

IGNORANCE AND FORCE: TWO EXCUSING CONDITIONS FOR FALSE BELIEFS

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Ever since at least Aristotle, it has been widely recognized that a theory of responsibility must allow for the fact that in certain conditions agents are excused for not doing what they ought to do (or for doing what they ought not to do)—and accordingly that they cannot be held responsible (and so, blamed) for what they did not, or did, do. In such conditions they are not appropriate candidates for one of what Strawson has called the “reactive attitudes” such as resentment, contempt, gratitude, and affection.¹ Let us call such conditions *excusing conditions*. The main aim of this paper is to show that the very same conditions that can excuse agents for not doing what they ought to do (or for doing what they ought not to do), also can excuse them for having false beliefs. As an afterthought it is suggested that this is a reason for thinking that humans can sometimes be held responsible (and so, blamed) for what they believe.

I. THE NATURE OF IGNORANCE

The two widely acknowledged excusing conditions are *nonculpable ignorance* and *force*. As to the first: when you open a door, thereby killing a puppy that unbeknownst to you was hiding behind it, you are not responsible for the death of the puppy—at least if your ignorance wasn’t culpable.²

Now when is ignorance nonculpable and when is it not? And what *is* ignorance? As to this last question, the first thing to see is that ignorance is not-knowing, and the second that not every instance of not-knowing is a case of ignorance.³ To see this clearly it must be noted that there are different ways in which an agent may fail to know that *p*—different reasons why a subject may be lacking in knowledge that *p*. Here are some possibilities derived from extant analyses of knowledge:

S doesn’t know that p when:

- (i) *S* has the true belief that *p* but his belief has no warrant⁴
- (ii) *S* has the true but unjustified belief that *p*
- (iii) *S* doesn’t believe *p*
- (iv) *S* believes that not-*p*

Each of these conditions is sufficient for not-knowing that *p*, but not all of them seem to be conditions of *ignorance*. Take (i) for 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*. The same holds for (ii): someone with the true but unjustified belief that *p* doesn’t know that *p* either, but he too can hardly be said to be *ignorant* of *p*.⁵ This becomes clear when we consider our earlier example: you open a door, thereby killing that puppy. Now suppose you didn’t *know* that the puppy was hiding behind that door because your true belief lacked warrant

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1 or justification—suppose, for example, that
 2 you have that belief because you misheard
 3 what someone was whispering to you. That
 4 person said, “There is a pumpkin on the
 5 floor,” but you heard her as saying, “That
 6 puppy is behind the door.” In this case your
 7 true belief that there is a puppy behind the
 8 door is certainly without warrant and on most
 9 accounts also without justification. So you
 10 qualify as not-knowing that there is a puppy
 11 behind the door. But your lack of knowledge
 12 of that fact is hardly an excusing condition—
 13 it doesn’t exculpate you from blame for the
 14 puppy’s death. But why is that? For this and
 15 no other reason: you believed that there was
 16 a puppy behind the door (and your belief
 17 happened to be true by luck) but you just
 18 didn’t act accordingly. No one who knows
 19 that you believed there was a puppy behind
 20 the door, and also knows that you nonethe-
 21 less opened that door, will think that you are
 22 excused from blame. You will be considered
 23 responsible for the death of the puppy. What
 24 this shows, then, is that ignorance is *not* the
 25 lack of knowledge that consists in having a
 26 true belief that is either unwarranted or un-
 27 justified. The ignorance-excusing condition
 28 is not satisfied by (i) and (ii). Ignorance isn’t
 29 just *any* lack of knowledge.

30 Might the relevant kind of ignorance then
 31 consist in the kind of not-knowing referred
 32 to under (iii), so in not believing that *p*? In
 33 order to answer this question it may be help-
 34 ful to start out by considering Sylvain Bro-
 35 mberger’s account of what he calls “rational
 36 ignorance”:

37 Ignorance is the relationship between a person *P*
 38 and a set of questions *Q*, when *P* does not know
 39 the correct answer to any of the members of *Q*
 40 and has no strong views as to what the correct
 41 answer is. (Bromberger 1992, p. 128)

42 As Bromberger makes clear, on this account
 43 ignorance requires that the ignorant person
 44 knows there is a question⁶—a question to
 45 which he furthermore “knows [he] does not

46 know the answer.”⁷ An example would be
 this: someone takes great interest in space
 research, reads about it as much as he can
 and is fascinated by the question whether
 there is extraterrestrial life. However, he finds
 the evidence inconclusive and accordingly
 neither believes nor disbelieves that there
 is extraterrestrial life. As Bromberger says,
 for that person the question, “Is there extra-
 terrestrial life?” is an “item of ignorance,”
 or, as he also says, an “item of nescience.”⁸
 We might also say that the ignorance that
 Bromberger has his eyes on is ignorance that
 requires awareness of *propositions*, such as
 the proposition that there is extraterrestrial
 life—and the ignorance consists in this: that
 the person *neither believes nor disbelieves*
that that proposition is true.

As the following example shows, however,
 there is more ignorance than Bromberger’s
 account allows for: *S* has never been inter-
 ested in Dutch intellectual history, nor in legal
 history, and accordingly has never heard of
 Hugo Grotius. So he has no awareness of the
 question, “Was Grotius the author of *De Mare*
Librum?” Accordingly, he doesn’t believe the
 proposition that Grotius is the author of *De*
Mare Librum; but neither does he disbelieve
 it. He is ignorant. But Bromberger’s condi-
 tion of ignorance isn’t satisfied. So there is
 more ignorance than rational ignorance. On
 Bromberger’s account the ignoramus knows
 that there is a question to which he knows that
 he doesn’t know the answer. In the Grotius
 case, however, the ignoramus doesn’t even
 know there is a question in the first place. Let
 us call this *deep ignorance.*

These two forms of ignorance both consist
 in neither believing nor disbelieving that *p*.
 Hence both fall within description (iii): they
 are cases where *S* doesn’t believe that *p*.

In addition to this there is a further but dif-
 ferent sort of case that falls within (iii), viz.,
 cases in which *S disbelieves p*, i.e., cases in
 which *S* believes that not-*p*. Disbelief that

p, of course, requires awareness of proposition p. For this reason Sam cannot be said to disbelieve the proposition that storks brings babies when he has never so much as entertained that proposition, but he can be said to disbelieve the proposition that $2+2=5$ when he *has* considered that proposition—and rejected it. (And a proposition that one rejects is a proposition that one disbelieves).

It is clear that disbelieving a false proposition isn't ignorance. If you disbelieve that storks bring babies you aren't ignorant. If disbelieving a false proposition counts as ignorance, then disbelieving that the Earth has two moons, or that Vienna is the capital of Germany, or any other falsehood would all signal ignorance—which is absurd. We might therefore say that one can't be ignorant of falsehoods.

The previous discussion can be summarized as follows:

S doesn't believe that p when

- (iiia) S neither believes nor disbelieves p, even though he has entertained p (rational ignorance).
- (iiib) S never so much as entertained p and accordingly neither believes nor disbelieves p (deep ignorance).
- (iiic) S disbelieves p.

But not all of these conditions qualify as *ignorance*: (iiia) and (iiib) do, but (iiic) doesn't.

Let us now turn to the final item on the list of possible ways of not-knowing, (iv), which says that S fails to know that p when S believes that not-p while p is, in fact, true. Suppose you believe that Grotius is not the author of *De Mare Librum*. Then you lack knowledge because the proposition you believe is false. Are you also ignorant with respect to the proposition that Grotius is the author of *De Mare Librum*? That surely seems to be the case. You are ignorant as to that book's author.

What this discussion shows, then, is that ignorance cannot simply be equated with

not-knowing but that only certain kinds of not-knowing qualify as ignorance:

S is ignorant with respect to p, when

- (iiia) S neither believes nor disbelieves p, even though he has entertained p (rational ignorance).
- (iiib) S never so much as entertained p and accordingly neither believes nor disbelieves p (deep ignorance).
- (iv) S has the false belief that not-p.

Each of these conditions is sufficient for ignorance.

There is a way to connect and summarize the three sufficient conditions for ignorance by saying, as Alvin Goldman has done, that ignorance is “the absence of true belief”⁹; after all, each of these conditions entails the absence of true belief. The main point of the discussion in this section is that it shows that there are important differences between cases of absence of true belief. The next section, therefore, continues with the nonsummary but richer account of ignorance as developed in this section.

2. WHICH IGNORANCE EXCUSES?

Now that we have seen what ignorance is, the next thing to investigate is which of these conditions can excuse an agent for a bad action she performed, or for unwanted results thereof.

Deep ignorance, to begin with, can surely be an excusing condition for a bad action—at least, provided the ignorance is nonculpable. When you were deeply ignorant about the puppy, so never so much as entertained the proposition that there is a puppy behind the door, then that excuses you for causing the death of the puppy—assuming your ignorance wasn't culpable.

With respect to rational ignorance things are more complex. This has to do with the fact that there are two sorts of rational ignorance. If we think, with Bromberger, about ignorance as not knowing the answer to a question, it

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1 should be noted that there is a distinction be-
 2 tween (a) questions to which S doesn't know
 3 the answer although somebody else does,
 4 and (b) questions to which S doesn't know
 5 the answer and nobody does.¹⁰ And among
 6 questions of the latter sort there is a further
 7 distinction between (b1) questions to which
 8 the answers, although not known by anybody,
 9 could easily be known by somebody, and (b2)
 10 questions to which nobody knows the answer
 11 and to which nobody could easily know them.
 12 Examples may be helpful. *S* may not know
 13 the answer to the question, "Who wrote *De*
 14 *Mare Librum*?" but somebody else does know
 15 it. This is an example of (a). *S* may not know
 16 the answer to the question "Is there a puppy
 17 behind the door?" and as a matter of fact
 18 nobody knows it at that time (there is simply
 19 nobody around), but the answer can be very
 20 easily known—a look in the right place will
 21 suffice. This is an example of (b1). Finally,
 22 *S* may not know the answer to the question,
 23 "Is there extraterrestrial life?" while nobody
 24 else knows it either—and furthermore no
 25 one could easily know the answer. This is an
 26 example of (b2).

27 These distinctions, which can be thought
 28 of as three grades of rational ignorance, are
 29 pertinent to whether or not rational ignorance
 30 constitutes an excusing condition for bad
 31 actions or bad results of actions. As follows:
 32 ignorance of type (b2) will always excuse an
 33 agent for a bad action or bad result thereof, for
 34 such ignorance will *always* be nonculpable.
 35 An example would be this: you have sworn a
 36 dire oath to the members of a club you belong
 37 to, to bring relief to the poor. A reliable agent
 38 has directed your attention to the poor Smith
 39 family. You give them a handsome amount
 40 of money, only to find out later that just as
 41 you have handed them the check, they are
 42 announced the winners of the local lottery.
 43 Your gift to the Smith family thus has a bad
 44 effect: you haven't really brought relief to a
 45 poor family, but instead made a family that
 46 was soon to be fortunate, even more fortunate.

Still, you cannot be blamed by the members
 of the club (nor by yourself) for your action;
 your ignorance about the winner of the local
 lottery was of type (b2): it was impossible to
 know who would win the lottery, and so you
 are entirely excused for your action.

As to (b1): Suppose that neither you nor
 anybody else knows the answer to the ques-
 tion, "Is there a puppy behind the door?"
 while someone easily could know it had she
 only been present. Then you are rationally
 ignorant with respect to the proposition that
 there is a puppy behind the door. Can this
 ignorance excuse *S*'s causing the puppy's
 death? Yes it can, provided the ignorance is
 nonculpable. As to (a), the same example can
 do duty; the fact that someone else does know
 that there is a puppy behind the door even if
S doesn't, doesn't change the situation. This
 kind of ignorance can excuse *S*'s sad act—
 provided it is nonculpable.

What this indicates is that some instances
 of rational ignorance, viz., those that fit (b2),
 will always constitute an excusing condition
 because the ignorance is always nonculpable.
 Other instances of rational ignorance, viz.,
 those that fit (b1) and (a), can constitute an
 excusing condition only if the ignorance
 wasn't culpable. We will shortly turn to the
 issue of culpable ignorance.

But first we must see whether the final type
 of ignorance distinguished earlier on, type
 (iv), i.e., having the false belief that not-*p*,
 can constitute an excusing condition for a bad
 action or an unwanted result. It surely can.
 If you have the false belief that there is no
 puppy behind the door, you will be excused
 for, by opening the door, causing the puppy's
 death—provided, again, your belief isn't cul-
 pable. A false belief, furthermore, excuses a
 bad action or an unwanted result only when
 that belief is, as we might say, "relevant" to
 the bad action or unwanted result. Here is
 the idea: your causing the death of the puppy
 can never be excused by your belief that the
 Netherlands is the capital of Amsterdam, or

by your belief that Boston is south of New York. These beliefs aren't relevant because they don't connect with the action or the result thereof. These beliefs played no role in your opening of that door, whereas your (false) belief that there is no puppy behind the door *did* play a role.

So, ignorance of the various types discussed *can* excuse an agent for doing something that is bad—but it certainly *need* not do so. Not all ignorance excuses. It all depends on whether or not the ignorance is culpable. So *when* is ignorance culpable? I suggest the following:

(CI) *S's ignorance with respect to p at time t is culpable* when (a) given S's position at t, S *should* have known that p at t and (b) given S's abilities and circumstances at t, S *could* have known that p at t.

Various remarks are in order here. The notion of a "position" in clause (a) comprises, first, certain officially recognized positions such as physician, tour guide, major, general, professor, parent, pastor, or prime minister and, second, much more ad hoc positions—such as the situation one finds oneself in when opening a door, or entering a public bus, or visiting a laboratory, or driving a car. The idea underlying this clause is that these positions require that persons occupying them know certain things and that not knowing what the position requires one to know, is failing one's duty.

Clause (b) is added because ought doesn't always imply can.¹¹ Your position may require you to know a certain thing at a certain time t—but when you got a brain stroke that prevents you from knowing that thing at that time, you *cannot* know what, given your position, you ought to know. And if you cannot know at t what, given your position, you ought to know at t, your ignorance isn't culpable at t. Or again, your position may require you to know a certain thing at a certain time t—but when your crucial informant with respect to

that thing has deceased, it may be that you cannot know at t what, given your position, you should have known at t. So abilities and circumstances at t may prevent you from knowing at t what you should know at t.¹² But if they don't, and if you should have known that p, then on the proposed account, your ignorance with respect to p is culpable.

So far the account of culpable and nonculpable ignorance was in terms of "positions" that require its occupants not to be ignorant of certain things. There is, however, another account that suggests itself, in terms of "justification" and in which the idea of "position" plays no role. The general idea of this account, which is familiar enough in the philosophical tradition and traces back to at least Descartes and Locke, links epistemic justification to deontology.¹³ However, this account is not as general as the one just offered. It doesn't work for deep ignorance nor for rational ignorance—it only works for ignorance that consists in having a false belief. The account is this:

(CI') *S's ignorance, consisting in having the false belief that p,¹⁴ is culpable* if (c) S's belief that p is unjustified.

Of course many different theories of justification have been advanced,¹⁵ and accordingly the same false belief (the same ignorance) may come out culpable on one theory, but nonculpable on another. This need not detain us now, however. What is relevant in the present context is that lack of justification (on whatever account) renders one's ignorance culpable. And since justification is not an all or nothing matter but allows of degrees, we should say that the less justified a false belief is, the more culpable it is; and the more justified, the less culpable. By way of illustration: you believe there is no puppy behind the door; your belief is false but you have a lot of justification for it: you saw the puppy just a few seconds ago in another place, you know there is only one puppy around, etc. You are

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1 excused for the puppy's death, for your igno-
 2 rance was not culpable, your false belief was
 3 justified. But if you lack these justifications,
 4 you are not excused for the puppy's death; for
 5 your ignorance was culpable, your false belief
 6 without (let us suppose) any justification.

7 This account of when ignorance is and
 8 isn't culpable is not in competition with the
 9 account given earlier on. Both accounts can
 10 be correct—they both specify a sufficient
 11 condition for culpable ignorance.

12 The account of culpable ignorance just
 13 offered commends itself over two rivals. On
 14 the account offered, a bad action is excused
 15 if done from nonculpable ignorance and
 16 the actor cannot be blamed for it. On Holly
 17 Smith's rival account, however, even a wrong-
 18 ful act done in *culpable* ignorance need not
 19 render the agent blameworthy. Smith holds
 20 that an agent is blameworthy for a wrongful
 21 act only if (1) the act is objectively wrong,
 22 (2) the agent had a reprehensible configura-
 23 tion of desires and aversions, and (3) this
 24 configuration gave rise to the performance
 25 of the wrongful act.¹⁶ She argues next that
 26 agents that act from culpable ignorance do not
 27 satisfy condition (2): the culpably ignorant
 28 doctor, for example, who administered the
 29 wrong and fatal drug because he hasn't kept
 30 up with the latest literature that was available
 31 to him, doesn't act from "a reprehensible con-
 32 figuration of desires and aversions"—in fact
 33 she acts from the laudable motive to enhance
 34 her patient's well-being. So, on Smith's ac-
 35 count, she is not to blame even though she is
 36 culpably ignorant. It is hard to see, however,
 37 that the presence of the laudable motive and
 38 the absence of reprehensible desires and
 39 aversions *excuses* her from administering the
 40 wrong and fatal drug. It is hard to see, that
 41 is, that (2) is required for blameworthiness.
 42 Not only agents that perform wrongful acts
 43 from reprehensible desires and aversions
 44 are blameworthy. Whether or not an agent
 45 is blameworthy for a wrongful act done in
 46 ignorance depends on whether or not the

ignorance is culpable. The doctor's ignorance
 is, in all likelihood, culpable. And therefore
 she is to blame—exactly as the preferred ac-
 count has it.¹⁷

Another rival account is offered by Michael
 Zimmerman. On his view "no one is ever
 substantially culpable for . . . ignorance or
 for behaviour performed in such ignorance."¹⁸
 The reason offered is that "all culpability
 involves a belief on the agent's part that he
 or she is doing something morally wrong."¹⁹
 So if an agent is to be culpable for one of his
 acts, he must believe that his act is morally
 wrong. Likewise, if an agent is to be culpable
 for his ignorance, he must believe that his
 ignorance is morally wrong. It of course
 relatively seldom happens that an agent does
 what he believes is morally wrong; and so
 agents are relatively seldom blameworthy for
 wrongful acts. But it almost *never* happens,
 says Zimmerman, that an agent is ignorant
 and believes his ignorance is morally wrong
 (if only because agents are often oblivious
 of their ignorance); and so agents are almost
 never blameworthy for their ignorance. The
 doctor, then, on this account, is not to blame
 for administering the wrong fateful drug, nor
 is she to blame for her ignorance; the reason
 is that in administering the drug she doesn't
 believe she does something morally wrong.
 It is hard to see, however, that the fact that
 the doctor didn't *believe* she did something
 that was morally wrong *excuses* the admin-
 istration of the drug. It isn't only agents that
believe that what they do is morally wrong
 that are blameworthy. What is required for
 blameworthiness is that the act is wrongful,
 and that the wrongfulness is not excused by,
 for instance, nonculpable ignorance—as the
 preferred account has it.

3. IGNORANCE AS EXCUSING CONDITION FOR FALSE BELIEF

With the account of culpable ignorance
 in place, we can now move on to one main
 point of this paper, which is to argue that non-

culpable ignorance is an excusing condition not only for certain bad actions but also for certain “bad” beliefs—*false* beliefs.²⁰ Let us again take our point of departure in certain cases.

Suppose you left a check on your desk, then naturally and typically you believe that that check is on your desk. You will continue to believe so, of course, even when, unbeknownst to you, a thief broke into your house and stole everything that was on your desk. No one will blame you for believing as you do. The reason is that your ignorance of the thief’s action is not culpable: neither condition (a) nor (b) for culpable ignorance is satisfied. For given your position and circumstances, it isn’t the case that you should and could have known that a thief stole your check away. Nor is condition (c) satisfied, for your false belief is justified. Accordingly, you are excused for believing as you do and cannot be properly blamed for it—you aren’t, because of what you believe, an appropriate candidate for one of the reactive attitudes. (Others may, and if you have any friends at all they will, pity you—but pity is not among the reactive attitudes.)

But now suppose you believe that you have mailed the check—a check that, as you are well aware of, should be in the mail on pain of severe financial consequences for both your family and the company you work with—while in fact you left it on your desk. Your belief is a bad one. In this case, however, your ignorance of the check’s whereabouts do *not* excuse you for your belief. That is because your ignorance is culpable: both condition (a) and (b) of (CI) are satisfied; given your position you both should and could have known that the check is not in the mail. In addition, condition (c) of (CI’) is satisfied as well: your belief is not justified. Accordingly, you are blameworthy for believing that the check is in the mail, and an appropriate candidate for one of the reactive attitudes because of it. You are responsible for your false belief.

What these cases indicate is that ignorance can be an excusing condition for false belief, so long as the ignorance is not culpable. Let us now take a closer look at these cases in order to see of what type the ignorance is, as well as of what exactly the subjects are ignorant—what the objects of their ignorance is, so to speak. As to the first case: the object of ignorance is the proposition that somebody stole everything from your desk. And your ignorance of it is of the deep sort: you have never entertained that proposition and neither believe nor disbelieve it. But it is the truth of the proposition you are deeply ignorant of that entails the falsity of the proposition that you continue to believe. Somewhat formally, the situation you happen to be in is this (let *p* be the proposition you believe: *that that check is on your desk* and *q* the proposition you are deeply ignorant of: *that someone stole everything from your desk* and, finally, let *S* be you):

- (a) *S* believes *p*
- (b) *q* is true
- (c) *q* entails not-*p*
- (d) *S* is ignorant of *q*
- (e) *S* is nonculpably ignorant of *q*.

Here (b), (c), (d), and (e) jointly constitute the excusing condition for (a). Can we generalize from this case and say that the joint obtaining of (b), (c), (d), and (e) constitutes an excusing condition for *S*’s belief that *p* for any *p* and relevant *q* (so *p* and *q* no longer name specific propositions but are variables for propositions)? No, we cannot—as the following example shows. Suppose Sam believes that his financial situation is healthy (=p). Suppose furthermore that his bank has send him a letter telling him that he is bankrupt (=q)—a letter that Sam hasn’t yet seen because it was delivered at the wrong address. Then (b), (c), (d), and (e) obtain, but this state of affairs need not entail that Sam is excused for (falsely) believing that *p*. For suppose that bank employees have

1 communicated, prior to sending the fatal but
 2 undelivered letter to Sam, that his finances
 3 weren't at all going well (=r) and that Sam
 4 was alert, awake, and in good shape when
 5 they did. Then Sam's belief that his finances
 6 are healthy is not excused, even though (b),
 7 (c), (d), and (e) obtain. The reason for this is
 8 that there is another proposition, r, that Sam
 9 is aware of—a proposition that is true and that
 10 obviously²¹ entails the negation of what he
 11 believes (viz., that p) and that he is culpable
 12 for not believing. This can be handled by
 13 adding a further clause to the list:

- 14 (a) there is no proposition r, such that (i) r is true,
 15 (ii) r obviously entails the denial of p, and (iii)
 16 S is culpable for not believing that r.

17 We can also see how (f) works in the initial
 18 case of your belief that the check is on your
 19 desk. That belief was supposed to be excused,
 20 and it *is* excused when we assume that there
 21 is no other true proposition that relevantly
 22 entails the denial of what you believe and fur-
 23 thermore is such that *would* it exist, you would
 24 be culpable for not believing it. But now
 25 suppose that you knew that your wife would
 26 take the check right after you left the house
 27 (perhaps she thought it is far too dangerous
 28 to leave the check there, given the thefts that
 29 have been taking place in the neighborhood
 30 recently). Then your belief that the check is
 31 on your desk would not be excused, for the
 32 very same reason that Sam's belief that his
 33 financial situation is healthy is not excused.
 34 For then there would be a proposition, viz.,
 35 the proposition that your wife would take the
 36 check right after you left the house, that is,
 37 we suppose, true, and that entails the denial
 38 of what you believe (that the check is on your
 39 desk) and that you, finally, are culpable for
 40 not believing. That is, in that case (f) is not
 41 satisfied—and hence your belief that the check
 42 is on the desk is not excused.

43 In the examples discussed so far the sub-
 44 jects are *deeply* ignorant of q. But what if
 45 they were *rationally* ignorant of q? Suppose
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that you believe that the check is on your
 desk (=p) but you *do* consider the proposi-
 tion that someone stole everything from your
 desk (=q). Would your false belief that p be
 excused by your rational ignorance of q? That
 surely seems to be the case. Of course, if you
 have good reasons for believing that q is true
 and you do, on that basis, believe that q, then
 your false belief that p won't be excused. But
 in that case you aren't rationally ignorant of
 q. Rational ignorance of q can excuse the
 false belief that p as well as deep ignorance
 of q can—provided, of course, the rational
 ignorance is nonculpable, and condition (f)
 is satisfied. So deep and rational ignorance
 don't require separate treatment.

Of what kind is the ignorance in the second
 case and what is its object? In this case, recall,
 you believe you have mailed the important
 check that you in fact have left on your desk.
 Your belief is false. The object of your igno-
 rance is the proposition that you have mailed
 your check, and your ignorance is of type (iv),
 i.e., it is a case of having a false belief. Is your
 ignorance excused, i.e., is your having a false
 belief excused? That depends on further fea-
 tures of the case. If you have no justification
 for your belief, it is not. But if you have, it
 might. In this case it is not entirely easy to see
 how your false belief could be justified. But
 it is a platitude (among epistemologists) that
 justification doesn't entail truth and hence
 that someone may have much justification for
 a false belief. And the principle that operates
 here is that the more justification one has for
 a false belief, the more one's ignorance is
 excused by it, and the less justification one
 has for a false belief, the less one's ignorance
 is excused by it.

To sum up the argument so far: the same
 condition, viz., ignorance, excuses bad ac-
 tions and bad (false) beliefs alike. If one is
 in that condition one cannot be properly held
 responsible for the action, nor for the belief.
 But not *all* false beliefs are excused by igno-
 rance. And this suggests that the following is

possible: we can properly be held responsible for nonexcused false belief, and hence that we can be candidates for one of the reactive attitudes *because of* our belief.

4. FORCE AS AN EXCUSING CONDITION FOR FALSE BELIEFS

Let us now turn to the second widely recognized excusing condition: *force*. This condition comes into focus when we change an earlier example just a bit. Suppose a person opens a door, thereby killing a puppy that he knew was hiding behind the door. Suppose, furthermore, that that person was coerced to open the door: a revolver was pointed at him and threats have been uttered. Then that person is not to be held responsible (and hence, not to be blamed) for the puppy’s death. Force is the excuse—the force exerted by a person wielding a revolver and uttering threats, a kind of force usually called *coercion*.

Force, then, can constitute an excusing condition for a bad action. Can it also constitute an excusing condition for a bad (false) belief? In order to answer this question a preliminary matter needs to be dealt with: how shall we understand “force” in this context, in what sense can belief be *forced* (or *coerced*)? An obvious example of a forced belief would be this: a super brain scientist intentionally tampers with Mrs. Beaver’s brain so as to cause her to believe (believe occurrently—as opposed to dispositionally) that she is in good health. In fact, however, she is seriously ill, and prior to the tampering, she knew this to be so. Mrs. Beaver’s false belief is forced. And she is excused for her belief *because* it is forced, at least when she finds herself in that condition nonculpably. This proviso is motivated by the following consideration. Suppose that Mrs. Beaver was very unhappy—she believed she suffers from a terrible disease and, furthermore, she has recently lost her job. She reads about a super brain scientist who can make

you believe almost anything. She visits his clinic and agrees to undergo a brain surgery that, if successful, will make her believe she is entirely healthy and has a steady job. The surgery is successful. So Mrs. Beaver now has two false beliefs that are forced. But in this case force doesn’t *excuse* her for having these beliefs. The reason is that Mrs. Beaver is culpable for being in a condition that forced these false beliefs.²²

The main point of this section has hereby been established: force can excuse an agent for a false belief. And thus the main point of this paper has been established: the very same conditions that can excuse agents for bad actions, viz., ignorance and force, can also excuse agents for bad (false) beliefs.

There is a reason, however, not to leave it at this. For super brain scientists are creatures of the philosopher’s imagination. In the real world no one can ever be excused for false belief by reference to the force exerted by such creatures. So it is an interesting question whether in the real world force can ever excuse agents for false beliefs. In order to make an affirmative answer plausible, we need to observe that there are looser forces than the force exerted by a brain scientist—and that those looser forces can, to some extent, excuse false belief. Or so the argument is going to be.

False belief can be forced in a looser manner in a number of ways—one of which is indoctrination. It is intuitive that oppressive indoctrination can, at least partially, excuse resulting false beliefs. Now “indoctrination,” of course, is a slippery notion, and its necessary and sufficient conditions are hazy. The argument in this section doesn’t require an analysis of the notion but the following clarifications will be helpful: (1) Indoctrinators typically use methods that aim to ensure that contrary views and countervailing evidence are kept hidden from the indoctrinees; they aim to smother and impair critical reflection and open-minded discussion. These methods

1 involve selective influencing, biasing children's minds, limiting information, and the like. (2) To indoctrinate is to bring it about that someone acquires a false belief. If S's belief that p is occasioned by indoctrination, then p is false. No acquisition of a true belief can be a case of indoctrination. There can be no indoctrination into the truth. (There can be wrong methods of teaching truths, but that is another matter.) (3) To indoctrinate is to mislead. But for indoctrination it isn't required that the misleading is intentional. The indoctrinator may not think she is misleading; she may hold herself fully convinced of the truth of her teachings. The indoctrinator may therefore not think of herself as an indoctrinator; some evidence for this is the fact that no one will refer to herself as an indoctrinator. But indoctrinators *may* intentionally manipulate others to believe what is false.²³

21 Examples of indoctrination are never entirely uncontroversial, but perhaps the case of seventeen-year-old Jane, who has been raised in a small but convinced Ku Klux Klan community, can serve as a paradigm. Jane has acquired the characteristic KKK beliefs about white supremacy, anti-Semitism, and anti-Catholicism on her mother's knee, and further schooling confirmed those beliefs, while at the same time alternative points of view and countervailing evidence were intentionally kept hidden from her. Her capacity for critical reflection was, in part because of this, impaired. Now Jane believes many factual falsehoods about human races. It is plausible to hold that these beliefs are occasioned by the force of indoctrination. Does this force also *excuse* Jane for having those beliefs? That certainly seems possible, for, as indicated, it is intuitively right to think that massive indoctrination can excuse resulting false beliefs. If, then, due to no fault of her own, Jane was never confronted with alternative views or evidence indicating that the typical KKK beliefs are false, and if, due to no fault of her own, her capacity for critical

reflection was seriously smothered, she cannot be blamed for believing as she does.²⁴ But had she been confronted with contrary views and evidence while her capacity for critical reflection was in good working order and she still never considered the contrary views and evidences with any seriousness, then her false beliefs, although occasioned by force, would not be *excused* by it. Whether or not Jane is excused for her beliefs, then, depends on whether or not she is culpable for indoctrination forcing her to believe as she does (and this includes whether or not she is culpable for her capacity of critical reflection being smothered by indoctrination). If Jane isn't culpable, she is excused for her false beliefs; but if she is, she isn't.

At this juncton an important qualification is called for. The discussion so far assumes that a belief's being forced by indoctrination is an all-or-nothing affair. But that is almost certainly incorrect. Indoctrination can be stronger or weaker and a false belief may be forced by it only in part and hence excused by it only in part. An account of false belief excused by force must be sensitive to this.

Indoctrination, then, can be a force that occasions, if only in part, false belief. It is plausible to hold that there are other, looser, forces that can occasion, or help occasion, false belief: peer group pressure, for example, and certain psychological conditions such as psychosis. These forces can be stronger or weaker and false belief occasioned by them (even if only partly) can partly be excused by them—at least when the agent is not culpable for being subject to peer group pressure or for being in a certain psychological condition and when the agent is not culpable for his critical capacities' being smothered by these forces.²⁵ There is a general principle here that was hinted at a moment ago: the less subject S is culpable for being exposed to the doxastic force of indoctrination, peer group pressure, psychological conditions, and the like, the more S is excused for false belief occasioned

by force; and the more S is culpable, the less S is excused.

There is a further issue about the notion of forced belief that needs attention. There are many entirely unproblematic beliefs that are also forced. You hit your head against a street lantern and you are forced to believe you hit your head. (Let us assume that you don't lose consciousness or hit your head so hard that you get very confused.) Your belief is forced but it isn't disqualified by that token. The same holds for many other perceptual beliefs, as well as many memory beliefs: they seem entirely unproblematic and forced at the same time. But if a belief is to be *excused* by force, then the fact that it is occasioned by force *should* disqualify the belief. So if it isn't force as such that can disqualify a belief, then what can? In response, two things need to be said. First, your belief that you hit your head is *true*, and so are many perceptual and memory beliefs. But force excuses only certain *false* beliefs (true beliefs don't seem to need excuses). Second, what disqualifies false beliefs forced by brain scientists, indoctrination, propaganda, peer group pressure, and certain psychological conditions is that they are at least partly occasioned by factors that confer no justification on them, factors that don't make it likely that the beliefs are true,²⁶ factors that in fact weaken and potentially undermine the justification that a belief might have from other sources. These factors, we may say, are *justificatory off target*. And if a belief is occasioned by factors that are justificatory off target, the belief is forced in a disqualifying way. Mrs. Beaver's beliefs are forced by factors that are justificatory off

target; but your belief that you hit your head is not.

Putting the points made in this section together, we get the following account:

S is at least partially excused²⁷ by force for believing falsely that p iff

- (i) S's false belief that p is at least partially forced by factors that are justificatory off-target
- (ii) S is not culpable for being subject to the force of whatever it is that occasions the false belief that p.

As we saw earlier on, force may only partly occasion and hence partly excuse false belief. The account must therefore be augmented by the following adjunct principle:

- (i) The less S is culpable for being subject to the force of whatever it is that occasions the false belief that p (and the less S is culpable for her capacity of reflection to be smothered by it), the more S is excused for so believing; and the more S is culpable, the less S is.

5. CONCLUSION

The main conclusion, then, is that ignorance and force can excuse agents not only for what they wrongfully do, but also for what they falsely believe. The main conclusion, in turn, suggests something of further importance the discussion of which will have to await another occasion. It suggests that when no excusing conditions obtain, the following is possible: we can rightly be held responsible for at least some of our beliefs.

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NOTES

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1 1. For this connection between responsibility and Strawson's reactive attitudes, see Fischer and Ravizza
2 1998, pp. 5–8.

3 2. In the text a fair but still very limited number of cases of ignorance, culpable ignorance, nonculpable
4 ignorance, and forced belief are discussed. These aren't, however, isolated cases; similar ones abound.
5 The cases discussed, however, are offered as paradigm cases and this should go some way to allevi-
6 ate the worry that one philosopher's possibly biased intuitions about particular cases are running the
7 whole show here. A further way in which that worry is addressed is by connecting the particular cases
8 with intuitively plausible general principles. A full defense of this version of the reflective equilibrium
9 approach would take us far afield.

10 3. A number of authors writing on ignorance have seen the first but not the second thing—they identify
11 ignorance with lack of knowledge, e.g., Unger 1975, p. 93; Driver 1989, p. 373. As will be shown, this
12 identification is problematic. Others, e.g., Smith 1983, don't comment on the notion of ignorance at
13 all.

14 4. Here "warrant" is the name for that whatever it is that bridges the gap between mere true belief
15 and knowledge. What exactly is required for warrant is a matter of ongoing controversy. On a simple
16 reliabilist account, one single condition makes the difference between mere true belief and knowledge
17 (see Goldman 1979), whereas on other accounts (e.g., Plantinga 1993), two or more logically distinct
18 conditions do the trick. The discussion of ignorance in this section need not take a stance in this con-
19 troversy, nor is it debilitated by it. The account of ignorance offered in the text is compatible with any
20 plausible account of warrant. The reason for this, as will appear shortly, is that unwarranted but true
21 belief doesn't qualify as ignorance.

22 5. A similar endorsement is made by Zimmerman 1997, p. 412; see also Zimmerman 1988, pp.
23 75–77.

24 6. Bromberger 1992 says that an ignoramus must, first, "know, or at least believe, that the presupposi-
25 tion of the question is true" (p. 131) and, second, "know that the question arises" (p. 132).

26 7. Bromberger 1992, p. 133.

27 8. Ibid., p. 116

28 9. Goldman 1999, p. 5.

30 10. "Nobody" here stands for "no human person." God may know the answer to any question, and
31 angels to many more than humans do.

32 11. I thus disagree with Zimmerman's claim that when an "ought" expresses an obligation, the "ought"
33 implies "can" (Zimmerman 1997, p. 413).

34 12. It is clear that clause (b) implicitly hints at excusing conditions itself—conditions such that, if they
35 obtain, one is excused for being ignorant.

36 13. See Plantinga 1993, chap. 1.

37 14. By "the false belief that p" is meant "the belief that p—and p is false."

39 15. Alston 1989, Moser 1989, Conee and Feldman 2004, BonJour and Sosa 2003. These works discuss
40 the justification conditions for belief at great (and often illuminating) length. But none of them even
41 raises the question when *ignorance* qua lack of belief is justified!

42 16. Smith 1983, p. 556.

44 17. Another aspect of Smith's account of culpable belief is that all such beliefs are grounded in prior
45 culpable actions, such as: not checking the relevant journal, ignoring information, etc. It might very
46

well be, however, that some beliefs are culpable in an underived way. For arguments, see Montmarquet 1995, pp. 42–43, and at greater length Montmarquet 1993.

18. Zimmerman 1997, p. 419; on Zimmerman’s account, someone is “substantially culpable” for X if the culpability contributes to the degree to which the agent is blameworthy.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 421.

20. We might say that whereas actions are directed toward the good, beliefs are directed toward the truth. The argument of this section is that nonculpable ignorance can excuse an agent for actions but also for beliefs that fail to attain their goal.

21. This qualifier is needed because if *r* entails not-*p* but the entailment is very hard to see, *S* *won’t* be culpable for (falsely) believing that *p*. In fact there is a gliding scale here: the harder it is for *S* to see the entailment, the less culpable *S* is for believing that *p*; and the easier, the more.

22. It is a very good question with what sort of beliefs super brain scientists would be able to “feed” their victims. For example, would they be able to cause a victim to believe that he doesn’t exist? Or that he believes an explicit contradiction? Or that he believes that Earth is the fifth planet even though he knows that all the evidence indicates it is the third and furthermore that all the experts agree on this? These questions suggest that it is not implausible to think there are limits to what super brain scientists would be able to accomplish. But whatever those limits, the principle developed in the text stands: when *S*’s false belief is occasioned by a super scientist and *S* is not culpable for being in a position in which the super scientist does his work, *S* cannot properly be held responsible (and hence, not be blamed) for that belief.

23. In such a case indoctrination shades into propaganda. Propaganda is another vague and slippery term of which this paper doesn’t offer a formal analysis (as it doesn’t of indoctrination). Fortunately this doesn’t debilitate the argument in this section (and this note), for the central point of the argument is that *insofar as* false belief is occasioned by indoctrination or propaganda, a subject *can*, at least in part, be excused by the sheer force of it; it *can* excuse false belief provided certain conditions are satisfied, such as that the agent is not culpable for being unaware of contrary views and counterevidence. This point stands even if it is difficult to say exactly when certain communications qualify as propaganda. The argument in this section does assume, however, that there are certain paradigm cases of propaganda and indoctrination.

24. It should be noted that in the example, Jane’s false beliefs concern matters of fact, not moral issues. This is important because beliefs about matters of fact, insofar as they are not acquired through one’s own personal observations and experiences, rest on testimony—but never on a priori reflection. Many moral beliefs, however, seem to rest, either in part or entirely, on a priori reflection. From this it follows that, *ceteris paribus*, indoctrination about moral matters is less likely to be successful than about matters of fact. For someone’s own a priori moral beliefs may constitute countervailing evidence to an indoctrinator’s false moral teachings. With respect to matters of fact, a priori reflection cannot provide such countervailing evidence.

25. These forces may furthermore work in conjunction with each other so that *S*’s false belief that *p* may to some degree be occasioned by the force exerted by indoctrination and to some degree by a certain psychological condition—and accordingly to some degree be excused by that conjunction

26. The notion of “justification” used here is in the broadly reliabilist spirit of Goldman 1979.

27. The conditions to follow can also be thought of as conditions for the *excusability* of a false belief.

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