

Ignorance, Humility and Vice

CÉCILE FABRE

University of Oxford

ABSTRACT

LaFollette argues that the greatest vice is not cruelty, immorality, or selfishness. Rather, it is a failure on our part to ‘engage in frequent, honest and rigorous self-reflection’. It is that failure which, on his view, explains the lion’s share of the wrongdoings we commit towards one another. In this short reply, I raise (in a sympathetic spirit) some questions about the task of identifying the greatest vice, and draw out some of the implications of LaFollette’s account of moral ignorance.



INTRODUCTION

Why do so many people commit so many and such serious wrongdoings as mass murder, rape, torture, lethal neglect? Indeed, why do so many people commit so many and comparatively less serious wrongdoings such as callously treating their friends and lovers by lying and cheating, exploiting their colleagues and neighbours’ goodwill, laughing at insulting jokes?

Well, because they are insane, we often say. Or because they are selfish. Or immoral. Or a combination of these. And yet, as Hugh LaFollette claims in his piece ‘The Greatest Vice?’, these first-call explanations cannot bear the full weight of accounting for ‘man’s humanity to man’ on such a large-scale—both geographically and temporally. Instead, we need to look closer to home, or rather, closer within: ‘the greatest vice is our failure to engage in frequent, honest and rigorous self-reflection’, LaFollette argues.

Let me put my cards on the table: I am hugely sympathetic to his claim that, to the extent that failure to engage in self-reflection leads us to do wrong, it is a

moral failure—and one to which we are not sufficiently attentive. In this short reply, however, I raise some questions about the task itself of identifying the greatest vice (s. I), before drawing out some of the implications of LaFollette’s account of moral ignorance. (s.II). I should say at the outset that my aim is to explore LaFollette’s points in a friendly, not critical spirit.

I. IDENTIFYING THE GREATEST VICE

There is comparatively little discussion of vices in contemporary ethics—as opposed to discussions of criteria for wrongness and rightness or, for that matter, discussions of virtues. Judith Shklar’s book *Ordinary Vices* is a notable exception (Shklar 1984). According to Shklar, cruelty is the greatest vice. Not so for LaFollette, who claims that neither cruelty nor, for that matter, the other obvious candidates mentioned in the introduction meet the desiderata for the greatest vice. The greatest vice, on his view, or at least (more cautiously) the most serious of vices, is one which:

1. we all have it in us to display;
2. ‘is frequently overlooked in ethical debates’
3. ‘produces, permits, or sustains mountains of moral wrongs’;
4. ‘is amenable to some control’.

At the risk of sounding pedantic, it is not clear to me that the fact that a vice is not discussed much in ethics makes it a good candidate for ‘greatness’. Setting that aside, the set of cognitive defects which, taken together, constitute the vice of ‘moral ignorance’ (my label, not LaFollette’s) does indeed meet conditions (1), (3) and (4). Condition (4) is particularly interesting: to the extent that I can do something about a vice, I act all the more wrongly for giving in to it.

One may wonder, however, what purchase there is to identifying one great vice as the best explanation for most of the wrongdoings which human beings commit—not just to one another, incidentally, but to all creatures which, irrespective of species, have claims against us that we treat them well. I have two concerns here. First, a great many wrongdoings—both trivial and not so trivial—are explained, not by moral ig-

norance but, rather, by weakness of the will. I know that I should honor my promise, yet I do not, knowing full well that I do not have a good justification for doing so. I know that I should speak up against abuse, yet I do not, for fear of incurring the relatively minor costs of my neighbour's disapproval. I know that I should not kill innocent civilians, yet I do not, for fear of incurring the somewhat higher cost of a court martial. And so on.

Second, seeking to explain 'mountains of moral wrongs' by pointing to one psychological trait, or a cluster thereof (be it moral ignorance, or weakness of the will, and their respective cousins) risks occluding stark differences between those wrongs, and/or between those who commit them. On the first count, failing to keep a promise to my sick friend, and persuading myself in willful ignorance of her emotional fragility that she will not mind, is wrong. So is a failure to stand up to military orders to torture prisoners of war, when one should know those orders are in breach of the Geneva Conventions and its underlying moral principles. But they are not the same wrongs, as LaFollette would of course agree. To rank them relative to each other, we need to do more than point at the agent's moral ignorance (or, for that matter, weakness of the will, or indeed at cruelty.) On the second count, you and I might both be in breach of our joint promise to our friend—I because I chose to ignore her frailty, you because you gave in to the greater allure of a long hoped-for trip. You and I might both be in breach of the Geneva Conventions—I because I am a sadist who refuses to recognise herself as such, you because you are worried about your career prospects.

Perhaps, then, it is best to explain why a given agent commits this or that wrong by appealing to a combination of moral and/or cognitive traits; and perhaps, too, this is the best way to explain why a given wrongdoing is committed by these or those moral agents.

II. MORAL IGNORANCE

There is no reason to believe that LaFollette would disagree with any of this. There is also every reason to believe that, with those qualifications in hand, he would nevertheless insist on the dangers of moral ignorance. He would be right. By 'moral ignorance', I mean, in agreement with him, the many ways in which we fail to think carefully about, indeed often willfully blind ourselves to, our beliefs, intentions and biases; the consequences of our actions; the institutional forces which shape us; and

so on. This kind of ignorance is moral, and not merely factual, precisely because it leads us to do wrong so often, and to so many people.

What, then, is the solution? It comes in the form of a set of epistemic duties to inform ourselves about all of those things, and to change our beliefs in the light of the evidence so gathered. More specifically, you will remember, it is a duty to ‘engage in frequent, honest and rigorous self-reflection’. On the assumption that ‘ought’ implies ‘can’, this presupposes a commitment to doxastic voluntarism which some of us might not endorse.¹ I for one am not one of the sceptics. LaFollette is right, I believe, that we often ought to know better, and that in order to know better, we have to cultivate and nurture the right set of beliefs in the light of the right kind of evidence.

However, even if we were conscientiously to do that, we would not necessarily be off either the philosophical or the moral hook. Note first that, if moral ignorance is the greatest vice, it ought to provide the best explanation for itself. Hence the philosophical difficulty. For why are we derelict in our epistemic duties, one may ask? Well, because we mistakenly believe that we do not suffer from the aforementioned cognitive defects. So, what is the solution? To scrutinise ourselves. But what explains our failure to do precisely that? Well, our failure to do precisely that. And what explains that failure? Well, . . . and so on.

There is little choice but to accept the whiff of circularity here. Were we to do so, we would still need to accept that the kind of rigorous scrutiny which LaFollette invites us to engage in (be it of ourselves, or of the world around us) often leaves us far short of doing the right thing. We might have all the relevant evidence at hand, and have interpreted it to the very best of our abilities, and yet it might be factually incorrect—as in the following example, which I draw *verbatim* from Jonathan Quong’s work on the ethics of defensive killing (Quong 2012, 61–62):

Duped Soldiers: A group of young soldiers are successfully fooled by a totalitarian regime into believing that the regime is good and just, and is under repeated attacks from their evil neighbors, the Gloops. The regime’s misinformation campaign is subtle and absolutely convincing: the soldiers are justified in believing what they are told by the regime. Once the misinformation campaign is complete, these Duped Soldiers are given orders to attack and destroy a Gloop village on the border which, they are told, is really a Gloop terrorist camp plotting a major attack. In fact,

1. For discussion, see, e.g., Alston 1989; Ginet 2001; Audi 2008; Hieronymi 2008.

everything the regime has said is a lie, and the Gloop village contains only innocent civilians.

On what Derek Parfit calls the evidence-relative account of wrongdoing, whereby an act is wrong only if the evidence is such that, were it true, the agent would not be justified in acting as he did, the soldiers would not act wrongly by attacking the village (Parfit 2011). If rightness and wrongness are evidence-relative, then by fulfilling our epistemic duties, we would stand a reasonably good chance of not doing wrong. Yet it is implausible to hold that the soldiers would not be acting wrongly: for the facts are such that, notwithstanding the evidence at the soldiers' disposal, the villagers are not a threat and ought not to be killed. Granted, the soldiers are not as blameworthy as they would be if the evidence had pointed to the villagers' innocence and if they had willfully refused to see this. But they do nevertheless act wrongly. Doing one's epistemic duty, thus, might protect us from blame. But we should be aware that it might not shield us from acting wrongly in as many cases as we might like to think.

For all that, I do agree that we can and ought to improve our epistemic situation. In particular, to the extent that we can be more transparent to ourselves than we normally are, and that greater self-knowledge would help steer us away from moral disasters, we ought to engage in introspection—and to listen to what others have to say about us. In so doing, not only would we gain greater knowledge of others, we would also better understand and empathizing with them, and stand a better chance of helping them see that, and where, they got it wrong. LaFollette's paper, thus, is a call for humility: our arrogance about who and what we are is morally costly, and we had better see this. And yet, the call is not without its dangers. Too much introspection—'watching ourselves like moral hawks'—can lead to a narcissistic preoccupation with our moral integrity, to an overly judgmental evaluation of our moral foibles, indeed to an arrogant unwillingness to forgive ourselves for what we easily forgive others. As LaFollette would (I think) agree, there really *can* be too much magic in the pronoun 'I'.

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