Are moral and epistemic normative ignorance symmetrical?

Does normative ignorance excuse? I argue that this depends on whether we are considering normative ignorance that is moral or epistemic. In the moral domain, various philosophers have argued that moral ignorance does not excuse – more precisely, having a false justified belief that action X is permissible, when in fact action X is impermissible does not excuse agents from blame incurred by performing action X. One influential line of argument for the inability of false beliefs about morality to excuse has been that what is important in moral evaluation is whether or not the agent responds appropriately to their reasons, where these reasons are understood as the morally salient facts of the situation (Arpaly, 2002; Harman, 2011; Mason, 2015; Smith, 1994; Weatherson, forthcoming). Morally salient facts include considerations such as that action X would be a cruel thing to do, or that doing action X would involve breaking a promise. Although this idea is not entirely without its critics (see Rosen, 2002), it does have some plausibility, especially if we think that the practice of apportioning moral blame is at least in part to be an interpersonal and regulatory one ((Sher, 2005; A. M. Smith, 2012; Strawson, 1962; Wallace, 1994). If blame is an interpersonal and regulatory practice, then it is plausible that it depends on the effects of one's actions and particularly their effects on others.

Contrary to what one might think (see e.g. Alvarez & Littlejohn, forthcoming), I argue that the same does not hold for normative ignorance in the epistemic domain. I argue that in the epistemic domain normative ignorance can excuse, and this is true even when we grant that moral evaluation depends on whether or not the agent responds appropriately to their reasons.

I start from the claim that reasons for belief are facts that speak in favour of a proposition. We might, following Williamson (2002), think of these facts as being evidence that increases the probability of a proposition. I then claim that it is possible for agents to have misleading evidence for false views about rationality. This misleading evidence means that they are justified in adopting false views about what rationality requires. This is a form of epistemic normative ignorance, they have

false views about what they ought to believe. This possibility should not be particularly surprising, epistemologists often disagree about whether it is rational to believe lottery propositions, or remain steadfast rather than conciliate. The considerations they cite in favour of their positions are generally considerations of theory choice, and these are facts about how the various theories match up. Consider, for example, the criticism of conciliatory positions that they are self-refuting. If this is a good reason not to conciliate, then that is because it is true, if it is. Misleading evidence for false theories can arise when agents do not have all of the evidence available, so that their available evidence is skewed.

If I am right that agents can have misleading evidence for false views about what rationality requires them to believe, and that this misleading evidence is comprised of a set of reasons to believe the false view of rationality, then to respond appropriately to one's reasons in the epistemic domain may well involve coming to believe misleading theories of rationality. Blocking this conclusion is difficult. One way would be to adopt an unacceptably demanding conception of when reasons apply to an agent, holding that facts count as reasons for agents to believe, even if those facts are beyond their epistemic grasp (Alvarez, 2010). Another would be to claim that we have very strong propositional justification to believe true theories of rationality, and this necessarily outweighs any misleading evidence one might have for alternative theories (Titelbaum, 2015). One might bolster this with the claim that theories of rationality have probability 1, and justify this by way of their similarity to truths of logic (see Titelbaum, 2015; Williamson, 2002). I argue that these methods of blocking the conclusion will not work.

Finally, I argue that defending the conclusion that normative ignorance does not excuse in the epistemic domain means accepting one of two unpalatable results – we must either give up the enkratic principle, accepting that there are some instances of rational incoherence between higher and first order beliefs; or hold that rational mistakes about what rationality requires are impossible.

Suppose you have a mistaken belief about what rationality requires, but this belief constitutes an appropriate response to the reasons that apply to you. Beliefs about

what rationality requires are higher order beliefs, issuing recommendations for first order beliefs, for example 'rationality requires you to believe P'. Suppose that, in fact, rationality forbids belief in P. If normative ignorance can excuse in the epistemic domain, then agents who end up believing P at the first order because they have an epistemically well-supported belief that rationality requires belief in P need not count as epistemically blameworthy – they could be excused. However, if normative ignorance does not excuse, then this is not possible. It would be blameworthy to believe P, since rationality forbids belief in P. However, since the agents have misleading evidence that rationality requires belief in P, then if they are to respond appropriately to their reasons, then they should believe the false belief about rationality – that belief in P is required. In other words, what is required of agents with misleading evidence for false views of rationality is level incoherence – they should both believe that rationality requires belief in P (because this is what their reasons support) and refrain from believing P (because rationality in fact prohibits it). This goes against the traditional idea that rationality requires coherence between levels (Broome, 1999; Horowitz, 2014; Reisner, 2013).

An alternative approach that avoids this result would be to hold that rationality does not permit us to make mistakes about what rationality requires (Littlejohn, 2015; Titelbaum, 2015). I offer some reasons to think that this route is implausible, and argue that we should prefer accepting the conclusion that normative ignorance can sometimes excuse to either of these results. I provide some support for this by clarifying the different roles that justification, excuse, and exemption should play in epistemology. I conclude that even if we think that moral ignorance does not excuse, we should not expect to be able to draw the same conclusion for the same reasons in the epistemic domain. Moral and epistemic normative ignorance are not symmetrical. Cases of epistemic normative ignorance in which agents have misleading evidence for false views about what rationality requires are cases in which normative ignorance should be thought to excuse false belief.

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