RESPONSIBILITY FOR BELIEF — THREE CASES

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Sometimes a person explains her action by saying “I believed it was right to do.” I am interested in those cases where the agent sincerely believes that she has acted correctly, even having a strong conviction about its correctness. In the classroom and at the Ethics Institute where I consult with other faculty about how to teach ethics, examples like these create a difficulty about how we morally appraise people and what they do. Part of the problem is the temptation to excuse a person for her wrongdoing by virtue of the strength of her beliefs or convictions. Acting in accordance with strongly held beliefs or principles implies that a person has a kind of moral integrity that is laudatory, no matter how wayward the principle is. In cases where a person acts wrongly but in accordance with her sincere and strongly held beliefs, the moral appraisal of the person may pull apart from the moral evaluation of the action she performs. In other words, we are prepared to evaluate the action as one that is morally wrong, but praise the person’s motivation to act in accordance with what she believes is morally right.

The cases I have collected here and my analysis of these is designed to help us make defensible judgments about responsibility for belief. In each case the agent acts in a way that is clearly morally wrong. Additionally, each agent believes that what he or she does is morally right, justified, or permissible. For different reasons the agent in each case experiences no cognitive dissonance about the action performed, though it is one that the rest of us would most likely classify as morally repugnant. We can use these cases to answer the following question: Under what circumstances do we hold a person blameworthy for the beliefs she acquires about the moral correctness or incorrectness of the acts she performs? At one extreme, “D.J.” is paradigmatic of those who should be
excused and blameless by reason of diminished capacity. Less clear is “Robert Harris,” whose moral beliefs are radically different than ours, but whose moral values are shaped by the unfortunate circumstances of his childhood. In the third case, “JoJo” represents the kind of person whose repugnant moral beliefs are the product of a surrounding culture, but who also wholeheartedly embraces these values.

In my analysis of these cases I draw on Aristotelian criteria for assessing when a person is morally responsible for the formation of one’s character. Of special relevance are the intellectual virtues, and the responsibility each of us has to develop as part of our character veridical knowledge and beliefs about the world and ourselves. But even so, the development of virtue of character may be impeded in ways and for reasons that are not blameworthy for the agent. These cases cluster around difficult questions we have about when a person should be held responsible for the formation of a vicious character. To settle these questions I make use of what Susan Wolf calls “the capacity to revise ourselves” as a criterion for judging when a person has non-culpable diminished capacity. These three cases about “D.J.,” “Robert Harris,” and “JoJo” allow us the opportunity to consider different circumstances that shape our moral beliefs, some of which constitute excusing conditions, and some of which do not.

THE CASE OF “D.J.”

D.J. was a white female in her early thirties arrested for the murder of a four-year-old black child. A paranoid schizophrenic, D.J. said that she supported genocide and cannibalism of blacks. She believed that blacks were an inferior race to whites who were descendants of extraterrestrial beings. D.J. thought that by killing a black person she would remind her fellow whites of their true origins and thus redress the earth’s natural order.

D.J. had graduated from high school in San Francisco and married a man who was later to become a successful lawyer. In the early years of her marriage, she began to consult a psychiatrist, first for hyperventilation and later for hallucinations. Her mental condition fluctuated but gradually deteriorated over the next several years. She left her husband and took up with a businessman, had a son by him, and then left him as well. Her life gradually became more and more chaotic; she began using
narcotic drugs, took up with a number of different men, and eventually had her visits with her son restricted by the courts. She was committed briefly to a mental hospital and was on anti-psychotic medication, which seemed to stabilize her thoughts; however, she did not take the anti-psychotics regularly, because she preferred her unmedicated state to her conditions while she was taking the medication.

Two and a half years before the murder, D.J. was arrested for clubbing a Chinese woman on the head with a wine bottle, in an attempt to hit the child that the woman was carrying. She was hospitalized from jail, and at that time her motives for the attack were not clear. She claimed that she was under the influence of drugs at the time of the attack and did not remember the incident at all. She was given probation for assault with a deadly weapon.

The year before the murder brought several bizarre incidents. At one point, D.J. stripped naked at her mother's house, smeared herself with menstrual blood and said that she was participating in some sort of ritual. Her mother called D.J.'s psychiatrist and eventually the police, but when the police arrived, D.J. was able to convince them that hospitalization would not be necessary.

D.J. later left home and traveled to Alabama to find the Ku Klux Klan, saying that she wanted "to hear the truth directly from the source." She never reached the Klan, however, but instead spent some time looking for "the ape that went into space," a chimpanzee which had been studied by the space program and which she had heard was kept in Alabama. She eventually wound up at a mission for runaways, the director of which contacted D.J.'s mother, who in turn sent D.J. money for a bus ticket home.

About a year after her return to California, D.J. murdered the black child. . . . The psychiatrist reported that D.J. seemed emotionally elated, that her thoughts ran together and that she admitted to both auditory and visual hallucinations. She claimed that nature talked to her, but she said that no voices told her to kill the black child. She said that she strangled the boy because she saw a California state flag with a bear on it, which suggested to her that she should kill with her "bare" hands.
A later examination revealed that D.J. possessed a complex delusional system of beliefs about the origins of blacks. She claimed that blacks were “put on earth, as were cows, chickens and rabbits, to be killed and eaten by people.” She believed that the rise of blacks in recent years to middle-class respectability defied the natural order of the world, and that she was somehow called upon to restore this order. She believed that if she had the courage to do what was clearly right, and kill a black child, others would follow her lead. Cannibalism would infuse whites with the vitality of the blacks that they ate. The examining psychiatrist noted that her illness “left her globally bizarre,” and that it “undermined her critical faculties” and “impaired her judgment.”

After a few weeks on anti-psychotic medication, the patient’s condition had improved markedly. She became less agitated, and stopped hearing nature speak to her. Even so, she still occasionally heard voices calling her name, and she held on to her racial ideas. However, she no longer believed that it was her duty to act on these beliefs. Her elation was replaced by an emotional blankness.2

CASE ANALYSIS

D.J. is certainly causally responsible for killing a child. Is she morally responsible for this act? Does she deserve our moral blame?

Aristotle believes that we are largely responsible for the kind of person we turn out to be. That is, he believes that the development of virtue of character initiated in childhood is partly under our control. What he means by this is that a person who voluntarily engages in self-indulgent activities, such as excessive drinking, may well become intemperate as part of her character. A person who cheats as a matter of course may become an unjust person. And those who engage in activities carelessly may become an inattentive kind of person.3 So when Aristotle says that we are responsible for having a vicious or virtuous character he means that we are each responsible for those particular acts that initiate traits of character since, only an insensible person fails to understand that living a certain way will lead to becoming a certain kind of person.4

Of course, according to Aristotle, we do not develop our characters independently and in isolation from family, friends, and citizen role models. Nor is Aristotle blind to the fact that there are many circumstances
beyond the agent’s control that either facilitate or impede the acquisition of virtue. Some bodily states, such as ugliness, weakness, or infirmity, are acquired by nature. This is just accidental or bad luck, and the agent is not to blame. But in some cases a person becomes ugly from “want of exercise or care,” and this is blameworthy. “No one would reproach a man blind from birth or by disease or from a blow, but rather pity him, while everyone would blame a man who was blind from alcoholism or some other form of self-indulgence.” If it is in our power to avoid these vices, then we are responsible and blameworthy for having them. The interpretive challenge is to provide a more precise rendering of what Aristotle (or anyone) might mean by saying that moral blameworthiness depends on its being in the agent’s power to avoid vice.

Most of us will agree that D.J. is not the kind of person that deserves our moral blame. In this sense the case is uncontroversial. But explaining why she should be excused morally is useful for making determinations about more difficult cases.

D.J. holds a variety of false beliefs about the origins of blacks, as well as mistaken moral beliefs about what it is right to do. She believes that it is her duty to kill a black child in order to restore order to the natural world. However, it will not do to merely insist that because D.J. has not gotten her facts correct about the world, or because she has an abhorrent set of moral beliefs, that she should be excused for killing a child. These conditions are not sufficient for excusing her from moral blame since there are certainly some among us who have false beliefs about the world, or who hold repugnant moral beliefs, but who ought to be held accountable for correcting or revising these beliefs. That we do subject our beliefs to moral criticism is a point made by Linda Zagzebski in her discussion of the intellectual virtues. “. . . We criticize others for their beliefs as well as for their actions, . . . we blame a person who makes hasty generalizations or who ignores the testimony of reliable authority. Such criticism is much closer to moral criticism than the criticism of bad eyesight or poor blood circulation.”

The difference between D.J. and the majority of us is that D.J. lacks a certain capacity that would allow her to evaluate and revise her beliefs. Susan Wolf suggests that the kind of agency moral responsibility attributions are tied to include those “minimally sufficient abilities, both cognitive and normative, required to appreciate the world for what it is.” Those of us who do have such abilities can “revise ourselves” by rejecting some desires or character traits we have, and replacing them with oth-
ers on the basis of deeper desires, values, or reflections. The capacity to revise ourselves presupposes two more fundamental abilities:

1. The ability to evaluate ourselves sensibly and accurately. In other words, we must have, to some extent, veridical knowledge of the world and ourselves.

2. The ability to transform ourselves insofar as our evaluation points in that direction. In other words, we must have the desire and power or will to enact change in ourselves as we see it is necessary.8

Wolf argues that if we lack the cognitive or deliberative resources that serve as the basis for self-correction, then we will be unable to revise ourselves according to what is right or wrong. In fact, it may also be that one of these cognitive deficiencies is the failure to know whether one’s actions are right or wrong. If so, then the agent cannot help but to have mistaken conceptions of value, and perhaps mistaken conceptions of facts about the world. Such a person is not to blame by virtue of her cognitive and deliberative deficiencies.

I think it is uncontroversial that D.J. fails to have this capacity to revise herself in the sense defined. We know that she suffers from auditory and visual hallucinations including hearing voices telling her what to do. She cannot avoid having these beliefs. The attending physician notes that her illness “undermined her critical faculties” and “impaired her judgment.”9 It seems correct to say that the beliefs that she forms are not ones that she can evaluate or revise. Part of the evidence for this claim comes from an assessment that her behavior is more generally dysfunctional and incoherent, as the physician puts it, “globally bizarre.”

Finally, it is a matter of constitutive luck that we have the capacity for self-revision and D.J. lacks it. The illness that she suffers from is not something that D.J. brought upon herself, nor could it have been avoided in the way that intemperance as a state of character can be avoided by not engaging in bouts of drinking. (This assessment is complicated by the fact that she does not take her medication on occasion.) Because it is not in D.J.’s power to avoid her illness, and the way in which this illness manifests itself impairs her capacity for self-revision, she is not morally responsible for the kind of person she has turned out to be. All of this may fit well with our intuitions that D.J. is to be pitied rather than blamed. However, other cases are less clear.
THE CASE OF “ROBERT HARRIS”

On July 5, 1978, John Mayeski and Michael Baker had just driven through a fast-food restaurant and were sitting in the parking lot eating lunch. Mayeski and Baker . . . lived on the same street and were best friends. They were on their way to a nearby lake for a day of fishing.

At the other end of the parking lot, Robert Harris, 25, and his brother Daniel, 18, were trying to hot-wire a car when they spotted the two boys. The Harris brothers were planning to rob a bank that afternoon and did not want to use their own car. When Robert Harris could not start the car, he pointed to the [car] where the 16-year-olds were eating and said to Daniel, “We’ll take this one.”

He pointed a . . . Luger at Mayeski, crawled into the back seat, and told him to drive east. Daniel Harris followed in the Harris’ car. When they reached a canyon area . . ., Robert Harris told the youths he was going to use their car in a bank robbery and assured them that they would not be hurt. Robert Harris yelled to Daniel to get the .22 caliber rifle out of the back seat of their car.

“When I caught up,” Daniel said in a recent interview, “Robert was telling them about the bank robbery we were going to do. He was telling them that he would leave them some money in the car and all, for us using it. Both of them said that they would wait on top of this little hill until we were gone, and then walk into town and report the car stolen.” Robert Harris agreed.

“Michael turned and went through some bushes. John said, ‘Good luck,’ and turned to leave.”

As the two boys walked away, Harris slowly raised the Luger and shot Mayeski in the back, Daniel said. Mayeski yelled: “Oh, God,” and slumped to the ground. Harris chased Baker down a hill into a little valley and shot him four times.

Mayeski was still alive when Harris climbed back up the hill, Daniel said. Harris walked over to the boy, knelt down, put the Luger to his head and fired.

“God, everything started to spin,” Daniel said. “It was like slow motion. I saw the gun, and then his head exploded like a balloon, . . . I just started running and running . . . But I heard Robert and turned around.”
“He was swinging the rifle and pistol in the air and laughing. God, that laugh made blood and bone freeze in me.”

Harris drove [the] car to a friend's house where he and Daniel were staying. Harris walked into the house, carrying the weapons and the bag [containing] the remainder of the slain youth's lunch. Then, about 15 minutes after he had killed the two 16-year-old boys, Harris took the food out of the bag . . . and began eating a hamburger. He offered his brother an apple turnover, and Daniel became nauseated and ran to the bathroom.

“Robert laughed at me,” Daniel said. “He said I was weak; he called me a sissy and said I didn't have the stomach for it.”

Harris was in an almost lighthearted mood. He smiled and told Daniel that it would be amusing if the two of them were to pose as police officers and inform the parents that their sons were killed. Then, for the first time, he turned serious. He thought that somebody might have heard the shots and that police could be searching for the bodies. He told Daniel that they should begin cruising the street near the bodies, and possibly kill some police in the area.

[Later, as they prepared to rob the bank,] Harris pulled out the Luger, noticed bloodstains and remnants of flesh on the barrel as a result of the point-blank shot, and said, “I really blew that guy's brains out.” And then, again, he started laughing.

. . . Harris was given the death penalty. He has refused all requests for interviews since the conviction.

“He just doesn't see the point of talking,” said a sister, . . . who has visited him three times since he has been on Death Row. “He told me he had his chance, he took the road to hell and there's nothing more to say.”

Harris was born Jan. 15, 1953, several hours after his mother was kicked in the stomach. She was 6½ months pregnant and her husband, an insanely jealous man, . . . came home drunk and accused her of infidelity. He claimed that the child was not his, threw her down and kicked her. She began hemorrhaging, and he took her to the hospital.

Robert was born that night. His heartbeat stopped at one point . . . but labor was induced and he was saved. Because of
the premature birth, he was a tiny baby; he was kept alive in an incubator and spent months at the hospital.

His father was an alcoholic who was twice convicted of sexually molesting his daughters. He frequently beat his children . . . and often caused serious injury. Their mother also became an alcoholic and was arrested several times, once for bank robbery.

All of the children had monstrous childhoods. But even in the Harris family, . . . the abuse Robert was subjected to was unusual.

Before their mother died last year, Barbara Harris said, she talked incessantly about Robert’s early years. She felt guilty that she was never able to love him; she felt partly responsible that he ended up on Death Row.

When Robert’s father visited his wife in the hospital and saw his son for the first time, . . . the first thing he said was, “Who is the father of that bastard?” When his mother picked him up from the hospital . . . she said it was like taking a stranger’s baby home.

The pain and permanent injury Robert’s mother suffered as a result of the birth, . . . and the constant abuse she was subjected to by her husband turned her against her son. Money was tight, she was overworked and he was her fifth child in just a few years. She began to blame all of her problems on Robert, and she grew to hate the child.

“I remember one time we were in the car and Mother was in the back seat with Robbie in her arms. He was crying and my father threw a glass bottle at him, but it hit my mother in the face. The glass shattered and Robbie started screaming. I’ll never forget it,” she said . . .

“Her face was all pink, from the mixture of blood and milk. She ended up blaming Robbie for all the hurt, all the things like that. She felt helpless and he was someone to vent her anger on.”

. . . Harris had a learning disability and a speech problem, but there was no money for therapy. When he was at school he felt stupid and classmates teased him, his sister said, and when he was at home he was abused.

“He was the most beautiful of all my mother’s children; he was an angel,” she said. “He would just break your heart. He
wanted love so bad he would beg for any kind of physical contact.

“He’d come up to my mother and just try to rub his little hands on her leg or her arm. He just never got touched at all. She’d just push him away or kick him. One time she bloodied his nose when he was trying to get close to her.”

. . . All nine children are psychologically crippled as a result of their father, she said, but most have been able to lead useful lives. But Robert was too young, and the abuse lasted too long, she said, for him ever to have had a chance to recover.

[At age 14] Harris was sentenced to a federal youth detention center [for car theft]. He was one of the youngest inmates there, Barbara Harris said, and he grew up “hard and fast.”

. . . Harris was raped several times, his sister said, and he slashed his wrists twice in suicide attempts. He spent more than four years behind bars as a result of an escape, and attempted escape and a parole violation.

The centers were “gladiator schools,” Barbara Harris said, and Harris learned to fight and be mean. By the time he was released from federal prison at 19, all his problems were accentuated. Everyone in the family knew that he needed psychiatric help.

. . . Since Harris has been on Death Row, he has made no demands of time or money on his family. Harris has made only one request; he wants a dignified and serene ceremony after he dies — a ceremony in marked contrast to his life.

He has asked his oldest brother to take his ashes, drive to the Sierra, hike to a secluded spot and scatter his remains in the trees.10

CASE ANALYSIS — “ROBERT HARRIS”

When we read how Robert Harris killed two teenage boys in 1978, what stands out most vividly is his maliciousness. What provokes us is his attitude during and after the killing. He is described as “lighthearted,” and he displays a mocking and irreverent disregard for loss of life. It is the malicious attitude of Robert Harris that marks his character as vicious.

What makes the case of Harris difficult for ascriptions of responsibility are the facts about his abusive childhood. Once we are privy to the tragic circumstances of his childhood we might feel as if we can explain
why he has turned out to be the way he is. But having a coherent explanation that matches the viciousness of Harris’ character with the degree of abuse Harris suffered as a child is not enough to answer the question of whether or not he is blameworthy.

One feature of Harris’ story that pulls us in the direction of mitigating moral blame is that he did not choose to be born into such a life, to parents who were alcoholics, a father who was abusive and vindictive, and a mother who had nowhere to vent her frustrations, and so on. It is just very bad luck for Harris that he had this kind of childhood. Gary Watson suggests that what is arresting and troubling about this case in a personal way is the thought that “. . . if I had been subjected to such circumstances, I might well have become as vile.”11 We may feel that we are less in a position to blame because perhaps, all that separates us from Harris is the matter of luck — to whom we are born, and in what circumstances we live out our formative years. Our moral selves seem fragile from this point of view.12

It is surely true that Harris did not choose the environment that shaped him into the kind of person we now would say is vicious or even evil. But we are no different from Harris in that respect. No one of us chooses the circumstances into which we are born. So if Harris is absolved from moral responsibility for his actions now on the basis of his unfortunate circumstances as a child, then attributions of responsibility lose their grip entirely on each and every one of us as well. That is to say, though my childhood was not horrific it was still not in my power to choose it. So for any action I perform now, neither am I to blame nor should I receive moral credit since the kind of person I have turned out to be was shaped by those conditions of my childhood for which I am not responsible.

This conclusion is tempting but it is also inconsistent with our ordinary practice of holding people morally accountable, and the way in which we use the concepts of praise and blame. This is the natural place for deeper philosophical reflection about the issue of free will and determinism. But we need not be sidetracked from rendering an assessment of Harris’ culpability. One way of responding to the metaphysical issue is to remind ourselves that our ordinary practice of holding ourselves and other people morally accountable for what they do is deeply embedded in our reactive psychological attitudes of resentment, indignation, guilt, forgiveness, etc. Moreover, these attitudes and practices may well be constitutive of our ascriptions of moral responsibility.13
What counts against the idea that Harris is a victim and is not responsible for his malevolent actions are the following two points. First, there is no necessary connection between those circumstances that prevail in our formative years, and our development into a particular kind of person. Surely it is not inevitable or unavoidable that Harris developed into such a mean and heartless person given the circumstances of his childhood.14

Second, we do not ordinarily believe that traits of character, even when correctly ascribed to a person, necessitate action. An unjust person might be tempted or even feel a strong urge to cheat. But it is not inevitable or unavoidable that she performs this action. She can do something else instead. The urge need not be “irresistible.”15

What we can do to negotiate between these two positions — holding Harris entirely responsible, and not holding him at all responsible — is to isolate those features of Harris’ life about which it is reasonable to say that he does have a choice, and it is within his power to either act or not. The relevant questions to ask are these:

- Could Harris have avoided venting his anger in the particular murderous way that he did?
- Does Harris have the cognitive skills necessary for evaluating and criticizing his beliefs?
- Does he have the capacity to revise himself, to change himself in accordance with a commitment to something he values?

Though we only have an abbreviated story about Harris, I think it is enough to answer these questions.

Harris did not appear to be suffering from any particular compulsion to kill Mayeski and Baker. That is, he was not motivated by a desire that on the face of it was irresistible or unavoidable. Nor was there a sense in which he was coerced into his actions. He killed with knowledge of what he was doing, and apparently with a kind of willingness to do it. Just as importantly he appears to have the minimally sufficient cognitive capacities required for evaluating his wrongdoing. At least, he knew enough about the wrongness of his actions to wonder if the police would be looking for him. All of this distinguishes Harris in important respects from D.J., who it was claimed heard voices and commands telling her what it was her duty to do. The beliefs that she formed were imposed on her. Moreover, her illness prevented her from revising her beliefs so as to bring them around to a more accurate way of representing the world.
Unlike D.J., Harris does seem to have the capacity for self-revision. Of course, this evaluation of Harris’ cognitive capacities is subject to revision. If we had more details perhaps we might say about him that his psychological states were more like D.J.’s, i.e., “globally bizarre.” The relevant details are those that are either indicative or not of his ability to function in the world in a more general way.

I think we ought to hold Harris morally responsible for his actions because as far as we can tell he satisfies the cognitive and deliberative requirements necessary for “revising himself.” But as Carl Elliott reminds us, there are any number of gradations of responsibility that we make use of in our ordinary practice of praising and blaming. We can hold a person responsible or exonerate her; hold a person morally, but not legally responsible; morally blame someone, but not punish her; morally blame, but forgive.16

By holding Harris morally responsible for his actions, but pitying him as well, we can take the “injustices of nature into account,” those unfortunate circumstances that shaped his character. Of course, Robert Harris might be the kind of person who should be imprisoned so that we insure our own safety. But this need not be interpreted as an unmitigated punishment that he deserves. If we genuinely believe that he is capable of revising himself in accordance with values that more accurately reflect our moral universe, then perhaps we have an obligation to Harris to encourage this possibility in him.

THE CASE OF “JOJO”

JoJo is the favorite son of Jo the First, an evil and sadistic dictator of a small, undeveloped country. Because of his father’s special feelings for the boy, JoJo is given a special education and is allowed to accompany his father and observe his daily routine. In light of this treatment, it is not surprising that little JoJo takes his father as a role model and develops values very much like Dad’s. As an adult, he does many of the same sorts of things his father did, including sending people to prison or to death or to torture chambers on the basis of whim. He is not coerced to do these things; he acts according to his own desires. Moreover, these are desires he wholly wants to have. When he steps back and asks, “Do I really want to be this sort of person?” His answer is resoundingly “Yes,” for this way of life
expresses a crazy sort of power that forms part of his deepest ideal.\textsuperscript{17}

**CASE ANALYSIS**

The case of JoJo is like the case of Robert Harris insofar as there are circumstances about JoJo’s past and formative years that might tempt us to say that he is not responsible for the brutal actions he engages in as an adult. The argument for this conclusion is worth attending to carefully. David Jones refers to this *kind* of argument as the argument from “Bad Political Culture” or (BPC). He articulates (BPC) in the following way.

People who are socialized in a bad political culture may lack the ability to see and appreciate the wrongness of [killing Jews, keeping slaves, etc.]. Since they develop without the basic capacities to know right from wrong, they have diminished responsibility for their characters, or the actions that flow from them. Therefore, they are not blameworthy for their participation in [the Holocaust, slavery, etc.].\textsuperscript{18}

Most of us who have used examples about slavery or the Holocaust to teach ethics have heard students say, “They didn’t know any better.” Or, “Everyone kept slaves, so it was considered right.” The difficulty in responding to such remarks is that they do entail what I believe is a relevant truth. If a person’s cognitive and deliberative capacities are so impaired that they interfere with the ability to recognize and correct either factual or normative errors, then we hold that person less than fully responsible for her actions.\textsuperscript{19} This is exactly the truth that D.J. illustrates.

The difficulty is in deciding to whom this excusing condition applies. Wolf argues that because JoJo has been raised to endorse the values of his mean and unscrupulous dictator father, JoJo is “unable to recognize” that his values are mistaken. I’m not convinced that this is so. A more careful analysis of the concept of “culpable” and “non-culpable ignorance” is needed. David Jones supplies just such an analysis in his discussion of whether or not those Germans who were “socialized” by the bad political culture of Nazi Germany had a moral excuse for their actions or inactions that resulted in the killing of Jews.

Jones is careful to note that the concept of non-culpable ignorance entails that people socialized by a bad political culture “. . . lacked (or
were seriously deficient in their cognitive and deliberative capacities to avoid, question, or change [the values or beliefs inherent in that culture].” For example, in the case of Nazi Germany it must be true that the combination of anti-Semitism, authoritarianism, and nationalism prevalent in German society during the rise of Nazism, created specific cognitive deficiencies in those people who were socialized, to such a degree that they were unable to judge the immorality of killing Jews. This point is crucial to understanding the distinction between culpable and non-culpable ignorance. Clearly there are people who display a kind of ignorance that is culpable or blameworthy. These are people whom, like most of us, do have adequate powers of cognition and deliberation and are capable of exercising them to evaluate and, if necessary, revise factual as well as normative beliefs. A person who has this capacity but fails to exercise it, or to exercise it carefully, is blameworthy. In describing the motivational basis for the intellectual virtues, Zagzebski says this:

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\text{. . . a person whose beliefs are uncritically picked up from those around him is criticizable even if a large percentage of his beliefs are true. It is probably also true that his belief-forming process is not a reliable way of getting to the truth, but that is not the fundamental reason we criticize him. He is subject to criticism because he should have known better than to form his beliefs in such a way. His belief-forming procedure shows a lack of motivation for knowledge. The same remarks apply to people who are dogmatic, close-minded, unfair in evaluating the opinions of others, insufficiently attentive or thorough, subject to wishful thinking, untrusting of authorities in specialized fields or, at the other extreme, unable to reason autonomously, and so on. In each case we fault the person because her attitude and behavior betrays a defect in her motivation for knowledge.} \]

Clearly, having mistaken moral beliefs or making wrong choices is not the same as having diminished cognitive and deliberative capacity, which is necessary for claiming non-culpable ignorance.

Not surprisingly Jones argues against (BPC) as it applies to most ordinary Germans. He reasons as follows. First, German society was not so completely homogeneous so as to permit the complete socialization of all Germans to the cultural values of anti-Semitism, authoritarianism,
and nationalism. Second, even Germans who were socialized to these cultural values experienced little or no diminished capacity as a result of this socialization. The evidence for this is that most Germans lived in cities, were well educated, interacted with people of different religions, including Jews, read newspapers, books, and traveled. The culmination of these kinds of intellectual and life experiences count against the plausibility that most people were not able to develop their cognitive and deliberative faculties. On the contrary, such experiences seem to equip people with exactly the kind of intellectual skills necessary for doing well in the world. Jones concedes that there may have been populations of people living in the countryside who were relatively homogeneous, socially isolated, and lacked education to the extent that they never had the opportunity to fully develop the particular reasoning skills required to evaluate and revise their beliefs about Jews, or to critically scrutinize the Nazi propaganda disseminated. For such people, Jones suggests, there may be a kind of “mitigating deficiency” that is attributable to socialization, and that may mitigate moral blame by degree.

Let us return to the case of JoJo. There are many details about his life that we fail to know. This makes it difficult to decide the degree of blameworthiness it is appropriate to attribute to him. On the one hand, JoJo has been raised to believe that it is right to torture and send people to prison for little or no good reason. So it might be thought that he is morally excused because his “socialization” has prevented him from cultivating those critical reasoning skills necessary for discerning right from wrong. But what is morally relevant to this case is the extent of his socialization. What we want to know more about is whether JoJo had any other educational experiences to contrast with his father’s teachings. Did he live in complete isolation from anyone who expressed a dissenting or opposing attitude toward his father’s dealings? Has he been allowed to read or travel? Does he go to school? What do his teachers say, and do they encourage him to ask questions? These are details about the case that we don’t have, but they are crucial for determining the extent of JoJo’s socialization, and the degree to which this contributes to his diminished cognitive and deliberative capacity to critically evaluate his own beliefs, both factual and moral. If we learned that JoJo, in fact, had opportunities to develop these cognitive skills, we might decide that he has no diminished capacities at all, and that his ignorance is culpable.²⁴

Have we made any progress in answering questions about blameworthiness in just those cases where an agent confesses to strongly held beliefs that what she does is morally right? Surely so, since now we can
do more than merely praise such a person for acting in accordance with what she believes. Even if we can’t say definitively whether or not JoJo, in particular, has diminished cognitive capacities, we at least have some guidelines for making this determination about people in similar circumstances. For example, we might want to know whether a child raised by racist and bigoted parents has a moral excuse for acquiring racist values, or even acting on them, by reason of her “socialization.” In these kinds of cases we ought to try to answer questions about the extent of a person’s social isolation, the degree of cultural homogeneity she experiences, and the amount and kinds of educational opportunities available to her. Obviously we will be estimating and judging cognitive deficiencies by degree relative to these factors. But at least we will have some criteria for determining to what extent socialization impedes the cognitive development of skills necessary for revising oneself. Recall that this ability presupposes:

• The ability to evaluate ourselves and our beliefs sensibly and accurately;
• The ability to transform ourselves insofar as our evaluation points in that direction.

To the extent that these particular abilities are impaired, a person is not blameworthy for the actions she performs. Perhaps it is helpful to keep D.J. in mind as we make these determinations about other kinds of cases. She is paradigmatic of those who are excused, and blameless by reason of diminished capacity.

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NOTES

1 Presented at the Thirteenth Annual Meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, February 26-28, 2004, Cincinnati, OH. My thanks to the participants of the Institute for Ethics in Public Life at SUNY Plattsburgh who read and commented on earlier versions of this paper.


3 Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* (1114a3-8).
4 Aristotle, *NE* (1114a8-10).


6 Linda Zagzebski, *Virtues of the Mind*, p. 5. Zagzebski argues that the intellectual virtues are to be understood as kinds of moral virtues. “Epistemic evaluation just is a form of moral evaluation” (256).


8 The capacity to revise oneself has its origins in what Wolf calls the “deep-self view.” Variations of this view are held by Frankfurt (1971), Watson (1975), and Taylor (1976).

9 Elliott, p. 102.


12 Ibid.

13 For further discussion of this view and responses to it see P.F. Strawson, “Freedom and Resentment”; Susan Wolf, “The Importance of Free Will”; and Galen Strawson, “On ‘Freedom and Resentment.’”

14 Michelle Moody-Adams makes this point in her article “On the Old Saw That Character is Destiny,” p. 122.

15 Michelle Moody-Adams, p. 123.


19 David Jones, p. 100.

20 David Jones, p. 108.

21 David Jones, p. 106.

22 David Jones, p. 108.


24 Jones correctly points out that (BPC) assumes a certain static account of how a person shapes and forms her personal identity. (BPC) assumes that children are “passive learners” who merely internalize a cultural identity that includes the values, beliefs, attitudes, and knowledge of the political community. A contrasting, and in my view, more accurate depiction of the formation of identity is that a child is an “active learner”—one who makes a choice to either become an anti-Semite, a submissive child, or an ardent nationalist, etc. Even though this is a terribly abbreviated account of identity construction, what is morally relevant is that there is nothing inevitable about either embracing one’s culturally defined identity, or calling it into question (Jones, 114) Embracing one’s culturally defined identity may involve choosing to deceive
oneself by avoiding morally relevant facts. About this point see Jones’ discussion of self-deception, Chapter 4.

REFERENCES


