

QUALITY OF WILL ACCOUNTS AND NON-CULPABLY DEVELOPED MENTAL DISORDERS

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A FAMILIAR FACT about our practice of blame is that an agent's ignorance sometimes, but not always, excuses what would otherwise be a blameworthy wrongdoing. This aspect of blameworthiness is the epistemic condition of blameworthiness. Dylan McChesney and Mathieu Doucet rightly note that any viable account of the epistemic condition must properly account for the significance of ignorance that is due to an agent's mental disorder. As they note,

your reaction to someone who does not notice your distress because he is an inconsiderate jerk is (we hope!) quite different from your typical reaction to someone who does not notice your distress because she is depressed or on the autism spectrum. Reactive attitudes like blame and resentment are standard in the first case, but inappropriate in the second.¹

This seems exactly right. An important commitment of our ordinary practice of blame is that mental disorders sometimes excuse an agent for what would otherwise be blameworthy ignorance. If an account of the epistemic condition cannot capture this commitment, then the account is not viable. Call this the disorder-based viability constraint.

McChesney and Doucet use the disorder-based viability constraint to argue (i) against George Sher's account of the epistemic condition and (ii) in favor of a quality of will view.² Against Sher's account, they argue as follows:

1. Mental disorders that "(a) involve the agent's constitutive dispositions and traits and (b) explain the agent's ignorance" sometimes (but not always) excuse.

1 McChesney and Doucet, "Culpable Ignorance and Mental Disorders," 235.

2 McChesney and Doucet, "Culpable Ignorance and Mental Disorders."

2. All mental disorders that meet conditions *a* and *b* fail to excuse on Sher's view.
3. Thus, Sher's view falls short of the disorder-based viability constraint.³

McChesney and Doucet then argue that since a quality of will view can tie blameworthiness to the agent's moral concerns, a quality of will view can accurately capture the range of cases where mental disorders excuse.

However, I argue that their quality of will approach also fails the disorder-based viability constraint. When it comes to cases where the agent developed a mental disorder in adolescence, our ordinary practice of blame sometimes takes this fact to be excusing. Any account of the epistemic condition that meets the disorder-based viability constraint needs to accurately account for the full range of cases where developing a disorder in adolescence is an excuse. Yet McChesney and Doucet's view cannot capture the full range of those cases. Thus, their view falls short of the disorder-based viability constraint.

1. QUALITY OF WILL ACCOUNTS

Let us begin with an overview of the quality of will account defended by McChesney and Doucet.⁴ Their view holds that when an agent is blameworthy for *x*, it is because *x* reflects a morally objectionable aspect of the agent's moral concerns.⁵ Accordingly, an agent's epistemic relation to his wrongdoing matters for blameworthiness on their view insofar as it bears on the moral concern expressed by the wrongdoing. For instance, if the agent is ignorant about the wrongness of the action because he simply is not concerned with what matters morally (e.g., fairness), then the ignorance reflects deficient moral concerns. And so the ignorance is blameworthy. But if the agent does not know better about the wrongness of the action because his attention is limited by fatigue rather than a deficiency in his moral concerns, then his ignorance does not reflect poor moral concern. In turn, the ignorance would not be blameworthy. The same applies to ignorance caused by mental disorders. When the presence of the agent's mental disorder-based ignorance is not explained by the agent's lack of moral concerns

3 McChesney and Doucet, "Culpable Ignorance and Mental Disorders," 231.

4 McChesney and Doucet cite Arpaly and Schroeder (*In Praise of Desire*) and Smith ("Responsibility for Attitudes") as the sort of account they are building on. Other quality of will views include Harman, "Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?"; Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions*; and Talbert, "Moral Competence, Moral Blame, and Protest."

5 For readers who hold that there are distinct types of blame with corresponding distinct types of blameworthiness, one can understand McChesney and Doucet as concerned with blameworthiness as the appropriateness of moral resentment.

but is instead explained by the disorder, then the ignorance is excused; the ignorance is not an appropriate target of resentment.⁶

2. BUILDING A COUNTEREXAMPLE

In what follows, I argue that McChesney and Doucet's quality of will view lacks the resources for adequately addressing some cases of disorder-based ignorance where (i) the ignorance reflects a deficiency in moral concern, (ii) the disorder is developed (and maintained) through no fault of the agent during adolescence, and (iii) the disorder poses an unreasonably demanding difficulty for avoiding the ignorance.

Consider the following scenario.

Narcissistic Joe: As a young child, Joe's life contains multiple risk factors for developing narcissistic personality disorder, such as having a cruel, authoritarian, and neglectful family at home. In his youth, while his peers are developing into empathetic, healthy individuals, Joe's desire for self-esteem develops in the unhealthy direction of having an overly inflated sense of self-importance that is maintained at the expense of others. Moreover, young Joe is neither diagnosed nor treated for his disorder. As a result of developing this disorder in his childhood and not receiving treatment, Joe grows into a young adult who finds it incredibly difficult to be empathetic. Frequently in his young adult life, Joe's narcissism results in him being ignorant of the moral significance of others' well-being.

Joe's ignorance of the importance of others' well-being is tied to a mental disorder that he developed during childhood. Moreover, let us consider a period of Joe's young adult life where there have been some opportunities to recognize that he has a serious personality disorder and that he should seek help, but *not* to an extent where he could reasonably be expected to do so. When it comes to this period of Joe's life, does his disorder-based ignorance warrant blame as resentment?⁷

To see why Joe's ignorance does not merit resentment, let us imagine the following. Joe has inconvenienced you by lying and he showed no regard for how this impacted you. Your initial reaction may understandably be one of resentment. But when you share what happened with a colleague, you learn more about Joe.

6 McChesney and Doucet, "Culpable Ignorance and Mental Disorders," 244.

7 McChesney and Doucet accept that their view may preclude personality disorders from the category of excusing disorders. The Narcissistic Joe case aims to show that this leads to violations of the disorder-based viability constraint. See McChesney and Doucet, "Culpable Ignorance and Mental Disorders," 245–46.

You learn that he is not just an ordinary jerk. Due to his childhood and deficient opportunities for seeking therapy, Joe suffers from narcissistic personality disorder. And while it is not impossible for him to see the wrongness of lying and manipulating others to get ahead, it is especially difficult for him. As your colleague tells you, it would be unreasonable to expect Joe's disorder-based ignorance to be resolved by Joe simply deciding to be more considerate; his disorder calls for professional help. And while there is nothing that makes it impossible for him to seek help, the way that a person with narcissistic personality disorder views the world makes it especially difficult (but not impossible) for Joe to even see that there is a problem with himself. His personality disorder that has been acquired in childhood sets him up to think of himself as exceptional and to tend to give this assumption more credence than the counterevidence he might get exposed to. Thus, even an expectation that he recognizes that there is a problem in the first place would itself be unreasonably demanding.⁸ After learning of Joe's history and the difficulty he now faces for knowing better, the initial blame and resentment you held should no longer seem appropriate. Now the appropriate response is to withdraw (or at least severely mitigate) your blaming reaction toward Joe for the ignorant wrongdoing. Sure, Joe is ignorant because he is a narcissistic jerk, but what other kind of young adult could he reasonably be expected to grow into? He developed a mental disorder during adolescence that calls for professional help. If you maintain your resentment, that would be unjustly harsh toward Joe.⁹

I hope we can now see that Joe's case is one of disorder-based ignorance that reflects poorly on the agent's moral concerns, yet resentment is plausibly not appropriate. However, this alone does not raise a problem for McChesney and Doucet's quality of will view. They rightly note that their view has resources to deem some cases of disorder-based ignorance that reflect poorly on the agent to be cases where the individual should not be blamed.¹⁰ But, as I argue, these resources are inadequate.

3. INADEQUATE RESOURCES

In the final section of their article, McChesney and Doucet highlight the fact that just because ignorance reflects an individual's poor moral concerns, it does not follow that their view deems the person blameworthy. This is because there's nothing about a person's ignorance reflecting poor moral concern that necessarily precludes the existence of "independent reasons for supposing that [the individ-

8 Ronningstam, "Narcissistic Personality Disorder."

9 This is not to say that it is inappropriate to feel upset, insulted, or even frustrated.

10 McChesney and Doucet, "Culpable Ignorance and Mental Disorders," 245–46.

ual] ought to be exempt from blame.”¹¹ McChesney and Doucet do not say what exactly these independent reasons are, just that they would be “very different from the reasons we have offered here.”¹² I take this to mean that the reasons, whatever they may be, would be reasons that are independent of the *epistemic condition* of blameworthiness. If this is right, then there are two general categories of reasons that can serve as independent reasons for exempting the agent from blame.

One category of independent reasons pertains to the agent failing a condition of moral responsibility that is not the epistemic condition. When a reason in this category occurs, the fact that the person is ignorant (i.e., their epistemic relation to the wrongness) would not itself explain the lack of blameworthiness. Instead, the lack of blameworthiness would be tied to the person’s deficiency in control or moral agency. For instance, consider someone who meets the diagnostic criteria for narcissistic personality disorder because that person *lacks* the general ability to understand the fact that other people’s well-being matters. In such a case, their view could say that the person has a deficiency in moral agency, such that when he is ignorant due to his lack of capacity, he is not blameworthy. This would not be because he fails the *epistemic condition*, but because he fails a prerequisite for even being a candidate for blameworthiness in the first place: having sufficient capacities for moral agency. However, this would not apply to *all* cases of ignorance rooted in narcissistic personality disorder. There is nothing about the diagnostic criteria that requires a person to lack that capacity.¹³ My point here is just to highlight one way that there could be independent reasons in a case of mental disorder–based ignorance where blame is not appropriate.

The other category of independent reasons consists of reasons that are independent of moral responsibility itself rather than only being independent of the epistemic condition. Reasons in this category could make an individual exempt from blame by *overriding* the responsibility-based reasons for blame. A paradigmatic example of this type of reasons is a forward-looking consideration, such as the ineffectiveness of engaging in blame to correct behavior compared to the effectiveness of showing compassion, patience, and understanding. For instance, consider a case where the mental disorder explains why the person’s moral concerns are frequently deficient, but where the person still meets the conditions for moral agency and responsibility. On McChesney and Doucet’s view, this person is not off the hook *via the epistemic condition* since the ignorance does reflect an objectionable deficiency in moral concern. However, if our goal is to encourage this person to foster a tendency to take steps that are conducive to consider-

11 McChesney and Doucet, “Culpable Ignorance and Mental Disorders,” 245–46.

12 McChesney and Doucet, “Culpable Ignorance and Mental Disorders,” 246.

13 American Psychiatric Association, “Personality Disorders.”

ing the significance of others' well-being, being resentful toward him might be counterproductive to our goal. The value of this goal of improving the person's behavior might give us overriding reasons *not* to blame the agent, even if the conditions for being morally responsible for the ignorance are met.

However, even with these resources for holding that an individual sometimes should not be blamed despite the disorder-based ignorance reflecting poor moral concerns, the case of Narcissistic Joe can still highlight a problem for McChesney and Doucet's view. There is nothing about Joe's case that requires us to build in an independent reason for exempting Joe from blame. While it is true that some cases of narcissistic personality disorder involve a lack of certain capacities necessary for moral agency, it need not occur in all cases where the diagnostic criteria are met. In fact, as the case of Joe is written, it is set up to where Joe has the various capacities needed for meeting the non-epistemic conditions of responsibility. He did not fail to develop a *capacity* for empathy, even though it is especially difficult for him to be empathetic. Similarly, there is nothing about a case of narcissistic personality disorder that requires us to build in reasons for exempting the agent from blame that are independent of concerns about moral responsibility-based blame (e.g., pragmatic reasons for withholding blame). For instance, suppose the person Joe wrongs is a passing stranger whose reaction, whether resentful or sympathetic, has no bearing on the likelihood of Joe seeking professional therapy. In short, there is no reason we cannot set up the Joe case to be one where there is no independent reason for exempting Joe from blame. Yet if what I have said above is correct about the significance of Joe's adolescence and deficiency of reasonable opportunities to pursue treatment, the attitude of resentment is inappropriate. And this is so even in the absence of *independent* reasons for withholding blame. Thus, McChesney and Doucet's view mistakenly deems Joe's ignorance as warranting resentment.

4. ANOTHER COUNTEREXAMPLE

Their view's inadequate resources for capturing the full range of cases where disorder-based ignorance is not worthy of resentment is not limited to ignorance due to personality disorders. The view also faces problems when it comes to more familiar disorders, such as depression. Consider a case of Joe's sister, Michele, who develops major depressive disorder in adolescence. Michele is currently a young adult whose life, strictly speaking, contains opportunities to seek professional help, but not to the extent that getting professional help is something that could reasonably be expected of her. During this period of her life, she frequently suffers from episodes of depression where she fails to care about the

right sort of things, such as her friendships and other important relationships. Moreover, this is not a case of her being too fatigued to act on her actual concern for her friendships. Instead, her depression is simply manifested as a lack of interest and concern for a great number of things, including being a good friend. For instance, when she thinks about keeping a promise to a friend, it is not impossible for her to see that it is worth doing, but it is very difficult for her to judge it as worth doing. Due to this disorder-based difficulty, she fails to judge the promise to be worth keeping.

Michele's ignorance reflects her deficient moral concern for the value of promise keeping and friendship. Yet she is not being an ordinary jerk. She is suffering from major depressive disorder. And in this particular case, her disorder-based ignorance does not warrant resentment. Any account of the epistemic condition that meets the disorder-based viability constraint must be able to capture this verdict about her ignorance. However, since we are not supposing that there are independent reasons to exempt Michele from being an appropriate target of blame, McChesney and Doucet's view holds that Michele's ignorance is blameworthy. Their view thereby falls short of the disorder-based viability constraint when it comes to cases like Michele's.

5. CONCLUSION

The significance of Narcissistic Joe and Michele is *not* that disorder-based ignorance always excuses. Their significance is that they highlight a category of mental disorder-based ignorance that plausibly excuses. Cases of mental disorder-based ignorance that fall into this category are instances of ignorance rooted in the agent's mental disorder, where (i) the ignorance reflects deficient moral concern(s), (ii) the disorder is developed (and maintained) through no fault of the agent during adolescence, and (iii) the disorder imposes a difficulty in avoiding or correcting the ignorance, such that an expectation to overcome said difficulty is unreasonably demanding. When these conditions are met and there are no independent reasons for exempting the agent from blame, then McChesney and Doucet's view takes the ignorance as not an excuse. Yet some of those, such as Joe's and Michele's, are cases where ordinary practice takes the disorder-based ignorance as not warranting resentment. Thus, their quality of will view falls short of the disorder-based viability constraint.

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