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Culpable More than you Think

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Abstract

In this paper, I take as my starting point Aristotle's accounts of culpable and non-culpable ignorance in the Nicomachean Ethics in order to address the following question. If non-moral factual knowledge is indeed so important to moral action—as Aristotle suggests—then why does non-moral factual ignorance seem to excuse so frequently? My intention is not to offer an in-depth analysis of Aristotle but rather to use his account as a base from which to examine in contemporary terms, the question of whether, when approached from an epistemological perspective, the notion of non-culpable ignorance can sometimes mistakenly involve ignorance for which one is in fact culpable. The conclusion I reach is that an analysis of ignorance that takes account of epistemological factors provides both a landscape of some of its various causes as well as an outline of the limits of its power to provide excusing force.

Keywords: Aristotle, Ignorance, Culpability, Moral Responsibility, Epistemology

1. Aristotle's Theory of Moral Responsibility

At the start of Book III of the Nicomachean Ethics, Aristotle asserts that ignorance exculpates provided that one is ignorant of non-moral facts. In laying out this view, he presents us with an outline of his theory of moral responsibility. He begins with the division between voluntary and involuntary action.[2] Voluntariness is the condition for praise and blame, punishment, and excuse. Actions are voluntary if: (1) the action is initiated by the agent and (2) the agent is aware of the particular circumstances of his action, that is, he knows what he is doing (Aristotle, 1999: 1109b31-33, 1111a21-23). Accordingly, we praise and blame actions because they are instances of an agent's character and voluntary acts are typically reflective of character (Aristotle, 1999: 1113b16; Broadie, 1999; Burger, 2008; Meyer, 1993). By contrast, involuntary actions do not initiate from one's moral character. The two primary sources of involuntary action are force and ignorance. Actions performed as a result of force or ignorance are involuntary because what initiates motion comes from outside the agent. The agent does not contribute to the act but is simply acted upon. Aristotle insists that if an agent's action is compelled by something external, he still made a choice to act as he did. But, if the conditions that compelled him were not present and thus he didn't act as he did, then his responsibility is mitigated. For Aristotle, this is a case in which the act did not genuinely issue from the agent's character. However, Aristotle's division between voluntary and involuntary is really not that simple. In Book III, he struggles with identifying a clear line from which to distinguish and establish that such acts are, in fact, a reflection of character. For example, a wind might carry a person somewhere <he did not want to go>, or men may do so who have him in their power. But a problem arises in regard to actions that are done through fear of a greater evil or for some noble purpose, for instance, if a tyrant were to use a man's parents or children as hostages in ordering him to commit a base deed, making their survival or death depend on his compliance or refusal. Are actions of this kind voluntary or involuntary? A similar problem also arises when a cargo is jettisoned in a storm.

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[2] Aristotle. (1999) Nicomachean Ethics. Trans. by Martin Ostwald. New York: Prentice Hall. Hereafter, all references from this text will include traditional line numbers.

Considering the action itself, nobody would voluntarily throw away property; but when it is a matter of saving one's own life and that of his fellow passengers, any sensible man would do so. (1110a2-11) These examples illustrate how an act that was motivated by an external force (like a tyrant or a storm) was still initiated by the agent himself. The act is not necessarily a reflection of character because under normal circumstances, a good person would not normally choose to commit what he knows to be a base deed and a captain would not choose to destroy his cargo. However, the urgency of these situations prompted their choices and subsequent acts. These cases of "mixed" action are those that drive Aristotle to confront the seemingly confused connection between voluntary action, character and responsibility. He concludes by suggesting that it is at "the moment of action" (Aristotle, 1999: 1110a13) that we are to determine voluntary and involuntary. In a similar vein, consider Aristotle's views concerning the division between culpable and non-culpable ignorance. He argues that actions performed as a result of ignorance are involuntary and exculpate provided that the agent is non-culpably ignorant. An agent is non-culpably ignorant if he doesn't know what he is doing—that is, he is ignorant of non-moral facts. He mistakenly believes, falsely believes, or doesn't know the relevant facts about his particular circumstance which can include: who the agent is, (2) what he is doing, (3) what thing or person is affected, and sometimes also (4) the means he is using, e.g., some tool, (5) the result intended by his action, e.g., saving a life, and (6) the manner in which he acts, e.g., gently or violently. (1111a2-6) Non-culpable ignorance is involuntary because it concerns mistakes of fact which is controlled by sense perception, not one's character.[3] If an act is the result of a mistake of fact, then that act is the result of an agent's non-culpable ignorance and thus, the agent is not responsible for the act.

In contrast, actions performed as a result of ignorance are voluntary provided that the agent is culpably ignorant. An agent is culpably ignorant if he lacks universal moral knowledge, which includes: (a) ignorance of what he ought to do, (b) ignorance of what is beneficial, or (c) ignorance in his decisions (Aristotle, 1999: 1110b25-32).[4] In this way, culpable ignorance is an indication of character. But an act can hardly be called involuntary if the agent is ignorant of what is beneficial. Ignorance in moral choice does not make an act involuntary—it makes it wicked; nor does ignorance of the universal, for that invites reproach; rather, it is ignorance of the particulars which constitute the circumstances and the issues involved in the action. It is on these that pity and pardon depend, for a person who acts in ignorance of a particular circumstance acts involuntarily. (1110b30-1111a2) Upon closer inspection, however, Aristotle's accounts of culpable and non-culpable ignorance become much more confusing. After offering his initial distinction, Aristotle tells us that non-moral factual ignorance actually doesn't excuse in every case. Even ignorance is in itself no protection against punishment if a person is thought to be responsible for his ignorance. […] Moreover, punishment is inflicted for offenses committed in ignorance of such provisions of the law as the offender ought to have known or might easily have known. It is also inflicted in other cases in which ignorance seems to be due to negligence: it was in the offender's power not to be ignorant, it is argued, and he could have made sure had he wanted to. (1113b30-1114a2)

Here Aristotle seems to expand the scope of culpable ignorance to include both moral and non-moral facts, particularly in cases where one should reasonably be expected or able to know. He suggests that we can be morally accountable for acting from—and in—ignorance when the ignorance that triggered the offense could have been prevented—even if it is ignorance of non-moral facts. So, he shows us that ignorance of non-moral facts often exculpates except in cases when one is expected to know, like in the case of law, or when it is in one's power to be able to know (but doesn't due to negligence). Of course, while non-moral factual knowledge may not be a direct reflection of an agent's moral character, how one goes about the business of generating beliefs can factor into our assessments of an agent's (overall) character as well as culpability for action issuing from his ignorance. In fact, Aristotle claims that agents are often accountable for developing certain dispositions of character that perpetuate ineffectual habits.[5]

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[3] Sarah Broadie and Susan Sauvé Meyer support a similar interpretation. Broadie states that non-culpable ignorance excuses because the agent "is not himself responsible for its being the case that the facts lie at odds with his beliefs" (Broadie, 1991: 148). Meyer agrees that for Aristotle, "particular beliefs, by contrast, are not states of one's persisting character […] they are simply occurrent states that represent the circumstances in which the agent finds herself" (Meyer, 1993: 175).

[4] Meyer makes the point that "Aristotle tells us, reasonably enough, that an agent's universal beliefs, his beliefs about the sorts of things it is worthwhile to do, are constitutive of his character" (Meyer, 1993:175).

[5] Broadie comments that "intellectual errors […] may arise from character (consider impatience) without identifying those errors as failures of character" (Broadie, 1991:289).

But, it might be objected, carelessness may be part of a man's character. We counter, however, by asserting that a man is himself responsible for becoming careless, because he lives in a loose and carefree manner; he is likewise responsible for being unjust or self-indulgent, if he keeps on doing mischief or spending his time in drinking and the like. For a given kind of activity produces a corresponding character. This is shown by the way in which people train themselves for any kind of contest or performance: they keep on practicing for it. Thus, only a man who is utterly insensitive can be ignorant of the fact that moral characteristics are formed by actively engaging in particular actions. (1114a4-11) Despite Aristotle's efforts to allow for a more robust account of non-moral factual ignorance for which one can be culpable, he limits culpability to instances in which an agent can or should be expected to know. But, what about difficult cases in which it may be unreasonable to expect that the agent know? What about cases in which an agent doesn't even know that she doesn't know? Indeed, contrary to Aristotle, even if an agent has moral knowledge, failure on the part of the agent to acquire non-moral facts relevant to the circumstances may not be excusable.

2. The Excuse of Ignorance

Consider the following cases.

Case One: Drue, the Young Amish Girl

Drue is an 18 year old Amish girl from Pennsylvania and she is 3 months pregnant. Her family and husband Brad are ecstatic about the news. She desires to have a healthy baby and takes active steps to promote a healthy lifestyle. Drue lives on a farm and as is customary for the Amish, only eats food produced by certain natural processes. A large part of her diet consists of unpasteurized cheese and milk because she read somewhere that calcium is really good for a developing fetus. As a result of consuming unpasteurized dairy products on a daily basis, she becomes ill from the bacteria Listeria, a potentially fatal bacterium to a vulnerable fetus. Drue contracts listeriosis and miscarries.

Case Two: Claire and the Unexpected Intruder

Claire is a 35 year old woman from Kentucky and former special ops agent with the U.S. Army. Late one evening while Claire is asleep in bed, she wakes up to hear what sounds like an intruder breaking into her home. Claire retrieves her gun that she keeps hidden in the bedside table. She quietly makes her way downstairs and sees the intruder close the refrigerator and sneak out the back door. She follows him and calls out – telling him to stop, that she has a gun. He doesn't stop and appears to pull what looks like a weapon out of his pocket. She proceeds to fire the gun. Claire immediately calls 911 and rushes over to the intruder. It is her son. He is dead.

Case Three: Barb, the Happy Housewife

Barb, a 50 year old married mother of four, loves to be a housewife. She takes great pleasure in hosting events, cooking lavish meals, designing new recipes, and taking care of her family. One hot summer day, Barb makes some of her famous homemade lemonade for her husband who has been outdoors all day landscaping and cleaning the garage. Barb developed a special lemonade recipe that includes using a medley of fruit drinks. While mixing the ingredients, Barb mistakes a contaminated beverage for a fruit drink. Unbeknownst to Barb, her oldest child is working on his science fair project that requires refrigerating a toxic liquid. His teacher has stored some for him at school to take home but the only container he had to transport it was an empty fruit juice bottle. Barb adds it to the mix. The lemonade that she made is actually contaminated and she winds up poisoning her husband. He dies. Each of these women is ignorant of at least one important non-moral fact. Drue is ignorant of the fact that unpasteurized milk is potentially harmful for a developing fetus. Claire is ignorant of the fact that the intruder is not an actual intruder but is instead her son. Barb is ignorant of the fact that the beverage she served her husband is toxic. Are these women culpable for their actions? An initial review suggests that Drue, Claire, and Barb are all non-culpably ignorant and excused for their bad acts. For example, in Case One, Drue is ignorant of non-moral facts about the dangers of unpasteurized milk. Of course, it is reasonable to suppose that she could have read a little more about the specifics of a pregnancy diet or sought out additional information from her community. However, perhaps she did seek out additional information but happened to misread the article or overlooked an important point about pasteurization. Perhaps she had never heard of pasteurization. If Drue had known better, she would not have consumed unpasteurized milk and cheese.

However, as a young Amish woman, Drue is subject to certain cultural influences that may account for her non-moral factual ignorance and subsequently mitigate her responsibility for her actions.[6] Next, consider the cases of Claire and Barb. Claire mistakenly believes that there is an intruder in her home when in fact it is only her son. Had Claire known that he was her son, she would not have shot him. Similarly, Barb is ignorant of the toxic nature of the beverage she served her husband. She, too, falsely believes that the drink was not contaminated. Had she known better, she wouldn't have served it to him. Of course, we can also suppose that both Claire and Barb could have known better. Claire could have looked more closely to ensure she wasn't going to shoot someone who was not actually an intruder. Further, Claire is a special ops agent—she could have used her training more effectively. Also, Barb could have smelled the beverage or tasted it prior to serving. These cases illustrate how non-moral factual ignorance is often the product of faulty sense perception, unintentional negligence, lack of awareness, or false belief, specifically, where an agent thinks she knows what she does not, in fact, know—or, in more extreme cases, when she doesn't even know that she doesn't even know. Such cases illuminate how profoundly we can be ignorant and how profoundly we can be ignorant of our ignorance.[7] Further, they suggest that mistakes of fact are often out of our control and thus, our ignorance is, too, out of our control.

These cases focus on situations in which a person doesn't know that she is ignorant. Often, this kind of ignorance is exculpatory because it seems unreasonable to expect that someone can overcome ignorance of which she is ignorant.[8] Aristotle shows us that the distinction between culpable and non-culpable ignorance is not so simple after all and in fact, plays an important role in moral appraisal. Along these lines, recent discussions by many contemporary figures endorse the view that ignorance excuses only if it is ignorance for which one is not culpable.[9] Specifically, each offers some variation on what is known as the Ignorance Thesis: "Whenever an agent acts from ignorance, whether factual or moral, he is culpable for the act only if he is culpable for the ignorance from which he acts" (Rosen, 2004: 64).[10] For example, Holly Smith argues that the presence of a benighting act is evidence of culpability for one's ignorance (Smith, 1983). Michael Zimmerman argues that "culpability for ignorant behavior must be rooted in culpability that involves no ignorance" (Zimmerman, 1997: 417). Most discussion about culpability for ignorance leaves cases like these alone to instead focus on cases in which someone is aware of her ignorance, isn't sure of her belief or knowledge, or is willfully negligent in her intellectual commitments. I think that cases like these are crucial to understanding the significance of non-moral factual ignorance to effective agency. Thus, we need to take a closer look at the excupatory power of non-moral factual ignorance—even the ignorance that we are ignorant of.

A modified version of the Ignorance Thesis, one that focuses solely on non-moral facts, can be formulated as: Whenever an agent acts from non-moral factual ignorance, and is ignorant of his ignorance, he is culpable for the act only if he is culpable for the ignorance from which he acts.[11] Arguably, this is a tenuous position. For one thing—and perhaps the most important—non-moral factual ignorance tends to be more excusing than its counterpart, moral ignorance. For those who are morally ignorant, the expectations are higher and the standards for exculpation are better patrolled. However, non-moral factual ignorance tends to more easily fall into the category of excuse because it is involves ignorance that we often tend to lack much (or any) control over. The previous cases demonstrate the types of non-moral factual ignorance that this paper is interested in investigating. If an agent is ignorant of her ignorance, then how can she take steps to avoid her ignorance and how can she be culpable for ignorance for which she lacks much, if any, control? I suspect that this may be an impossible question to answer. My aim in this paper is to analyze non-moral factual ignorance and, by examining cases like those presented, show that non-moral factual ignorance is a much more pervasive problem than has previously been acknowledged. In what follows, I proceed to offer an analysis that situates the discussion about culpability for ignorance in an epistemological context.

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[6] For example, Michelle Moody-Adams defends what she calls the "Inability Thesis" which asserts that one's culture can impair one's ability to know right and wrong (Moody-Adams, 1994). Of course, while this thesis focuses on moral knowledge, perhaps it can extend to non-moral factual knowledge given one's cultural practices, habits, and beliefs.

[7] Of course, this is not a new idea. See Nicholas Rescher (2009).

[8] See Guerrero (2007), p. 66, and Rosen (2004).

[9] Some contemporary figures include: Guerrero (2007), Rosen (2004), Smith (1983), and Zimmerman (1997).

[10] See Guerrero (2007), Rosen (2003), Zimmerman (1997), and Smith (1983).

[11] I have borrowed from and modified (for my purposes) Alexander Guerrero's "Moral Ignorance Thesis (Deep Ignorance): Whenever an agent acts from moral ignorance, and is ignorant of his ignorance, he is culpable for the act only if he is culpable for the ignorance from which he acts" (Guerrero, 2007: 95).

I introduce contemporary epistemological responses to show that standards of non-culpable ignorance are often ignorance for which one can be culpable. Indeed, I show that this seemingly impossible question isn't so impossible if we look at it in a different context and with a different approach—specifically, by concentrating on processes and not simply products or acts. In so doing, I offer a number of reasons to favor this analysis. By raising awareness of the value of epistemological analyses of knowledge and belief and their relation to questions about moral responsibility, it becomes apparent how standards for moral appraisal, like the Ignorance Thesis, under appreciate the epistemic dimensions of action. I will show that non-moral factual ignorance plays a meaningful role in what it means to be a morally responsible agent. As illustrated in the cases of Drue, Claire, and Barb, the significance of non-moral facts to moral action is quite meaningful. The significance of knowledge and belief to action is demonstrably apparent in these cases. We tend to act upon what we believe or (don't) know. Non-moral factual knowledge is important for agents to realize their beliefs about what is beneficial or what they ought to do. An alternative analysis of these cases may help to show just how pervasive non-moral factual ignorance can be to moral action as well as its relevance to moral appraisal.

3. An Epistemological Anaylsis of Ignorance

According to the Ignorance Thesis, Drue, Claire, and Barb are culpable for their actions only if they are culpable for the ignorance from which they acted. Are they culpable for their ignorance? What is ignorance? According to Nicholas Rescher, ignorance is an "error of omission" (Rescher, 2009: 1). René Van Woudenberg defines it as "not-knowing" (van Woudenberg, 2009: 373).[12] Others connect ignorance to one's epistemic and doxastic activities (Ayer, 2000; Dretske, 2000; Heil, 1984; Kornblith, 1983). Epistemological accounts of ignorance tend to treat it as an epistemic state. The Ignorance Thesis, however, treats ignorance less as an epistemic state and more as a type of activity or product of some activity or omission.[13] Consider the case of Drue, the young Amish girl. Drue held beliefs about the nature of a healthy pregnancy diet. However, some of her beliefs were incomplete or false—either due to lack of education, understanding, or improper evaluation. The significance of belief to action in this case is clear: she utilized her beliefs to make sense of and function in the world. Beliefs provide us with representational content about our environment so we can effectively operate as agents.

First, Drue held beliefs. She ought to care about the effectiveness of her belief-forming and belief-generating mechanisms.[14] As Jason Stanley points out, the importance of responsible believing can be justified independent of knowledge claims (Stanley, 2005). At least we can examine belief-generating processes because we ought to engage in effective and responsible belief-related practices even if we can't call all or some of the products/beliefs genuine instances of knowledge. Since we hold beliefs we still ought to care about how we form, acquire, and arrive at our belief-related attitudes. We can hold beliefs carelessly or carefully, assiduously or trivially, negligently or responsibly. Thus, Drue ought to be accountable for her beliefs.[15] To illustrate how we can hold beliefs in careless or responsible ways, consider the case of Michael, a flat-earth neophyte. Michael holds the belief that the earth is not round, it is actually flat. As a result of the current environmental crisis happening in the world, he also believes that the edges of the earth are slowly eroding and chipping away. He believes that the earth is growing smaller. Michael has a lot of evidence available to him about the actual shape of the earth and does not dispute its source or reliability. Instead, he believes "in the teeth of the evidence" and "against the evidence" (Heil, 1984: 63-64, 66, 68). Michael believes incontinently: he holds beliefs that are incompatible with his reasons and evidence.[16] Further, he is epistemically negligent because he knew what he shouldn't do (believe)—namely, to believe against the evidence. This example demonstrates an alternative understanding of culpable ignorance: it can be defined in terms of incontinence.

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[12] Of course, van Woudenberg's definition of ignorance is not that simple. He clarifies that not all instances of not-knowing are instances of ignorance. He offers an example: "someone having the true but unwarranted belief that p doesn't know that p, but can hardly be said to be ignorant of p" (van Woudenberg, 2009: 373-375).

[13] Zimmerman supports this interpretation. See Zimmerman (2008): 173-178.

[14] Fred Dretske makes this point. See Dretske (2000).

[15] Whether or not we have control over our beliefs goes beyond the scope of this paper. For present purposes, I will presume that at a minimum, we have control over our rational and deliberative faculties.

[16] For a discussion of the doxastically incontinently agent, see John Heil (1984).

Incontinence is produced by irresponsible epistemic attitudes and conduct and not simply the result of an error in reasoning or the impossibility of knowledge attributions. Second, Drue cannot remove the possibility of error. But, this does not exclude or excuse her from doing the best she can with respect to her belief-related practices. For example, A.J. Ayer makes the point that knowledge claims should not necessarily require objective standards of certainty (Ayer, 2000). Rather, we ought to have an extremely high degree of confidence in our beliefs. We have 'a right to be sure' and this requires that an agent's belief is arrived at by some reliable means and she holds evidence to support her attitudes towards that belief. If she has 'the right to be sure' this is compatible with error, but 'to be sure' requires that she possesses credible evidence or that her beliefs are arrived at by some reliable means. The 'right to be sure' requires that an agent takes reasonable steps towards making sure that one is in fact sure. This implies that in many cases we can agree that one belief may be better or more reasonable than another. While we cannot remove the possibility of error, ignorance is often an insufficient excuse.

Third, did Drue seek to pursue the truth? Ignorance can also be viewed as the product of failing to pursue truth regardless of the outcomes (Kornblith, 1983). Specifically, ignorance is the result of failing to pursue one's epistemic goals responsibly. An agent can be excused for her epistemic failings provided that she desires truth and does the 'best she can' to attain her goal (Kornblith, 1983). Even if we cannot remove the possibility of error there are relevant standards that identify the presence of "epistemically culpable ignorance" and we must assess an agent in virtue of "the processes responsible for the presence of his beliefs" (Kornblith, 1983: 36-38). This also extends to "the defects in his evidence-gathering procedures" (Kornblith, 1983: 35). On this view, ignorance is the product of one's epistemic failings for which one is culpable. The outcome, while important, is not the only mark of responsible epistemic conduct. The mark of culpable ignorance includes how an agent pursues her epistemic goals and not simply whether she has attained those goals.[17] An epistemological analysis sheds light on our understanding of ignorance and suggests that the Ignorance Thesis—specifically, the nature of non-moral factual ignorance—is much more pervasive than has been acknowledged. This analysis illuminates the importance of our epistemic and doxastic practices and goals to moral agency. These perspectives, in turn, help to clarify that the nature of culpable ignorance (at least as it pertains to belief) may, in fact, be much wider than previously acknowledged in the Ignorance Thesis. It can also serve to provide us a better appreciation of the scope of non-moral factual culpable ignorance.

4. Why We Are Culpable for Our Ignorance More Often than We Think

An epistemological examination of ignorance brings to light the inadequacy of some existing attempts to identify the proper scope of non-moral factual ignorance for which one is culpable. Further, this examination shows us that processes matter more than the product (like knowledge or true belief). I have argued here in favor of an analysis of ignorance that clarifies how one's epistemic practices have a bearing on establishing culpability for one's acts. Rather than allowing for the limits of ignorance to be set based on the limits of being human, epistemological perspectives offer something different—they offer us more motivation to take our epistemic lives into our own hands. Rather than simply stress the limits of human reason and cognition, figures like Ayer, Dretske, Heil and Kornblith stress method and process—in this way, these approaches demand that we work harder which seems reasonable in light of the fact that our beliefs have practical consequences. However, there are two major obstacles to overcome. The first concerns an argument from skepticism and the second involves our cognitive limitations. I will explore each in turn. Gideon Rosen offers the first objection. He argues that non-moral factual ignorance is much more far-reaching than is often acknowledged in accounts of moral responsibility (Rosen, 2004). He claims that we ought to suspend judgments of blame for bad acts because we can never be certain of (or we can never genuinely know) one's original or derivative responsibility for the act.

The skeptical argument assumes as a premise that whenever you are culpable for failing to know some pertinent truth, this is because you are culpable for failing to comply with one of these procedural epistemic obligations. Ignorance is culpable only if it derives from culpable recklessness or negligence in the management of one's opinion. Take any case of action done from ignorance and let it be stipulated that the agent has been utterly scrupulous in policing his own opinion: he has been as careful and as inquisitive and as reflective as a person in his circumstances should be, and yet he has failed to grasp some crucial fact.

[17] Gideon Rosen supports a similar point as it relates to the Ignorance Thesis (Rosen, 2004). He claims that we are subject to "procedural epistemic obligations" which are obligations "to take steps to ensure that when the time comes to act, one will know what one ought to do" (Rosen, 2004: 301). These obligations don't necessarily require success in one's epistemic endeavors but they do require that the agent makes a reasonable effort.

I claim that if you bear this stipulation clearly in mind, you will be persuaded in every case that the agent's ignorance is not his fault. (Rosen, 2004: 302) While Rosen acknowledges that the epistemic position is important, ignorance for which we are not culpable is often ignorance that, no matter how hard we try to overcome it, is beyond our ability to prevent. Barb, the happy housewife, appears to be a case like what Rosen describes. If Barb could not have prevented her ignorance about the contaminated beverage, it seems unreasonable to hold her culpable for her actions. In this way, ignorance excuses her conduct on the assumption that she did all she could to be responsible in her action-guiding judgments. Zimmerman also suggests that Drue, Claire, and Barb could be non-culpably ignorant even though—without taking extreme steps or utilizing many resources—they could have known better. He questions why people who don't but could know better are considered culpable for not knowing as well as for their bad acts. He states:

[E]ven if it is true on some occasion that someone should have known something that he (or she) didn't know, it does not follow that that person is culpable for not knowing what he didn't know. To say that he should have known what he didn't know is, presumably, to attribute his ignorance to some wrongdoing on his part. But wrongdoing doesn't suffice for culpability! (Zimmerman, 2008: 178) Conversely, epistemology shows us that these woman who are ignorant of non-moral facts may actually fail to do all they can to be responsible in epistemic matters.[18] For example, we must ask whether Claire responsibly pursued the truth or if she had confidence in her beliefs that night. Even if she could have known better, was she responsible with regard to her epistemic attitudes and practices?[19] The upshot is simply that, when viewed from an epistemological perspective, contemporary accounts of the excusing force of ignorance are unsatisfying because they don't help to explain these kinds of difficult cases. They under-appreciate the significance of non-moral factual ignorance and its relation to epistemically responsible goals and practices. Indeed, non-moral factual ignorance is, in many cases, ignorance that does not excuse—even in light of our human limitations to gain knowledge. A second objection concerns George Sher's insistence that the limits of our cognitive faculties should be accounted for in discussions about knowledge as it relates to the excusing force of ignorance.[20]

Given the many limitations on what we can know, it is impossible for any given agent to be aware of every morally and prudentially relevant fact about every act that he might perform. Thus, if being fully responsible requires being aware of all such facts, then no agent is ever fully responsible for what he does. Still, because agents vary widely in the sorts of things of which they are aware, there remains ample room for the view that how much responsibility any given agent has for what he has done is a direct function of the range of relevant facts of which he was aware. (Sher, 2009: 178) Sher notes that not only is it the case that we cannot know everything there is to know, our cognitive faculties have limits as to what they can do. However, this suggests that we are non-culpably ignorant more than we think. Here, his point is consistent with the claim that since we cannot remove the possibility of error due to our cognitive limitations, then we should be regarded as neither culpable for failing to satisfy moral standards nor for our ignorance.[21] And yet, recall that Ayer points out that the inevitability of error does not exclude or excuse us from doing all we can with respect to our belief-related attitudes—we ought to have confidence in our beliefs (Ayer, 2000). Nicholas Rescher offers an interesting and positive response that supports my position that we ought to focus more on process and less on product. The fact that ignorance is ineliminable in the larger scheme of things does not stand in the way of answering any or many of the particular questions in which we take an interest. While ignorance is indeed here to stay, it will never block the path to progress. And so, while our cognitive limitedness as finite beings is real enough, there nevertheless are no boundaries—no determinate limits—to the manifold of discoverable facts. […] For while the cognitive range of finite beings is indeed limited, it is also boundless because it is not limited in a way that blocks the prospect of cognitive access to ever new and ongoingly more informative facts that afford us an ever ampler and more adequate account of reality. (Rescher, 2009: 32) It is inevitable that we hold beliefs.

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[18] Of course, this claim raises the question: What does it mean for an agent to be 'responsible' in epistemic matters? This paper focuses on illuminating the problem and not offering a solution.

[19] Of the three women, I think in Claire's case it is quite easy to see her culpable ignorance due to the fact that she was specially trained to effectively deal with situations like the one she was faced with that night.

[20] Of course, Sher is not alone. Nicholas Rescher (2009) supports a similar claim about.

[21] Rescher's account of culpable ignorance is also consistent with this view (Rescher, 2009: 1-27, 140-151).

Thus, we ought to care and be confident about the beliefs we hold (Ayer, 2000; Dretske, 2000). A clear standard that limits the range of beliefs that are rational or reasonable for agents to hold when pursuing moral ends ought to be identified. Moreover, there must be some standard that accounts for how agents acquire, assess, and apply particular knowledge in the moral domain—and one that does not restrict its focus to what is ineliminable, but instead, to focus on what is in our power.[22] Consider again Barb's ignorance about the lethal beverage that she unwittingly served to her husband. For Aristotle, Barb's action is involuntary (and excusable) for the reason that the ends she brought about were not what she intended or desired. She lacked any vicious intent to kill her husband. Barb only wanted to take care of him and thought she was by serving him a cold drink on a hot day. Her actions were not a reflection of a bad or vicious character; it was simply a great misfortune. But, if Barb is ignorant as a result of negligent behavior, then there is no excuse for her conduct.[23] Both Rosen and Sher might argue that it was unreasonable to expect that Barb could have overcome her ignorance or cognitive limitations and hence she, too, is non-culpably ignorant.

However, a number of questions spring to mind: How did Barb manage to mistake a lethal beverage for a fruit drink? Was her ignorance the product of some faulty character disposition? Was it the result of some habits she unwittingly developed years ago about proper beverage handling?[24] Perhaps Barb has never seen or come into contact with a toxic beverage before or maybe the container appeared safe. Perhaps she overlooked the horrible odor coming from the beverage or perhaps it was odorless. Maybe she didn't consider the oddly fluorescent yet fruity color of the beverage. These factors all seem relevant as to whether or not Barb is culpable for her ignorance even though her beverage-ignorance constitutes a simple and unwitting mistake of fact. A strong case can be made for the importance of responsible believing in light of the practical consequences of belief.[25] Epistemological perspectives seem to show that failing to take seriously the relation between our epistemic conduct and the practical consequences of belief, we only have a partial picture of what responsible moral agency looks like. In fact, John Hawthorne defends the position that an agent should act only on what she knows (Hawthorne, 2004; Stanley, 2005). Without holding responsible epistemic attitudes and engaging in responsible epistemic practices we may not be able to effectively function in the world and satisfy what morality requires of us.

Both as epistemic and moral agents we carry out belief-related activities. Competing views about the conditions for responsible epistemic conduct have largely treated epistemic agents as subject to these governing norms. Yet, the significance of these various approaches is also applicable to a broader range of activities. Epistemological principles and norms play a central role in illuminating the effective and responsible exercise of moral agency. Moral agents ought to pursue epistemic success in carrying out their moral practices precisely because their action-guiding activities can be directed, influenced, and impaired by what they believe. In light of the practical consequences of belief and the pervasive presence of ignorance in our lives, a moral agent ought to responsibly pursue non-moral facts and adopt reasonable beliefs about her situation in order to satisfy standards of right conduct. Belief-acquisition, belief-formation, reflection, and evidence-gathering are fundamental activities for carrying out our moral practices and manifesting our moral knowledge in action. Non-moral factual ignorance can more often than we think be treated as ignorance for which we are culpable.

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[22] Guerrero appears to support a position similar to mine. He acknowledges that when the stakes are higher, morally, our epistemic obligations increase. He endorses what he calls "moral epistemic contextualism" which is the view that "what is required of us from an epistemic point of view increases as what is at stake from a moral point of view increases: our epistemic obligations grow as the relevant context becomes more morally serious" (Guerrero, 2007: 68, 70).

[23] See Aristotle, 1999: 1113b30-1114a2, 1111a6-15.

[24] For a discussion about tracing, see Vargas (2005).

[25] Rosen makes a case for the importance of following one's "procedural epistemic obligations." He holds that "X is culpable for failing the know that P only if his ignorance is the upshot of some prior culpable act or omission" (Rosen, 2004: 300-304).

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