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You Oughta Know: On the Possibility of Morally Mandatory Knowledge

Jimmy A. Licon 

School of Historical, Religious, and Philosophical Studies, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ, USA
Email: jimmylicon01@gmail.com

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Abstract

Some people act despite knowing their actions are wrong. Others know and do the right thing. This paper focuses on people who rightly believe that gaining specific knowledge would be enough to motivate moral action but remain strategically ignorant due to self-interest. This paper argues that such individuals have a moral obligation to acquire the salient knowledge given the following applies: first, such individuals are aware of the morally efficacious knowledge; and second, the efficacious knowledge is accessible to them. Then, we examine similarities and differences between morally mandatory knowledge and culpable ignorance. Finally, morally mandatory knowledge shows that ignorance can result from deficient moral character.

Keywords: Culpable ignorance; social cognition; cooperation; epistemic duties

It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it.

—H. L. Mencken, I, Candidate for Governor (1935)

1. Introduction

Begin with the relatively benign assumption that humans have the cognitive capacity to acquire moral knowledge (McGrath 2019; Huemer 2005; Audi 1997). On that basis, we can assign people to groups based on their relationship to moral knowledge. Some people know their actions are wrong but act anyway. Others know what morality requires and do it. And still, others rightly believe that acquiring that specific knowledge, due to their psychology and temperament, would be enough to motivate them to act morally instead of pursuing their self-interest. They avoid acquiring the knowledge in question to avoid cognitive dissonance and subjective ambivalence produced by the conflict between what they know, and the actions they choose (Connor and Armitage 2008).

This paper focuses on the last group: individuals who rightly or justifiably believe that there is morally efficacious knowledge such that acquiring that knowledge would be

sufficient to motivate them to act morally, with their cognitive dissonance and subjective ambivalence acting as an obstacle to acquiring that knowledge. This paper argues that such individuals, under appropriate conditions, have a moral obligation to acquire the morally efficacious knowledge given that such knowledge will (often enough) motivate them to do what morality requires – they just need the knowledge to act. The aim here is to make a case for *the possibility of morally mandatory knowledge*, that is, the knowledge that certain individuals have an obligation to acquire under the following conditions: first, they are aware that acquiring such knowledge would be enough to motivate moral action; and second, they have access to the knowledge in question, even if only indirectly. Here's a rough sketch of the argument,

First, some individuals choose strategic ignorance to avoid acquiring knowledge that would be enough to motivate moral action. Second, choosing to remain ignorant of information that would be enough to motivate morally required actions is immoral, barring exceptional cases. So, individuals who choose strategic ignorance do something immoral, barring exceptional cases.¹

Here's the paper outline: first, we examine the evidence showing that there are individuals who strategically avoid certain kinds of knowledge, despite (rightly) believing that their actions are morally wrong because they prefer to continue their (suspected) immoral actions. And second, we explore why people value their moral identities, and what would motivate them to avoid specific morally efficacious knowledge: to maintain plausible deniability, and to preserve their positive moral self-identity. Next, we explore similarities and differences between culpable ignorance and morally mandatory knowledge. And finally, we explore how the possibility of morally mandatory knowledge indicates that sometimes ignorance can be both an intellectual deficiency and a moral deficiency too.

2. Caring consumers, strategic ignorance

Some individuals engage in what the literature terms *strategic ignorance*, “the willful avoidance of evidence about the negative social [and moral] impacts of one’s own decisions” that can result in the muting of cognitive dissonance and subjective ambivalence (Grossman 2014: 2,659). Some individuals are more likely to stay strategically ignorant, the more cognitive dissonance they would otherwise experience without that strategic ignorance, especially where something the individuals highly value is threatened by acquiring new information (Elliot and Devine 1994). For example, Erica loves her designer heels but avoids information about the sweatshop where her shoes were made for fear that her conscience would revolt at the idea of wearing the heels made by people who are exploited and vulnerable, even though, in her strategic ignorance, she *suspects* something is morally afoot with her high heels (Dana 2005).

One of the primary motivations for engaging in strategic ignorance is that avoiding information on the moral standing of one’s activities may be enough to shield the individual from subjective ambivalence, the feeling of conflict when choosing an action. This mismatch can arise from a disparity between what someone suspects morality requires, and what her pursuing her self-interest. However, such individuals, despite

¹The “barring exceptional cases” clause aims to capture cases where one has a *weightier moral obligation* to avoid acquiring knowledge that would otherwise be morally mandatory. For example, Samantha would otherwise have a moral obligation to acquire knowledge the *F*, except the suffering caused by knowing, and acting on, *F* would outweigh the suffering prevented by knowing and acting on *F*.

engaging in strategic ignorance, will choose the fair outcome if they are informed that acting selfishly will harm other individuals, but they would prefer to remain ignorant of the harm their actions would do to others if given the opportunity to remain ignorant (Onwezen and van der Weele 2016: 97; Nyborg 2011). This consumer group is caring in that when they “are informed about the fact that a selfish choice will hurt other participants, [they] will usually choose a fair outcome.” They are sensitive to moral factors more than indifferent consumers, and it is partly due to this sensitivity that they decide to remain strategically ignorant (Onwezen and van der Weele 2016: 97; Nyborg 2011). Despite their initial appearance, we can describe this group of consumers as caring consumers because, though they consume meat, they have pangs of conscience. This psychological tendency also explains their choice to stay strategically ignorant of the fact that consuming meat is wrong and incentivizes undue animal suffering.

Here, a potential objection emerges.² In cases of strategic ignorance, one would seemingly be in an untenable epistemic position to maintain plausible deniability. Take Erica from earlier: she must strategically avoid the knowledge of sweatshops conditions where her shoes were made to uphold plausible deniability but also knows enough about sweatshops such that she knows to avoid further information about sweatshop conditions. How could she do that? This looks like an epistemically untenable position – call this *the too much knowledge objection*.

There are a couple of problems with this objection. First, it relies on a questionable assumption: one cannot know enough to avoid moral obligations while preserving plausible deniability. But this assumption is doubtful. For example, Marie is a busybody who collects and spreads gossip about others, often morally criticizing their actions, and often with good reason. And Erica is aware of this about Marie. And so, Erica avoids interacting with Marie. Even though she often (though often not too) finds herself in agreement with Marie, she wants to avoid acquiring further moral obligations. Here, Erica has enough knowledge to avoid interacting with Marie, but not enough to make her morally culpable. Erica knows enough to avoid Marie, thereby preserving her strategic ignorance, but not enough to acquire a moral obligation by talking with Marie and perhaps learning of her latest moral failing.

Erica may even have some vague idea or credible suspicion that Marie could convey knowledge enough to generate moral obligations on Erica’s part to, say, avoid buying more of her favorite designer shoes, but vague ideas and credible suspicions are too weak to generate culpability for wrongdoing in this case, even if they are sufficient to enable Erica to avoid acquiring knowledge that generates moral obligations. One can imagine any number of cases – avoiding panhandlers and charity Santas – where a suspicion or intuition strategically facilitates avoiding acquiring knowledge that would morally require action, along with the motivation due to psychological dispositions, but without losing plausible deniability. They could learn more about the issue, but in doing so, they would lose their plausible deniability to themselves and to others.

Second, the evidence for unwitting self-deception is overwhelming (Simler and Hanson 2018; von Hippel and Trivers 2011). There are many ways that people self-deceive without conscious awareness that they are doing so – they are not culpable, in other words, for that self-deception. How does that bear on the too much knowledge objection? One could possess knowledge that, without distortions from self-deception, would be enough to generate a moral obligation but would be insufficient to generate that same moral obligation due to the effects of self-deception. Consider an example: Erica has a (highly credible) pamphlet handed to her at *Whole Foods* about the horrific conditions of sweatshop labor that produces consumer electronics, clothing, and other

²Thanks to an anonymous referee for pressing this objection.

kinds of products Erica often buys. However, Erica has been a longtime Jimmy Choo customer due to the quality of the heels and other fancy shoes. She also has a great deal of respect for the designer and the brand, thinking them to be of utmost integrity. And so, Erica weighs her options and concludes that Jimmy Choo must be the exception to the evidence presented about the abhorrent conditions of sweatshops – somehow, someway. She cannot bring herself to believe that a company she holds in such high esteem is guilty of such awful conduct. But if Erica were to investigate and learn more about the company, she would acquire knowledge that would compel her, due to her psychology, to cease purchasing Jimmy Choo products. This is similar to a classic case from the self-deception literature:

[Consider] the case of a man who believes that a certain woman loves him even though he possesses (and realizes he possesses) strong evidence to the contrary. He is cognitively unmoved by the fact that she has never wanted to go out with him, always hangs up on him whenever he calls, returns his unsolicited gifts, plans to marry someone else, etc. He ‘knows’ there must be some explanation for all this: her mother poisoned her mind against him, her father wants her to marry someone respectable, she thinks he is too good for her, she does not realize how much he loves her, or whatever (Bach 1981: 358–9).

Similarly, Erica has solid evidence, which she would find persuasive upon further investigation, except for her unwitting self-deception, but which she cannot take seriously enough to further investigate her favorite shoe company. Here, Erica has enough information for her to discharge her moral obligations – it would only require more investigation on her part – but due to factors like motivated reasoning, as a means of unwitting self-deception, Erica manages to uphold her plausible deniability. She also knows that *evidence of immoral conduct* by the Jimmy Choo shoe company would psychologically (and morally) compel her to cease purchasing their products, at a minimum. So, while there are cases where one knows too much to avoid culpability, there are clearly cases where someone can know enough to avoid moral culpability, by preserving their strategic ignorance, without losing plausible deniability.

To highlight the contrast with strategically ignorant consumers, there are other consumer types in the study (Onwezen and van der Weele 2016, 97–8): the first group, *struggling consumers*, are consumers who suffer from cognitive dissonance involving actions that they strongly suspect are immoral (e.g., meat-eating, buying sweatshop clothes), yet do not attempt to avoid acquiring knowledge that would reveal their actions as immoral. The second group, *coping consumers*, are individuals who choose to acquire morally efficacious knowledge and to adjust their actions accordingly to mitigate cognitive dissonance and subjective ambivalence. The last group, *indifferent consumers*, are unbothered by the potential immorality of their actions, and they lack any related cognitive dissonance or subjective ambivalence.

How do we describe the subset of individuals who are both sensitive to moral knowledge and yet who prefer to remain strategically ignorant and avoid cognitive dissonance, such that they continue to engage in their preferred immoral actions? They share a cluster of traits,

- (1) They care, to a certain degree, about the suffering and immorality of their actions [eating meat, buying sweatshop products].

- (2) They lack sufficient knowledge about the wrongness of their actions to motivate them to act better, morally speaking, but they (rightly) believe that their actions are wrong.
- (3) They choose strategic ignorance of the wrongness of their actions to abate cognitive dissonance and subjective ambivalence, and to protect their moral identity and to preserve their plausible deniability with third parties.
- (4) They are psychologically constituted such that they would cease their (immoral) actions if they were to acquire knowledge that those actions are morally wrong.
- (5) Their actions are, as a matter of fact, morally wrong.³

From these characteristics, it is clear that caring consumers would prefer to remain strategically ignorant instead of forgoing meat consumption: they value consuming meat more than doing what is morally right, and yet would experience cognitive dissonance if they *knew* consuming meat is wrong, given their psychological makeup, yet still consume meat anyway. Such caring consumers aren't aided, in their strategic ignorance, by the fact that there are robust reasons to believe that, generally, the consumption of animal products like meat and fur, especially in rich and industrialized nations, is morally wrong, including simple, powerful arguments (Rachels 2004; Singer 1989; Engel 2001). As the moral philosopher, James Rachels, argues,

It begins with the principle that it is wrong to cause pain unless there is a good enough reason. The qualification is important, because causing pain is not always wrong. [...] However, as the principle says, causing pain is acceptable only when there is a good enough reason for it. Justification is required. The second step in the argument is to notice that in the modern meat production business, animals are made to suffer terribly. There is a reason for this suffering, too. We eat the meat, and it helps to nourish us. But there is a catch: we could just as easily nourish ourselves in other ways. Vegetarian meals are also good. [...] Therefore, we should stop eating the products of this business. We should be vegetarians instead (2004: 71).

The moral case for eschewing meat consumption is very strong and includes not only potent, yet simple arguments, but also compelling personal stories, emotional appeals, intimate interactions with animals, hearing stories and explanations of why other individuals adopted vegetarianism, and others (Schwitzgebel et al. 2023; Elsey and Moss 2023). For example, though Winston likes eating meat, he (perhaps rightly) suspects that meat consumption is immoral. He intentionally avoids discussing the matter with vegetarians and vegans, discards articles and other material offering evidence and arguments against consuming meat, because Winston suspects that such literature will convince him, and due to his psychological makeup, motivate him to forgo meat consumption.

One could appeal to many examples to explain strategic ignorance. So, why vegetarianism and veganism? First, the applied ethics literature contains compelling arguments against meat consumption, at least for individuals residing in rich and industrialized nations with sufficient nutritional alternatives that do not involve killing and harming animals. Second, the study used by this paper to highlight the possibility of morally mandatory knowledge (Onwezen and van der Weele 2016) focuses on

³Assuming for the sake of argument that there are moral facts that both prescribe right actions, and to which most of us have adequate epistemic access; we remain metaethically neutral otherwise.

strategically ignorant consumers who would otherwise feel bad about eating meat but for their strategic ignorance.

Here, we come to the key issue: why would caring consumers who choose strategic ignorance have a moral obligation, not only to morally improve their behavior, but to acquire the morally efficacious knowledge, that is, knowledge that would be sufficient to motivate such individuals to morally improve their lives? Obviously, such individuals choose to remain ignorant for morally strategic reasons: to avoid the subjective ambivalence they would otherwise experience if they continued to consume meat, they choose to stay ignorant and to avoid any information related to the ethics of consuming meat. This subset of individuals wants to enjoy the taste of meat, despite having good reason to think it is morally wrong, without feeling the pangs of conscience they would otherwise feel if they were not strategically ignorant.

However, we shouldn't conclude that individuals are only strategically ignorant about the issues of animal suffering and meat consumption. There is no reason to conclude that strategic ignorance would be specific to animal ethics in the sense that there are likely many morally required actions that individuals would rather avoid, and where individuals may choose to address the subjective ambivalence that arises when they (rightly) believe they have a moral obligation to *G* but choose to remain strategically ignorant about *G* such that they can still act immorally. We can imagine other cases where people make morally wrong choices involving climate change, exploited sweatshop labor, and others where they choose strategic ignorance of the wrongness of their actions just like their strategic ignorance of animal suffering.

The fact that a subset of individuals chooses *strategic* ignorance to avoid moral correction reveals a couple of things. First, they have the ability (even if only indirect or in need of cultivation) to acquire moral knowledge that would cut against the moral permissibility of their meat eating. If they have the capability to strategically ignore evidence and reasons showing that meat eating is morally wrong, they have the ability to acquire the salient moral knowledge. If they can freely avoid acquiring salient moral knowledge demonstrating meat eating is wrong, then they have the capacity to acquire the moral knowledge in question. Who cares? Presumably, one could be morally mandated to acquire knowledge only if they have the capacity to acquire it. Underlying this point is the *ought-implies-can* principle (Stern 2004). A strategically ignorant agent is morally mandated to acquire morally efficacious knowledge only if:

(CC) A moral agent, *S*, is morally mandated to acquire moral knowledge, *K*, only if *S* has the ability to freely acquire *K* (Washington and Kelly 2016).

And because this subset of individuals chose to remain strategically ignorant, not only do they have the ability (or perhaps uncultivated capacity) to acquire or avoid salient moral knowledge, but they must meet the other condition necessary for moral culpability too:

(AC) A moral agent, *S*, is morally mandated to acquire moral knowledge, *K*, only if *S* is aware that acquiring *K* would be enough to psychologically motivate morally required actions (Washington and Kelly 2016).

Indeed, we wouldn't be justified in ascribing *strategic* ignorance to someone if they lacked some level of awareness that there was knowledge available that could overcome that ignorance. If, suppose, there were no such knowledge, there would be nothing strategic to their ignorance, but would rather be incidental ignorance. The same holds of the access condition required for moral responsibility: if an individual lacked epistemic

access to morally efficacious knowledge, then they couldn't be *strategically* ignorant, just regular ignorant. One can only be strategically ignorant of information given that they have epistemic access to that information since their ignorance would otherwise be a product of circumstance.

Here, we should apply principles (CC) and (AC) to the Winston example: if you recall, Winston consciously avoids discussing animal ethics with avowed and educated vegetarians and vegans, and promptly discards pamphlets and other materials that offer reasons and arguments against the moral permissibility of consuming meat, because he worries such information will convince him, due to his psychological constitution, to forgo meat consumption – except that he strongly desires to keep consuming meat. Here, Winston's strategic ignorance satisfies principle (CC): Winston has the capacity to acquire, or avoid acquiring, the information that would be sufficient to motivate Winston to act better morally; one cannot strategically avoid information unless they have the ability to acquire and avoid that information. The same holds of the awareness condition (AC): Winston cannot strategically avoid information about the immorality of meat consumption unless he was aware, at least in some cases, of where and when the information is located to allow him to avoid acquiring it, for example, he hides from Charles at mealtimes to avoid hearing about his spiritual and moral transition from omnivore to vegan.

Since we have established that there are strategically ignorant consumers, who choose to remain ignorant of morally salient information that, given their psychological constitution, would likely be enough to motivate such individuals to morally reform their actions, we should turn to the issue of what, in a wider sense, motivates their strategic ignorance beyond their desire to keep at their immoral practices. This will provide explanatory depth to why consumers choose to stay strategically ignorant and the causes and incentives underlying those epistemic choices.

3. Moral identities, moral knowledge

Most people want to see themselves as good people, incurring costs and avoiding knowledge to the contrary to preserve their self-conception (De Brigard and Stanley 2021). And it makes sense that people want a good reputation: humans are capable, and often willing, to cooperate with nearly anyone – for example, despite genetic relatedness – if the incentives are right and the potential partners are trustworthy enough (Henrich 2015), even when other cooperative species will only cooperate with mates and family members on a few fixed tasks like building a dam (beavers) or a hive (honeybees). But, unfortunately, despite the versatility such cooperative abilities afford human beings, a downside of depending for survival on cooperation by others is that it makes one subject to free riders, those who take resources without either giving back or without good reason not to. As Sperber and Baumard explain:

[Humans] depend for their survival and welfare on frequent and varied cooperation with others. In the short run, it would often be advantageous to cheat, that is, to take the benefits of cooperation without paying the costs. Cheating [though] may seriously compromise one's reputation and one's chances of being able to benefit from future cooperation. In the long run, cooperators who can be relied upon to act in a mutually beneficial manner are likely to do better in what may be called the 'cooperation market' (2012: 495).

A strong incentive for us to care how other people view us *as moral agents* is that we rely on them to survive, thrive, and to reproduce – something that could be jeopardized by a bad reputation. If we must rely on others to survive, then it matters how they view us as moral agents – *ceteris paribus*, people are less inclined to cooperate, come to the aid of, or otherwise help people who they view as morally bad. Often, demonizing others is the first step taken toward justifying their mistreatment. Something similar applies to romantic pair bonding: *ceteris paribus*, people would be more hesitant to date, and especially marry and procreate with, individuals they believe to be untrustworthy or morally bad.

And this is clear from the empirical evidence: many people would prefer “jail time, amputation of limbs, and death” to acute reputational damage like acquiring a reputation as a Nazi or child molester (Vonash et al. 2018: 604). And even young children recognize the value of maintaining a good reputation by avoiding “cheating at the cost of losing a highly desirable prize” (Fu et al. 2016: 277). Finally, people avoid sharing “fake news” to protect their reputations, even when they are offered a cash incentive (Altay et al. 2020). And finally, people value their moral identity and how others represent them as *moral agents*, considerably, because this influences who will cooperate with them (Hardy Sam and Carlo 2011; De Brigard and Stanley 2021).

However, people are good at social cognition. Most people have what cognitive scientists call a *theory of mind* that includes “the ability to use concepts of intentional mental states, such as beliefs, emotions, intentions, goals, and perceptual states, . . . to predict and interpret behavior” (Westra and Carruthers 2017: 1). Frequently, people have decent epistemic access to our mental states like believing and knowing by using their innate theory of mind. Humans have a remarkable ability, exceeding the scope and accuracy of other species, to infer and interpret actions by members of their group. Sometimes we are wrong, and other times deceived, but the fact that humans are fairly good at mindreading others’ beliefs entails that what we believe can influence how others view us, and influence how they think about our moral and epistemic reputations (Funkhouser 2017, 2020; Williams 2020; von Hippel and Trivers 2011).

Moreover, others not only (often) accurately attribute mental states to us, but they care about our mental states too. It matters to others, not only what someone does, but what motivated their actions to begin with. This may be related to the fact that what people believe and know guide actions they will likely take in the future and reveals aspects of their moral character (Rand et al. 2014). Others care about what we believe and know since that is a guide to our future actions that could impact them negatively, and thus, we are incentivized to pay attention to the intentions of those around us.

Here, we have a two-fold explanation for why people engage in strategic ignorance. The first is that people want to maintain plausible deniability where other people are concerned: they want people to appreciate that despite their morally impermissible actions, they are ignorant of the moral status of their actions. And if someone doesn’t know that their actions are wrong, then that ignorance would mitigate their blameworthiness for engaging in morally impermissible actions (Zimmerman 2008). When there is good reason to believe that someone is genuinely ignorant of what morality requires, then *ceteris paribus*, others are less likely to blame or punish that individual and excuse their immoral actions as a product of ignorance.

A second reason involves maintaining one’s moral identity. In order to protect the view that many people self-represent themselves as morally “good people.” Because of this desire to look morally good to oneself, people would often prefer to remain ignorant of the moral status of their actions, even if they suspect that their actions are wrong. This is because they would both prefer to keep engaging in immoral actions while maintaining a strong sense of moral identity. This epistemic avoidance by strategically

ignorant consumers reduced negative feelings they would have otherwise had they engaged in practices they suspected to be morally prohibited, and thus puts less pressure on them to adjust their sense of moral identity.

Empirical studies in moral psychology and economics support the notion that when people act altruistically, one of the motivations underlying their actions is moral identity: the degree to which being a moral person is crucial to their identity as individuals (LeBoeuf et al., 2010; Hardy Sam and Carlo 2011; Simler and Hanson 2018). And essential to having a substantial moral reputation is that one's moral identity is a valuable element of one's overall identity and is assigned adequate weight in decision-making processes. One's moral identity is perhaps one of the best predictors of moral actions and beliefs. In practical terms, most people want to picture themselves as good people, and few want to be seen as a bad person. These insights provide a picture of the reasons and incentives underlying strategic ignorance, allowing us to both better understand the phenomenon and how to undercut it.

From what we have described, it may appear that morally mandatory knowledge is simply the mirror image of culpable ignorance – if one has a moral mandate to acquire knowledge, then their (strategic) ignorance would be culpable (in some form) by implication. In the next section, we turn to the similarities and differences between morally mandatory knowledge and culpable ignorance to clarify how such epistemic items are related and distinct.

4. Morally mandatory knowledge, culpable ignorance

There are instances of culpable ignorance. The doctor who performs risky surgery while lacking the salient knowledge, despite knowing she should have had it. This suggests that there are cases where one is morally culpable for their ignorance, namely cases where someone harms a client due to their ignorance, and they were culpable for that ignorance – they were sufficiently aware their ignorance could be an issue, and knew how to improve their epistemic situation, but they choose against doing anything about it. And because one is culpable for their ignorance, any harm that results from that culpable ignorance is something for which the culpably ignorant individual is morally blameworthy because they should have informed themselves and they knew it, but they chose to stay ignorant. As the philosopher, Holly Smith, writes,

[There] are occasions when a person's ignorance is itself criticizable – when *he should have realized* what he was doing. Perhaps the doctor should have known that high oxygen enrichment would induce blindness: the latest issue of his medical journal described a study establishing this effect and recommending the use of lower concentrations as equally effective for respiratory problems. The doctor should have read his journal, and if he had done so, would have realized he ought to use less oxygen (1983: 533 – original emphasis).

It appears, then, that people are culpably ignorant only if their ignorance is morally criticizable: they are ignorant of something where they should have been informed, their ignorance resulted in impermissible harm to others, and they were aware they should inform themselves and how to do so, but where they chose instead to remain ignorant. When described like that, it appears that culpable ignorance has much in common with morally mandatory knowledge.

Ignorance is morally criticizable when one is blameworthy for lacking the salient information, despite them knowing they should and can acquire it. And that ignorance

either did or easily could have harmed innocent individuals. On the flip side, had someone been ignorant, but they were incapable of causing harm as a result of that ignorance, clearly such ignorance wouldn't be blameworthy or culpable. Presumably, essential to what makes it *culpable* ignorance is that the ignorance in question was necessary to prevent harm to innocents *given the future actions of the ignorant individual*. For example, Malcolm is a doctor who often performs surgery on trusting patients, and he is aware that his surgical knowledge is subpar and how to fix his epistemic deficiency. Here, Malcolm has culpable ignorance due to the fact that his epistemic failing makes performing surgery needlessly riskier for the patient. Rebecca, by contrast, is ignorant of the latest surgical techniques too, except that she isn't culpably ignorant because of it due to the fact that her ignorance will not harm anyone – she isn't planning to perform surgery on anyone. And, as such, Rebecca clearly has no moral obligation to address her surgical ignorance.

By contrast, morally mandatory knowledge is knowledge necessary to *motivate future moral action*, rather than to avoid moral blame or criticism. Why? Such knowledge would be sufficient, given their psychological constitution, to motivate acting in accordance with moral prohibitions. If one has the ability to acquire knowledge that would then motivate moral action, and one is aware that acquiring such knowledge would motivate them to act as morality requires, then one has a moral obligation to acquire such knowledge. Another way to express this point: a moral agent has a moral obligation to acquire knowledge when they have the ability and the awareness that such knowledge would motivate them to act morally. If the sole factor that would prevent someone from acting morally is acquiring knowledge, to which they have access and of which they are aware, then they have moral obligation to acquire. So, although culpable ignorance and morally mandatory knowledge are similar, they are sufficiently distinct such that they should be treated as distinct phenomena: ignorance is blameworthy if it leads to culpable harm, whereas strategic ignorance is blameworthy only if it facilitates someone to avoid doing what morality requires of them by choosing to remain strategically ignorant.

And finally, just as ignorance may indicate that one has an intellectual deficit or failing, there may be cases too where it indicates a moral deficit or failing. That comparison is explored next in the penultimate section of the paper.

5. Moral and epistemic failings, deficiencies

The genuine possibility of morally mandatory knowledge has another implication for the moral and epistemic character of strategically ignorant moral agents.⁴ Before addressing that, though, it is worth briefly canvassing the nature of propositional ignorance. Though the literature is too extensive to survey (Peels 2016; Peels and Pritchard 2020), there are broadly two views on the descriptive nature of propositional ignorance. On the traditional view, ignorance just is the lack of knowledge: one is ignorant of *p* if one lacks knowledge that *p* (LeMorvan 2011; Zimmerman 2008). However, on a recent view: one is ignorant of *p* if one lacks true belief that *p* (Peels 2010; Goldman and Olsson 2009).

Many philosophers worry, though, that such definitions are too limited (Arfini 2020). Consider that someone can be ignorant of how to perform a task if they lack know-how (Nottelmann 2016), they can be ignorant of subject matter (Brogaard 2016), and ignorance can even be an actively upheld falsehood, for example, choosing to stay ignorant due to bad epistemic practices that are rewarded by institutions and society

⁴Using the term “character” in a loose sense such that it isn't susceptible to the situationist challenge, see: Doris (2002) and Harman (1999). The paper takes no position on the situationist challenge.

(Kassar 2018). Finally, others argue that epistemic agents can be completely ignorant despite lacking any doxastic attitudes toward a proposition, along with investigative ignorance, where someone stays ignorant of something to better investigate it (Haas and Vogt 2015; Peels and Pritchard 2020). The strategic ignorance centered in this paper is a cross between ignoring sources of moral knowledge and propositional ignorance that results from actively ignoring sources of moral knowledge.

These accounts of ignorance are descriptive. Some philosophers, though, argue ignorance has a normative dimension. When someone is ignorant, it isn't merely that they lack knowledge or true belief, but that they suffer from an epistemic and intellectual failing or deficit. Otherwise, such a state of epistemic absence is better characterized as *not knowing*. Attributing ignorance to Robert, then, is more than conveying his lack of knowledge or true beliefs, it is also conveying that Robert is epistemically or intellectually deficient. As Duncan Pritchard argues:

The crux of the matter is that ignorance captures a normative status in that to be ignorant of a truth is not merely to lack the relevant knowledge (or true belief), but more specifically involves one's lack of knowledge (or true belief) manifesting a kind of failing or deficiency in one's intellectual character . . . [So] long as one's lack of knowledge is intellectually appropriate, and so involves no intellectual failing on one's part of this kind, then it is not a case of ignorance (2021a: 5–6).

The rough idea is that we do not ascribe ignorance to someone who simply lacks knowledge or true belief because the ascription of ignorance, intuitively, has negative valence.⁵ For example, it isn't a compliment to label someone "ignorant" because the connotation underlying such a label is that the person in question has an intellectual failing or defect. Whereas someone who simply lacks knowledge or true belief may lack such epistemic items due to happenstance unrelated to any potential intellectual defect or failing. As Pritchard explains again:

What the cases just considered demonstrate is that there is a normative dimension to ignorance, in the sense that it implies a specific kind of intellectual failing on the subject's part. In particular, the sort of intellectual failing in question is one concerned with a failing of good inquiry. In all the cases we have looked at, while there is a clear absence of the target epistemic good (whether true belief or knowledge), there is no intellectual failing of the subject qua inquirer in play, and that's why we don't attribute ignorance to the subjects concerned (2021b: 115).

On this view, ignorance is an epistemic failing or deficiency in that ignorance is the residue that remains as the result of the "failing of good inquiry" where one should have successfully gained knowledge or true belief provided they weren't intellectually or epistemically defective. And so, simply not knowing isn't, in Pritchard's view, sufficient to constitute ignorance, but instead it is the fact that one lacks knowledge of something that, for good reason, they should have known but they do not that renders them *ignorant*. Perhaps they had an obligation to know as a journalist, lawyer, or detective, for example – they had an obligation to know, and they would have known had they been

⁵However, we agree with Pritchard that ignorance has a normative aspect but disagree that it is *exhausted* by intellectual failing: there are instances of epistemic (and other) benefits from what looks like ignorance (Wang and Wang 2023; Bortolotti 2020; Licon 2023). For example, Trayvon relying on heuristics *enhances his ability as epistemic agent* to acquire information and solve problems (Hertwig and Todd 2003). We will bracket off this issue for the paper's sake.

intellectually robust and capable epistemic agents. Their ignorance is the result of an intellectual failing or defect on the part of the epistemic agent in question.

A similar diagnosis is applicable to moral agents who lack morally mandatory knowledge and have the epistemic ability to acquire the mandatory knowledge in question: their ignorance results in failing or defective moral character such that they refuse to acquire the efficacious knowledge they know or justifiably believe will be sufficient to motivate them to perform actions that are morally required of them. Had they possessed better moral character, they would have acquired the salient morally efficacious knowledge and been acting, more or less, in compliance with their moral obligations. The fact that someone indulges in *strategic* ignorance reveals their moral blameworthiness for their actions because they choose to avoid acquiring moral knowledge they have solid reason to believe would be sufficient to motivate morally required actions on their part. Just like ignorance can indicate that someone has an intellectual failing or deficit – they should know *p*, but they don't due to their intellectual failing or deficit – it appears that strategic ignorance can indicate that someone has a moral deficit or failing. They have a moral obligation to acquire knowledge that would motivate morally mandatory actions.

There is another connection between strategic ignorance and morally efficacious knowledge with respect to caring consumers: they are both means for addressing the cognitive dissonance and subjective ambivalence that is produced from (rightly) believing that their actions are morally wrong and strongly desiring to keep acting wrongly. One avenue for addressing this cognitive dissonance and subjective ambivalence is strategic ignorance: if one doesn't really *know* that their actions are morally wrong, then they can sincerely affirm that they do not know if their actions are wrong due to their ignorance about such matters. A better way to dissolve their cognitive dissonance and subjective ambivalence is simply to do what is morally required and cease avoiding morally efficacious knowledge.

6. Conclusion

There are some individuals with a moral obligation to acquire knowledge that, once known, would compel them psychologically to act to fulfill their moral obligations, and where they are avoiding the acquisition of such knowledge to continue to avoid doing what morality requires. Such individuals highlight the possibility of morally mandatory knowledge. And because such individuals want to engage in actions that they (plausibly) suspect are immoral, for example, buying meat and sweatshop clothes, without cognitive dissonance or subjective ambivalence, they stay strategically ignorant of information that would both reveal their actions to be immoral, and would be enough to psychologically compel them to act morally. And though there are some similarities between morally mandatory knowledge and culpable ignorance, there are some important differences too. The paper then concludes by showing how failing to acquire morally mandatory knowledge is a moral defect or failing just as ignorance is sometimes an epistemic or intellectual deficit or failing.

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Jimmy Licon is a Philosophy Professor in the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies at Arizona State University. He works on issues at the intersection of ethics, epistemology, and political economy. He teaches classes like bioethics, philosophy of law, and philosophy of time travel.