

What's special about moral ignorance?

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Abstract

According to an influential view by Elizabeth Harman (2011, this journal), moral ignorance, as opposed to factual ignorance, never excuses one from blame. In defense of this view, Harman appeals to the following considerations: (i) that moral ignorance always implies a lack of good will, and (ii) that moral truth is always accessible. In this paper, I clearly distinguish these considerations, and present challenges to both. If my arguments are successful, sometimes moral ignorance excuses.

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1. No Excuse

Ignorance about non-moral facts (factual ignorance) can excuse you from blame. If you do not know that your neighbour is keeping slaves, you might be excused for not informing the relevant authorities (that is, depending on whether your factual ignorance is blameworthy). According to an influential proposal by Elizabeth Harman, however, the same does not carry over to *moral* ignorance:¹

No Excuse. Moral ignorance never excuses.

If you do know that your neighbour is keeping slaves, but do not know that slavery is wrong, you might not be excused for not doing anything.² Harman

¹ Cf. Harman (2011, 2014). Partial support and inspiration for No Excuse can also be found in Moody-Adams (1994); Arpaly (2003); Guerrero (2007); FitzPatrick (2008); Talbert (2013); Littlejohn (2014); and Arpaly & Schroeder (2014) (though most of these authors add certain qualifications). No Excuse has ancient roots: Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1110b-1111a.

² I will assume that moral ignorance amounts to a lack of true beliefs and possession of false beliefs about moral facts, whatever view you might have of the latter. Moreover, if you think that the need to inform the relevant authorities is not a moral fact, you are invited to consider another example.

has stated the clearest expression of this view here: “Being caught in the grip of a false moral view is not exculpatory.”³ (2014)

Moral ignorance is different from factual ignorance. Examples of factual ignorance include: ignorance that your neighbour is keeping slaves, that those slaves are people like you and me, that those people suffer, or that you could inform the authorities. Moral ignorance, then, is ignorance that you should help them, and that it is wrong not to help them.⁴ Moral ignorance comes in two kinds, call them ‘pure’ and ‘impure’. If you are *impurely* morally ignorant, then you do not know a moral fact because you do not know certain non-moral facts. You do not know that you should inform the relevant authorities because you do not know that your neighbour is keeping slaves. If you are *purely* morally ignorant, by contrast, you do not know a moral fact because you do not know certain other moral facts (while you do know all the relevant non-moral facts). You do not know that you should inform the relevant authorities because you do not know that the interests and welfare of the slaves matter, and that slavery is wrong. The ancient slave owner might well have been ignorant in the latter sense.⁵

Now the idea is that No Excuse is meant to apply only to pure moral ignorance (cf. Harman 2011, p.460). If your moral ignorance is due to factual ignorance, you might still be excused (namely if your factual ignorance is blameless). But if it is due to further moral rather than factual ignorance, the proposal goes, you might not be excused. Henceforth, all occurrences of ‘moral ignorance’ will refer to the pure kind.

Why would No Excuse hold? Proponents of No Excuse typically appeal to the following consideration: as opposed to factual ignorance, moral ignorance never excuses because *moral ignorance always implies a lack of good will*. The practice of slavery and the belief in its permissibility just testifies to one’s lack of good will. Another example:

Consider the ancient Roman who goes to the circus because he heartily enjoys watching people thrown to the lions. We think this person is blameworthy for going to the circus. Enjoying other people’s suffering in this manner speaks ill of the agent’s will even if the enjoyment in question is encouraged by a corrupt and

³ In fact, this could mean two things. First reading: regardless of whether one’s moral ignorance is blameworthy, it can never provide an excuse. Second reading: moral ignorance is always blameworthy, and for that reason it can never provide an excuse. The second reading seems the more natural one, though the difference may not matter for what I have to say.

⁴ Morally speaking, or even all-things-considered. I will say more about such qualifiers in §4.

⁵ Cf. Rosen: “His ignorance is not straightforwardly grounded in factual ignorance. Unlike race slavery in the Americas, ancient Near Eastern slavery was not supported by myths about the biological or psychological inferiority of the slave. One became a slave through bad luck or imprudence; in principle the status could befall almost anyone.” (2003, p.65)

corrupting society, and even if there is no moral theory available that disagrees. (Arpaly & Schroeder 2014, p.182)

In this paper, I will also draw attention to a second possible consideration: as opposed to factual ignorance, moral ignorance never excuses because *the moral truth is always accessible*. For example, everyone can figure out that slavery is wrong. Witness: “It seems implausible to say that it would take a ‘moral genius’ to see through the wrongness of chattel slavery.” (Guerrero 2007, p.71)⁶

These two considerations do not apply to factual ignorance. First, non-moral facts are not always accessible. You might fail to know that your neighbour is keeping slaves because there has been no way you could have heard or seen any evidence for this. Second, and for a related reason, factual ignorance does not always imply a lack of good will. You are ignorant because you could not have heard or seen anything, and not because you do not care.

In this paper, I will clearly distinguish both considerations, and present challenges to both. This will undercut No Excuse. Importantly, my aim in this paper is *not* to deny that many of the blameworthiness verdicts by No Excuse proponents might be right. Instead, as will become clear, the point will be that considerations concerning accessibility are more important than No Excuse proponents have recognized so far. Basically, the argument will be this: *morally ignorant agents might still be excused if the moral truth is not accessible enough*.

Some readers might think that the universally quantified version of No Excuse (i.e. the view that it has no possible counterexamples) is not plausible in the first place. If so, the cases I will present in the following are still instructive in that they highlight the role of accessibility when it comes to blameworthiness verdicts. This issue has not been explored in depth by No Excuse opponents and merits attention.

The plan of this paper is simple: first I will put some cases on the table (§2), before challenging the first (§3) and second (§4) candidate motivation for No Excuse.

One preliminary remark. Throughout the paper, we will assume that blameworthiness is intimately linked to one’s quality of will: an agent *S* is blameworthy for one of her actions (or omissions) *X* iff *S* does *X* with a lack of good will. That lack of good will is both necessary and sufficient for blameworthiness is a controversial assumption, though proponents of No Excuse will typically accept this, and I will not question it for the purposes of this paper.⁷

⁶ Guerrero responds here to Rosen (2003, p.66), who suggested that it would take a ‘moral genius’ to overcome one’s ignorance in this case.

⁷ The sufficiency of this criterion is controversial because certain circumstances (such as extreme stress, or an unfortunate upbringing) might render a bad will blameless. In the following, I will abstract from such special cases.

2. Dummy cases

It is instructive to consider four cases where the agent has or lacks good will, and where the moral facts are accessible or inaccessible. We will consider these cases without full-fledged theories or substantive assumptions concerning the agent's will and the accessibility of moral facts. Instead, I will employ the following simple interpretations. Moral facts are accessible to the agent when she could figure out the right thing, and this will basically be taken to mean that *the majority of people in her society are not ignorant*. To have a good will is to desire to do the right thing, and this will basically be taken to mean that *the agent would not have done the given action if she had not been ignorant that it is wrong*.⁸ To be sure, these are dummy interpretations, and might be replaced with more sophisticated ones. In fact, the cases below call for further such interpretations which we will consider in the following sections.

Case 1. Cleo keeps two slaves and forces them to work for her without pay. Cleo is ignorant that this is wrong because she is ignorant that slavery is wrong. Had Cleo not been ignorant, however, she would not have changed her practices. She lives in our society in the year 2015.

Case 2. Cleo keeps two slaves and forces them to work for her without pay. Cleo is ignorant that this is wrong because she is ignorant that slavery is wrong. Had Cleo not been ignorant, however, she would not have changed her practices. She lives in a society where no one knows that slavery is wrong.⁹

In these cases, Cleo's moral ignorance does not explain why she does what she does: had she not been ignorant, she would still have exploited her slaves. In this sense, she lacks good will. If blameworthiness is intimately connected to the will (as we have assumed), then Cleo is blameworthy in these cases. I think that is a plausible result. Note that if accessibility matters (that is, in addition to considerations regarding her will), then perhaps Cleo could be considered less blameworthy in case 2 than in case 1. The potential role of accessibility is clearer in the following cases:

⁸ This counterfactual reading of the good will is a familiar clause used to distinguish acting *from* ignorance, as opposed to acting merely *in* ignorance (cf. Rosen 2003, p.62; Guerrero 2007, pp.62-3). S does X *from* ignorance iff S is ignorant that X is wrong, and S would not have done X had she not been ignorant that X is wrong (S did X only because of her ignorance, and would have acted differently had she known better). S does X merely *in* ignorance, by contrast, iff S is ignorant that X is wrong, and S would still have done X had she not been ignorant that X is wrong. To my knowledge, no detailed study exists of these counterfactuals. The in/from distinction has ancient roots (cf. Aristotle, cited earlier).

⁹ Perhaps the ancient slave owner lived in such a society; see §4 below.

Case 3. Cleo keeps two slaves and forces them to work for her without pay. Cleo is ignorant that this is wrong because she is ignorant that slavery is wrong. Had Cleo not been ignorant, she would have stopped her practices. She lives in a society where no one knows that slavery is wrong.

Case 4. Cleo keeps two slaves and forces them to work for her without pay. Cleo is ignorant that this is wrong because she is ignorant that slavery is wrong. Had Cleo not been ignorant, she would have stopped her practices. She lives in our society anno 2015.

In these cases, Cleo's moral ignorance does seem to explain her conduct: had she not been ignorant that the interests and welfare of her slaves matter, she would not have exploited them. According to the dummy interpretation, then, Cleo does have a good will in 3 and 4. Hence, insofar as her will is concerned, she should be considered blameless in those cases. This appears somewhat plausible in case 3 (where Cleo lives amongst people who are also ignorant). However, whether Cleo is blameless in case 4 (where she lives amongst people who are *not* ignorant) is not so clear.

In fact, both of the latter cases are potentially unstable, and this has to do with the No Excuse thesis. According to this thesis, moral ignorance never excuses one from blame and so Cleo should be considered blameworthy in *all* four cases. This seems implausible in at least case 3, and so No Excuse proponents might try to show that Cleo does not really have a good will in that case. Indeed, one might wonder whether it is really possible to have a good will and yet be ignorant that slavery is wrong. Does having a good will not just imply that one is not ignorant about that, independently, that is, of the society in which one happens to live? In addition, there is another potential instability that affects case 4: is it really possible to have a good will and yet be ignorant that slavery is wrong, that is, in a society where most others are not ignorant? Does having a good will not just imply that one made a serious attempt to figure out the moral facts? These issues raise the question: *what exactly does a good will entail?*

3. Good will

In the four cases, I have assumed that S does X with good will iff S would not have done X if she had not been ignorant that X is wrong. But perhaps the good will should be taken in another way, which moreover would render the problem cases 3 and 4 from the previous section impossible (and save No Excuse). Both cases 3 and 4 would be impossible on the assumption that S can have a good will only if S is not ignorant that X is wrong, and does not act in ignorance that X is wrong. Such an assumption links moral ignorance to the lack of good will

and so to blameworthiness, and hence would immediately establish No Excuse. However, the question is of course whether such an assumption can be made, and in the following I will cast doubt on it.

Particularly, I will consider two alternative interpretations of the good will, and argue that they do not succeed in saving No Excuse.¹⁰ The first variant: S does X with good will (despite the fact that she is ignorant that X is wrong) if S has made a serious attempt to figure out whether X is wrong.¹¹

*Case 3**: Cleo keeps two slaves and forces them to work for her without pay. Cleo is ignorant that this is wrong because she is ignorant that slavery is wrong. She has made a serious attempt to determine whether slavery is wrong, yet she lives in a society where no one knows that slavery is wrong and so concluded that it is permissible. Had Cleo not been ignorant, she would have stopped her practices.

This case strongly suggests that one can have a good will and yet still act from moral ignorance. Cleo has a good will partly because she made a serious attempt to discover the truth. But she does not discover the truth because in an important sense it is inaccessible to her.¹² Moreover, if Cleo does indeed have a good will, then her moral ignorance excuses her from blame, and provides a counterexample to No Excuse. It is important to stress that No Excuse proponents cannot just deny the counterexample by denying that Cleo is blameless in case 3*. Rather, it has to be shown that she lacks a good will in that case, and it is not clear that that can be done. A similar variant on 4 seems less convincing in this respect:

*Case 4**: Cleo keeps two slaves and forces them to work for her without pay. Cleo is ignorant that this is wrong because she is ignorant that slavery is wrong. She has in fact made a serious attempt to determine whether slavery is wrong, but concluded that it was permissible. She lives in our society in the year 2015. Had Cleo not been ignorant, she would have stopped her practices.

¹⁰ An account that I will not discuss here is Moody-Adams' (1994) suggestion that moral ignorance would be affected or willfully sustained. Affected ignorance is a complex notion: on the one hand, the agent sustains her ignorance because this is convenient for her in a certain way; on the other hand, to a certain extent she is ignorant that she does this. For discussion, cf. Benson (2001), Peacock (2011), among others.

¹¹ The necessity of this condition faces potential problems. What if S had no opportunity to make such attempts? Or what if S was (blamelessly) ignorant that she had to make such attempts (cf. Rosen 2003)? In case 3* below, I will sidestep these issues by assuming that the agent does make such attempts.

¹² Here, I still rely on the notion of accessibility from §2, though I will address more sophisticated notions in §4 below.

The main difference between cases 3* and 4* lies in Cleo's peers: most of them are not ignorant that slavery is wrong. For this reason, case 4* may seem unstable: how can Cleo live in our society and yet remain ignorant after a serious inquiry? Yet, Harman-style cases show that cases like 4* might well be possible, and even occur with some frequency. In such cases, agents make a serious effort to figure out the moral truth (for example, about gay marriage), and yet they go horribly wrong (Harman 2011, pp.454-5, 2014). Moreover, in such cases it is not obvious that the agents have a good will and are blameless (for instance, Harman thinks they are not), and so, even if those cases are possible, they do not form clear-cut counterexamples to No Excuse. If this is so, only cases like 3* will pose a problem for the latter.¹³

One might wonder whether wholly different accounts of the good will could establish No Excuse. The strongest such candidate is the view by Arpaly (2003, ch. 3), according to which the will is taken in terms of *de re responsiveness*. One is *de re* responsive if one has a concern for facts that make actions wrong or right. In contrast, one is *de dicto* responsive if one has a concern for facts that one *thinks* make actions wrong or right. Furthermore, one is blameworthy in two cases: when one acts with ill will or when one acts with a lack of good will. Ill will occurs when S does X with a concern for the fact that makes X wrong (if S keeps slaves because she wants to violate their rights, to disregard their interests and welfare, or enjoys their suffering). Lack of good will occurs when S does X with an indifference for the fact that makes X wrong (if S keeps slaves because S cares nothing for their rights or suffering).

This view will render many morally ignorant actions blameworthy. Suppose Cleo keeps two slaves and forces them to work for her without pay. Cleo is ignorant that this is wrong because she is ignorant that slavery is wrong. Moreover, she does not even know that her slaves suffer, given that she pays hardly any attention to them. In such a case, Cleo is blameworthy because she is indifferent (in the relevant sense).¹⁴ The question is whether this view renders *all* morally ignorant actions blameworthy (and yields No Excuse). I will argue next, on the basis of a further variant of case 3, that this is not the case.

*Case 3**.* Cleo keeps two slaves and forces them to work for her without pay. Cleo is ignorant that this is wrong because she is ignorant that slavery is wrong. She has made a serious attempt to determine whether slavery is wrong, and collected all the non-moral facts about the issue (she knows that they suffer, that she could have been a slave herself if she were unlucky enough, etc.). It is not the case that Cleo keeps slaves because she wants them to suffer. Nor is

¹³ In my view, the essential difference between cases 3* and 4* is that in 3* the moral truth is inaccessible via testimonial sources; more on this in §4.

¹⁴ Here and below, I will assume that keeping slaves is wrong because they suffer from it; suffering is the fact that makes keeping slaves wrong. If you do not think that suffering does the work here (but rather would point to the violation of their rights, for example), the case can be adjusted accordingly.

she indifferent to their suffering: she is aware of it and feels sympathy with the slaves. Still, she did not succeed in drawing the inference that slavery is wrong because of the limited social context, and concluded that it was permissible.

In this case, Cleo has no ill will: it is not the case that she keeps slaves because she wants them to suffer. She also does not lack good will: it is not the case that she is indifferent to the slaves' suffering. According to Arpaly (2003, pp.86-7), one's indifference and concern is sensitive to emotional and cognitive factors: you are concerned to the extent that you are able to notice their suffering and feel sympathy with them. In these respects, Cleo does care, and she seems to be blameless on Arpaly's account. Yet she is morally ignorant, and so we have another counterexample to No Excuse.

Again, No Excuse proponents cannot just deny the counterexample by denying that Cleo is blameless in case 3**. Rather, it has to be shown that she lacks a good will in that case, and that does not seem plausible. Still, one might respond as follows:¹⁵ "Cleo doesn't care enough about her slaves' welfare – if she cared for her slaves in the way that we would regard as morally sufficient, then typically she would treat them in a way that we would regard as morally acceptable." This seems to imply that Cleo acts with good will and sufficient concern only if her action is morally permissible (at least in our eyes). In my view, this is too strong. Generally, it is not the case that S does X with good will only if X is the morally right or acceptable course of action. There should be cases where good will and wrongful conduct go together, and in my view 3** is a case in point. Still, as will become clear soon, I would agree that Cleo might lack a good will, but only if it has been specified that the moral truth was accessible to her (in a relevant sense).

Finally, consider Harman's extension of Arpaly's view:

Beliefs (and failures to believe) are blameworthy if they involve inadequately caring about what is morally significant. Believing a certain kind of behavior is wrong on the basis of a certain consideration is a way of caring about that consideration. (2011, p.460)

So, to believe that keeping slaves is wrong because of their suffering (and so not being ignorant) is a way of caring about their suffering. Does it follow from this that failures to believe the truth always involve a lack of good will (or an inadequate concern for what is morally significant)?

It does not. To see this, two claims should clearly be distinguished. *Sufficiency*: if you believe that X is wrong because of Y, then you care about Y (thus, if you believe that keeping slaves is wrong because of their suffering, then you care about their suffering). *Necessity*: if you care about Y, then you believe that X is wrong because of Y (thus, if you care about the slaves'

¹⁵ Thanks to a referee for this response.

suffering, then you believe that keeping slaves is wrong because of this suffering). Sufficiency might be right, but Necessity is not. For it seems plausible to think that one might care about the slaves' suffering without the belief that keeping slaves is wrong. This is exactly what case 3** is supposed to convey. Yet, without Necessity one does not get to No Excuse.

4. Accessibility

At this point, proponents of No Excuse might suggest that all the problem cases I have given (case 3 and variants) never occur in real life. For in real life, the moral fact that slavery is wrong just *is* accessible, that is, regardless of the society in which one lives. That fact is accessible even if no one else in one's society knows that slavery is wrong. If this is so, we need not bother about cases where moral facts are insufficiently accessible. A variant of this idea has been voiced by Harman:

People who have false moral beliefs ... could realize the moral truth, though for many of them there may be no guarantee that they will if they try. (2011, p.463)

Everyone would be in a position to realize that slavery is wrong, or that gay marriage is permissible (which does not mean we will always succeed if we try). I am sympathetic to this idea, though I do not think it saves No Excuse. The question is what exactly 'being in a position to realize the moral truth' amounts to. I will assume that it basically means that, in any given case, sufficient evidence is available about a given truth. Such evidence might be available through different sources, and this yields at least three readings. First: it might mean that there is always enough *testimonial evidence* available to us. Second: it might mean that we could always figure out the truth by *mere reflection*. Third: it might mean that we could always figure out the truth by *direct experience* with the given practice. Importantly, these readings do *not* guarantee that we will overcome our ignorance so long as we try hard enough, though it may imply that we will have epistemic justification for believing the moral truth if we consult such sources (cf. Harman 2011, pp.462-3).¹⁶

Before discussing these sources, I would like to distinguish three further kinds of moral ignorance.¹⁷ For different evidence is needed to overcome different kinds of ignorance. First, S is *deeply* ignorant about the wrongness of slavery iff S has never even considered the issue. Second, S is *mistakenly* ignorant about the wrongness of slavery iff S has considered the

¹⁶ Accessibility is a gradual notion: evidence can be accessible to a greater or lesser degree (depending on the capacities of the agent, and the effort needed to access the given sources).

¹⁷ This classification employs distinctions from Guerrero (2007, p.63) and Peacock (2011).

issue but reached the wrong conclusion that it is permissible.¹⁸ This latter ignorance has two varieties. One might balance the moral considerations in the incorrect way, and so fail to conclude that slavery is all-moral-things-considered wrong (mistaken ignorance I). Or one might balance the moral and non-moral considerations in the incorrect way and fail to conclude that slavery is all-things-considered wrong (mistaken ignorance II).¹⁹ One might, for example, believe that slavery is all-things-considered permissible because of financial reasons.

To overcome one's deep ignorance, one would need a reason to consider the permissibility of X. To overcome one's mistaken ignorance I, one would need a reason to believe that X is all-moral-things-considered wrong. To overcome one's mistaken ignorance II, one would need a reason to believe that X is all-things-considered wrong. Accordingly, to say that one has the capacity to realize the moral truth basically amounts to saying that one always has reasons of these three kinds. But this is a rather strong claim. Furthermore, it is doubtful that the three candidate sources mentioned above (testimonial evidence, mere reflection, direct experience) will be able to deliver such reasons. Let us consider these sources in turn.

To what extent are we able to overcome our moral ignorance on the basis of testimonial evidence that others can provide us? This depends on our social context. Rosen wrote: "The evidence suggests ... that until quite late in antiquity it never occurred to anyone to object to slavery on grounds of moral or religious principle." (2003, p.64) Arguably this is too strong. As Peacock (2011, pp.70-3) shows, certain people in ancient Greece did question the practice, and in that respect they could provide others with reasons to consider the permissibility of slavery themselves (and hence overcome their deep ignorance). Still, Peacock adds, that there were such debates does not imply that many people in fact concluded that the practice was wrong. Moreover, even if some thought slavery is wrong from a moral perspective, they still thought it is all-things-considered permissible since the greatness of Athens depended on it. Without slavery they might not have been able to realize other values such as democracy. For in that case Athens' citizens would not have been free to engage in a political life (Peacock 2011, pp.74-5). This suggests that the social context does not always provide reasons to overcome the two kinds of mistaken ignorance.

Are we able to overcome our moral ignorance on the basis of mere reflection? Guerrero tentatively suggests a positive answer:

Given the relatively simple and apparently a priori nature of the reasoning required to figure out that slavery is wrong, it is natural to

¹⁸ There are mixed cases, where you have considered the issue, but thought it not to be important and so forgotten about it. Also, mistaken ignorance might be occurrent (or fail to be occurrent) to various degrees.

¹⁹ There might be alternative ways to characterize this kind of ignorance (e.g. in terms of an incorrect balance between selfish and altruistic considerations).

think that engaging in this reasoning wouldn't be terribly different for any particular individual, even 2500 years ago. (2007, pp.71-2)

I doubt that this is right, again for reasons concerning the difference between the three kinds of ignorance. For while one might be able to overcome deep ignorance on the basis of mere reflection, and perhaps mistaken ignorance I (and see that something is morally wrong about slavery), the same does not carry over to mistaken ignorance II (i.e. that everyone is able to see that slavery is all-things-considered wrong).

Compare Moody-Adams: "Every human being has the capacity to imagine ... that her social world might be organized on quite different principles" and "the capacity to question existing social practices" (1994, p.296). Questioning slavery, however, is different from drawing the conclusion that it is wrong. So even if it is right that we have a default capacity to question slavery (just as we have a default capacity to question any practice), it does not follow that we have a default capacity to infer that slavery is all-things-considered wrong (just as we do not have a default capacity to infer that any arbitrary practice is all-things-considered wrong). The latter capacity would imply, for example, that one could see by mere reflection that the suffering of slaves outweighs the benefits of slavery for a given society (such as Athens), and, in contrast to what Guerrero suggests above, I do not think that everyone is in a position to make such rather philosophical inferences.²⁰

The third source, i.e. direct experience with the practice, is in my view the most promising. Consider:

If the slave owner sees his slave as a person like himself, equally capable of autonomous action, equally capable of suffering, equally wishing to exercise his talents and pursue his dreams – and yet grossly fails to treat him accordingly, the slave owner is blameworthy, even though he [acts in a way] that his society ... endorses. (Arpaly & Schroeder 2014, p.183)

According to the authors, these slave owners can be considered blameworthy since they act with a lack of good will. I would like to make a related though different point. Namely, on the basis of direct experience with the practice of keeping slaves, we are able to figure out certain relevant non-moral facts: that slaves are similar to us, equally capable of suffering, and so on.²¹ Moreover, it is not implausible to think that this experience also puts one in a position to see that their suffering is a *decisive* moral consideration against keeping them, and hence that the practice is wrong (both morally and all-things-considered).

²⁰ Moreover, to a certain extent ignorance *that* slavery is wrong depends on ignorance *why* slavery is wrong, and in the latter case it is quite clear that many people are not in a position to overcome their ignorance (and engage in debates such as the one in Hare 1979).

²¹ In a similar way, Adams' imaginary Hitler Jugend alumnus is in a position to see the humanity of the non-combatants (cf. Adams 1985, pp.26-7).

Clearly, many ancient Greeks were in direct contact with slaves and did not in fact see this consideration as decisive, but this does not mean they were not *in a position* to see it. In my view, this is the most plausible reading of the claim that the moral facts are always accessible. Yet, I do not think it saves No Excuse, for three reasons.

First, you might know that slaves suffer, but if you do not know that their suffering makes slavery wrong (morally, or all-things-considered), you do not have a reason to infer that slavery is wrong. That is one additional step to be made. As Pleasants (2008, p.102) and Peacock (2011, p.78) point out, while non-moral facts are typically acquired through evidence-gathering and reflection, moral facts are typically acquired through instruction and socialization. This of course does not *exclude* the possibility of acquiring moral facts in another way (in this case, by direct experience with the practice), but it does cast doubt on the claim that we are *always* in a position to do so independently from what others in our social context do.

Second, and most importantly, you might not always be in direct contact with the facts that make your actions wrong. For example, slavery comes in different forms, and you might support it in direct or rather indirect ways. You might keep slaves and exploit them yourselves. More likely, you contribute more indirectly to slavery by buying certain products (such as food and clothing) which are made through slave labour.²² This means that direct experience is not always an available source of information, and hence that moral facts are not always accessible through that source.

Finally, and somewhat trivially, slavery is of course a special case. From our perspective, it is hard to imagine how one cannot be in a position to see its wrongness. But how about other issues, such as gay marriage, sexism, private property, euthanasia, famine relief, climate change, animal exploitation, and so on? Is everyone always in a position to see what is permissible and what is impermissible just on the basis of direct experience with the given practice?²³ There is a clear difference between ‘in the present context, the fact that slavery is wrong is accessible’ and ‘in *all* real-life contexts, the moral facts are accessible’ and it is the latter claim that is needed for No Excuse.

I think these three reasons sufficiently show that we are not always in a position to obtain the moral facts on the basis of direct experience. I have suggested that the other candidate sources (testimony and reflection) will not

²² According to the Global Slavery Index, there are currently more than 35 million slaves in the world. Of course, it is not so easy to determine the extent to which we profit from slave labour.

²³ One might think that Arpaly’s Solomon case (2003, pp.103-4) is a good counterexample (i.e. the young version of the case). Solomon is a sexist boy. He does regularly meet women, and yet is in no position to overcome his moral ignorance due to the limited social context (“a small, isolated farming community in a poor country”). But it should be noted that this is not a perfect case of *pure* moral ignorance. For Solomon seems ignorant that sexism is wrong partly because of his belief that “women are not half as competent as men when it comes to abstract thinking.”

do the job either, which means that the counterexamples to No Excuse (case 3 and variants presented in §3) are real-life possibilities.

5. Coda

If what I have argued here is right, then moral ignorance and lack of good will might come apart. Furthermore, if blameworthiness depends on the will (as we have assumed), then moral ignorance and blameworthiness might also come apart: *sometimes moral ignorance excuses*. Importantly, though, this does not mean that many morally ignorant agents are off the hook. For all I have said, they are off the hook only if they act with good will (for example, if they are sufficiently responsive to the facts that make their actions wrong) and only if the relevant moral facts are not accessible to them (for example, on the basis of direct experience). Most slave owners, I agree, will not satisfy these requirements, yet other morally ignorant agents might well do so.²⁴

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