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Keshav Singh and Joshua Blanchard

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Abstract

It is widely agreed that one's degree of blameworthiness for performing a wrong action is lower under conditions of non-culpable ignorance than under conditions of knowledge. One might also ask, however, whether there are conditions under which one's degree of blameworthiness is *higher* than it would be under conditions of mere knowledge. One such condition is satisfied when the agent has not just moral knowledge, but moral acquaintance. Intuitively, all else equal, the acquainted wrongdoer is more blameworthy than the unacquainted (but still knowledgeable) wrongdoer. Our goal in this paper is to explain why this is the case. We consider and reject three proposals that attempt to explain the phenomenon by appeal to normatively significant features not unique to acquaintance. We then develop our own proposal: the phenomenological possession account. According to the phenomenological possession account, moral acquaintance heightens blameworthiness for wrongdoing because it uniquely puts the agent in a position to phenomenologically possess reasons against the wrong action. When an agent possesses a reason not just intellectually but phenomenologically, her grasp of that reason is stronger. We contend that given plausible connections between blameworthiness and the possession of reasons against wrong actions, phenomenological possession heightens blameworthiness. After developing the phenomenological possession account, we conclude by considering three applications of our view to debates in normative theory, as well as responding to three objections.

1. Introduction

It is widely agreed that one's degree of blameworthiness for performing a wrong action is lower under conditions of non-culpable ignorance than under conditions of knowledge.¹ In other words, non-culpable ignorance (at least partly) exculpates. One might also ask, however, whether there are conditions under which one's degree of blameworthiness is *higher* than it would be under conditions of mere knowledge. Compare two simple cases of torturing an innocent person that have just one difference:

Knowledge. S knows that torture is morally wrong and why, but S is not acquainted with what makes torture wrong. Despite knowing that it is wrong, S proceeds to torture A.

Acquaintance. S* knows that torture is morally wrong and why, and moreover, S* is acquainted with what makes torture wrong. Despite being acquainted with what makes torture wrong, S* proceeds to torture A.

¹ Smith (1983), Zimmerman (1997) Ginet (2000), Rosen (2003), Mele (2011), Robichaud and Wieland (2017). Harman (2011) argues that while non-culpable non-moral ignorance exculpates, moral ignorance never does.

In both cases, the torturer knows that what he is doing is wrong and knows why it is wrong. But in only one case is he acquainted with what makes torture wrong. Is the acquainted torturer more, less, or equally blameworthy than the unacquainted torturer? Intuitively, he is more blameworthy. In contrast to exculpation, we refer to this phenomenon of heightened blameworthiness as *extraculpation*.² We will take it as a datum that the acquainted wrongdoer is, all else equal, more blameworthy than the unacquainted wrongdoer. In at least some circumstances, acquaintance extraculpates. In this paper we explain why this is the case. Acquaintance extraculpates because acquaintance with the wrong-making features of actions puts moral agents in a position to possess those features as reasons for action in a way that the unacquainted cannot.

In §2, we consider candidate explanations of why acquaintance extraculpates. In doing so, we distinguish between different kinds of acquaintance that are often run together in the literature on moral acquaintance: observer-, agent-, and patient-acquaintance. Each candidate explanation is plausible with regard to some cases, but none of them captures the full range of cases, especially once we distinguish between the different kinds of acquaintance.

In §3, we develop our positive proposal. We distinguish between two ways of possessing a reason: intellectual possession and phenomenological possession. Acquaintance uniquely puts one in a position to phenomenologically possess the reasons against performing the wrong action. Given the plausible connection between blameworthiness and the failure to respond to the reasons that one has, phenomenological possession of the reasons against wrong action is extraculpating.

In §4, we lay out three applications of our account. The first is to the debate over whether there are asymmetries between acquaintance and testimony with regard to their normative significance. The second is an application to questions about acquaintance and blameworthiness in the aesthetic domain. The third is to the debate in normative ethics over whether there are asymmetries in responsibility between proximate and distant wrongs.

In §5, we consider and respond to objections. Finally, in §6, we offer brief concluding remarks.

2. Three Candidate Explanations

In this section, we canvass some initially attractive explanations of acquaintance's extraculpating potential. We argue that although each explanation contains something insightful about acquaintance and blameworthiness, none fully explain why acquaintance extraculpates.

To appreciate the inadequacy of these explanations, we must first distinguish between the ways in which one can become acquainted with the wrong-making features of actions. Much of the literature on moral acquaintance focuses on examples in which one becomes acquainted with a wrong action by witnessing it. One commonly used example that fits this form is from Orwell's 'A Hanging,' in which an Anglo police officer in Burma witnesses a Burmese man being hanged.³

² We mean 'extraculpation' to refer to something more specific than what some have called 'inculpation,' which is simply a lack of exculpation. Extraculpation, by contrast, refers to the phenomenon of blameworthiness being heightened beyond the baseline.

³ Lord (2018a: 81-82), McGrath (2011: 268, 270, 292).

The Orwell case is one that involves what we call *observer-acquaintance*: becoming acquainted with what makes an action wrong through observing it as it happens. But this isn't the only way in which one might become morally acquainted with something. For example, one could be morally acquainted with torture not because one has observed torture occurring, but because one has *been* tortured. This kind of acquaintance, which we call *patient-acquaintance*, seems typically to be a stronger form of acquaintance than mere observer-acquaintance. Finally, one might even become morally acquainted with torture by being the torturer. This kind of acquaintance, which we call *agent-acquaintance*, is yet different from each of the other two forms of acquaintance.

The literature on moral acquaintance has tended to run together these different kinds of acquaintance. Perhaps this is because moral acquaintance tends to be modeled on aesthetic acquaintance, and the most natural examples of the latter are ones involving observer-acquaintance. Or perhaps this is because each form of acquaintance seems to involve observer-acquaintance in some way, and so it has seemed primary.⁴ In any case, we contend that the differences between the three kinds of acquaintance are normatively significant—especially, the difference between observer- and patient-acquaintance. As we will show, one problem that arises for the three explanations we consider is that they can't explain intuitive differences between observer-acquaintance cases and patient-acquaintance cases.

2.1. Acquaintance yields moral understanding

The fact that moral acquaintance extraculpates suggests that in cases of acquaintance, there is something over and above moral knowledge that makes agents more blameworthy for wrong actions. One plausible candidate for what agents have in such cases is moral understanding. Moral understanding is often said to have normative significance over and above that of moral knowledge. For example, Hills (2010) argues that moral understanding, not just moral knowledge, is necessary for morally worthy action. In a similar vein, one might think that agents are more blameworthy for acting wrongly when they have both moral understanding and moral knowledge, as opposed to mere moral knowledge.

According to Hills, moral understanding requires not just knowing the reasons why something is wrong, but also having a “grasp of the reasons why” that is constituted by a range of abilities.⁵ These abilities include the ability to explain why something is wrong and the ability to make the appropriate moral judgments in similar cases. In general, in order to understand why something is wrong, one must be able to use the reasons why it is wrong in various forms of moral reasoning. Thus, one might think that acquaintance extraculpates because moral understanding extraculpates, and acquaintance provides moral understanding.

The claim that moral understanding extraculpates is plausible. If (as Hills claims) knowing why something is wrong is not sufficient for understanding why it is wrong, then it seems like the torturer who understands why torture is wrong is also more blameworthy than the torturer who merely knows why it is wrong.

⁴ Notice that neither agent- nor patient-acquaintance entails observer-acquaintance. For example, the drone operator or assassin may lack observer-acquaintance with morally wrong killing, and the subject of immoral gossip may lack observer-acquaintance due to not having been present for it.

⁵ Hills (2010: 193-194).

Unfortunately, however, moral understanding can't explain why acquaintance extraculpates. This is because acquaintance is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral understanding. Of course, there are cases where acquaintance does provide moral understanding, and in such cases, it may be that this is another extraculpating factor. But there can also be cases where acquaintance does not provide such understanding. In such cases, acquaintance still extraculpates, despite the lack of moral understanding.

There are also cases of moral understanding without acquaintance. In such cases, it seems that the addition of acquaintance still extraculpates (all else equal). For example, consider the following pair of cases:

Understanding. S knows that torture is wrong because of the intense and long-lasting physical and emotional suffering it causes its victims, and S has the ability to use these reasons in moral reasoning. Thus, S not only knows that torture is wrong but understands why it is wrong. Nevertheless, S proceeds to torture A.

Acquainted Understanding. S*, just like S, understands why torture is wrong. Moreover, S is acquainted with what makes torture wrong. Nevertheless, S proceeds to torture A.

To be sure, both S and S* are the appropriate objects of strong moral condemnation. And S's understanding why torture is wrong does seem to make him more blameworthy than someone with mere knowledge that torture is wrong—or even than someone with moral understanding in a sense less robust than Hills'. But S*, who has both understanding *and* acquaintance, is the appropriate object of yet stronger condemnation. If moral understanding were what explains why acquaintance extraculpates, this would not be the case.

The key point here is that the explanation in terms of moral understanding requires that acquaintance is simply a route to moral understanding. But acquaintance can extraculpate without providing moral understanding. Moreover, even if acquaintance sometimes provides moral understanding, it's clearly not the only route to moral understanding. For example, one could come to understand the wrongness of torture through philosophical theorizing. While such moral understanding would have normative significance, it wouldn't have exactly the same normative significance as acquaintance with what makes torture wrong.

Finally, the moral understanding proposal fails to explain differences in blameworthiness within the range of cases of acquaintance. It is plausible that although observer- and patient-acquaintance both extraculpate, patient-acquaintance extraculpates more than observer-acquaintance (at least, in many cases—see §5.3, below). There are cases in which there seems to be something especially condemnable about the person who has experienced what makes torture wrong from the inside and still goes on to torture others. But the difference in normative significance between observer- and patient-acquaintance is not plausibly construed as a difference in moral understanding, for there is nothing about patient-acquaintance in particular that would grant the acquainted the abilities that are (according to Hills) constitutive of moral understanding.

2.2. Acquaintance provides evidence

Another candidate explanation proposes that acquaintance extraculpates because it provides evidence of wrongness. Such an explanation relies on the intuitive thought that the more evidence one has that something is wrong, the more blameworthy one is for doing it (and in so doing it, failing to respond to this evidence of wrongness). If the acquainted possesses evidence of wrongness that the unacquainted lack, then this would explain why acquaintance extraculpates.

This proposal also has significant initial plausibility. The more evidence one has that something is wrong, the more blameworthy one is for doing it. In some cases, perhaps acquaintance provides such evidence. For example, acquaintance with torture provides very strong evidence that it is wrong, in the form of evidence that torture causes terrible physical and emotional suffering. Because this evidence puts the acquainted in a better epistemic position with regard to the wrongness of torture, he would then be more blameworthy for going on to himself torture someone.

The problem with this proposal, however, is that acquaintance is not the only way of acquiring this evidence. For any piece of evidence that torture is wrong, one could also acquire such evidence without being acquainted with torture. For example, assuming that evidence can be transmitted via testimony, one could acquire that evidence from a reliable source who already had it. Thus, there does not seem to be the special connection between acquaintance with what makes something wrong and evidence of its wrongness that there would need to be in order for this proposal to explain why acquaintance extraculpates.

This point becomes especially salient if we conceive of evidence as reasons for belief. If any piece of evidence that torture is wrong is a reason to believe that torture is wrong, then for any piece of evidence that torture is wrong, acquaintance is not the only way of acquiring that evidence. On the assumption that reasons for belief are facts or propositions that count in favor of believing something, acquaintance is not the only way of getting in touch with those facts. For example, whatever reasons for believing torture is wrong that one might become acquainted with (such as *torture causes terrible suffering*), one could possess those same facts as reasons to believe that torture is wrong through means other than acquaintance.

Furthermore, like the moral understanding proposal, the evidence proposal can't explain why patient-acquaintance extraculpates more than mere observer-acquaintance. Of course, someone who has experienced what makes torture wrong from the inside does seem to be in a better epistemic position with regard to torture than someone who has merely witnessed the same. But this difference in epistemic position is not suitably captured by the thought that patient-acquaintance provides more, or different, evidence than observer-acquaintance. It seems to misidentify the special normative significance of patient-acquaintance to hold that what being tortured does is provides one with stronger or additional evidence to believe that torture is wrong.

2.3. Acquaintance provides additional reasons

Because moral acquaintance seems to provide access to moral reasons, perhaps it's by providing access to *additional* reasons that acquaintance extraculpates. According to this proposal, the unacquainted agent necessarily lacks at least one of the reasons that bears on the action (even if she has other moral reasons that bear on it). The acquainted agent is extraculpated because she has an additional, *sui generis* reason accessible only via acquaintance, upon which she fails to act.

Like the above two proposals, this proposal is quite plausible. It does seem that, in plenty of cases, an acquainted agent has access to reasons that an unacquainted agent lacks. For example, an unacquainted torturer may know that torture is morally wrong, and even know a reason for this—e.g., that torture involves a kind of disrespect for persons. Yet the acquainted agent may have access to something over and above this reason—e.g., that torture involves a particular kind of suffering and humiliation with which the agent is acquainted.

Unfortunately for this explanation, acquaintance doesn't always provide additional reasons when it extraculpatates. Suppose that the unacquainted agent knows that torture is wrong because of the particular character of the suffering and humiliation that it causes, though the agent has no acquaintance with what such suffering and humiliation is like. This knowledge seems to provide unacquainted access to the very same reason that the acquainted agent possesses via acquaintance. So, the normative significance of acquaintance can't in general be that it provides additional reasons. Instead, what it seems to provide is a distinctive way of accessing reasons that are in principle accessible in other ways (though we leave it open whether such reasons are *always* accessible both through acquaintance and other methods).

In the same vein, this proposal fails to explain differences in blameworthiness within the range of cases of acquaintance. Recall the distinction between observer- and patient-acquaintance. Although both are forms of acquaintance that extraculpatate, it seems that (at least, in many cases) patient-acquaintance extraculpatates more than observer-acquaintance. We are scandalized by the torturer who has witnessed much torture; but we are even more scandalized by the torturer who knows what torture is like from the inside. Rather than think of these two kinds of acquaintance as providing different reasons, whose difference explains the differing degrees of extraculpatation, it's more natural to think of them as providing different kinds of access to the very same reasons. This is exactly the direction we will go in laying out our positive account.

3. The phenomenological possession account

So far, we've considered three candidate explanations for why acquaintance extraculpatates. Each relies on plausible principles and gets something right about certain cases. However, none of them capture the distinctive extraculpatating role of acquaintance. Furthermore, none of them explain the difference in normative significance between observer- and patient-acquaintance.

We will now offer an account of why acquaintance extraculpatates that succeeds on both of these counts. Acquaintance extraculpatates, not because it necessarily provides moral understanding, evidence, or additional reasons, but because it puts one in a position to possess normative reasons in a way that the unacquainted cannot. We call this distinctive mode of possessing normative reasons *phenomenological possession*. We distinguish phenomenological possession from *intellectual possession* and argue that possessing reasons against wrong actions not just intellectually, but also phenomenologically, is what makes the acquainted more blameworthy for wrongdoing than the unacquainted.

3.1. *Phenomenological possession*

What is it to possess a normative reason? If a normative reason is just a consideration that counts in favor of or against doing something, then there are normative reasons everywhere. For example, every

reason why torture is wrong is a consideration that counts against torturing, and thereby a normative reason against torturing. But we might fail to possess such reasons; for example, if we have no idea that torture causes terrible suffering, that fact is still a reason not to torture, but it's not a reason that we have.

Nearly everyone agrees that there is some kind of epistemic condition on the possession of normative reasons such that if someone has no awareness of some reason-constituting fact, then while there may still be a reason, it is not a reason that she possesses.⁶ We are neutral about what this epistemic condition amounts to, but we take for granted that it is a necessary condition for reason-possession.

The epistemic condition is often taken to also be a sufficient condition for reason possession.⁷ However, Errol Lord argues convincingly that in addition to the epistemic condition, there is a practical condition on possessing a reason, which involves the ability to use that reason.⁸ According to Lord, satisfying this practical condition is a matter of knowing how to use a normative reason as the reason it is. We agree that satisfying some condition like this is necessary for reason-possession; in order to possess a reason, one must not only have epistemic access to that reason, but also be able to use that reason to perform the action it bears on.

Lord has a complex story about what it takes to be in a position to use a normative reason as the reason it is, which we will not discuss here. We'll remain neutral on whether being able to use a reason requires the complex machinery of Lord's account, or something less stringent, like the ability to act on the basis of that reason. For our purposes, all that must be granted is the claim that in order to possess a normative reason, one must be able to be guided by that reason in acting.

Our central claim is that acquaintance yields a distinctive kind of reason-possession by putting a moral agent in a position to use reasons in a distinctive mode. The kind of access to normative reasons that one gets from acquaintance is thus different from the kind one gets from other ways of possessing reasons, such as moral reasoning and testimony (though the latter is controversial)⁹. To see how this is so, let us return to our original cases involving two torturers. Recall that both torturers not only know that torture is wrong, but also know what makes it wrong. The difference between them is that the former, S, is not acquainted with what makes torture wrong, while the latter, S*, is.

The fact that it causes terrible suffering is a reason why torture is wrong. Call this reason R. Both S and S* know that R is a reason why torture is wrong. And both know how to use R in deciding whether or not to torture. Thus, both S and S* possess R as a normative reason not to torture. However, when we think about the ways in which they are able to use that reason, we can see that S* is able to use it in ways S is not.

Now, imagine that S knows through reliable testimony that torture causes terrible suffering. Furthermore, through thorough theorizing, S has come to understand both that this fact contributes

⁶ Lord (2018a: 77, 2018b: chapter 3).

⁷ Schroeder (2008, 2011b), Way (2010a, 2009), Parfit (2011)

⁸ Lord (2018a, 77-78, 2018b: chapter 4).

⁹ For discussions of whether normative testimony can provide reasons, see Wodak (ms.) and Reisner and van Weelden (2015).

to the wrongness of torture, and that it's thereby a reason not to torture. However, because he is not acquainted with torture, he lacks access to what the terrible suffering involved in torture is like.

In contrast, let us imagine that S* has all the features stated above, but in addition to these, he has either witnessed torture or himself been tortured. Thus, he is acquainted with the fact that torture causes terrible suffering, and he is acquainted with that fact as part of what makes torture wrong. When S* reasons about whether or not to torture, he can use R in a way that S cannot. While S can only use R as a reason on an intellectual level, S* can use it on a phenomenological level. While S is only able to act on the basis of R by taking into account the abstract normative relations that R bears to actions, other facts, and so on, S* is able to act on the basis of R by taking into account all of that *plus* the phenomenology of the wrong-making suffering itself.

When someone uses reasons in the ways in which both S and S* are able to use R, they use reasons in what we call the intellectual mode. When someone uses reasons in the ways that only S*, who has acquaintance, is able to use R, they use reasons in the phenomenological mode. While both S and S* are able to use R in the intellectual mode, only S*, in virtue of being acquainted with R, is able to use R in the phenomenological mode.

S and S* also have importantly different modal profiles. For example, were S to lose intellectual possession of R, S would plausibly no longer be able to use R at all. S*, on the other hand, might lose intellectual possession of R yet still be able to employ R phenomenologically. This may be a promising way to understand the sort of case that the story Huckleberry Finn represents for many philosophers. Huck believes that turning in his friend Jim, a runaway slave, is the morally right thing to do, but cannot bring himself to do so. Nevertheless, it seems Huck also has some sort of grasp of what would make it wrong to turn Jim in. One way of making sense of this would be to hold that Huck has phenomenological but not intellectual possession of what would make it wrong to deliver Jim to the authorities.

What is it to use a reason in the phenomenological mode? So far, we have said that it involves acting on the basis of that reason partly by taking into account phenomenological features of the reason-constituting fact. Because acquaintance uniquely grants us access to such phenomenological features, acquaintance is necessary for phenomenological possession.¹⁰ Beyond this, however, we are otherwise mostly noncommittal about exactly what is involved in using a reason in the phenomenological mode. This is because we want our account to be as neutral as possible between a variety of views on what it is to use a reason in general.¹¹ What it is to use a reason in the phenomenological mode will thus depend partly on which of these views we accept, and how the phenomenological features of reason-

¹⁰ It might be objected that the imagination could also grant us access to such phenomenological features. This is possible, but the imaginative capacities involved would have to be sufficiently powerful to make the imaginative exercise function as a kind of pseudo-acquaintance. And we are skeptical that the imaginative capacities of ordinary agents are powerful enough that an ordinary agent would be able to imaginatively access something like the phenomenology of torture. But there may be other cases where we are happy to concede that imagination can play the role of acquaintance in delivering phenomenological possession.

¹¹ This is a complicated issue for a variety of reasons. One such reason is that there is disagreement about whether using a some reason R to φ is just a matter of φ -ing on the basis of R (making R one's motivating reason), or whether something else is required. For discussion of this issue, see Lord (2018b) and Sylvan and Lord (forthcoming). For discussion of the nature of motivating reasons, see Smith (1994) Hornsby (2008), Alvarez (2018), and Singh (forthcoming). Bittner (2001), Hornsby (2008), Alvarez (2018)

constituting facts might play a role in using reasons on those views. We hope that despite remaining noncommittal, we have said enough to provide an intuitive grasp of using reasons in the phenomenological mode.

Acquaintance with normative reasons uniquely grants agents the ability to use reasons in the phenomenological mode. It does this in virtue of the way in which it grants access to those reasons; it grants access not just to the intellectual features of those reasons, but to the phenomenological features as well. So, the acquainted agent also satisfies the epistemic condition on reason-possession in a way the unacquainted agent does not, and it is partly in virtue of this that she has the ability to use the reason in a way the unacquainted agent cannot.¹²

This distinctive mode of possessing reasons is what we call phenomenological possession (as opposed to intellectual possession). According to our account, acquaintance extraculpatates in virtue of its connection to phenomenological possession. We are now in a position to explain why this is so.

3.2. How phenomenological possession extraculpatates

Consider the following principle:

POSSESSION–BLAME₁: S is blameworthy for φ -ing in virtue of failing to respond to some reason R not to φ only if S possesses R as a reason not to φ .

This principle is highly plausible, especially given the assumption that (non-culpable) moral ignorance can exculpate. It seems that if S doesn't have R as a reason not to φ , then the fact S failed to respond to R can't explain why S is blameworthy for φ -ing. And if S is ignorant of R, then S fails to meet the epistemic position on possession, so S doesn't have R as a reason to φ . Of course, it could be that S is culpably ignorant of R, in which case S might still be blameworthy for failing to respond to R, but this complication doesn't bear on our argument.

Now, consider the following extension of POSSESSION–BLAME₁:

POSSESSION–BLAME₂: S's failure to respond to some reason R not to φ contributes to S's blameworthiness for φ -ing to the degree that S possesses R as a reason not to φ .

It's uncontroversial that blameworthiness comes in degrees. POSSESSION–BLAME₂ is a highly plausible extension of POSSESSION–BLAME₁ given just one further assumption, which is that the possession of reasons also comes in degrees. And this is an assumption that should be quickly granted once we countenance different ways of possessing a reason. This is because the following principle is also plausible:

POSSESSION–DEGREES: If S possesses some reason R in more distinct ways than S* does, then S possesses R to a greater degree than S* does.

¹² Like Lord (2018a, 2018b), we find it plausible that satisfying the epistemic condition on possession is a precondition for satisfying the practical condition.

We see no plausible grounds for denying POSSESSION–DEGREES. If there are distinct ways of possessing a reason, and one can possess a reason in more or fewer of these ways, then it seems there are corresponding degrees of possession.

Taken together, the above three principles explain how phenomenological possession extraculpatates. They entail that if both S and S* are blameworthy for φ -ing partly in virtue of failing to respond to some reason R that they possess, but S* possesses R both intellectually and phenomenologically, while S possesses R only intellectually, then S* is more blameworthy for φ -ing than S. Since acquaintance yields phenomenological possession, this explains why, all else equal, acquaintance extraculpatates.

It also explains why patient-acquaintance often seems to extraculpatate more than mere observer-acquaintance (recall that alternative proposals were plagued by a failure to explain precisely this). Because different kinds of acquaintance have not been distinguished in the literature, little attention has been paid to the fact that different kinds of acquaintance grant access to different sets of phenomenological features of the objects of acquaintance. For example, while observer- and patient-acquaintance with torture each might put us in touch with the fact that it causes suffering, as a reason not to torture, they obviously do not put us in touch with the very same phenomenological features of that fact. While observer-acquaintance puts us in touch with what that suffering is like from the outside, patient-acquaintance puts us in touch with what that suffering is like from the inside. And although we have not said much about it, agent-acquaintance seems to put us in touch with yet other phenomenological features of the fact—e.g., what torture is like from a distinctively second-personal perspective.

We contend that in virtue of the above, patient-acquaintance with what makes an action wrong is a stronger form of acquaintance than mere observer-acquaintance. Correspondingly, patient-acquaintance with the wrong-making features of an act yields a stronger form of phenomenological possession than mere observer-acquaintance. We can gloss this by saying that while observer-acquaintance yields weak phenomenological possession, patient-acquaintance yields strong phenomenological possession. And because strong phenomenological possession is a greater degree of possession than weak phenomenological possession, the former extraculpatates more than the latter (all else being equal). This explains why patient-acquaintance (all else equal) extraculpatates more than mere observer-acquaintance.

We conclude that our account offers a principled, plausible explanation of the datum. Acquaintance heightens blameworthiness for wrong action because, and to the degree that, it provides phenomenological possession of the wrong-making features of actions as reasons against performing those actions.

4. Applications

Our proposal, aside from explaining what we set out to explain, has interesting implications for a number of debates in normative theory. In this section, we apply our proposal to three issues. The first is the debate over whether there are asymmetries between acquaintance and testimony with regard to their normative significance. The second is the relationship between acquaintance and blameworthiness in the aesthetic domain. The third is whether there are asymmetries in responsibility between proximate and distant wrongs. Insofar as these applications shed light on the respective controversies in philosophy, they accrue to the theoretical strength of our account.

4.1. The normative significance of acquaintance vs. testimony

Recently, there has been a burgeoning debate about whether there are asymmetries between acquaintance and testimony with regard to their normative significance. In particular, the debate has focused on whether testimony can yield the same kinds of achievement that acquaintance can. Some in this debate have been concerned with whether testimony can yield moral knowledge.¹³ Others have been concerned with whether testimony can give us normative reasons for actions and attitudes.¹⁴ Finally, there is the issue of whether agents can perform morally worthy actions by relying on moral testimony.¹⁵

Our proposal makes two contributions to these debates. The first is that, whether or not any of the asymmetries described above exist, our proposal establishes that there is at least one asymmetry between acquaintance and testimony with regard to their normative significance. This is because we have shown that acquaintance extraculpatates in a unique way, and thus has normative significance that testimony cannot. Whether or not there are asymmetries between acquaintance and testimony with regard to providing knowledge or reasons, or enabling morally worthy action, our proposal can explain some of the intuitiveness of the thought that there must be some asymmetry between acquaintance and testimony with regard to their normative significance.

The second contribution our proposal makes to these debates is that because it entails that there is at least one normatively significant asymmetry between acquaintance and testimony, it likely has implications with regard to other putative asymmetries between acquaintance and testimony. While exploring such implications is beyond the scope of this paper, we hope to explore them in further work.

4.2. Aesthetic acquaintance

While this paper focuses on the normative significance of moral acquaintance, our proposal also provides some insight into the normative significance of aesthetic acquaintance. There has been substantial theorizing about the significance of aesthetic acquaintance, and more recently, theorizing about the relationship between moral and aesthetic acquaintance.¹⁶ Our proposal sheds further light on the significance of aesthetic acquaintance by shedding light on its relationship to an undertheorized topic: that of distinctively aesthetic blame.

Despite being undertheorized, aesthetic blame is something familiar in ordinary life. When others are acquainted with the aesthetic properties of objects but fail to respond to those properties by forming fitting attitudes, we often have condemnatory responses. For example, it often seems appropriate to blame someone for failing to respond with admiration to a beautiful piece of art. Because this blame is in response not to moral failure, but to aesthetic failure, it seems to be a distinctively aesthetic form

¹³ Hopkins (2007), McGrath (2011b), Sliwa (2012, 2016), Hills (2009, 2013).

¹⁴ Wodak (ms.), Reisner and van Weelden (2015).

¹⁵ Nickel (2001), Hills (2010), Sliwa (2012, 2016).

¹⁶ Budd (2003), Driver (2006), Konigsberg (2012), Robson (2013), McKinnon (2017), Franzén (2018), Hanson (2018), Lord (2018a), Ransom (2019).

of blame. Assuming this blame is sometimes appropriate, we are sometimes aesthetically blameworthy for failing to respond with attitudes like admiration toward objects that merit such attitudes.

Our account of how moral acquaintance extraculpates has significant carryover to the aesthetic case. It seems like we are most aesthetically blameworthy for failing to respond to an object's aesthetic features when we are acquainted with those features (as opposed to when we simply know that the object has these features). And an analogous explanation of this data seems plausible: insofar as aesthetic acquaintance leads to the phenomenological possession of aesthetic reasons, it makes us more blameworthy for failing to respond to those reasons.

Interestingly, the connection between acquaintance and blameworthiness may be even stronger in the aesthetic case than in the moral case. For it seems that without acquaintance, we may not be blameworthy at all for failing to form the relevant attitudes, whereas mere moral knowledge can ground blameworthiness in the moral domain. To see this, consider a case in which one learns through aesthetic testimony all the beautiful-making features of a particular artwork, but is not acquainted with any of them. Without acquaintance, there would be something positively odd about admiring that artwork on the basis of those features. Given this fact, it would seem inappropriate to blame someone in this situation for failing to admire that artwork. Thus, it might be that phenomenological possession does not just heighten aesthetic blameworthiness but is actually necessary for it.¹⁷

Our proposal also helps to shed light on an important disanalogy between moral and aesthetic acquaintance. While the distinction we have made between the three different kinds of acquaintance is natural in the moral case, it does not have an obvious analogue in the aesthetic case. Standard cases of aesthetic acquaintance resist being separated into sub-categories of observer-, patient-, and agent-acquaintance. This is important because it helps explain why discussions of moral acquaintance on the model of aesthetic acquaintance have failed to distinguish between the different kinds of moral acquaintance. This disanalogy between moral and aesthetic acquaintance gives us reason to be cautious about modeling moral acquaintance on aesthetic acquaintance in our theorizing.

4.3. *Proximate and distant wrongs*

Finally, our proposal has implications for a longstanding debate in moral theory. Singer (1972) famously argues that mere proximity to (or distance from) suffering people does not affect our obligations toward them. From relatively simple principles, Singer defends surprisingly stringent demands on our charitable activity toward distant people. He notes that his argument “takes... no account of proximity or distance.” According to Singer, this is a principled neglect and needs no serious defense:

I do not think I need to say much in defense of the refusal to take proximity and distance into account. The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we *shall* assist him, but this does not show that we *ought* to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever,

¹⁷ One might even make the yet stronger claim that we need phenomenological possession of a reason (and thus, acquaintance) for it to even be possible for us to have distinctively aesthetic attitudes on the basis of that reason.

we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him).¹⁸

In short, Singer regards proximity or distance as morally irrelevant features. Our account of the relationship between acquaintance and blame provides a way to partially vindicate the psychological tendency to think that obligations to nearby persons are stronger than obligations to distant persons. Physical proximity facilitates acquaintance with the suffering and moral evil endured by, e.g., people who are starving. In particular, physical proximity facilitates observer-acquaintance. It may even facilitate agent-acquaintance, since direct confrontation with someone who is suffering may involve acquaintance with the fact that one is positively contributing (whether *via* action or inaction, and whether individually or institutionally) to a moral wrong. If we are right that one's degree of blameworthiness partly tracks not only the reasons one has available, but the ways in which (and the degree to which) one possesses those reasons, then it seems that physical proximity (as a conduit for acquaintance) can heighten blameworthiness for failing to fulfill our obligations.

This does not show that Singer is wrong to reject the idea that mere proximity can create or eliminate an obligation, full-stop; on this much, we do not take issue with his argument. But Singer is wrong to think that proximity is a merely psychological factor in our relationship to activities like charitable giving. Rather, proximity is normatively significant insofar as it affects our acquaintance with the grounds of our obligations to others, and thus the degree to which we are blameworthy for failing to fulfill those obligations. However, it's worth noting that insofar as modern technology enables more and more acquaintance from afar, this asymmetry in responsibility between proximate and distant wrongs is increasingly mitigated.

5. Objections and Replies

In this section, we discuss a few objections to our account. The first objection asks why the explanation we have given cannot simply be appropriated by a defender of one of the proposals we rejected. The second objection claims that our notion of phenomenological possession of a reason relies on an implausible assumption that wrong-making features of actions always have a distinct phenomenology. The third and most serious objection to our account is that it seems to have the disturbing implication that victims of certain kinds of life-altering trauma are more, rather than less, blameworthy for going on to inflict the same or similar trauma on others.

5.1. *Alternative proposals revisited*

Defenders of the proposals we rejected in §2 might respond to our proposal by claiming that it can be easily appropriated to support a more sophisticated version of their views. It is particularly easy to see how a defender of the explanation in terms of moral understanding might respond in this way. We can imagine a defender of this view saying something like the following:

On Hills' account, moral understanding involves a range of abilities to use the reasons why an action is right or wrong in one's moral reasoning. If phenomenological

¹⁸ Singer (1972, 232).

possession is a matter of being able to use reasons in a way one would not otherwise be able to, then this seems like a kind of moral understanding. Therefore, the phenomenological possession account is compatible with a more sophisticated version of the understanding view, according to which acquaintance extraculpatates because it yields a special kind of moral understanding.

We agree with all this. If the defender of the moral understanding view wants to say that phenomenological possession leads to a special kind of moral understanding, we have no objection. However, if phenomenological possession is ultimately what does the work in making this kind of moral understanding a distinct kind with distinct normative significance, then it seems to us that the phenomenological possession account is doing the real explanatory work, and the language of moral understanding is just (somewhat less natural) packaging. Thus, we are happy to concede what we see as the largely verbal point that phenomenological possession could be construed as being partly constitutive of a kind of moral understanding, since this does little to detract from the explanatory work done by our account.¹⁹

We think that for any attempt to revisit one of the proposals we rejected, the same sort of response is available to us. For any such proposal, whatever x it posits as an explanation, it will only explain the data as well as the phenomenological possession account if it either implicitly or explicitly relies on phenomenological possession to make the relevant distinction between different kinds of x . Therefore, while we grant that things might be explained using other terminology, as long as something like the machinery we have proposed is ultimately necessary for making the relevant distinctions, the availability of alternative ways of putting things does not detract from our account. Furthermore, we are skeptical that alternative ways of putting things will do justice to the role of reasons in extraculpation (as well as exculpation).

5.2. *Missing phenomenology?*

Another objection that might be pressed against our account is that for many wrong actions, their wrong-making features lack distinctive phenomenology. The moral reasons against performing these actions, then, would not be candidates for phenomenological possession. For example, imagine that your colleague puts up slanderous flyers about you all over your workplace. Let's assume that this is wrong, and part of what makes it wrong is that it is slanderous. When you see the posters, there is some sense in which you become acquainted with the fact that you have been slandered. Nevertheless, one might think, there is no distinctive phenomenology here. In other words, there's nothing in particular that it is *like* to be slandered.²⁰ So, in such cases, contra our guiding datum, acquaintance does not extraculpatate.

We have two responses to this objection. The first is that it isn't obvious that there is no distinctive phenomenology associated with being slandered, or other similar wrong-making features of actions. It might be thought that only actions like torture, whose wrong-making features constitutively involve felt pain and suffering, have wrong-making features with distinctive phenomenology. However, there

¹⁹ Incidentally, the same could be said in response to an objection that attempted to assimilate the normative significance of acquaintance to a special kind of moral knowledge (for instance, distinctively *phenomenal* knowledge).

²⁰ We are grateful to Tristram McPherson for raising this objection and the corresponding example.

is also something to the thought that for any distinctive form of wrongdoing, there is the possibility of a distinctive phenomenology associated with it. Therefore, we should not dismiss out of hand the possibility that there is a distinctive phenomenology associated with, for example, slander.

The second response is that even if there can be such cases of ‘missing phenomenology,’ this is not obviously a problem for the phenomenological possession account, because in such cases, it isn’t clear that there is any significant sense in which one becomes *acquainted* with what makes the action wrong. Instead, we might think that one comes to possess the wrong-making features as reasons against the action *intellectually*, by exercising one’s inferential and other reasoning capacities. If some reason-constituting fact R truly has no distinctive phenomenology, then it’s plausible that there is no real acquaintance with R to be had. Thus, cases of missing phenomenology would not be counterexamples to our datum, because they would not be cases of moral acquaintance at all.

5.3. *Acquaintance and exculpation*

The most serious objection to our account involves the observation that, at least sometimes, acquaintance seems to do the exact opposite of what we say it does – that is, it exculpates instead of extraculpating. Without getting into macabre details, there are cases where suffering a wrong makes a victim more likely to perform that wrong themselves. In these sorts of cases, it seems odd to heap further blame, and hence further burden, on the victim. After all, their propensity to harm others is itself a result of their own victimization. It might be objected, then, that at least in these sorts of cases of patient-acquaintance, our account gets things exactly backwards.²¹

We concede that there are cases where patient-acquaintance exculpates instead of extraculpating. However, our account can accommodate this. While we have claimed that acquaintance is necessary for phenomenological possession, we have not claimed that acquaintance necessarily results in phenomenological possession. In fact, this would be quite implausible. We should expect the impact of acquaintance, especially acquaintance with wrongdoing, to have complex effects on people. One of the effects of trauma in particular might be damage to the victim’s capacity for moral reasoning, or, in the case of childhood trauma, the prevention of the further development of such capacities. Such damages may block phenomenological possession of the reasons why what was done to the agent are wrong. We might even say that such cases are not true cases of *moral* acquaintance at all, since the experience itself prevents the victim from making moral sense of it.

In light of this, not only does our account not deliver the wrong verdict about such cases, it can actually help to explain what is intuitively the right verdict. If acquaintance in general extraculpates through enabling phenomenological possession of the reasons against the wrong action, then when a traumatic experience instead has the effect of blocking possession of those reasons (phenomenological and intellectual), our account predicts that this experience exculpates instead of extraculpating. It may even be that experiencing trauma can lead to non-culpable moral ignorance, which would be even more exculpating.

²¹ Cf. Wolf (1987), who discusses cases in which upbringing may in some sense determine bad behavior yet not exculpate.

In short, the cases at issue are not counterexamples to our account, but rather instances where the phenomenon we've identified is defeated by countervailing considerations. We can further illustrate the point by considering a somewhat exotic counterfactual. Consider the commonplace view that agents are more blameworthy for wrong actions under conditions of moral knowledge than under conditions of (non-culpable) moral ignorance. But now suppose that there is a certain action-type which is such that, due to contingent features of human psychology, actions of that type are extremely difficult for humans to resist doing precisely when they know that they are wrong. Would the existence of such actions falsify the commonplace view relating moral knowledge to blameworthiness? We think not. Rather, these cases are just ones where the phenomenon identified by the commonplace view is blocked or defeated by an exculpatory condition. And this is exactly what we want to say about these putative counterexamples to our account.

6. Concluding Remarks

Our aim in this paper has been twofold. Our primary aim has been to highlight an underexplored fact (acquaintance extraculpatory) and explain it. To that end, we have defended the **phenomenological possession account** and demonstrated the inadequacy of some of its most plausible rivals. Furthermore, we have outlined how this account bears additional fruit in several areas of normative theory.

Our secondary aim has been to complicate the standard picture of moral acquaintance. Whereas philosophers have typically given unified accounts of acquaintance, we contend that, at least in the moral case, it is also important to think about at least three distinct kinds of acquaintance. This suggests a further research program in itself. For example, we have said very little about moral agent-acquaintance: acquaintance with the moral properties of an action by way of performing that action. What are the features of agent-acquaintance with right and wrong actions? Does agent-acquaintance with wrong actions extraculpatory in the way that, we argue, observer- and patient-acquaintance does? It's beyond the scope of this paper to answer such questions. But we take ourselves to have shown at least that they are important areas for further research on the normative significance of acquaintance.

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