

## WHAT KIND OF IGNORANCE EXCUSES? TWO NEGLECTED ISSUES

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*The philosophical literature displays a lively debate on the conditions under which ignorance excuses. In this paper, I formulate and defend an answer to two questions that have not yet been discussed in the literature on exculpatory ignorance. First, which kinds of propositional attitudes that count as ignorance provide an excuse? I argue that we need to consider four options here: having a false belief, suspending judgement on a true proposition, being deeply ignorant of a truth, and having a true belief that falls short of knowledge. Secondly, ignorance of which propositions counts as an excuse? I discuss four candidates: ignorance of one's obligation, ignorance that one is able to meet that obligation, ignorance of how to meet that obligation, and lack of foresight regarding that obligation. I argue that we can give a satisfactory account of exculpatory ignorance only if we pay attention to these two neglected issues.*

**Keywords:** disbelief, excuse, ignorance, obligation, suspension, warrant.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Ever since Aristotle, it has been acknowledged that ignorance sometimes excuses (see Aristotle 2003: 123–9, 145–7, 299–305, NE III.i.13–27; v.7–12; V.viii.3–12; see also Brandt 1969: 349; Fischer and Ravizza 1998: 12–3; Goldman 1970: 208; Rosen 2003: 61–2; Smith 1983: 543–71; Zimmerman 2008: 169–205). For instance, it seems that I am blameless for offering a friend chocolate pudding if, unbeknownst to me, it was poisoned by one of his jealous colleagues—unless, perhaps, I should not have been ignorant. But precisely when does ignorance excuse? This question can be divided into many other questions. At least two of them have been explicitly addressed in the literature. First, does ignorance excuse only if one is blameless for it, or does ignorance for which one is blameworthy excuse as well? Some philosophers think that blameworthy ignorance provides a full excuse (e.g., Ross 1939: 163–4). Others claim that it provides only a partial excuse (e.g., Beardsley 1979: 578; Burren 1999: 516–7; Joyce 1914:

404). Still others defend the view that it provides no excuse at all (e.g., Aristotle 2003: 145–7, NE III.v:7–9; Kornblith 1983: 35–6; Murray 1914: 104; Wolterstorff 2010: 106; Zimmerman 2008: 175). For the distinction between these three views, see Smith (1983: 548–51). Secondly, does one's ignorance excuse only if one acted *from* ignorance or does it suffice if one acted *in* ignorance? The former is claimed or suggested by Donagan (1977: 128–30), Guerrero (2007: 63–4), Rivera-López (2006: 135) and Zimmerman (1997: 424). The latter view is adopted by Houlgate (1968: 112–3), Rosen (2008: 598n) and Zimmerman (1988: 79, 139n). On the former view, one's being ignorant does not suffice for being excused; one's action should be based on or motivated by that ignorance. Philosophers give rather different answers to these two questions.

Remarkably, though, there are two questions regarding the conditions under which ignorance excuses that have not received the attention that they deserve. First, from an epistemological point of view, ignorance comes in varieties. It seems one can be ignorant because one holds a false belief, because one suspends judgement on a true proposition, because one has never even considered the true proposition in question, and, according to some, because one's true belief falls short of knowledge. Do all of these kinds of ignorance (equally) excuse? Secondly, one might wonder which propositions are such that ignorance of them provides an excuse. It seems that there are four serious candidates here: ignorance of one's obligation, ignorance that one is able to meet that obligation, ignorance of how to meet that obligation, and lack of foresight regarding that obligation. The second and third propositions might seem identical. Below, I argue that this is not the case. It is important to answer these two additional questions as well, because which account of exculpatory ignorance we adopt will make a difference to our view on when people are blameworthy.

Let me be explicit that when I talk about blame and responsibility, I am talking about such things as moral, prudential, and epistemic blame and responsibility, not about legal blame and responsibility. Here, I will not attempt to spell out how we should understand moral, epistemic, and prudential responsibility and blame. For our purposes, it suffices that there is a clear difference between these kinds of responsibility and blame on the one hand and legal responsibility and blame on the other. I exclude legal responsibility, because at least on orthodox criminal law doctrine, ignorance of the law does not excuse. And there is also such a thing as strict liability. In certain countries, for instance, it is prohibited to sell intoxicating liquors to minors and one will be liable to legal punishment if one sells intoxicating liquors to minors, even if one is blamelessly ignorant that the person in question is of minor age. Henceforth, when I talk about excuses, blame, and responsibility, I am excluding legal excuses, legal blame, and legal responsibility. This is not to deny that my account of ignorance as an excuse may be relevant to ignorance as a legal

excuse. Many ethicists and philosophers of law, for instance, believe that legal responsibility should in some sense of the word be at least partially based on moral responsibility. I leave the discussion of ignorance as a legal excuse for another occasion though.

The paper is structured as follows. In order to answer the two questions that I have formulated, I first spell out what it is to be excused for something and show that, from an epistemological point of view, ignorance comes in several varieties. I argue that one is excused if and only if one did something wrong by violating an obligation and one is blameless for that (§ 2), and show that if ignorance is lack of knowledge, there are four varieties of ignorance: disbelieving, suspending, deep, and warrantless ignorance (§ 3). Next, I argue that there are four kinds of propositions, ignorance of which provides an excuse: ignorance of one's having the obligation in question (§ 4), ignorance that one has the ability to meet that obligation (§ 5), ignorance of how to meet that obligation (§ 6), and lack of foresight regarding that obligation (§ 7). I argue that disbelieving and deep ignorance of these propositions provides a full excuse. Subsequently, I defend the thesis that when ignorance is suspending ignorance, it provides at most a partial excuse (§ 8). Finally, I argue that warrantless ignorance provides no excuse whatsoever (§ 9).

In order not to get entangled in the hotly debated questions of whether only blameless ignorance excuses and whether only ignorance from which one acts excuses, I will henceforth assume—and I cannot stress this enough—that the ignorance in the cases that I discuss is ignorance from which one acts and for which one is blameless, for all parties agree that such ignorance can provide an excuse.

## II. WHAT IS AN EXCUSE?

If we want to give an account of when ignorance excuses, it is good to first get a firmer grip on what it is to be excused. Let me stress that I do not mean to be asking when someone is verbally excused by herself or someone else. For it seems clear that one can be excused for something, even if no one verbally excuses one for that. For instance, I may be completely blameless for having accidentally killed someone, even though nobody, including myself, is aware of that. Thus, I take excuses not to be speech acts performed by a person in defence of her or someone else's  $\varphi$ -ing, as some philosophers do (see Austin 1979: 176; Brandt 1969: 337; Zimmerman 1988: 64–9), but to be those state of affairs, the actualization of which renders one blameless.

As the etymology of the word 'excuse' suggests,<sup>1</sup> one is excused for something only if one is blameless for it. And one is blameless for something if one

<sup>1</sup> The Latin expression *ex causa* means 'out of' or 'away from' an 'accusation'.

is not the proper object of the reactive attitude of blame. For more on the reactive attitude of blame, see Peter Strawson's (1974) landmark essay. And I take it that one is not the proper object of blame if one does not deserve to be blamed. It is clear, however, that being blameless cannot be the whole story about excuses. I am blameless for drinking two cups of coffee a day, but I am not excused for that. Blamelessness seems necessary for being excused, but not sufficient. What, in conjunction with blamelessness, is sufficient for being excused? Austin (1979: 175–7) and Brandt (1969: 337) are quite ambiguous on what it is that one is excused for. The view that I defend here is similar to that of Fields (1991: 11). One might think that we are excused for the actualization of some state of affairs if and only if we are blameless for it and it is objectively bad or objectively undesirable, for instance, because it has harmful consequences. Thus, a doctor is excused for giving his patient a deadly medicine if he falsely believed that giving that medicine would cure his patient—at least, if, as I said we would assume throughout this paper, his ignorance is blameless. Here, the excuse for his objectively bad action is his blameless ignorance of the consequences of his giving that medicine. There is much more to be said about objective badness, but I think that what I have said here suffices for the purpose at hand.

However, the idea that one is excused for something only if the act or omission in question is objectively bad seems to me misguided. First, I am blameless for not solving the Middle East problem and for not curing all cancer patients in my country. The actualization of these states of affairs is objectively bad. Clearly, though, I am not excused for the actualization of these bad states of affairs. That is because I have no obligation to prevent these bad states of affairs from obtaining.

Secondly, most philosophers agree that we can be excused for violating subjective obligations, even if there is nothing objectively bad about (not) performing the act in question. It is a controversial matter precisely how subjective obligations are to be spelled out—in terms of what one believes about one's obligation or in terms of what one believes about badness, in terms of what one believes or in terms of what one should believe. However, that debate need not concern us here. All I need is the intuitive idea that we have subjective obligations, i.e., obligations that arise because of the subject's perspective on things. Thus, if a doctor is physically forced to give his patient a medicine that he falsely believes will kill his patient, it seems that he is excused, even though there is nothing objectively bad about giving his patient that medicine. Objective badness of the relevant state of affairs, then, is not necessary for being excused for its actualization, nor is it in conjunction with blamelessness sufficient for it.

Why, then, is the view that one is excused only if one actualized or maintained some objectively bad state of affairs initially plausible? A good

explanation, it seems, is that this is because we can be excused only if we have violated an obligation. And stereotypical obligations, such as an obligation not to kill and an obligation not to torture are obligations to avoid some kind of objective badness. The necessary conditions for being excused are easily confused with what usually accompanies them.

One can be excused, then, only if one has violated an obligation, that is, if one did something wrong. More precisely, one is excused only if one violated an all-things-considered obligation rather than a pro tanto obligation. For example, if I violate a pro tanto obligation to prepare my biology exam by meeting my moral obligation to attend the funeral of my parents who died in a car accident, then it seems that I am justified in not preparing my exam rather than excused for not preparing my exam. I agree that ordinary language may be vague on this point, but it seems that most philosophers prefer to describe such a case as one in which I am justified in violating an obligation rather than excused for it.

Let me be explicit that I take particular excuses to be sufficient for blamelessness, not necessary. For it seems that different excuses can obtain simultaneously. Imagine that I give a piece of chocolate to my six-year-old daughter. Unbeknownst to me, it is poisoned. Moreover, someone is pointing a gun at her and threatens to kill her if I do not give her that piece of chocolate. My acting under duress—I am forced to give her the chocolate—excuses me for giving her the chocolate. But it is not necessary for blamelessness. After all, even if I had not acted under duress, I would have been excused for doing it. For, I was ignorant that that piece of chocolate was poisoned. Hence, I am excused both by my acting under duress and by my ignorance. This is because both are sufficient conditions for being blameless for giving my daughter that piece of chocolate.

For our purposes, it is also important to note that some excuses are full excuses, whereas other excuses are only partial excuses. When someone is fully excused, say, by her ignorance, then she is not blameworthy at all. She does not deserve any blame, at least not for the actualization of the state of affairs for which she is excused. If I give my daughter a piece of chocolate that, unbeknownst to me, was poisoned by a maniac who happened to choose my house for his malicious action, and I have no indication whatsoever to think that the chocolate is poisoned, then, it seems, I am not blameworthy at all for giving her that piece of chocolate. Thus, given what I said earlier in this section about obligations, full excuses can be defined as follows:

*Full Excuse.* Some person  $S$ 's ignorance that  $p$  fully excuses her for the actualization of some state of affairs  $\Sigma$ <sup>1</sup> iff (i)  $S$  fails to meet an all-things-considered

<sup>2</sup> I say 'state of affairs' rather than 'action', for it seems that people can also be excused for other things than their actions, such as their omissions, beliefs, and vices.

obligation to prevent the actualization of  $\Sigma$  or to (not) do something which would have prevented the actualization of  $\Sigma$ , and (ii) due to  $S$ 's ignorance that  $p$ ,  $S$  is blameless for the actualization of  $\Sigma$ .

But not all excuses are full excuses. Imagine that I heard on the news that some maniac is poisoning people's chocolate bars in my neighbourhood. I notice that my chocolate bar is opened. But then, I know, we often leave opened chocolate bars in the desk and finish them later. I nonetheless decide to give it to my daughter. Imagine that it is poisoned. It seems that in that case I am blameworthy for giving it to my daughter; I act recklessly in doing so and violate an objective obligation not to give it to her. Still, it seems, I am not as blameworthy as I would have been if I had known that it was poisoned. Thus, my ignorance that it is poisoned makes me less blameworthy than I would have been if I had not been ignorant, but I am still blameworthy to some degree. The following account of partial excuses captures this idea:

*Partial Excuse.*  $S$ 's ignorance that  $p$  partially excuses her for the actualization of some state of affairs  $\Sigma$  iff (i)  $S$  fails to meet an all-things-considered obligation to prevent the actualization of  $\Sigma$  or to (not) do something which would have prevented the actualisation of  $\Sigma$ , (ii)  $S$  is blameworthy for the actualization of  $\Sigma$ , but (iii) due to  $S$ 's ignorance that  $p$ ,  $S$  is less blameworthy for the actualization of  $\Sigma$  than she would have been if she had *not* been ignorant that  $p$ .

It is, of course, also possible that one has violated an obligation and that one has no excuse for it, or—the kind of scenario that is relevant for our purposes—one's ignorance does not excuse one for violating that obligation. If I know that the chocolate bar has been poisoned and I am ignorant that the president was brushing his teeth at the moment at which the chocolate bar was poisoned, then that ignorance provides no excuse whatsoever for giving the chocolate bar to my six-year-old daughter. Since the issue of whether or not one is excused only arises in situations in which (it seems) one has done something wrong, we can now give the following account of not being excused by ignorance:

*No Excuse.*  $S$ 's ignorance that  $p$  provides no excuse for the actualization of some state of affairs  $\Sigma$  iff (i)  $S$  fails to meet an all-things-considered obligation to prevent the actualization of  $\Sigma$  or to (not) do something which would have prevented the actualization of  $\Sigma$ , (ii) and  $S$  is blameworthy for the actualization of  $\Sigma$  and if  $S$  had *not* been ignorant that  $p$ , she would have been equally blameworthy for the actualization of  $\Sigma$ , or  $S$  is excused by something else than her ignorance that  $p$ .

Thus, one's ignorance provides no excuse if it is the case that one had been equally blameworthy if had one not been ignorant, or if one

is excused by something else, such as acting under duress or being forced.<sup>3</sup>

### III. THE VARIETIES OF IGNORANCE

What is it to be ignorant? The etymology of the word suggests that ignorance is lack of knowledge. The word ‘ignorance’ derives from the Latin *in* (not) and ‘*gnarus*’ (knowledgeable, acquainted with). That ignorance is lack of knowledge is explicitly accepted by Fields (1994: 403), Haack (2001: 25) and Zimmerman (1988: 75; 2008: ix). It is implicitly accepted by Anscombe (1963: 400), Driver (1989: 373–6), Flanagan (1990: 422), Houlgate (1968: 109) and Unger (1975: 93). Let us, therefore, consider under which conditions one lacks knowledge. On most accounts of knowledge, there are five ways in which one can lack knowledge that *p*:

- (i) *p* is false;
- (ii) *S* disbelieves the true proposition *p*, that is, believes that  $\sim p$  while *p* is true;
- (iii) *S* suspends belief on the true proposition *p*, that is, *S* has considered the true proposition *p*, but neither believes nor disbelieves that *p*;
- (iv) *p* is true and *S* neither believes that *p*, nor disbelieves that *p*, nor suspends belief on *p*;
- (v) *S* believes the true proposition *p*, but *S*’s belief that *p* lacks warrant, where warrant is that which turns true belief into knowledge.

It seems to me that instances of (ii)–(iv) all count as cases of ignorance. As to (ii) and (iii), if someone disbelieves that Darwin published his *Origin of Species* in 1859, he is ignorant that he did, and if someone suspends belief on whether Phnom Penh is the capital of Cambodia, because he has considered this proposition but subsequently neither believes it nor disbelieves it, then he is clearly ignorant of this truth. Instances of (iv) are also instances of ignorance. Most people do not believe, disbelieve, or suspend belief on the proposition *p* that the nucleus of a helium atom contains two protons and two neutrons. Many of them even lack certain concepts that one needs to have in order to grasp *p*. The right way to think of a case like this, then, seems to acknowledge that the people who lack these concepts are deeply ignorant of the truth of this proposition.

Things are slightly more complicated when it comes to (i). For it seems that someone who believes a false proposition *p* and, thereby, lacks knowledge of *p*, is not ignorant that *p*. I cannot be ignorant of Nîmes’ being the capital of France, because it is not. I can only be ignorant of truths. However, if *p* is false,

<sup>3</sup> This means that condition (ii) of No Excuse should be read as follows:  $[q \wedge (r \rightarrow s)] \vee t$ .

one can still be ignorant that  $p$  is false, for that is a truth. If  $p$  is false and one believes  $p$ , suspends belief on  $p$ , or neither believes that  $p$ , nor disbelieves that  $p$ , nor suspends belief on  $p$ , then it seems one is ignorant that  $p$  is false.

This leaves us with the question whether (v) is a variety of ignorance. Elsewhere, I have argued that it is not: ignorance is lack of true belief rather than lack of knowledge (see Peels 2010; 2011a; 2012). That ignorance is lack of true belief is also accepted by Goldman (1986: 26), Goldman and Olsson (2009: 19–21), Guerrero (2007: 62–3), Rivera-López (2006: 135) and Van Woudenberg (2009: 375). However, since I have no space to repeat my defence of that thesis here and many philosophers take ignorance to be lack of knowledge, let us, for the sake of argument, assume that (v) is also a variety of ignorance. Thus, when it comes to the propositional attitude of someone who is ignorant that  $p$ , it turns out that there are four kinds of ignorance:

*Disbelieving Ignorance.*  $S$  is disbelievingly ignorant that  $p$  iff (i) it is true that  $p$ , and (ii)  $S$  disbelieves that  $p$ .

*Suspending Ignorance.*  $S$  is suspendingly ignorant that  $p$  iff (i) it is true that  $p$ , and (ii)  $S$  suspends belief on  $p$ .

*Deep Ignorance.*  $S$  is deeply ignorant that  $p$  iff (i) it is true that  $p$ , and (ii)  $S$  neither believes that  $p$ , nor disbelieves that  $p$ , nor suspends belief on  $p$ .

*Warrantless Ignorance.*  $S$  is warrantlessly ignorant that  $p$  iff (i) it is true that  $p$ , (ii)  $S$  believes that  $p$ , and (iii)  $S$  does not know that  $p$ .

In the following three sections, I consider four proposals as to what the relevant proposition of whose truth one is ignorant might be. In doing so, I confine myself to the question whether disbelieving and deep ignorance provide a full or partial excuse in such scenarios. After that, I consider respectively suspending ignorance and warrantless ignorance.

#### IV. IGNORANCE OF ONE'S OBLIGATION

One proposition that seems relevant when it comes to ignorance as an excuse is the proposition that one has the obligation  $O$  (not) to actualize a certain state of affairs  $\Sigma$ :

*Ignorance of One's Obligation.*  $S$  is ignorant that she has an all-things-considered obligation  $O$  (not) to actualize  $\Sigma$  or (not) to do something which would have prevented the actualisation of  $\Sigma$ .

Imagine, for instance, that Jenny enrolls as a history graduate student and that, as a student, it is her obligation to read an entire 200 page student manual. However, her tutor told her that she does not have that obligation. So she is

disbelievingly ignorant of her obligation. It is clear that she is fully excused for violating her obligation to read the manual in virtue of her ignorance. She is not blameworthy at all for not reading the manual. This seems also true when she has no idea that there is a manual that she ought to read because nobody told her so—again, I am assuming that her ignorance is blameless. It seems that she is fully excused for violating her obligation to read the manual and that she is excused in virtue of her ignorance. If one is blamelessly disbelievingly or deeply ignorant of one's obligation, then it is hard to see how one could properly be blamed at all for violating it. For the same intuition, see Plantinga (1990: 52). According to Fields (1994), having acted from a false moral belief is not an excuse. In his defence of this thesis, however, Fields conflates blame and disapproval. Also, he provides a pragmatic justification of the practice of blaming without considering the issue of whether someone deserves blame.

However, we should make an important distinction here: that between *pro tanto* and all-things-considered obligations. For one can know that one has an obligation to  $\varphi$  and yet be ignorant that one has an all-things-considered obligation to  $\varphi$ . For instance, I may perfectly well realize that I have an epistemic obligation to gather evidence on  $p$  (an obligation that has to do with acquiring true beliefs on  $p$ ), but falsely believe that that obligation is trumped by a moral obligation not to do so (an obligation that has to do with the moral goodness or badness of gathering evidence on  $p$ , such as respecting a person's privacy), so that I am ignorant that gathering evidence on  $p$  is my all-things-considered obligation. In such a scenario, my ignorance may excuse me for violating my all-things-considered obligation to gather evidence on  $p$ , despite my knowing that I have an obligation to gather evidence on  $p$ . Hence, if one is ignorant that one has an all-things-considered obligation to  $\varphi$ , one need not be ignorant that one has an obligation to  $\varphi$ . But if one is ignorant that one has an obligation to  $\varphi$ , then one is also ignorant that one has an all-things-considered obligation to  $\varphi$ . Hence, one kind of ignorance that excuses is ignorance of one's all-things-considered obligation rather than ignorance of one's *pro tanto* obligation. It follows that one can act from ignorance and be excused by that ignorance, even if one is not ignorant of every wrong-making feature of one's act; ignorance of all-things-considered wrongness suffices.

One might worry that the idea that disbelieving ignorance can excuse is too strong in that it contradicts the principle, advocated by a number of philosophers, that one should act from  $p$ —treat  $p$  as a reason to act—only if one knows that  $p$ . For a defence of this principle, see, for instance, Hawthorne and Stanley (2008: 577–8). It is important to note that this principle is meant not merely as an evaluative principle, but as a principle that has to do with responsibility, as is evidenced by Hawthorne's and Stanley's use of the terms 'blame' (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008: 572, 587) and 'excuse' (Hawthorne and Stanley 2008: 573, 582). Hawthorne and Stanley explicitly allow, though, that

one can be excused for violating the principle that one should act only from knowledge. One might think that such a principle implies or suggests that one is blameless for acting on the basis of one's disbelief that  $p$  only if one does not merely blamelessly disbelieve that  $p$ , but if one knows that  $\sim p$ . I do not think that this objection is convincing, though. On the one hand, if the principle does not allow for excusing circumstances, it is clearly false. Someone who believes on the basis of good evidence that  $p$  and who has no reason to mistrust her belief that  $p$  clearly blamelessly acts on  $p$ , even if it turns out that  $p$  is false. On the other hand, if the principle allows for excusing circumstances, then blameless disbelieving ignorance looks like one of the best candidates. If one believes that something is (not) the case and has no reason to mistrust that belief, then it seems that one is off the hook for acting on that belief, even if it is false or otherwise fails to be an instance of knowledge.

This means that we have found a first category of propositions which is such that disbelieving and deep ignorance of them provide a full excuse: ignorance of one's all-things-considered obligation. Harman (2011) has argued that disbelieving ignorance of one's obligation does not always excuse. However, I find the description of her cases insufficiently detailed to see whether they are convincing counter-examples. In any case, elsewhere I have argued that if we take people's dormant and tacit beliefs into account, we can explain why people are blameworthy in many (if not all) of the kinds of scenarios she describes; see Peels (2011b).

## V. IGNORANCE OF ONE'S ABILITY TO MEET ONE'S OBLIGATION

The second kind of proposition ignorance of which seems to be an excuse is ignorance that one is able to meet one's obligation:

*Ignorance of One's Ability to Meet One's Obligation.*  $S$  is ignorant that she is able to meet her all-things-considered obligation  $O$  (not) to actualise  $\Sigma$  or (not) to do something which would have prevented the actualisation of  $\Sigma$ .

By the 'ability to actualize  $\Sigma$ ' I mean something rather simple here, namely the physical or mental feasibility of actualizing  $\Sigma$ . It does not require that one knows or has true beliefs about how to actualize  $\Sigma$ . It is because of this rather restricted meaning of the phrase 'ability to actualize  $\Sigma$ ' that we can distinguish the kind of ignorance discussed here from that discussed in the following section.

Imagine that a teacher assigns to two of her students, Stephanie and Rachel, the task of giving a class presentation on Operation Valkyrie, a well-known attempt to assassinate Hitler. Stephanie knows that if she is to do that, she needs

to borrow certain books from the university library that are not available online. Reading those books is the only way to acquire the relevant information. Imagine, however, that right after class, large parts of the city are flooded because of heavy rainfall, so that she cannot reach the library. By accident, Rachel (not Stephanie) finds out that another professor of theirs has a large World War 2 (WW2) collection, among which are all the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie, and that he is happy to lend them to any of his students. Since he would be happy to lend them to Stephanie as well, but Stephanie is completely unaware of the fact that he has these books, her ignorance that she is able to meet her obligation seems to provide a full excuse for not preparing a good presentation on Operation Valkyrie.

What about deep ignorance that one is able to meet one's obligation? Remember that if one is deeply ignorant that  $p$ , then one neither believes that  $p$ , nor disbelieves that  $p$ , nor suspends belief on  $p$ . This means that one has never considered whether  $p$  is true. It is much harder to imagine that such ignorance excuses, but that is only because it is much harder to imagine that one is blameless for not even considering whether  $p$  is true. It is clear, for instance, that if Stephanie does not even think about whether or not she can go to the library, she is blameworthy for that. For if Stephanie has to give a presentation, she should have thought about going to the library. However, it seems that if one's deep ignorance that one is able to meet one's obligation is blameless, then we cannot blame the agent for violating her obligation.

## VI. IGNORANCE OF HOW TO MEET ONE'S OBLIGATION

The third kind of proposition which is such that ignorance of it seems to excuse one in certain circumstances is that there are certain means that are available to one to meet one's obligation. Many philosophers, such as Rosen (2008), overlook this third kind of exculpatory ignorance. Or, slightly more precisely:

*Ignorance of How to Meet One's Obligation.* S is ignorant that  $X_1, X_2, \dots$ , or  $X_n$  is a sufficiently good means that is available to her to meet her all-things-considered obligation O (not) to actualize  $\Sigma$  or (not) to do something which would have prevented the actualization of  $\Sigma$ .

Note that this kind of ignorance (ignorance of this kind of proposition) differs from the one distinguished in the previous section. Imagine that Rachel accidentally finds out that another professor has a large WW2 book collection, among which are all the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie and tells Stephanie that she (Stephanie) is able to prepare her presentation, despite the fact that the library cannot be reached because of recent floods in the

city. Imagine also that Stephanie knows that Rachel is highly reliable, but that they are so intellectually competitive that Rachel refuses to share with Stephanie how she can get access to the relevant books. Then Stephanie will know that she can meet her obligation, but she will be ignorant as to how to meet that obligation. Of course, if one knows how to meet one's obligation, then one knows that one can meet one's obligation. But, as this example shows, the reverse does not hold. This means that, for the sake of completeness, we should distinguish this as a separate variety of ignorance, for even if one has an obligation, one knows that, and one knows that one is able to meet one's obligation, one may still be excused by ignorance, namely if one is ignorant (again, inculpably so) as to how to meet that obligation.

Ignorance of this kind of proposition fully excuses both when it is disbelieving ignorance and when it is deep ignorance. When Stephanie believes on the basis of strong evidence that that professor has no books on Operation Valkyrie or when she has not even considered it and is blameless for that, it seems that her ignorance of how to meet her obligation fully excuses her for not preparing a good presentation on Operation Valkyrie.

## VII. LACK OF FORESIGHT

Finally, one can be excused by lack of foresight. One can know or truly believe that one has an obligation to  $\varphi$ , that one is able to  $\varphi$ , and even how to  $\varphi$  and yet be ignorant that  $\sim\varphi$ -ing will result in the actualization of  $\Sigma$ . For instance, imagine that I have an obligation to prepare my biology exam and that I know that I am able to meet that obligation by reading Miller and Levine's *Biology*. Imagine also that I culpably violate this obligation. However, I am inculpably ignorant that the knowledge that I would have acquired by reading the book would have enabled me to save someone's life in an utterly unforeseeable situation a week after the exam. It seems that in such a case, I am blameless for not saving that person's life. Since by not saving that person's life I, presumably, violate an obligation, this means that I am excused for not saving her life.

But, in virtue of what am I excused in such a situation? First, one might think that what excuses me in such a scenario is my ignorance of how to save that person's life. This suggestion, however, is unconvincing. If I do not know how to save that person's life and if we know that that ignorance is blameworthy, it is not yet clear whether I am to be blamed for not saving that person's life. For whether or not I am to be blamed for that depends on whether, at the time at which I violated my obligation to prepare my biology exam, I could foresee that not doing so would result in my ignorance of propositions that I would have to know in order to save someone's life on that future occasion. Hence, a second, more convincing, proposal is that what excuses me in such a case

is my blameless lack of foresight regarding my future obligation to save that person's life and my inability to meet that obligation in virtue of not preparing my biology exam.

This is not to say that every case in which I violate my obligation to prepare my biology exam, and in which I later need the relevant biological knowledge to save someone's life, and in which my lack of foresight at the time at which I violate my obligation is a scenario in which lack of foresight excuses me. Imagine that after my biology exam, but before encountering the victim, I learn that there is life saving information in the book that I need at some point in the nearby future, but that I can no longer acquire that information. In that case, it is not my lack of foresight that excuses me for violating my obligation to save the victim's life, for at the time at which I encounter the victim, I no longer lack such foresight. Rather, it is the inability to gather that relevant information after my biology exam. All I have claimed here, is that in at least some cases lack of foresight provides a full excuse for violating an obligation.

It is a complex issue precisely how 'lack of foresight' should be spelled out. Rather than trying to provide a precise definition, let me point to two characteristics of such foresight. First, it seems that foresight does not require conscious or occurrent beliefs about one's future obligations, one's future inability, or one's future ignorance. If foresight required such conscious or occurrent beliefs, then we would hardly ever be excused by lack of foresight, for it is impossible to consciously or occurrently foresee many of the consequences of the violation of one's obligations. It seems that dormant or tacit beliefs suffice. By 'dormant beliefs' or 'tacit beliefs' I mean, roughly, that one would consciously or occurrently believe the proposition in question if one were to consider it (For a more detailed articulation of what I mean by 'dormant beliefs' and 'tacit beliefs'; see Nottelmann and Peels 2013: 238, 248–9). Secondly, one need not believe that one will actually have the relevant obligation, or that one will actually be unable to meet that obligation, or that one will be ignorant of how to meet that obligation. It suffices if one believes that it is sufficiently likely that one will have that obligation at some time in the future, and that by violating one's present obligation, one sufficiently raises the chances of being unable to meet that future obligation or of being ignorant regarding that obligation.

Here, again, both disbelieving and deep lack of foresight provide a full excuse. If I have deep lack of foresight because I have not even considered whether my biology exam might be relevant to saving someone's life in the future (and I am blameless for that), it seems that I am not blameworthy for not saving that person's life. Similarly, if I have every good reason to believe that whether or not I prepare my biology exam will make no difference to whether or not I can save someone's life on future occasions and, therefore, disbelieve that, it seems that I am not blameworthy at all if I do not save someone's

life on some future occasion if I could have saved that person's life with the knowledge that I would have acquired if I had prepared my biology exam.

### VIII. SUSPENDING IGNORANCE

We saw that, under certain conditions, disbelieving and deep ignorance provide a full excuse for an action or a consequence of an action. Let us now turn to suspending ignorance. In this section, I argue that we have good reason to think that suspending ignorance all by itself never provides a full excuse. I consider each of the four kinds of ignorance that I discussed in the previous four sections in turn.

First, imagine that Jenny suspends judgement on whether it is her obligation, as a history graduate student, to read the manual. I think it is clear that such suspending ignorance all by itself, even if it is blameless, does not provide a full excuse. If Jenny suspends belief on whether she should read the manual, say, because she only vaguely remembers someone saying something to that effect, then it seems that she should either err on the side of caution by reading the manual or find out whether or not she should read the manual. Let me stress that what I mean is that in such a case, suspending ignorance does not provide a full excuse. It may well provide a partial excuse. At least in certain cases someone who fails to read a manual because she suspends belief on whether she should do so should not be blamed as much as someone who is aware that she should do so but fails to do so, say, out of laziness.

Secondly, imagine that Stephanie suspends judgement on whether she can go to the library. It seems that she should then try to find out whether she can reach the library, or, if it is not too dangerous, simply try doing so. If she neither tries to reach the library nor investigates the matter further, it seems that her suspending ignorance does not provide a full excuse. It might even provide no excuse whatsoever—I will not discuss that here. If she investigates the issue, but finds no answer, she can simply go and have a look, if it is not too dangerous. If it then turns out to be impossible, then that (or her blameless belief that that is the case) counts as her excuse, and if it turns out to be too dangerous, then she is excused by that (or by her blameless belief that that is the case).

Thirdly, one might think that, *mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to a case in which Stephanie knows that she is able to meet her obligation but suspends judgement about how she can meet her obligation. If she knows that she can collect the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie, but suspends judgement on whether professor *x* has those books and is willing to lend them, she can send him an email or try to call him. But here is the problem: virtually any professor might happen to have a collection of books on WW2 among which are the

relevant books on Operation Valkyrie. True, this is unlikely, but Stephanie has no reason to completely exclude this for those professors she does not know well. But then if she considers all those professors and suspends judgement in each case, it would follow that she is not fully excused by her ignorance of how to meet her obligation and that seems clearly false. I think there are two ways to meet this worry, though. First, one might think that, given the low probabilities involved, it is rational for Stephanie to disbelieve that rather than suspend judgement on whether a particular professor  $x$  whom she does not know has the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie, and that if the probabilities were much higher, she would have an obligation to investigate and suspending ignorance would not fully excuse. Second and more importantly, even if it is rational to suspend judgement for each professor as to whether he or she possesses the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie and whether he or she is willing to lend them, that suspending ignorance (on a large series of propositions) all by itself does not provide a full excuse. It is only if we add that it is impossible or out of proportion to find out whether one of them has the relevant copies of the books that Stephanie is fully excused.

Last, when it comes to lack of foresight, it also seems that only disbelieving and deep ignorance provide a full excuse. Imagine that I suspend belief on the true proposition that by violating my obligation, I sufficiently raise the chances of violating certain future obligations. Imagine also that I nonetheless violate that obligation. It seems that that will not get me off the hook. True, in at least some cases, I will not be as blameworthy as I would have been if I had known this true proposition. But it seems that I am not completely blameless either. Hence, suspending lack of foresight provides at most a partial excuse.

One might think that there are exceptional circumstances in which suspending ignorance does fully excuse. Imagine that I should  $\phi$ , but that I suspend belief about whether I should  $\phi$ , because someone puts a gun to my daughter's head and says that he will pull the trigger if I believe or disbelieve that I should  $\phi$  (for the sake of the argument, I assume that I can voluntarily suspend belief). Does my blameless suspending ignorance not fully excuse me for failing to  $\phi$  in a situation like this? No. Remember that, as I said in section 2, excuses are sufficient conditions for being blameless. But my suspending ignorance in this scenario is not sufficient for being blameless. We should add something about acting under duress—someone's putting a gun to my daughter's head—in order to explain why I am blameless.

One may wonder precisely why, in opposition to disbelieving and deep ignorance, suspending ignorance provides at most a partial excuse. Here, I have focused on arguing that there is this difference rather than explaining why there is this difference. What I said provides some suggestions, though: it seems that suspending ignorance, in opposition to disbelieving and deep ignorance, gives rise to further obligations, namely an obligation to investigate

or find something out if the stakes are sufficiently high. This issue clearly deserves further consideration, but given the purposes of this paper, I will not do so here.

## IX. WARRANTLESS IGNORANCE

Finally, let us consider warrantless ignorance, assuming that true belief that fails to be knowledge is indeed a variety of ignorance. Does it ever provide a full or partial excuse? In order to see whether it does, imagine that it is my task to set fire to an old barn. Then, it seems whether I know that there is someone in there or whether I merely truly believe that there is someone in there and that, therefore, I should not put the barn on fire, does not seem to make a difference to the degree of my blameworthiness: in both cases I am blameworthy to an equally high degree. For whether I know or justifiably believe or merely believe as the result of wishful thinking that there is someone in the barn and that I have an obligation not to put the barn on fire does not make an important difference to my phenomenology. In all these cases, I sincerely think that there is someone in the barn; that is how reality appears to me. Thus, whether my true belief is a mere true belief, a mere justified true belief, a mere Gettierized true belief, or an instance of knowledge does not seem to make a difference to the degree to which I am blameworthy for setting fire to the old barn. Given that warrantless ignorance is true belief that falls short of knowledge, it follows that warrantless ignorance does not provide a full or partial excuse. The same seems to apply to warrantless ignorance of one's ability to meet one's obligation, warrantless ignorance of how to meet one's obligation, and warrantless foresight of one's future obligation.

This is not to deny that if there are degrees of belief and if they are to be spelled out in terms of strength of conviction, then I may be more blameworthy if I am certain that there is someone in the barn and, therefore, have an obligation not to put the barn on fire, than if I am merely fairly convinced that this is the case. But notice that such varieties in degree of belief are not necessarily correlated with whether one knows, believes on the basis of good evidence, or believes without any evidence. One could in principle, quite irrationally, be a hundred percent sure without having any reasons or evidence. Thus, warrantless true belief as such does not provide one with an excuse, not even a partial one.

Let me stress that I do not contend that a true belief along these lines renders one blameworthy to the highest degree possible. Maybe someone who burns the barn with an evil intention is even more blameworthy (thus, for instance, Beardsley 1979: 577). The point is: someone who knows that there is someone in the barn is equally blameworthy as someone who is warrantlessly

ignorant—merely truly believes, merely truly justifiedly believes, etc.—that there is someone in the barn and, on my definition of ‘partial excuse’, this means that such a person is not even partially excused. And if one is not even partially excused, one is not excused at all.

## X. CONCLUSION

Let me draw the threads of this paper together. I have confined myself to ignorance for which one is blameless and that plays a motivational role in one’s act or omission. I have distinguished four varieties of ignorance: disbelieving, deep, suspending, and warrantless ignorance. Also, I have distinguished four categories of propositions that are relevant when it comes to ignorance that excuses: (1) the proposition that one has an all-things-considered obligation  $O$ , (2) the proposition that one is able to meet  $O$ , (3) the proposition that  $X_1, X_2, \dots$ , or  $X_n$  is a good means to meet  $O$ , and (4) lack of foresight regarding one’s future obligation. Since it is confusing to call warrantless true belief regarding one’s future obligation ‘lack of foresight’, let us subsume lack of foresight regarding one’s future obligation and warrantless true belief regarding one’s future obligation under the heading ‘ignorance regarding one’s future obligation’. I cannot think of any further kind of proposition ignorance of which provides a full or partial excuse that is not reducible to any of the four kinds of propositions that I distinguished. I, therefore, submit that this list of four kinds of propositions is exhaustive—a claim which could, of course, be falsified if someone comes up with a convincing counter-example. Putting the results together, we get the scheme that can be found on the next page, where ‘F’ stands for ‘full excuse’, ‘P’ for ‘partial excuse’, and ‘N’ for ‘no excuse’ (Table 1).

Now, this scheme can be made even more complex by also distinguishing between blameworthy and blameless ignorance and between acting from ignorance and acting in ignorance. I will not do so here. I take it, though, that this scheme provides enough evidence to think that a satisfactory account of when ignorance excuses has to address two questions that have so far been neglected in the philosophical literature: What variety of ignorance does the instance of ignorance in question belong to?, and Which proposition is the cognitive subject in question ignorant of?<sup>4</sup>

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**Table 1.** When does acting from blameless ignorance excuse?

Ignorance of What?	Which kind of ignorance?			
	Disbelieving ignorance	Deep ignorance	Suspending ignorance	Warrantless ignorance
Ignorance of one's obligation	F	F	P/N	N
Ignorance of one's ability to meet one's obligation	F	F	P/N	N
Ignorance of how to meet one's obligation	F	F	P/N	N
Ignorance regarding one's future obligation	F	F	P/N	N
Ignorance of any other kind of proposition	N	N	N	N

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