



## UNCERTAINTY AND IGNORANCE

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### ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this paper is to explore the significance of uncertainty as it bears on our judgments of agents' epistemic position. I present and evaluate a series of cases to show that cognitive habits of mind like the hindsight bias impair our evaluative judgments about ignorance. Initial judgments of ignorance in cases of wrongdoing are often the result of this bias and not grounded on genuine moral criteria. I claim that these cases demonstrate uncertainty in ethics-especially in connection to ignorance of non-moral facts. From this, I make a bold leap to offer a rationale for what I call "educated ignorance"-when an agent chooses ignorance as his or her epistemic position. I conclude by offering some suggestions for why the project of what I call "educated ignorance" is a promising area of study to an ethics of uncertainty.*

**Keywords:** educated ignorance; uncertainty; scholarship; ethics;

### INTRODUCTION

A growing body of scholarship continues to yield a rich discussion about ignorance and its moral significance. Ignorance can be an obstacle to fulfilling our moral duties and its impact on moral practice is often treated as an excusing condition for moral responsibility provided an agent is not culpable for his ignorance.<sup>1</sup>

When evaluating cases that involve agents who are ignorant, we tend to focus on the source of one's ignorance in order to make a moral judgment. However, those who investigate its moral significance do not adequately acknowledge the inevitable presence of uncertainty in ethics - especially as it relates to ignorance.

The purpose of this paper is to explore the significance of uncertainty as it bears on our judgments of agents' epistemic position. I present and evaluate a series of cases to show that cognitive habits of mind like the hindsight bias impair our evaluative judgments about ignorance. Initial judgments of ignorance in cases of wrongdoing are often the result of this bias and not grounded on genuine moral criteria. I claim that these cases demonstrate uncertainty in ethics-especially in connection to ignorance of non-moral facts. From this, I make a bold leap to offer a rationale for what I call "educated ignorance"-when an agent chooses ignorance as his or her epistemic position. I conclude by offering some suggestions for why the project of what I call "educated ignorance" is a promising area of study to an ethics of uncertainty.

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<sup>1</sup> Excusing conditions are descriptions of states that explain how an agent's action is not genuinely attributable to him. If an agent fails to possess knowledge or beliefs relevant to his acting, we often tend to excuse him on the ground that ignorance in some way mitigates his responsibility for acting provided that he is not in some way culpable for the ignorance from which he acts. For a discussion of excusing conditions, see Rosen (2003).



Consider the following cases.

***The case of John.***<sup>2</sup>

One morning my husband John decides to make my cup of coffee and adds the usual heaping scoop of sugar that I enjoy. John believes that the white substance he is spooning into my coffee is sugar. But, it's not sugar-in fact, it's poison. John falsely believes that the white substance in the sugar bowl is sugar. As a result, I die from drinking the poisoned coffee that John made for me.

***The case of Ann.***

Ann is 7 months pregnant and her obstetrician informed her that it is time to start exploring her options for designing a birth plan. Ann signs up for a labor and delivery class at the hospital. The class is offered in two parts. After the first session, Ann is terrified about giving birth and jokingly (although, with a bit of truth behind it) informs her husband that she'd like to carry around the baby in utero for the rest of her life. Ann refuses to go to the next session. She doesn't want to know anything more about labor. She reasons that if she remains informed about the rest of the process then she will become anxious and panic. She is truly terrified and believes that not knowing is all-things-considered *better* than knowing the facts. As a result, Ann was able to fully experience the birth of her first child without anxiety.

These cases are strikingly different. First, Ann did not kill anyone due to her ignorance but John did. Second, John did not know that the sugar was poison and while he did not choose to be ignorant of this fact, he did not make any effort to know better. Indeed, John was ignorant of his ignorance. Ann knew that she did not know much about labor and delivery and she chose to be ignorant. Nevertheless, Ann willfully chose ignorance, not for its own sake (just to be ignorant), but in order to achieve her goal. Third, after his wife's death, John wished he had known better about the true nature of the white substance he spooned into the coffee-that is, he wished he had not been ignorant. By contrast, even after delivering her baby, Ann was pleased that she had chosen ignorance. Interestingly, these striking differences are those that concern their epistemic position.

John and Ann also share a few things in common. I will highlight three similarities. First, they both had good intentions that resulted in choices to do good. John made his wife her coffee that morning because he wanted her to feel loved and appreciated. He believed this small act of kindness would increase the chance of her feeling this way. Like John, Ann wanted to do good-she wanted to have a successful and positive birth experience and chose a course of action that she believed would increase the possibility that she reach this goal. Both John and Ann acted in ways that they believed would be conducive to achieving their goals. Second, there is an element of luck in the outcomes of both cases. Ann's decision resulted in a good outcome and it was what she desired.

However, the choice John made did not result in a good outcome and certainly did not bring about the end he desired. Third, John's and Ann's epistemic position is judged, in part, upon the *consequences* of their choices. John did not choose to investigate the bowl of sugar to ensure it did not contain poison-and this choice resulted in the death of his wife. While his choice was neither reckless nor premeditated, we pause to question whether he should have been more thoughtful-even cautious-about what he put in his wife's coffee.

Given the horrible outcome, we may tend to over-exaggerate and examine how he was negligent.<sup>3</sup> We seriously question whether he was culpable for his ignorance and in some

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<sup>2</sup> I have borrowed and modified this example from Harman [2011].



way even culpable for his wife's death. As for Ann, she chose not to pursue more information and to remain ignorant about the labor and delivery process. Ann's epistemic conduct was deliberate. Fortunately, she gave birth to a healthy baby and experienced no complications during delivery. We do not scrutinize Ann's conduct in the way that we are critical or wary of John's because no harm came to the baby or Ann. We think Ann was rational—not negligent or thoughtless—in her decision not to acquire information in this situation. If either Ann or her baby suffered harm, I suspect that many of us would be inclined to blame her and criticize her choice to be ignorant.

## 1. UNCERTAINTY IN THE CASES OF JOHN AND ANN

John's ignorance led to the death of his wife. However, is he responsible for her death? In what follows, I explore four competing responses to this question: (1) The Standard Response, (2) The Aristotelian Response, (3) The Skeptical Response, and (4) The Hard Luck Response. Each of these responses directly address the epistemic position of an agent and attempts to evaluate its cause. They illuminate complimentary as well as competing perspectives about the significance of ignorance to moral responsibility.

The Standard Response (SR) to the case of John turns on whether he could have prevented his ignorance.<sup>4</sup> On this view, John may be culpably ignorant and hence, blameworthy for killing his wife if he could have prevented or avoided his ignorance. However, John may be non-culpably ignorant and hence, excused for his actions, just in case his ignorance was inevitable or unavoidable.<sup>5</sup>

SR captures our ordinary intuitions about the relationship between ignorance, action, and accountability.<sup>6</sup> The things that are out of our control *cannot* be things for which we are accountable and the things within our control are those for which we *can be* accountable. George Sher nicely captures this point.

The principle that it is unfair to hold agents responsible for what is beyond their control is compatible with many theories of rightness. [...] Because the only facts to which we can appeal when we deliberate are facts of which we are aware, a deliberating agent's conscious beliefs must be central both to his conception of what is within his control and to

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<sup>3</sup> This is consistent with the halo effect. See Kahnemann [2011], p. 199-200: "The halo effect helps keep explanatory narratives simple and coherent by exaggerating the consistency of evaluations: good people do only good things and bad people are all bad."

<sup>4</sup> I draw on Rescher's [2009] concise distinction between culpable and non-culpable (or what he calls 'venial' or 'excusable') ignorance. He states: "Culpable ignorance obtains when the requisite information is available, but insufficient, incompetent, or inadequate efforts are made to obtain it. [...] Excusable ignorance] obtains in all of those situations where ignorance is inevitable because the requisite information regarding the fact is unavailable thanks to the general principles of the situation" (Rescher [2009] p. 11).

<sup>5</sup> Or, in this case, non-culpable ignorance could be ignorance that we could not have reasonably been able to prevent or avoid. However, in part, one of the major issues concerning discussions of the excusing force of ignorance is this very point – namely, identifying what is a reasonable expectation for preventing one's epistemic shortcoming.

<sup>6</sup> SR has a number of proponents, like George Sher, who offer a variety of response that attempt to locate the moment of culpability or excuse. See Zimmerman [1997], Vargas [2005], and Smith [1983]. Zimmerman claims we ought to hold moral agents responsible for his having brought about his state of ignorance provided that "culpability for ignorant behavior must be rooted in culpability that involves no ignorance" (Zimmerman [1997] p. 417). Vargas employs Van Inwagen's 'tracing principle' to the knowledge condition for moral responsibility. He makes the point that a tracing principle strategy for difficult cases (involving ignorance) "anchors responsibility in either prior decisions to act, or acquisitions of dispositions, habit, or the self" (Vargas [2005] p. 271). Holly Smith maintains that ignorance is only an excusing condition to the extent that the state of affairs was such that the agent "should have realized what he was doing" (Smith [1983] p. 453).



his conception of what he may fairly be asked to do. When we deliberate, we necessarily view our control as extending only as far as the possibilities of which we are conscious.<sup>7</sup>

SR concentrates on the connection between the excuse of ignorance and the control one has over his epistemic position. On this view, freedom or some kind of control condition must be present in order to assign culpability. Ignorance can exculpate only when it the result of something *outside* of our control. John's ignorance of the white substance was something that he had the opportunity to correct. It did not occur to him that he needed to investigate any further.

The Aristotelian Response (AR) suggests that John is responsible if he lacks knowledge of *moral facts* relevant to the circumstance.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, John should have access to or constitutional understanding of what is good, bad, right, wrong, beneficial or harmful.

Ignorance in moral choice does not make an act involuntary – it makes it wicked; rather, it is ignorance of the particulars which constitute the circumstances and the issues involved in the action.<sup>9</sup>

In this case, John was not ignorant of moral facts but he was ignorant of non-moral facts. He believed that it is morally good to make your wife feel loved and this is beneficial to persons and to one's marriage.<sup>10</sup> He also believed that this small act of kindness would satisfy this moral belief. However, if John had known better, he would not have spooned poison into his wife's coffee.<sup>11</sup> He would have thrown out the poison and figured out a different way to make his wife feel loved.

Also, had it been a different day or different bowl of sugar, it is possible that John's wife would not die and the outcomes been more in line with his actual intent and goal. If so, perhaps we would have perceived John differently—and not questioned his conduct. Interestingly, John's actions do not change in either scenario, only the outcome. This point highlights that John's knowledge of moral facts is not what is at issue here. An assessment of John from the perspective of AR turns on his knowledge of moral facts. On this view, then, John's ignorance would excuse him from responsibility.

Atypical responses to the case of John focus on the limits of knowledge and the influence of factors beyond our control. The Skeptical Response (SKR) would likely claim that he cannot be morally responsible for his wife's death in light of his ignorance about the nature of the white substance in the sugar bowl because we cannot know anything with absolute certainty.<sup>12</sup> According to SKR, John will inevitably be ignorant in some way—

<sup>7</sup> Sher [2009] p. 55, 59.

<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, this is a very strict interpretation drawn from Aristotle's distinction between culpable and non-culpable ignorance. He does acknowledge that we can be culpably ignorant for ignorance of non-moral facts in certain cases. For the purposes of this paper, I present this strict interpretation to stress a very specific point, namely, that the type of one's ignorance is also another way of looking at and understanding the nature of ignorance in determining responsibility. See Aristotle [1999].

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle [1999] 1110b31-35.

<sup>10</sup> For the sake of argument, I will presume that this is a moral belief. To defend a conception of what counts as moral belief goes beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>11</sup> I presume this is the case because John's intention was to make his wife feel loved and appreciated.

<sup>12</sup> I have drawn SKR from Unger [1975]. 1975). Unger's classic defense of skepticism is a thesis denying the possibility of genuine knowledge claims. He argues that there is no degree of sufficient justification to make (or warrant) such claims. Thus, the beliefs we hold are no more or less reasonable (or justified) than another. On this view, we cannot assess agents in virtue of the claim for universal ignorance. The case of John is a good model for SKR. Yet, a willfully ignorant agent—like Ann—may have a different kind of epistemic status.



whether he knows it or not—so there can be no meaningful moral assessment of his actions. Nicholas Rescher [2009] acknowledges a similar point.

One of the great defects of cognitive scepticism is that it annihilates the very idea of culpable ignorance. For if (per impossible) the sceptic were right and we could know nothing whatsoever, then of course ignorance of any and all sorts would be at once eventualities. Where no one can know anything, no one is open to reproach for a lack of knowledge.<sup>13</sup>

Sher [2009] also sketches out a version of SKR. He claims that we cannot know everything there is to know and our faculties have limits as to what they can do.<sup>14</sup> On this view, John is not morally responsible for the death of his wife and certainly not culpable for his ignorance. For John to investigate the white substance seems to go beyond our expectations of what we would imagine he would do under such (seemingly) ordinary circumstances. However, what drives us to question John's responsibility in his wife's death is largely the product of hindsight in light of the outcomes.

SKR helps to illuminate the limitations that influence an agent's choices and actions.

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.<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, Zimmerman [2008] addresses and challenges the impact of skepticism concerning moral responsibility.

What seems usually to be overlooked, however, and may help explain our tendency to overestimate the number of cases in which people are to be blamed for their ignorant behavior, is that, even 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. [...] It is ironic that someone who recognizes the possibility that one have an excuse for wrongful behavior performed in or from ignorance should be blind to the possibility that one have an excuse for wrongful behavior that results in ignorance; yet that seems precisely to be the mistake committed by those who claim that its being the case that one should have known what one didn't know suffices (*ceteris paribus*) for one's being culpable for one's ignorance.<sup>16</sup>

Zimmerman's insight here is important to John's case. It challenges our ordinary intuitions about how one's epistemic position determines blame for wrongdoing. Even if a person is ignorant and could have known better does not mean that his ignorance is the product of some kind of (blameworthy) negligence on his part. What we can or cannot know is not necessarily a function of accountability or culpability for moral action. From the skeptical position, if we should only act on what we know, then how can we act?<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the Hard Luck Response (HLR) replies by saying that John was unlucky and cannot be morally responsible for his wife's death because he lacked power and control over

<sup>13</sup> Rescher [2009] p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> See Sher [2009].

<sup>15</sup> Sher [2009] p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> Zimmerman [2008] p. 178.

<sup>17</sup> John Hawthorne claims that we ought to care about what we believe and should act only on what we know. See Hawthorne [2004].



his epistemic position.<sup>18</sup> John is rarely, if ever, free to the extent that warrants being morally responsible for actions that issue from ignorance. Neil Levy argues this point.

Thanks to luck, distant or present, agents who perform wrongful actions *typically* lack freedom-level control over their actions because they do not satisfy one or both prongs of the epistemic conditions on such control. If their ignorance is non-culpable, then they are not responsible for failing to possess such control, and—prima facie—ought to be excused responsibility for their actions.<sup>19</sup>

The Hard Luck Response shares an element of the Standard Response in that it acknowledges the distinction between culpable and non-culpable ignorance. However, HLR goes beyond SR by illuminating how luck can impair and disable our ability to be morally responsible agents. Rarely are we culpably ignorant because luck can sometimes explain how we arrived at our epistemic position. John's ignorance is an example of the influence of luck—albeit bad luck in this case—in his life.<sup>20</sup> Luck could have had a positive influence instead—no poison wound up in the sugar bowl—and John's wife would have not only been alive but also felt cared for and loved.

How would these four perspectives respond to the case of Ann? Ann deliberately planned to be ignorant and yet no negative consequences arose as a result. According to SR, questions concerning culpability seem out of place because no one suffered harm. Of course, Ann is surely culpable for her ignorance—she *chose* her epistemic position. Nevertheless, she is not culpable for any wrongdoing arising from it since there was none. Similarly, AR would likely respond that Ann clearly is in possession of moral facts, yet she chose to be ignorant of non-moral facts. This is a case of willful ignorance and yet criticism does not seem appropriate. Perhaps choosing non-moral ignorance is a sign of character—however, Ann is typically one who bases her decisions on good reasons and evidence. Ann's decision to choose ignorance as her epistemic position in that context was the result of an all-things-considered reasoned view.

The Skeptical Response does not apply to Ann because it does not seem like we can say anything meaningful about her epistemic position. SKR cannot offer an interesting explanation for a case in which someone chooses ignorance and yet committed no wrongdoing. Ann chose ignorance but the SKR might suggest that she really did not choose anything because you can't really choose not to know what you don't know since you don't really know what you are choosing not to know.<sup>21</sup>

The Hard Luck Response would likely acknowledge that Ann was lucky. The situation could have turned out differently but Ann's choice to be ignorant was no more in her control than the outcome was. HLR cannot offer anything substantive about the case of Ann. However, HLR helps to illuminate the uncertainty of her decision as well as the uncertainty of reaching her desired end.

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<sup>18</sup> I draw this view along with its name from Levy [2011].

<sup>19</sup> Levy [2011] p. 115-116.

<sup>20</sup> Levy notes: "Blaming agents for false beliefs (once more from the control-based perspective adopted here) requires that we locate a benighting action, and actions whereby an agent *knowingly and freely* passed up an opportunity for knowledge, and in virtue of which they are responsible for their ignorance. But as we have seen, locating such a benighting action is no trivial task. *Very* often there is no plausible candidate for a benighting action. The epistemic conditions on control are so demanding that they are rarely satisfied." (Levy [2011] p. 131.)

<sup>21</sup> Rescher claims: "while one can know indefinitely *that* one is ignorant of something – that there are facts one does not know – one cannot know specifically *what* it is that one is ignorant of – that is, what the facts at issue are" (Rescher [2009] p. 5).



At first glance, what we can learn about John and Ann's epistemic position from these competing responses appears to be philosophically uninteresting. As far as I can tell, there is no normative guidance drawn from these responses. For example, if the Skeptical or Hard Luck responses are correct, then we rarely, if ever, make any meaningful moral judgments. If the Standard or Aristotelian responses are correct, ignorance as an epistemic position relates to outcomes but it is not clear how we can avoid it—we can infer that we should avoid ignorance when we are aware but there is no clear moral imperative to do so when we are unaware. These perspectives do not offer much in terms of the cases themselves; however, they do bring to light the apparent uncertainty in ethics from a variety of viewpoints.

Upon closer inspection, SR and AR offer us some insight into the connection between our epistemic position and understanding of morality. Consider John. He could have tasted the white substance and would have noticed that it did not taste like sugar. This may have alerted him to investigate further or dispose of the contents of the sugar bowl. Hindsight is the cause of this insight and not any established moral criteria. Hindsight bias is a cognitive habit of mind that “*leads observers to assess the quality of a decision not by whether the process was sound but by whether its outcome was good or bad.*”<sup>22</sup>

According to hindsight, John should have investigated the contents of the sugar bowl. From the perspective of hindsight, John *could* have known better. Yet this does not mean that his ignorance is the product of some wrongdoing on his part. Just in case an agent is ignorant and could know better does not mean that the moral infraction resulting from his ignorance is necessarily something for which he *ought* to be accountable.<sup>23</sup>

The strategy for isolating culpability for ignorance illuminates the uncertainty present in ethics. Recognizing and understanding the relationship between moral responsibility, skepticism, luck, and uncertainty suggests that ignorance is important to ethics in different way than it is traditionally viewed. As an epistemic position, ignorance demonstrates that ethics *is* uncertain. The uncertainty present in our lives is that for which we wind up being accountable and one cause of this is *hindsight*. Moral judgments based on hindsight are a threat to ethics.

## 2. A CASE FOR EDUCATED IGNORANCE

We need to reinvigorate our understanding of ignorance—willful and otherwise—and take into account the goals we pursue *in connection to* our epistemic position. Our inevitable epistemic limitations, in whatever form they emerge to affect us—willful, unavoidable, unforeseeable, or merely a matter of luck—tend to be judged on the basis of hindsight. John's ignorance is the result of unreactive agency; he unintentionally fails to take steps to improve his epistemic position because he does not think that he needs to.

Ann's ignorance is the result of reactive agency; she intentionally chooses behaviors that allow her to avoid improving her epistemic position. While John is an unwittingly ignorant agent, Ann demonstrates “educated ignorance”—she *chooses* ignorance as her epistemic position in pursuit of a moral end.

She rationally and deliberately decided not to improve her epistemic position because she believed knowing could interfere with the achievement of moral ends. I think we can learn a lot about the significance of ignorance and the power of uncertainty from the case of Ann. If properly cultivated, ignorance can at times be meaningful—even valuable—to the

<sup>22</sup> Kahneman [2011] p. 203.

<sup>23</sup> See Zimmerman [2008].



pursuit of moral ends. Thus, we ought to do a better job of acknowledging uncertainty in ethics with regard to one's epistemic position. One way we can do this is to acknowledge the epistemic position of what I call "educated ignorance."

### CONCLUSIONS

"Educated ignorance" helps to make sense of an ethics of uncertainty. It accounts for the uncertainty that regularly shadows our epistemic practices and positions. On my view, an ethics of uncertainty does not presuppose skepticism or hard luck but simply acknowledges that we often have little control over the environment in which we find ourselves. This also includes our access to and the availability of information. In this way, an ethics of uncertainty need not "suppose no knowledge whatsoever."<sup>24</sup> An account of "educated ignorance" helps make a case for the uncertainty present in ethics by setting forth clear standards for epistemic responsibility.<sup>25</sup> Educated ignorance affirms our epistemic position rather than judges it in order to preserve the possibility of making meaningful and valuable ethical assessments.

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<sup>24</sup> Walsh [2001] p. 164.

<sup>25</sup> For example, this could include 'a right to be sure' or 'confidence in one's beliefs.' For a discussion of 'a right to be sure,' see Ayer [2000]. For a discussion of what it means to have confidence in a belief, see Dretske [2000].