

Responsibility – The Epistemic Condition

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Philosophers have long agreed that moral responsibility might not only have a freedom condition, but also an epistemic condition. Moral responsibility and knowledge interact, but the question is exactly how. Ignorance might constitute an excuse, but the question is exactly when. Surprisingly enough, the epistemic condition has only recently attracted the attention of scholars, and it is high time for a full volume on the topic. The chapters in this volume address the following central questions. Does the epistemic condition require akrasia? Why does blameless ignorance excuse? Does moral ignorance sustained by one's culture excuse? Does the epistemic condition involve knowledge of the wrongness or wrongmaking features of one's action? Is the epistemic condition an independent condition, or is it derivative from one's quality of will or intentions? Is the epistemic condition sensitive to degrees of difficulty? Are there different kinds of moral responsibility and thus multiple epistemic conditions? Is the epistemic condition revisionary? What is the basic structure of the epistemic condition?

Jan Willem Wieland

The Epistemic Condition

This introduction provides an overview of the current state of the debate on the epistemic condition of moral responsibility. Its main goal is to offer a framework that contextualizes the chapters that follow. In §1, we discuss the main concepts 'ignorance' and 'responsibility'. In §2, we ask why agents should inform themselves. In §3, we describe what we take to be the core agreement among main participants in the debate. In §4, we explain how this agreement invites a regress argument with a revisionist implication. In §5, we provide an overview of the main responses to the regress argument. In §6, we address the question why blameless ignorance excuses. In §7, we describe further issues that are addressed in the book. In §8, we conclude with some discussion of future directions the debate might take.

William J. FitzPatrick

Unwitting Wrongdoing, Reasonable Expectations, and Blameworthiness

I defend the view (1) that when an agent is blameworthy for an action performed in ignorance of its wrongness, the blameworthiness for the action derives from blameworthiness for the ignorance, (2) that ignorance is culpable just in case (and because) the agent could reasonably have been expected to have known better through having taken measures that would have avoided or remedied this ignorance, and (3) that such reasonable expectations do not require that the agent acted akratically in the mismanagement of her beliefs at some point in her past. This commonsense, moderate position avoids the problematic implications of rival views that insist on a strong akrasia condition for blameworthiness and views that reject (1)-(3). My aim is to defend my view against objections that have been raised against it from both sides, and to raise objections to these rival views.

Matthew Talbert

Akrasia, Awareness, and Blameworthiness

Some philosophers believe that because ignorance tends to excuse, a blameworthy actor will either be akratic – that is, she will be a knowing wrongdoer – or her ignorance

will be traceable to a prior instance of knowing wrongdoing. I argue that this claim is false because a wrongdoer's behavior can exhibit moral and attributional qualities that are sufficient for blameworthiness even if she never acted akratically. However, while blameworthiness does not depend on a wrongdoer recognizing the moral status of her behavior, it often does depend on the wrongdoer being aware of the circumstances in which she acts and the likely consequences of her behavior. Nevertheless, I argue that the fact that an agent could have or should have been aware of the consequences of her behavior is in many cases insufficient for genuine blameworthiness.

Maria Alvarez and Clayton Littlejohn

When Ignorance is No Excuse

We argue that the best non-skeptical accounts of moral responsibility acknowledge that factual ignorance and mistake will diminish moral responsibility in a way that moral ignorance and mistake will not. That is because factual ignorance is often non-culpable so long as it meets certain merely procedural epistemic standards but the same is not true of moral ignorance. Our argument is that the assumption that it is gets the standards of culpability for moral ignorance wrong, and that the mistake is encouraged by the thought that culpability in general requires an instance of known wrongdoing: that acting wrongly requires *de dicto* unresponsiveness to one's obligations at some stage. We deny this and conclude that, therefore, ignorance and mistaken belief are indeed often perfectly good excuses – but far less often than some philosophers claim.

Elinor Mason and Alan T. Wilson

Vice, Blameworthiness and Cultural Ignorance

Many have assumed that widespread cultural ignorance exculpates those who are involved in otherwise morally problematic practices, such as the ancient slaveholders, 1950s sexists or contemporary meat eaters. In this chapter we argue that ignorance can be culpable even in situations of widespread cultural ignorance. We argue that moral ignorance often results from the exercise of vice, and that this renders subsequent acts blameworthy, regardless of whether the ignorance happens to be widespread. We develop an account of moral-epistemic vice, and argue that two families of moral-epistemic vice may be common. Vices of arrogance involve the motivation to self-aggrandizement, while vices of laziness involve the motivation for comfort. If cases of cultural ignorance involve the operation of these moral-epistemic vices then that ignorance ought to be viewed as culpable.

George Sher

Blame and Moral Ignorance

Can a person legitimately be blamed for acting wrongly when he knows what he is doing, but does not know that it is wrong? Like a good many others, I believe the answer is sometimes "yes," but that whether blame is appropriate in any given case depends on certain facts about the agent's epistemic situation. My aims in this chapter are to establish, first, that a morally ignorant wrongdoer's epistemic circumstances do have a bearing on his culpability, but, second, that giving content to this familiar view is far harder than is generally appreciated.

Elizabeth Harman

When Is Failure to Realize Something Exculpatory?

Sometimes one has sufficient evidence for p , but one simply does not realize that p is true. In some of these cases, the failure to realize is exculpatory. In other cases, it is not. In general, failures to realize the moral truth are not exculpatory. In this chapter I argue that the principle that gives the correct explanation of blameworthiness in certain moral ignorance cases cannot account for the blamelessness of agents who know their actions have features that suffice to make the actions wrong but who do not realize this. Though I do not think this puzzle should make us question the claims about blameworthiness that motivate it, I argue that the view that moral ignorance is not exculpatory faces this important puzzle and that more work is needed to solve it.

Paulina Sliwa

On Knowing What's Right and Being Responsible for it

The debate about whether morally responsibility has an epistemic condition has traditionally focused on whether and, if so, when moral ignorance can provide an excuse for wrong actions. This chapter takes up the question of moral responsibility for right actions. Its central claim is that whether an agent is morally responsible for her right action depends on whether she knows what the right thing to do is. My argument for this appeals to considerations from the philosophy of action. I argue that moral knowledge matters to moral evaluations because it is a central ingredient in intentional action. Our knowledge of what the right and wrong thing to do is partly determines whether we do the right or wrong thing intentionally. Moral responsibility inherits its epistemic condition from the epistemic condition on intentional action.

Gunnar Björnsson

Explaining (Away) the Epistemic Condition on Moral Responsibility

This chapter combines the familiar Strawsonian idea that moral blame and credit depend on the agent's quality of will with an independently motivated account of responsibility as grounded in a normal explanatory relation between agential qualities and objects of responsibility. The resulting 'explanatory quality of will condition' on moral responsibility is then further motivated by being shown to account for the effects on moral blame and credit of justifications, excuses, and undermined control in cases where agents are fully aware of what they are doing. Having been independently motivated, the explanatory quality of will condition is then applied to cases involving lack of awareness. Though this condition involves no explicit epistemic condition on responsibility, it is shown how it accounts for the degrees to which lack of awareness can excuse.

Peter A. Graham

The Epistemic Condition on Moral Blameworthiness, A Theoretical Epiphenomenon

It is often said that there is an epistemic condition on a person's being morally blameworthy for something. The epistemic condition, I argue, is a theoretical epiphenomenon: for those A-ings for which one is morally blameworthy, most fundamentally, there is no particular epistemic relation one must stand in to one's A-ing for one to be morally blameworthy for it. The thought that there is an epistemic condition on moral blameworthiness is a consequence of a failure to appreciate that what people are most fundamentally morally blameworthy for are not their actions or even the consequences of their actions. Rather, what people are most fundamentally morally blameworthy for are their attitudes to and mental bearing toward those things of intrinsic value around them. Once this is recognized, the epistemic condition simply falls away.

Gwen Bradford

Hard to Know

It is a natural thought that if discerning some morally relevant factor would be exceptionally difficult, we are not to blame if we fail to recognize it. This chapter argues that difficulty per se does not shape the epistemic condition. According to the best account of difficulty, difficulty is a matter of exerting effort. All other apparent kinds of difficulty can be explained by this unified account. Further, there is no stock set of what we may call effort-requiring features. Importantly, some of these effort-requiring features mitigate blameworthiness, whereas others do not. Effort-requiring features that reflect badly on the agent, for example, mitigate blameworthiness to a lesser extent than those that do not. Difficulty itself does not actually mitigate blameworthiness. In cases where difficulty does appear to mitigate blameworthiness, it is either the effort-requiring features that do so, or it is overriding considerations lost through sacrifice of effort.

Alexander A. Guerrero

Intellectual Difficulty and Moral Responsibility

This chapter considers the relationship between intellectual difficulty and moral responsibility. It focuses on this question: if it is difficult for us to come to believe the truth about some matter, and we do not in fact come to believe it, so that we are ignorant of that matter, does that affect our responsibility if we then act from our ignorance? Answering this question requires getting clearer on both intellectual difficulty and moral responsibility for actions done from ignorance. This chapter takes up both tasks, distinguishing three different kinds of intellectual difficulty – skill-related difficulty in performing, effort-related difficulty in performing, and difficulty in trying – and two different families of views regarding moral responsibility: agential control views and agential revelation views. The chapter then considers the interaction between these different kinds of intellectual difficulty and these different views of moral responsibility, focusing particularly on the familiar case of the Ancient Slaveholder.

Michael J. Zimmerman

Moral Responsibility and Quality of Will

It is frequently claimed that moral responsibility is a function of quality of will. This chapter investigates whether and, if so, how this is the case. First, it is noted that the term “quality of will” may be too narrow to fully capture the kinds of mental characteristics, both epistemic and non-epistemic, that are relevant to a person’s being morally responsible for something. Then the questions are raised just which kinds of mental characteristics are relevant and how they should be said to be relevant. In response to these questions, an account is given of the concepts of praise and blame and of the worthiness of praise and blame, on the basis of which it is suggested that (a) there are different kinds of praise and blame, (b) there are correspondingly different kinds of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, and (c) there are accordingly different kinds of moral responsibility.

Randolph Clarke

Ignorance, Revision, and Commonsense

Many theorists hold that an agent’s blameworthiness for unwitting wrongful conduct must stem from – or trace back to – her blameworthiness for something else. And appeals to tracing in these cases lead some writers to a highly revisionist view, on which people are blameworthy for wrongdoing much less often than we ordinarily think (and our

mistake, unfortunately, is not about how much wrongdoing there is). In this chapter, I set out the main claims of an argument for such a view and respond to it. I offer grounds for retaining a good many of the judgments that the revisionist would have us reject. The defense rests to a significant extent on commonsense views about the psychological capacities and abilities to act that people ordinarily possess, views that, as far as I can tell, revisionists have not shown to be mistaken.

Neil Levy

Methodological Conservatism and the Epistemic Condition

The claim that agents are morally responsible for actions the wrongness of which they fail to be aware of only if they are responsible for their occurrent ignorance strikes many philosophers as unacceptable, because it is too revisionary: it entails that many of the everyday judgments that we are disposed to make are false. Agents satisfy these conditions too infrequently for our everyday judgments to be vindicated. These philosophers maintain that it is a theoretical virtue to preserve as many of our everyday judgments as possible. In this chapter, I attempt to show that we ought not to strive to preserve as many of our everyday judgments about responsibility as we might think. I offer an error theory for why we are often disposed to judge that individuals are responsible when we are implicitly committed to thinking that they are not.

Matt King

Tracing the Epistemic Condition

Tracing is an explanatory strategy which proposes to explain responsibility for some present action (where a necessary condition on responsibility is missing) by tracing back to some past one (in which the conditions are met). Tracing is thought by many theorists of moral responsibility to be an indispensable element of an adequate theory of responsibility. Previously, I have argued that we can dispense with tracing for cases in which control is absent, by appealing to either a recklessness model or a negligence model. This chapter considers the prospects for that general line of argument with respect to tracing applied to the epistemic condition on responsibility, notably cases of culpable ignorance. I draw out how I understand tracing to apply to the epistemic dimension and argue we need no special explanatory mechanism like tracing to explain responsibility and blameworthiness.

Jan Willem Wieland and Philip Robichaud

Blame Transfer

Many philosophers accept derivative blameworthiness for ignorant conduct – the idea that the blameworthiness for one's ignorance can 'transfer' to blameworthiness for one's subsequent ignorant conduct. In this chapter we ask the question what it actually means that blameworthiness would transfer, and explore four distinct views and their merits. On views (I) and (II), one's overall degree of blameworthiness is determined by factors relevant to one's ignorance and/or one's subsequent conduct, and transfer only involves an increase in scope. On views (III) and (IV), one's overall degree of blameworthiness is determined by factors relevant to one's ignorance as well as one's subsequent conduct, and transfer might not only entail an increase in scope, but also in degree.