns of behaviour that characterize the culture of honour (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 86).

A noteworthy further effect of social roles on reasons-responsiveness concerns their potential impact on agents’ capacity for self-control. This impact can be manifested directly, that is, without influencing first which considerations agents take to be reason-giving. Here’s a telling example, not restricted to the culture of honour. A plausible explanation for higher rates of male marital infidelity is that men come to internalize widespread beliefs about how difficult it’s for them to be monogamous given the potency of their ‘natural’ desires (Mallon 2016, 127). In light of this, it’s very plausible that some unfaithful men do value monogamy and so don’t take these desires as reason-giving and yet the social role they occupy affects their capacity for self-control by sustaining their beliefs about how unmanageable these desires are.

These diverse and pervasive influences support my claim that social roles partially constitute reasons-responsive capacities in the sense explained above, i.e., by structuring their content and scope. And this is also true of socially available self-conceptions that fall short of social roles. This is the case, for example, with self-conceptions like ‘enlightened man’ and ‘old-fashioned man’ that affect how people conceive of sexist practices and their responsibility for perpetuating them (Calhoun 1989, 403-5), and also with self-conceptions linking race and gender with putative native abilities (Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002). Given the variety of social roles (covert and otherwise) and self-conceptions that people occupy in different settings, a socially-constituted view of reasons-responsive capacities seems like the right way to go.

Fourth and finally, the social factors described above sometimes coalesce into formal institutions that constitute a ‘public ecology of responsibility’ (Hurley 2011). Prominent among such formal institutions is the law, and there is evidence that the culture-of-honour ideology has left its mark in certain distinctive features of legal codes and practices in the US south. For example, as of 1996 a much greater proportion of southern states in comparison with northern states lacked so-called ‘retreat rules’ or ‘surrender of property rules’ regulating the way victims may use violence in the face of an armed robbery, and southern states also featured a *total* absence of mandatory arrest provisions in cases of domestic violence (Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 62, 65-6).[[8]](#footnote-8) Plausibly, these absences in the public ecology of responsibility of southern states has further reinforced the culture of honour by signalling to their citizens what counts as legitimate reasons for employing violence in a variety of situations.

The aim of this lengthy discussion of the culture of honour was to substantiate my view that reasons-responsive capacities are partially socially constituted. Now I want to make explicit the implications of this view for the *fair opportunity account of blameworthiness*. According to this account, which I endorse, moral blame requires fair opportunities to avoid wrongdoing (Brink and Nelkin 2013; Franklin 2013). However, while its proponents usually think of fair opportunities as comprising two separate dimensions—an internal dimension related to the agent’s reasons-responsive capacities and an external dimension related to the aptness of the situation for exercising them (Brink and Nelkin 2013, 292, fn. 10, 302; Nelkin 2016, 372)—I have strived to show that this distinction is misleading given the way in which expectations-generating social factors contribute shaping these capacities.[[9]](#footnote-9) If this is right, it follows that fair opportunities to avoid wrongdoing are tightly bound up with expectations-generating social factors. And since having this kind of opportunity is a necessary condition of blameworthiness, and given that being an appropriate target of blame is one of the defining marks of responsible agency, it also follows that responsible agency itself is tightly linked to these social factors. Let’s call the latter—the expectations-generating social factors that afford or thwart the fair opportunity to avoid wrongdoing by partly constituting the reasons-responsive capacities of agents—the *social bases of responsible agency*.

Returning to our example, assume for the sake of argument that killing someone in order to protect one’s honour is a serious moral wrong. If the wrongdoer in question was raised within a culture of honour, the social bases of responsible agency in this person’s context—the social factors sustaining the culture-of-honour ideology—are such that he has less than an optimal opportunity to avoid *this* kind of wrongdoing (not wrongdoing in general).[[10]](#footnote-10) It’s open to debate how much this opportunity can deviate from some specific standard before the agent ceases to be responsible at all (again, with respect to this kind of wrongdoing). Plausibly, fairness of opportunity comes in degrees and, consequently, so does blameworthiness (Nelkin 2016). The central point for my purposes, however, is that the social bases of responsible agency are a vital element that must be taken into account when trying to establish whether, and how much, a particular agent is blameworthy for a specific bit of wrongdoing. In the next couple of sections I will argue that this is especially the case when what is at stake are wrong actions performed from a position of moral ignorance, because whether (and in what degree) agents possess a fair opportunity to avoid or overcome moral ignorance largely depends on the particularities of their social context.

**3. Blameworthiness for morally ignorant wrongdoing**

Now let’s put to work the socially situated account of responsible agency sketched above to address the recent debate regarding blameworthiness for morally ignorant wrongdoing.[[11]](#footnote-11) Let ‘pure moral ignorance’ be ignorance of any of the following: of normative facts, of moral principles, or of the scope of moral principles one accepts, where, in addition, one’s ignorance isn’t grounded on ignorance of non-normative facts or considerations, i.e., on factual ignorance (Wieland 2017). And let a morally ignorant wrongdoer be a wrongdoer who acts *out of* pure moral ignorance in the following sense: had she known better in moral matters, she wouldn’t have performed the wrong action in question. Since everybody agrees that sometimes factual ignorance excuses from or at least lessens the agent’s degree of blameworthiness, the pressing question is whether moral ignorance can do the same.

Here I’ll focus on those philosophers who give a negative answer to this question.[[12]](#footnote-12) They offer two kinds of explanations to support their position. First, some of them suggest that moral ignorance is usually (or even always) culpable, either because this kind of ignorance is typically affected. i.e., the result of a decision to avoid certain uncomfortable moral truths one could have grasped had one wanted to do so (Moody-Adams 1994; MacIntyre 1999), or because morally ignorant but factually informed wrongdoers possess sufficient evidence to arrive at the moral truth and so it isn’t impossible for them to overcome their moral ignorance (Harman 2011, unpublished). Let’s call this position *the always culpable view* *of moral ignorance*. Second, other philosophers argue that, regardless of whether a wrongdoer’s pure moral ignorance is culpable or not, the fact that her actions manifest ill will, or a failure to respond to what is in fact morally significant, suffices for blameworthiness (Fields 1994; Katz 1998; Talbert 2012, 2013, 2017; LittleJohn 2014; Mason 2015; Arpaly 2015). Let’s call this position *the irrelevance of moral ignorance view*.

I will now argue that it follows from my socially situated account of responsible agency that these two views are untenable and that, since we have good reasons for embracing an account of this kind, we ought to reject them. In particular, I will show that these philosophers go wrong in assuming an individualistic and acontextualist picture of moral capacities, moral cognition, and blameworthiness, which leads them to implausible conclusions regarding the ability of ordinary agents to overcome their moral ignorance and the culpability they bear for the latter and for actions prompted by it.

***3.1 The always culpable view***

Consider first the always culpable view of moral ignorance. The core idea behind this view is that people are, quite generally, capable of transcending the way morality is socially articulated in their particular contexts and grasping what we take to be the correct moral norms. Thus MacIntyre writes:

That human beings have by their specific nature a capacity for recognizing that they have good reason to acknowledge the authority of evaluative and normative standards that are independent of those embodied in the institutions of their own particular social and cultural order, and soshare equally in *a capacity to be able to transcend in thought* *the limitations of those established standards*, has been a widely held doctrine. (MacIntyre 1999, 314, italics added)[[13]](#footnote-13)

Let’s call the capacity MacIntyre describes in this passage ‘the capacity for moral transcendence’. Philosophers who defend the position that moral ignorance is usually (or always) culpable appeal precisely to a capacity of this sort. For instance, Moody-Adams (1994, 296, fn. 14) claims that ‘every human being has the capacity to imagine (to conceive) that her social world might be organized on quite different principles’. In turn, Harman (unpublished, 22) contends that ‘each of us has a great deal of moral evidence which makes it possible for us to realize the moral truth. That we do not all succeed when we try does not mean that for some of us realizing the moral truth is impossible’. And in the course of discussing Rosen’s (2003) case of the ancient slaveholder, Guerrero (2007, 71-2) argues that ‘[g]iven the relatively simple and apparently *a priori* nature of the reasoning required to figure out that slavery is wrong, it is natural to think that engaging in this reasoning wouldn’t be terribly different for any particular individual even 2500 years ago’. A natural corollary of the views expressed in these passages is that since people possess the capacity to grasp the moral truth regardless of their particular social context—the capacity for moral transcendence—they can’t appeal to features of that context looking for exculpation when they fail to grasp it. Rather, failures to properly exercise this capacity are blameworthy and, consequently, so is the resulting moral ignorance.[[14]](#footnote-14)

However, reflecting on the social nature of responsible agency yields several considerations that speak heavily against this view. First, if I’m right that moral cognition is socially constituted, then a capacity for moral transcendence as characterized above is hard to make sense of. On the natural assumption that this capacity would itself be a manifestation of the more basic capacity (or set of capacities) for moral cognition, it’s implausible to claim that there are some manifestations of this basic capacity that are *wholly* independent of social-contextual factors. In saying this, I’m not denying that there could be some innate ‘moral modules’ (Haidt and Joseph 2004) that predispose human beings to track certain kinds of considerations related to, e.g., fairness, avoidance of harm, loyalty, etc. Notice, however, that that existence of these moral modules wouldn’t amount to a capacity for moral transcendence. What the philosophers quoted above need is a capacity not only to grasp certain *types* of considerations—related for example to acceptable distributions of goods or acceptable ways of employing violence—but also a capacity to grasp what we see as *the correct* *subset of those considerations*—what fairness or harm avoidance actually require—with complete independence from particular social contexts. It’s this imagined context-independent individual capacity to grasp specific moral truths the one that is implausible given the socially constituted nature of moral cognition. In arguing against the plausibility of a capacity for moral transcendence, however, I’m not picturing human beings as ‘cultural robots’ who mechanically reproduce the ways of thinking and acting that are prevalent in their social context. As I claimed above when discussing rules of moral salience, it’s indeed possible to criticize and improve the accepted practices—including the accepted moral code—of one’s context. But, as I also indicated there, this is better conceived as a *collective* capacity than as an individual capacity—something human beings accomplish together rather than in isolation.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Second, even if it were true that in some sense individual agents always can transcend in thought the moral limitations of their particular contexts, this still wouldn’t show that moral ignorance is usually affected and thus culpable. Defenders of this position think otherwise: they think that what is at stake in the debate over the exculpatory potential of moral ignorance is whether it’s ever literally *impossible* for morally ignorant wrongdoers to grasp specific moral truths. Since they think (perhaps correctly) that no such impossibility generally obtains (after all, the relevant thought can always pop up in the wrongdoer’s head), they conclude that moral ignorance is always blameworthy (Moody-Adams 1994, 293-8; Harman unpublished, 22). But this is mistaken: blameworthiness requires more than the mere possibility of avoiding wrongdoing; it requires the fair opportunity to do so. And, as I argued in 2.2 above, fair opportunities are socially constituted. So, even if we had it, a capacity for moral transcendence wouldn’t entail that moral ignorance is always the product of a blameworthy decision not to know certain uncomfortable moral truths; rather, moral ignorance can be the result of one’s context failing to provide adequate opportunities for exercising one’s moral capacities (although, as I explained above, social factors usually play the more fundamental role of constituting moral capacities themselves). And, when this happens, moral ignorance isn’t culpable, even if it remains true that it wasn’t *impossible* to know better in moral matters. Compare: coercion needn’t render the person literally unable to avoid wrongdoing in order to provide an excuse; it’s enough if it deprives her of a fair opportunity to act rightly.

Third and finally, Moody-Adams’ affected ignorance view fails to do justice to the fact that moral progress oftentimes involves genuine advancements in moral knowledge. Returning to the example of sexual harassment discussed above, it was a genuine achievement—first for the victims themselves, then for the wider community—to have been able to reconceive certain practices as wrongful harassment rather than innocent flirting. But this involved more than simply deciding to acknowledge something they knew all along; rather, it involved a real discovery. And in case you are tempted to reply ‘But how could they honestly failed to know?!’ think about current discussions about the pervasiveness of sexist conducts carried out even by well-intentioned men: for a lot of them, it comes as a genuinely shocking discovery to realize that certain behaviours they took to be plainly acceptable (and even desirable) help to reproduce and legitimize oppressive practices against women. The affected ignorance view obscures this crucial aspect of moral progress. This isn’t to deny that *sometimes* moral ignorance is affected, but it’s a mistake to approach the issue of whether moral ignorance exculpates by assuming that it generally is.

***3.2 The irrelevance of moral ignorance view***

Consider now the solution to the problem of moral ignorance offered by *quality-of-will accounts of blameworthiness*. According to these accounts, evincing ill will or lack of proper regard suffices for blameworthiness. Since morally ignorant wrongdoers normally evince ill will in their actions, they are blameworthy, regardless of whether they can reasonably be expected to overcome their moral ignorance and act appropriately (Katz 1998, 1476-7; Talbert 2013, 237; 2012: 101; LittleJohn 2014, 143-4; Mason 2015, 3043; Arpaly and Schroeder 2014, 182; Arpaly 2015, 152). Thus, whether moral ignorance is culpable is irrelevant for assessments of blameworthiness for morally ignorant wrongdoing.

As suggested at the outset, what makes quality-of-will accounts initially attractive is that they are well positioned to capture the way in which victims of morally ignorant wrongdoers seem to be entitled to respond to their actions (Talbert 2017, 55). People rightly expect a minimum of consideration to their interests and, when this expectation isn’t met, they will normally respond with anger and resentment and will protest the mistreatment they were subject to. And, as quality-of-will theorists rightly emphasize, appealing to the wrongdoer’s moral ignorance as a possible excuse won’t make the victim’s resentment go away; quite the contrary, such an appeal will likely prompt the question ‘whose side are you on?’ (Arpaly 2015, 154).

However, this virtue of quality-of-will accounts comes at the cost of blurring the key distinction being bad and being blameworthy (Levy 2005), and this is why they are unsatisfactory as responses to the problem of moral ignorance. It’s true that this is a subtle distinction and one that probably wouldn’t be made or accepted in ordinary contexts, especially by the victims and by those who sympathize with them (Arpaly 2015, 154-5). But this doesn’t show that we shouldn’t hold fast to it when theorizing about responsibility if it proves relevant for capturing something important. And it does: it captures the distinctive connection between blame and desert that sets blame apart from negative moral appraisals in general. A central reason why some wrongdoers but not others are blameworthy, as opposed to morally defective agents or people with bad characters, is that they have *earned* certain negative reactions not merely by evincing ill will but by behaving wrongly even though they had a fair opportunity to avoid doing so (Watson 2004, 276). In the case of morally ignorant wrongdoers, this involves a fair opportunity to avoid or overcome their moral ignorance. The contrary position, according to which there is nothing unfair in blaming morally ignorant wrongdoers who couldn’t reasonably have been expected to recognize the relevant reasons at play (Talbert 2013, 237), is something like the moral analogue of strict liability in the law and as problematic as the latter.[[16]](#footnote-16) *Deserving* blame and its associated sanctions requires more than agents’ expressing an objectionable moral orientation; it requires viable options to act rightly. The interesting problem posed by the phenomenon of moral ignorance is precisely that sometimes moral ignorance seems to foreclose such viable options. By neglecting this point, quality-of-will accounts render it a mystery why moral ignorance seemed a problem in the first place.

At this juncture, quality-of-will theorists usually reply by doing two things. First, they invoke a distinction between two types of responsibility, i.e., accountability and attributability (Arpaly and Schroeder 2014, 160; Mason 2015, 3048; Talbert 2017, 48), and, second, they dismiss worries about the role social factors play in the moral choices of agents by equating them with worries about constitutive and circumstantial luck that, they think, should in general be rejected in assessments of blameworthiness (Arpaly 2003, 172-3; Harman 2011, 462; Talbert 2017, 59-60).

I find both responses inadequate. Consider first the two-types-of-responsibility reply. As standardly understood, the distinction between accountability and attributability concerns, on the one hand, the responses and sanctions to which agents are liable in virtue of their wrongdoing (accountability) and, on the other, the evaluations triggered by the way in which their actions speak well or ill of them (attributability). Whatever the value of this distinction for the theory of responsibility in general, employing it in the present context is misguided. We already knew that the actions of morally ignorant wrongdoers typically cast them in a bad light by revealing some measure of lack of moral concern for others (Arpaly and Schroeder 2014, 161), and also that morally ignorant wrongdoers treat other people in ways that the victims and morally informed onlookers find objectionable (Talbert 2013, 236). That much follows from the fact that they fail to uphold moral norms we and the victims see as binding, whenever this failure isn’t explicable in terms of underlying factual ignorance. The difficult questions are whether and how much, in which ways and under what conditions, their moral ignorance impairs their ability to do the right thing and thus affects how deserving they are of moral opprobrium and associated sanctions. Refusing to tackle these questions head-on by insisting that their actions speak ill of them is underwhelming. The problem of moral ignorance is essentially a problem about the relevance of social factors for responsible agency; appealing in response to a context-insensitive type of blame—which is what attributability blame is—neglects this aspect of the problem by providing too easy a solution: just focus on the agent’s quality of will and forget about the rest.[[17]](#footnote-17) By contrast, accountability blame, at least when developed along the lines suggested by the fair opportunity account of blameworthiness, *is* sensitive to the social nature of responsible agency and therefore must take centre stage when discussing the problem of moral ignorance. It’s important to emphasize that my deeper point is *not* that attributability blame isn’t a ‘real’ form of blame (cf. Levy 2005). I can concede that it is; that is, I can concede that it’s a full-blooded form of condemnation that goes beyond mere grading and that it’s a common enough response to wrongdoing (Arpaly and Schroeder 2014, 162). I’m not quarrelling about the referent of the word ‘blame’. Rather, my point is that invoking attributability blame in this context isn’t the best way to address the problem of moral ignorance given that it obscures crucial aspects of the latter.

Turn now to the irrelevance-of-moral-luck reply. The idea here is that even if it’s true that a great deal of morally ignorant wrongdoing can be explained in terms of bad constitutive and circumstantial luck, this is beside the point because a person’s badness being partly (or greatly) due to her environment and upbringing does nothing to show that she isn’t a bad person *now*, and this is sufficient for blameworthiness (Arpaly 2003, 170). Of course, one worry with this response is that it simply reiterates the primacy of attributability blame. But leaving that aside, the deeper point quality-of-will theorists try to make here is that their rivals seem to be unduly concerned with erasing the role of luck in assessments of blameworthiness (Arpaly 2003, 169-73). Be that as it may with other views, this objection is cleanly sidestepped by my socially situated account, because it isn’t committed to the view that blameworthiness is incompatible with bad moral luck. In effect, its key contention is *not* that blaming morally ignorant wrongdoers is unfair whenever luck plays a big role in how the agent is and in the kinds of considerations her social environment makes salient to her but, rather, that it’s unfair to do so whenever she lacks a fair opportunity to avoid or overcome her moral ignorance and thus avoid wrongdoing. And what is crucial to notice is that bad constitutive and circumstantial luck don’t necessarily deprive agents of a sufficiently good opportunity to do these things. When this is the case, my account too concludes that luck doesn’t stand in the way of blameworthiness.

In sum, we have good reasons for rejecting the idea that culpability for moral ignorance is irrelevant because evincing ill will is sufficient for blameworthiness, and so the question of what makes moral ignorance culpable is still the central one in this debate. I’ll conclude by briefly outlining how my socially situated account addresses it.

**4. How to handle moral ignorance**

I’ll sketch in closing the positive position recommended by my socially situated account on the debate about moral ignorance. In my view, in order to determine whether particular morally ignorant wrongdoers are blameworthy we need to find out whether they had a fair opportunity to avoid or overcome their moral ignorance and avoid wrongdoing. This will lead us to focus on two variables: the agent’s reasons-responsive capacities and her social context. But, as we have seen, these are deeply intertwined, given that which capacities to detect and respond to relevant moral considerations we can rightly attribute to an agent is partly a measure of the way morality is socially articulated in her social context and of the expectations-generating social factors prevalent in it. So we will need to take a close look at the agent’s social context in order to determine whether the requisite capacities are in place. By calling attention to the social articulation of morality and to the social bases of responsible agency, my account suggests some key questions that must be asked in this regard.

Here’s a representative list: How conducive are the rules of moral salience in the agent’s context to her perceiving the relevant harm as a harm? What about the available vocabulary for describing it? To what extent do the moral values prevalent in that context allow for the possibility of criticism? How frequently has the agent been exposed to the characteristic experiences and practices that arouse moral reflection? Are there certain conditions present of the sort that contribute to the effectiveness of these experiences and practices, for instance a significant social movement advocating for the moral issue at hand (Anderson 2014)? If so, how powerful is it? To what extent do political and legal institutions obscure or visibilise the wrongness of certain types of actions? To what degree do the social roles the agent occupies contribute to neglecting certain kinds of considerations? How pervasive and entrenched are the social practices within which the wrongdoing in question was perpetrated? How available is dissident criticism of them?

This is of course only a partial list, but we can make three important observations on the basis of it. First, since answers to these questions admit of degrees, culpability for moral ignorance and morally ignorant wrongdoing is also gradable rather than simply a yes/no issue. Social factors may enhance or hinder responsiveness to relevant considerations to varying degrees and, consequently, the fairness of opportunities to overcome one’s moral ignorance and avoid wrongdoing is also a matter of degree. Compare, for instance, the cases of two British slaveholders, one living in the 18th century and another living in the 19th century: surely the latter had a fairer opportunity to realize the wrongness of slavery than the former (let alone than the ancient slaveholder), because, although in the 18th century there were many voices criticizing slavery on moral grounds, it wasn’t until the 19th century that a powerful social movement advocating for its abolition took off (Anderson 2014). Similarly, a parent who acquiesces to her daughter’s clitoridectomy in a small African village where only a handful of voices express opposition to this practice has less of an opportunity to realize the wrongness of it than a parent from the same village now living in the US, where the alleged rationales for the practice are almost unanimously rejected.[[18]](#footnote-18) Finally, two persons with similar racist inclinations will have different opportunities to realize the wrongness of demeaning actions against people from certain ethnic backgrounds if one of them lives in a country where political authorities employ a language plagued with racist overtones or where racist practices are legally sanctioned.

Now a significant concern with the account at this point is whether there is a clear threshold above which an opportunity to avoid ignorance and wrongdoing counts as sufficiently fair for the agent to be on the hook.[[19]](#footnote-19) In this paper I have been working with a largely intuitive notion of fair opportunity and at this point I can only gesture at how it can be made more precise. My inclination is to rely on a modestly teleological conception of our responsibility practices of the sort developed by Vargas (2013). According to Vargas’ ‘agency cultivation model’, the function of the responsibility system is to sustain and develop agents’ moral reasons-responsive capacities over time. In the case of blaming responses, this works via their targets giving them a particular kind of uptake—usually involving feelings of guilt, social estrangement, and sorrow—which makes salient previously unrecognized moral considerations and motivates agents to undertake restorative actions (262-3). Crucially, Vargas’ model doesn’t require that each and every instance of blame actually improves wrongdoers; rather, ‘what matters is the overall efficacy of the responsibility system in influencing us’ (179). The important thing to notice for current purposes is that this model provides a straightforward—if still schematic—answer to the question of how good an opportunity needs to be for someone to have a fair opportunity, namely: however good for co-optimal or better outcomes, where optimality is measured precisely in terms of the system’s ultimate goal, i.e., agency cultivation.[[20]](#footnote-20) Thus, on this view an agent has a fair opportunity to avoid ignorance and wrongdoing if and only if, taking into account all the relevant facts about her situation, to regard her as an apt target of characteristic blaming responses is co-optimal or better for the attainment of that goal.[[21]](#footnote-21)

A second important observation regarding the account of blameworthiness sketched above is that the appropriateness of blame is highly contextual and, consequently, determining the culpability of particular morally ignorant wrongdoers will rely on a fine-grained inquiry of their social context. But, third and finally, this inquiry can’t be made from the philosophical armchair alone: historical, sociological, and social psychological considerations will be germane as well. The proper role for a theory of moral responsibility is to provide a framework for guiding this inquiry and, as I’ve strived to show, a socially situated account is the most suitable for this task.[[22]](#footnote-22)

**References**

Anderson, Elizabeth. 2014. “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress:

Case Studies from Britain’s Abolition of Slavery.” *Lindley Lecture*, University of Kansas.

Arpaly, Nomy. 2003. *Unprincipled Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Arpaly, Nomy. 2015. “Huckleberry Finn Revisited: Inverse Akrasia and Moral Ignorance.” In *The Nature of Moral Responsibility*, edited by R. Clarke, M. McKenna, and A. Smith, 141-156. Oxford: Oxford University Press,

Arpaly, Nomy, and Timothy Schroeder. 2014. *In Praise of Desire*. Oxford: Oxford University

Press.

Benson, Paul. 2001. “Culture and Responsibility: A Reply to Moody-Adams.” *Journal of Social*

*Philosophy* 32 (4): 610-620.

Björnsson, Gunnar. 2017. “Explaining Away Epistemic Skepticism about Culpability.” *Oxford*

*Studies in Agency and Responsibility* 4: 141-162.

Brink, David and Dana Nelkin. 2013. “Fairness and the Architecture of Responsibility.” *Oxford*

*Studies in Agency and Responsibility* 1: 284–314.

Calhoun, Cheshire. 1989. “Responsibility and Reproach.” *Ethics,* 99 (2): 389-406.

DesAutels, Peggy. 1996. “Gestalt Shifts in Moral Perception.” In *Minds and Morals: Essays on*

*Ethics and Cognitive Science*, edited by L. May, M. Friedman, and A. Clark, 129-144. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press,

Dewey, John and James Tufts. 1932. *Ethics*. New York: H. Holt.

Fields, Lloyd. 1994. “Moral Beliefs and Blameworthiness.” *Philosophy* 69 (270): 397-415.

Fischer, John, and Mark Ravizza. 1998. *Responsibility and Control: A Theory of Moral*

*Responsibility*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Fitzpatrick, William. 2008. “Moral Responsibility and Normative Ignorance: Answering a New

Skeptical Challenge.” *Ethics* 118 (4): 589-613.

Fitzpatrick, William. 2017. “Unwitting Wrongdoing, Reasonable Expectations, and

Blameworthiness.” In *Responsibility: The Epistemic Condition*, edited by P. Robichaud and J. Wieland, 29-46. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Franklin, Christopher. 2013. “A Theory of the Normative Force of Pleas.” *Philosophical Studies*

163 (2): 479–502.

Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fricker, Miranda. 2010. “The Relativism of Blame and Williams's Relativism of Distance.”

*Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 84 (1): 151-177.

Goddard, Cliff and Anna Wierzbicka. 2004. “Cultural Scripts: What are They and What are They

Good for?” *Intercultural Pragmatics* 1-2: 153–166.

Guerrero, Alexander. 2007. “Don’t Know, Don’t Kill: Moral Ignorance, Culpability, and

Caution.” *Philosophical Studies* 136 (1): 59-97.

Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. 2004. “Intuitive Ethics: How Innately Prepared Intuitions

Generate Culturally Variable Virtues,” *Daedalus* 133 (4): 55-66.

Harman, Elizabeth. 2011. “Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?” *Ratio* 24 (4): 443–468.

Harman, Elizabeth. Unpublished. “Ethics is Hard.” Available at

<https://www.princeton.edu/~eharman/Ethics%20Is%20Hard%20020714%20For%20Web.pdf>

Haslanger, Sally. 2018. “What is a Social Practice?” *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement*

82: 231-247.

Herman, Barbara. 1993. “The Practice of Moral Judgment.” In *The Practice of Moral Judgment*,

73-93. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Hurley, Susan. 2011. “The Public Ecology of Responsibility.” In *Responsibility and Distributive*

*Justice*, edited by C. Knight and Z. Stemplowska, 187-215. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Katz, Leo. 1998. “Incommensurable Choices and the Problem of Moral Ignorance,” *University of*

*Pennsylvania Law Review* 146: 1465-1485.

LaFave, Wayne and Austin Scott. 1986. *Substantive Criminal Law*. St. Paul: West Publishing.

Levy, Neil. 2003. “Cultural Membership and Moral Responsibility,” *The Monist* 86 (2): 145-163.

Levy, Neil. 2005. “The Good, the Bad, and the Blameworthy.” *Journal of Ethics and Social*

*Philosophy* 1 (2): 1-16.

Littlejohn, Clayton. 2014. “The Unity of Reason.” In *Epistemic Norms: New Essays on Action,*

*Belief, and Assertion*, edited by C. Littlejohn and J. Turri, 135-152. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

MacIntyre, Alasdair. 1999. “Social Structures and their Threats to Moral Agency,” *Philosophy*

74 (3): 311-329.

Mallon, Ron. 2016. *The Construction of Human Kinds*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Mason, Elinor. 2015. “Moral Ignorance and Blameworthiness.” *Philosophical Studies*

172 (11): 3037-3057.

McGeer, Victoria. 2019. “Scaffolding Agency: A Proleptic Account of the Reactive Attitudes.”

*European Journal of Philosophy* 27 (2): 301-323.

Moody-Adams, Michelle. 1994. “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance,” *Ethics* 104

(2): 291–309.

Nelkin, Dana, 2011. *Making Sense of Freedom and Responsibility*. Oxford: Oxford University

Press.

Nelkin, Dana. 2016. “Difficulty and Degrees of Moral Praiseworthiness and Blameworthiness.”

*Nous* 50 (2): 356–378.

Nisbett, Richard and Dov Cohen. 1996. *Culture of Honor: The Psychology of Violence in the*

*South*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Pauer-Studer, Herlinde and David Velleman. 2011. “Distortions of Normativity.” *Ethical Theory*

*and Moral Practice* 14 (3): 329-356.

Pleasants, Nigel. 2008. “Institutional Wrongdoing and Moral Perception.” *Journal of Social*

*Philosophy* 39 (1): 96–115.

Rosen, Gideon. 2003. “Culpability and Ignorance.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 103

(1): 61–84.

Rosen, Gideon. 2004. “Skepticism about Moral Responsibility.” *Philosophical Perspective*s 18:

295–313.

Rudy-Hiller, F. 2017. “A Capacitarian Account of Culpable Ignorance.” *Pacific Philosophical*

*Quarterly* 98 (S1): 398-426.

Smith, Michael. 2004a. “Rational Capacities.” In *Ethics and the A Priori*, 114-135. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Smith, Michael. 2004b. “Moral Realism.” In *Ethics and the A Priori*, 181-207. Cambridge:

Cambridge University Press.

Steele, Claude, Steven Spencer, and Joshua Aronson. 2002. “Contending with Group Image: The

Psychology of Stereotype and Social Identity Threat.” *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 34: 379-440.

Talbert, Matthew. 2012. “Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest.” *Journal of Ethics* 16

(1): 89-109.

Talbert, Matthew. 2013. “Unwitting Wrongdoers and the Role of Moral Disagreement in

Blame.” *Oxford Studies in Agency and Responsibility* 1: 225-244.

Talbert, Matthew. 2017. “Omission and Attribution Error.” In *The Ethics and Law of Omissions*,

edited by D. Nelkin and S. Rickless, 17-35. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Vargas, Manuel. 2013. *Building Better Beings: A Theory of Moral Responsibility*. New York:

Oxford University Press.

Vihvelin, Kadri. 2013. *Causes, Laws, and Free Will: Why Determinism Doesn't Matter*. New

York: Oxford University Press.

Wallace, Jay. 1994. *Responsibility and the Moral Sentiments*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard

University Press.

Watson, Gary. 2004. “Two Faces of Responsibility.” In *Agency and Answerability*, 260-288.

Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Wieland, Jan. 2017. “What’s Special about Moral Ignorance,” *Ratio* 30 (2): 149-164.

Wolf, Susan. 1987. “Sanity and the Metaphysics of Responsibility.” In *Responsibility,*

*Character, and the Emotions*, edited by F. Schoeman, 46-62. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wolf, Susan. 1990. *Freedom Within Reason*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Zimmerman, Michael. 2002. “Controlling Ignorance: A Bitter Truth.” *Journal of Social*

*Philosophy* 33 (3): 483-490.

1. I say ‘partially’ because I don’t deny that there are certain aspects of responsibility-relevant capacities that *are* constituted independently of social factors and rather depend on, say, biological factors. I expand on this point below. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This isn’t to deny that there might be certain concerns that are distinctively (and perhaps innately) moral, which would entail that the content of our moral-reasons responsive skills isn’t unrestrictedly open-ended. See subsection 2.2 for more on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I owe the label ‘social articulation of morality’ to Pauer-Studer and Velleman (2011). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I employ this notion for my own purposes, without endorsing all the elements Herman includes in her characterization of it. In particular, I’m not assuming that rules of moral salience are interpretations of the Kantian Moral Law. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See for example Guerrero (2007, 71-2), Moody-Adams (1994: 296, fn. 14), and Harman (2011, unpublished). I discuss their views in subsection 3.1 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The term “dissident criticism” is Pleasants’ (2008, 100). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Again, I discuss Moody-Adams’ and Harman’s views about culpability for moral ignorance in section 3.1 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Interestingly, a rationale for rejecting retreat rules and adopting instead ‘true man rules’ that has been offered by legal scholars is that ‘there is a policy against [the law] making one act a cowardly and humiliating role’ (LaFave and Scott 1986, 659, quoted in Nisbett and Cohen 1996, 62). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brink and Nelkin (2013, 304) do countenance the possibility of an interaction between these two dimensions, but the kind of interaction they have in mind has nothing to do with the constitution relation that in my view obtains between social factors and reasons-responsive capacities. Their idea is, rather, that ‘how much and what sort of capacities one needs can vary according to situational features’, for instance that one may need more self-control in order to avoid certain kinds of wrongdoing in the face of provocation or duress. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. If, on the contrary, you think that responding to certain insults with violence is morally praiseworthy, then you’ll conclude that the social bases of responsible agency afforded by cultures of honour actually scaffold the reasons-responsive capacities of agents with respect to this kind of moral considerations (i.e., related to honour), and that cultures devoid of this concern are the ones whose social bases are defective. This is immaterial for my larger point, however, which is that expectations-generating social factors partially constitute our reasons-responsive capacities—sometimes scaffolding recognition of moral considerations, sometimes hindering that recognition. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Some of the main participants include Zimmerman (2002), Rosen (2003), Levy (2003), Guerrero (2007), FitzPatrick (2008, 2017), Harman (2011, unpublished), Talbert (2013, 2017), Arpaly (2015), and Wieland (2017). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Philosophers who accept the contrary position and accept that moral ignorance can exculpate include Wolf (1987), Benson (2001), Zimmerman (2002), Rosen (2003, 2004), Levy (2003), FitzPatrick (2008, 2017), Fricker (2010), and Wieland (2017). It bears noting that Zimmerman (2002), Levy (2003), and Rosen (2004) defend their position by appealing to an extremely demanding conception of culpable ignorance, according to which ignorance (be it factual or moral) is culpable only if the person *knowingly* brings it about upon herself. See Rudy-Hiller (2017) for criticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Although MacIntyre problematizes this ‘widely held doctrine’ by calling attention to social structures that hinder the exercise of this capacity, in the end he adopts a view quite similar to Moody-Adams’, according to which morally ignorant agents are responsible for their ignorance because they actively refuse to overcome it (1999, 328). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Harman (2011: 455, 457–8) does acknowledge that people can be socialized in ways that lead them to hold false moral views despite their having devoted a reasonable amount of time to reflect on them. This suggests that she does countenance the possibility of social-contextual factors making it harder for agents to realize the moral truth. Her considered position, however, is that such factors don’t have in the end any bearing on whether agents are blameworthy for their moral ignorance and subsequent wrongdoing, for three reasons: first, morally ignorant but factually informed wrongdoers have sufficient evidence that their actions are wrong and so their false moral beliefs aren’t justified (462); second, and relatedly, because of this evidence they can always realize the moral truth (463, unpublished, 22); and third, false moral beliefs are always blameworthy because they reveal the agent’s inadequately caring about what is in fact morally significant (2011, 460). I discuss the view of blameworthiness behind the third contention – the quality-of-will view – in 3.2 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Interestingly, MacIntyre (1999, 317) himself acknowledges the social dimension of the capacity for moral transcendence but fails to fully work out its implications for the question about blameworthiness for moral ignorance, which for him is usually the product of an active refusal to question accepted moral standards (see p. 328). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. As an anonymous referee for another journal pointed out, there is a disanalogy here since strict liability in the law is usually understood in terms of punishment in the absence of *mens rea*, while morally ignorant wrongdoers (even those whose moral ignorance is non-culpable) oftentimes do evince ill will. This is right, but my point in the text is to foreground another feature that strict liability does share with holding responsible blamelessly morally ignorant wrongdoers, namely that in both cases a sanction is meted out to someone who couldn’t reasonably have been expected to avoid wrongdoing. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Björnsson’s (2017) quality-of-will account may be an exception. Björnsson claims that an agent’s degree of blameworthiness diminishes in proportion to how difficult it’s for her to display the appropriate level of moral concern, and acknowledges that the agent’s social context is relevant for addressing the question about difficulty (2017, 154-5). This version of the quality-of-will account is, I think, most naturally interpreted as a kind of reasons-responsive view of the sort I defend here. See for instance Björnsson’s remarks (p. 149) on the centrality of capacities to grasp and respond to moral reasons for questions about blameworthiness. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. And yet the practice still exists today in the US. See https://www.pri.org/stories/2017-04-21/female-genital-mutilation-illegal-us-so-why-it-still-happening [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for raising this question. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Thanks to Manuel Vargas for help on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. A fuller answer would need to specify how or who is to determine when the requirement of co-optimality is satisfied. Vargas’ (2013: 214) answer appeals to the figure of an ideally rational, fully informed observer whose interest is precisely that of setting up a system of responsibility that reliably cultivates moral agency. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this journal (and to several reviewers for other journals) and to audiences at the 2019 Central Division meeting of the APA and the 2018 ALFAn meeting for helpful comments. Special thanks to Robert Hartman and Manuel Vargas for detailed and extremely helpful written comments to previous versions of this paper. This work was supported by Dirección General de Asuntos del Personal Académico, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, PAPIIT grant number IA400318. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)