

## Controlling Ignorance: A Bitter Truth

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### **Article:**

When Auschwitz camp commandant Rudolf Höss had over two million people put to death, he was not to blame. When Adolf Eichmann delivered victim after victim to the concentration camps, he was not to blame. When William Calley led the massacre of hundreds of civilians at My Lai, he was not to blame.

These are startling claims. Many find them outrageous. I think that they are probably true. It surely matters whether they are true. Evil is committed every day, sometimes of monstrous proportions, sometimes not. Those who commit evil are often punished for their actions. This is a natural response to what they have done, for the desire to see evildoers punished is primitive and instinctive. But we all recognize, in our calmer, more detached moments, the possibility that an evildoer does not deserve, indeed deserves not, to be punished because he is not to blame for his evil actions, and he is not to blame because he has an excuse. In such a case, a gross injustice is perpetrated if the evildoer is punished nonetheless. (It is just possible that such an injustice is morally justified, due to certain overwhelming, countervailing considerations, but, even so, the injustice remains undiminished.) I believe it likely that Höss, Eichmann, and Calley all had an excuse for their terrible deeds. The excuse was that they did not believe that they were doing anything morally wrong.<sup>1</sup>

### **Part I**

Ignorance of wrongdoing does not automatically exculpate the wrongdoer. I believe (but will not argue here) that it exculpates only if it is constituted by the failure to believe that one is doing wrong.<sup>2</sup> Nor does it automatically exculpate even then, for the wrongdoer may be culpable for his ignorance. But I believe (and will argue here) that culpability for such ignorance is *itself* to be traced to behavior that is conducted in the belief that one is doing wrong, and this is presumably quite rare; it is surely more common that ignorant behavior has no such nonignorant origin. Thus, unless the instances of wrongdoing displayed by Höss, Eichmann, and Calley were themselves rooted in the belief on their part that they were doing wrong, they were not to blame for the atrocities they committed.

Here is the argument. Suppose (1) that Alf did something morally wrong, but that he was ignorant of the fact that it was wrong because he failed to believe, at the time that he did it, that it was wrong. ("Did" is to be construed broadly, covering both action and omission; "morally wrong" is to be understood to express overall, and not merely *prima facie*, moral wrongness.) Now (2) Alf is to blame for his ignorant behavior only if he is to blame for the ignorance that gave rise to it, and (3) he is to blame for this ignorance only if he was in control of it. But (4) one is never in direct control of whether one is ignorant about something, and (5) if one is to blame for something over which one's control was merely indirect, then one's culpability for it is also merely indirect. Furthermore (6) one is indirectly culpable for something only if that thing was a consequence of something else for which one is directly culpable. Hence (7) Alf is to blame for his ignorant behavior only if there was something else for which he is directly culpable and of which his ignorance was a consequence. But (8) whatever this something else was for which Alf is directly culpable, it cannot have been an instance of ignorant behavior, because then the argument would apply all over again to it. Thus (9) Alf is to blame for his ignorant behavior only if there was some other piece of behavior, for which he is directly culpable and of which his

ignorance was a consequence, about whose wrongness he was not ignorant, that is, only if there was some such piece of behavior which he believed, at the time that he performed it, to be morally wrong.

Alf was picked at random, of course. What is true of him is also true of Bert and Charlie, of Doris and Elsie, and so on. Hence all culpability for ignorant behavior is to be traced to behavior about whose wrongness the agent was not ignorant.

This is an argument that I have presented, in somewhat modified fashion, before.<sup>3</sup> On that occasion I elaborated on the moral significance of the conclusion, but I said little in defense of the premises. Now, it is an obvious truth that all arguments rest on premises that have not been argued for in turn, thus rendering the arguments open to attack. The trick, of course, is to pick premises that are as independently plausible as possible. However, there will almost always be room for reasonable doubt, especially if the conclusion challenges common beliefs. Perhaps each of the premises in my argument could do with further support, but here I want to focus on one in particular, the claim (4) that one is never in direct control of whether one is ignorant about something. For this has recently been the target of criticism.<sup>4</sup>

## **Part II**

How might one be culpable for ignorance about something? A tempting answer is: by way of being careless regarding what to believe about it. James Montmarquet has endorsed this answer; he has claimed, moreover, that such carelessness is typically in one's direct control and that, when it is, one's state of (dis)belief is also in one's direct control. Hence in these cases at least—and cases of this type are very common—there is, in his view, an important exception to the claim that one is never in direct control of whether one is ignorant about something.<sup>5</sup>

Montmarquet's argument is by way of an analogy. Suppose that one has direct control over the degree of care with which one whistles a tune. This does not imply that one's whistling is only in one's indirect control. On the contrary, direct control over the former is typically accompanied by direct control over the latter; if one whistles carelessly, for instance, then both the carelessness with which one whistles and the whistling itself are typically in one's direct control. Analogously, suppose that one has direct control over the care one takes regarding what to believe about what one ought to do. It would be a mistake to infer that any beliefs that one forms can be only in one's indirect control. On the contrary, direct control over the degree of care one takes in forming a belief is typically accompanied by direct control over the belief itself.

How, exactly, is it that one might take care regarding what one believes? According to Montmarquet, this involves "the familiar twin goals of [the pursuit of] truth and the avoidance of error," which themselves presuppose a certain quality of "openness" on one's part.<sup>6</sup> To take care in this regard is just to have a mind that is sensitive to what is true and false and to (dis)believe accordingly, all of which is typically in one's direct control.

I believe that Montmarquet's analogy is flawed and that it fails to establish that we can ever be in direct control of whether we are ignorant about something. I shall argue that one cannot have direct control either over the care one takes regarding what to believe about something or over the belief itself. I shall argue further that, even if one could have direct control over the former, one could not have such control over the latter, in precisely the sort of case that concerns Montmarquet.

## **Part III**

My argument for the claim that one cannot have direct control either over the care one takes regarding what to believe about something or over the belief itself is grounded in a rather conventional theory of action.<sup>7</sup> On this theory, all actions, whether physical or mental, are complex events that involve one event, a volition, causing a certain other event or state. This other event or state (which, following Georg von Wright,<sup>8</sup> I shall call the "result" of the action) is of course an "external" effect of the volition, but it is "internal" to the action. Further effects are "external" to the action and thus mere consequences of the action, although these further effects may

themselves be the results of other actions. Thus, and for example, if I flip a switch by raising my hand, then the following will have occurred: a volition (typically, a decision to raise my hand in order to flip the switch) causing my hand to rise, thereby causing the switch to go up. The action of my raising my hand comprises the volition's causing my hand's rising; the action of my flipping the switch comprises this same volition's causing the switch's going up. My hand's rising is an effect of my decision to raise it but the result of my raising it; the switch's going up is an effect of my decision to raise my hand, of my hand's rising, and of my raising my hand, but it is the result of my flipping the switch. And so on. We may assume (for the sake of this illustration) that the action of my raising my hand is "basic," in that it is not itself performed by way of performing any other action; the action of my flipping the switch is of course nonbasic.

On this view, all action consists in the bringing about of a result. This is most easily seen in the sort of case that I have just described, where English provides a ready term not only for the action ("raising," "flipping") but also for the result ("rising," "going up"). But it holds also in those cases where no obvious term for the result is available. (Consider the action of walking. This involves the bringing about of a certain motion of one's feet, but there is no English term I know of that precisely expresses this motion.) It holds also in cases of mental action (such as multiplying six by seven "in one's head," or offering up an unspoken prayer).

On such a theory of action, freedom of action can be seen to rest in freedom of the will. To return to the original case: under the circumstances, I control my flipping the switch just in case I control my raising my hand, and I control my raising my hand just in case I control my decision to raise it. It is the decision over which I have direct control; its effects, which include not just the consequences of my basic action but also its result, are something over which I have only indirect control. On this view, it is misleading to say that any action, even a basic action, is in an agent's direct control. Control over actions is "hybrid": direct with respect to the volition but, as just noted, indirect with respect to the result.

It is plausible to think that all basic actions are intentional. But, even if this is so, one can be in control of actions that are (nonbasic and) unintentional. Suppose that, in raising my hand, I not only flip the switch, but I also turn on the light, illuminate the room, and alert a prowler to the fact that I am home.<sup>9</sup> It may well be that I am in control of all that is involved here, including the prowler's being alerted, even if I am wholly oblivious to the presence of the prowler.

One can be in control of omissions as well as actions. It can happen, for instance, that my hand rises not because I raise it, but because I let it rise—I omit to prevent its rising. (It is being raised by someone or something else; I could do something about this, but I do not.) According to the present theory, it is once again the case that my control over my hand's rising must be indirect, by way of direct control over a decision to let it rise. (If there is no such decision, its rising will occur wholly independently of me.) In this case, my hand's rising is not a *causal* consequence of my decision to let it rise, but it is a consequence nonetheless, in that my hand would not have risen, under the circumstances, if I had not decided to let it rise.

As with basic actions, it is plausible to think that all basic omissions are intentional. But still one can be in control of omissions that are (nonbasic and) unintentional. For example, it may be that, in letting my hand rise, I unintentionally let the prowler be alerted.

Consider now Montmarquet's case of whistling. He claims that one can exercise direct control both over the care with which one whistles and over one's whistling itself. It is an interesting question whether there are two actions here or one. Is whistling carefully a single action, as whistling loudly is? Or does whistling carefully consist in doing one thing (taking care, focusing one's attention) while doing another (whistling)? I incline toward the latter view. In either case, though, it is clear that the present approach implies that neither the care with which one whistles nor the whistling itself is in one's direct control. For whether there is one action here or two, control over actions is not direct but hybrid.

Turn now to the case of careful (or careless) belief. If the analogy were apt, the same inference would hold: control over the care one takes regarding what to believe and over the belief itself is not direct. But there is in fact an important disanalogy between the whistling and belief cases. For belief (that is, the attitude of believing, not the proposition believed) is *not* an action, as whistling is; it can at best be the *result* of an action (the action of bringing it about that one believes something. Sometimes the attitude of believing is called an “act” of believing, but this is misleading; “state” is far more appropriate). Let us use the phrase “to form a belief” to express the action in question. Now, as in the whistling case, whether carefully forming a belief constitutes one action or two, one’s control over the action(s) is, on the present theory, not direct by hybrid. But in addition—and this is where the disanalogy arises—one’s control over the belief itself is not direct but *indirect*.<sup>10</sup>

It may be that “to form a belief” is sometimes used to express, not the action of bringing it about that one has a certain belief, but the omission that consists in letting it happen that one has a certain belief. But again, on the present theory, one can at best have *indirect* control over such a belief, by way of directly controlling a decision of which the belief is a (noncausal) consequence.

(It may indeed be that “to form a belief” is sometimes used to express simply the coming, or beginning, to have a certain belief. In such a case, there is no necessity that the belief be brought about or allowed to happen. But, if so, then there is no opportunity for anyone to exercise control over it, either directly or indirectly.)

In summary, the central question is: How can I control (whether intentionally or not) my transition from a state of not believing that *p* to a state of believing that *p*? Such control requires that the transition occur either by way of my bringing it about that I believe that *p* or by way of my letting it happen that I believe that *p*. According to the present theory, however I manage to achieve this, in either case my believing that *p* will be a consequence (causal or otherwise) of a decision of mine, and hence something over which I have at best indirect control.

#### **Part IV**

Conventional though it may be, the theory of action just adumbrated is nonetheless controversial. Those who subscribe to it will accept that one cannot have direct control either over the care that one takes regarding what to believe about something or over the belief itself. But those who do not subscribe to it may still resist this conclusion. At this point I could of course try to elaborate the theory and argue for it in turn, but that is an unmanageable task in the present context. At this point, it will be more effective to take a different tack. I shall now argue that, even if it is allowed that one can have direct control over the care that one takes regarding what to believe about something, still it must be accepted that one cannot have direct control over the belief itself, in precisely the sort of case that concerns Montmarquet.

Montmarquet is concerned with the sort of case in which one’s state of (dis)belief is attributable to one’s not having a mind that is sensitive to what is true and false. It seems to me that it is just such closed-mindedness that probably characterized Höss, Eichmann, and Calley and surely does characterize many people (a *great* many, I should think) when they engage in wrongdoing. I shall argue that there is good reason to think, regardless of which particular theory of action is in the end to be accepted, that in such cases one’s control over one’s state of (dis)belief about what it is morally wrong to do can at best be merely indirect.

My argument rests on the following claim: any plausible account of control will deny that we are directly in control of what I have called the results of our nonbasic actions.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps, on the theory you prefer, I am in direct control of my raising my hand. Perhaps also, on this theory, my raising my hand is identical with my hand’s rising, so that direct control of the former implies direct control of the latter. Perhaps even, on this theory, my raising my hand is identical with my flipping the switch, so that direct control of the former once again implies direct control of the latter. But surely you will agree that I am *not* in direct control of *the switch’s going up*.

Let us now apply this observation to the issue at hand. Remember that the central question concerns how I can control my transition from a state of not believing that *p* to a state of believing that *p*. Let us now assume (as is

surely typical of the sorts of cases that concern us here) that this transition is not going to happen “on its own” and thus is not something that I can simply let happen. If I am to control it, then, it must be a matter of my controlling my bringing it about that I believe that *p*. How might I bring this belief about? Well, one way might be to adopt the Pascalian strategy, advocated at times by William James, of acting as if I believed that *p*.<sup>12</sup> But notice two things about this sort of case. First, it is clear that, in such a case, my forming the belief that *p* is a nonbasic action. Second, such a strategy would seem to require that I attend to the proposition that *p*, which is precisely not what occurs in the cases of inattentiveness that concern Montmarquet. Another strategy might be that which Montmarquet himself advocates. But even if taking such care were in my direct control, *still* we should say that my believing that *p* is not in my direct control. This is because, in such a case, my bringing it about that I believe that *p* must be a nonbasic action, since I must first change my attitude from one of being “closed” to one of being “open” and it is only *by way of* doing this that I can come to see the truth.

Notice that it would be a mistake to characterize the care that I take in such a case as being a matter of *keeping* an open mind, for this implies that my mind is already open and that all I need to do is maintain such openness. Perhaps, if my mind were open, my believing that *p* would not be achieved *by* keeping my mind open (just as I would not normally be said to bring it about that I see a certain object by keeping my eyes open), and so perhaps it could be argued that my bringing it about that I believe that *p* (like my bringing it about that I see the object) would then be a basic action. But the sort of case under consideration here is not like that. Rather than my mind’s already being open, so that taking care consists simply in keeping it open, if I am to take care about what I believe, I must open my mind. It is only *by way of* doing this that I can bring it about that I believe that *p*, and thus the latter is a nonbasic action (just as my bringing it about that I see the object will be nonbasic if I do this by way of opening my eyes). If, then, any plausible account of control will deny that we are directly in control of what I have called the results of our nonbasic actions, any such theory will deny that, in the sort of case under discussion, I am directly in control of my believing that *p*.

## Part V

I have a second, briefer argument for this same conclusion. It rests on the claim, mentioned earlier, that all basic actions are intentional. (Of course, this too is controversial.) Now, in the sort of case under discussion, where I do not already believe that *p* and I am not attending to the proposition that *p*, my bringing it about that I believe that *p* will not be something that I do intentionally. (It is one thing to intentionally bring it about that one believes whatever is true; it is quite another to intentionally bring it about, with respect to a particular true proposition that *p*, that one believes that *p*.) Hence, in this sort of case, my bringing it about that I believe that *p* is not a basic action. Once again, then, it follows, from the claim that no one is directly in control of the result of a nonbasic action, that I am not directly in control of my believing that *p*.

## Part VI

In defending the premise (4) that one is never (or, at least, not in the sort of case that concerns Montmarquet) in direct control of whether one is ignorant about something, I have naturally had to rely on some subpremises that have not themselves been defended. This is inevitable. Perhaps someone will want to take issue with one or more of these subpremises. But, even if so, that of course would not show the premise false. More effective would be a positive argument in favor of the claim that, in cases like those that involved Höss, Eichmann, and Calley, the ignorance that is displayed concerning the evil that is committed is in the agent’s direct control. In the absence of such an argument, and given my own original argument plus the considerations that I have presented in this paper, I continue to maintain that such agents are in all likelihood not to blame for what they have done. I know that this is a bitter pill to swallow, but I submit that it is true. If we ignore this truth, we run the risk of treating many individuals unjustly (a *great* many, I should think) and thus of ourselves becoming doers of evil (for which, I concede, we will likely not be to blame, but that will not diminish the evil). Indeed, this is surely a risk that is realized every day. We must put an end to this evil that we do.

## Notes

1. Of course, I cannot be certain that they did not believe this, but it does seem likely. Cf. Fred E. Katz, *Ordinary People and Extraordinary Evil* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993), 19, 26 ff., 66 ff.

2. Ignorance can of course be occasioned in other ways. For example, even if one believes that Sam is six feet tall, one is ignorant of this if either one's belief is not justified or Sam is in fact not six feet tall.
3. Michael J. Zimmerman, "Moral Responsibility and Ignorance," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 410–26.
4. An anonymous referee has objected to another premise, the claim (3) that Alf is to blame for his ignorance only if he was in control of it. This premise is itself an instance of a more general claim that I accept, namely, that one is to blame for something only if one was in control of that thing. It is this more general claim that I made in the original article, but, again, I said little in defense of it. The referee recognizes that it's a claim that is "accepted by many philosophers and possibly a handful of jurists," but he or she finds it "absurd," stating that "it doesn't hold in law, and it's hard to see why it would in morals." It's not at all clear to me, though, that this view does not hold in law. As I see it, those who commit legal offenses and are held accountable for doing so are almost always presumed to have been in control of their behavior. (Of course, I concede that it may frequently be the case that they are not presumed to have believed that their behavior was morally wrong, but that is not the point here. I grant that the law is not in keeping with the conclusion of my argument—indeed, it is partly for this reason that I present the argument here—but that does not mean that the law repudiates the view that blameworthiness requires control.) There are, of course, cases in which the law holds offenders accountable even when it is acknowledged that they were not in control (at any stage in the genesis) of their behavior. This is a matter of strict liability. But even here, it seems to me, the law is in keeping with the view that blameworthiness requires control. When a defendant is acknowledged not to have been in control (at any stage in the genesis) of his behavior but is found liable nonetheless, this is not to be construed as a finding of "blameworthy even though lacking control" but rather as a finding of "liable even though blameless."
5. James Montmarquet, "Zimmerman on Culpable Ignorance," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 842–45.
6. See James Montmarquet, *Epistemic Virtue and Doxastic Responsibility* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1993), 21, and "Zimmerman on Culpable Ignorance," 845.
7. This theory is elaborated in Michael J. Zimmerman, *An Essay on Human Action* (New York: Peter Lang, 1984).
8. Georg Henrik von Wright, *Explanation and Understanding* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1971), 66.
9. The case is taken from Donald Davidson, *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 4.
10. Regarding this issue, consider these remarks by Montmarquet ("Zimmerman on Culpable Ignorance," 843 and 844): "Here what I will try to show is that if ... one's responsibility for one's carelessness is direct, one's responsibility for one's carelessly formed belief is *also* direct"; "it should be clear that we can speak of an individual as having direct control over his degree of care and, to that extent, direct ... control over his forming the belief that he is then forming"; "My ... conclusion ... is that ... [an agent] may have direct responsibility both for his carelessness and for his carelessly formed belief." The vacillation between talk of the forming of a belief and talk of the belief itself is plain.
11. Or at least it will deny that we are directly in control of the results of actions that are non- basic in virtue of what Alvin Goldman calls causal generation. (See Alvin I. Goldman, *A Theory of Human Action* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970], 22–23.) It is only with this type of nonbasic action that I will be concerned below.
12. See *The Writings of William James*, ed. John J. McDermott (New York: Modern Library, 1968), 719 ff. Cf. Richard M. Gale, "William James and the Willfulness of Belief," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 59 (1999): 71–91, at, 87.