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Source: *Ethics*, Vol. 118, No. 4 (July 2008), pp. 589-613

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/589532>

Accessed: 26/06/2014 10:54

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ARTICLES

Moral Responsibility and Normative Ignorance: Answering a New Skeptical Challenge*

William J. FitzPatrick

Philosophical doubts about moral responsibility have typically been rooted in worries about free agency in the face of causal determinism, culminating in familiar metaphysical arguments against the very possibility of moral responsibility.¹ Recently, however, a skeptical argument has emerged that is simultaneously less ambitious and potentially more challenging to many of our common beliefs and practices concerning responsibility. It is less ambitious because the aim is to show not that agents cannot in principle be responsible for what they do but only that the ascription of responsibility or blame for bad actions is never warranted in any particular case.² Since this more modest argument does not rely on the truth of determinism, however, the worries it raises for attributions of moral responsibility are likewise not mitigated by familiar compatibilist strategies for rescuing moral responsibility from the threat of determinism. The problems remain whatever one concludes about the underlying metaphysical issues.

The strategy of the skeptical argument, as forcefully developed by Gideon Rosen, proceeds in two stages. The first task is to argue from

* This article began as a colloquium presentation at Virginia Tech, and I am grateful to members of that audience for very helpful feedback. I would also like to thank the referees and editors for *Ethics*, who provided beneficial comments and suggestions.

1. For an excellent survey of the central issues and arguments, see John Martin Fischer, "Recent Work on Moral Responsibility," *Ethics* 110 (1999): 93–139.

2. See Gideon Rosen, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility," *Philosophical Perspectives* 18 (2004): 295–313. There are interesting similarities and points of overlap between Rosen's argument and Michael Zimmerman's earlier argument in "Moral Responsibility and Ignorance," *Ethics* 107 (1997): 410–26. I shall focus here, however, on Rosen's more recent argument, which I find particularly lucid and challenging.

Ethics 118 (July 2008): 589–613

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common thoughts about the potential exculpatory force of ignorance to the subconclusion that all cases of moral responsibility for bad action must involve a strong form of akrasia (i.e., acting against one's better judgment), either directly in connection with the action or indirectly in connection with relevant causal antecedents. From there it is then argued that we are never warranted in making attributions of akrasia in particular cases, which therefore seems to show that "confident positive judgments of responsibility are never justified," so that we should suspend judgments about blame.³ This is striking because, while the skeptical conclusion has far-reaching, revisionist implications for moral (and likely also legal) thought and practice, it is supposed to follow from basic principles we already accept and apply in a more limited way in everyday judgment.

It turns out, however, that what is most interesting and powerful about the argument is not its general skeptical conclusion. We can in fact avoid that conclusion fairly easily by undermining the strong skeptical claim about attributions of akrasia, which lacks compelling support and has little plausibility in itself. A deeper challenge remains, however, because the rest of the argument, focused on the necessary role of akrasia in generating responsibility for bad actions, can still be used to raise serious worries about responsibility—particularly in connection with cases involving basic normative ignorance. Bad actions resulting from an agent's moral ignorance are among those we typically regard as paradigm cases of moral responsibility, yet upon reflection they seem often to fail the akrasia-involving condition and to do so all the way back. This then raises worries not merely about our epistemic warrant for attributions of responsibility in such cases but also about whether there can really be responsibility in these cases. So while the scope of the modified argument is more restricted than in the original argument (there is no denial that some attributions of responsibility may be warranted), the worry raised is more compelling and deeper and it still applies to a large and important range of cases.

After examining and responding to the original argument in Sections I and II, I will go on, in Sections III and IV, to consider and critique the more challenging modified argument. I will argue that we should resist the moves that lead to such a tight linking of moral responsibility to akrasia, and I will defend an alternative view that appeals instead to facts about personal capabilities, social opportunities for acquiring normative knowledge, and the role of voluntary exercises of vices in certain failures to fulfill epistemic obligations. This shows how there can be moral responsibility due to culpable circumstantial or normative ignorance even without the operation of akrasia at any point, thus opening

3. Rosen, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility," 295.

up much more space for responsibility. In Section V, I will illustrate this account of culpable ignorance by applying it briefly to an important real case, and I will conclude by considering some important qualifications that show why difficult problems remain even if the central challenges have been met. It is a virtue of skeptical arguments such as Rosen's that they draw our attention to these difficulties and qualifications, even if they go too far in the general doubts they raise about moral responsibility.

I. THE SKEPTICAL ARGUMENT

The argument applies only to responsibility or blameworthiness for wrong acts, not to responsibility or praiseworthiness for right acts.⁴ It begins with an intuitive distinction between "original" and "derivative" responsibility: an agent may be said to be originally responsible for an action just in case she is directly responsible for it as opposed to being responsible for it only by virtue of being responsible for something else in the past that has led to it, which latter makes for derivative responsibility for the action.⁵ For example, a bank robber would normally be thought to be originally responsible for shooting the teller, while a doctor who gives the wrong medicine out of ignorance would be derivatively responsible for the resultant harm if she were earlier originally responsible for failing to learn the relevant medical facts. The argument is complex enough to be worth reconstructing and laying out systematically at the start, after which I will summarize it less formally. Here, then, is the argument:

- i. If an agent X is responsible for a wrong act A, then either
 - a. X is "originally responsible" for A, or
 - b. X is "derivatively responsible" for A by virtue of being originally responsible for something else that led to A.
- ii. Thus, "if X is responsible for A, then either
 - a. A itself is a locus of original responsibility or
 - b. there exists such a locus of original responsibility somewhere in A's causal history."⁶
- iii. A can be a locus of original responsibility (case ii.a above) only if X knows the balance of reasons against doing A; ignorance of this—whether due to circumstantial ignorance or to normative

4. The argument is easily extended to cover responsibility for bad events as well (e.g., the negligent engineer's responsibility for the bridge's collapse), taking this to be a function of responsibility for bad actions leading to them. On these and related cases, see Holly Smith, "Culpable Ignorance," *Philosophical Review* 92 (1983): 543–71, at 552–55 and 564ff. For simplicity I will focus just on responsibility for bad actions.

5. Rosen, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility," 298–99.

6. *Ibid.*, 299.

- ignorance—removes original responsibility for A.⁷
- iv. Thus, X will be originally responsible for A only if his action is a case of clear-eyed akrasia (i.e., acting against his considered judgment about what there is most reason for him to do).
 - v. If instead X is ignorant of the balance of reasons against doing A, and hence is not originally responsible for A, then X may still be derivatively responsible for A (case ii.b above) but only if X is culpable for the relevant circumstantial or normative ignorance by being originally responsible for whatever led to that state of ignorance.
 - vi. But (as in iii) X will be originally responsible for what led to his ignorance only if this amounted to a knowing failure to fulfill certain procedural epistemic duties—that is, knowing “negligence or recklessness in the management of his opinion,” in this case related to securing knowledge of the balance of reasons against doing A. (Otherwise, if X has been duly thoughtful and reflective all along, and his ignorance is merely a result of poor available information, bad upbringing, or being in the grip of a false normative view despite his best efforts, then the ignorance leading X to do A isn’t his fault: he blamelessly believes what he believes.⁸)
 - vii. So the only way for X to be responsible for what led to the ignorance that resulted in A would again be for X to have been involved in a form of clear-eyed akrasia in connection with the relevant epistemically debilitating behavior—that is, knowing that he had most reason to fulfill certain epistemic duties and yet failing to do so, knowingly being negligent in the management of his opinion.
 - viii. Thus, if X is responsible for A, then either A is itself a case of clear-eyed akrasia or it results from such akrasia associated with A’s causal antecedents.
 - ix. But it is not possible for us to know in any particular case whether such clear-eyed akrasia is really involved in the etiology of the action.
 - x. Therefore, it is not possible to know in any particular case whether X is truly responsible for A, and we should thus suspend judgment about it.

To summarize the argument: If an agent does something bad, either he does so in full knowledge that he shouldn’t be doing it, which is

7. *Ibid.*, 304.

8. *Ibid.* See also Smith, “Culpable Ignorance,” 548, though Smith focuses only on circumstantial ignorance, such as a doctor’s ignorance of the effects of a procedure on a certain kind of patient.

clear-eyed akrasia, or he is acting from ignorance, either circumstantial or normative. In the former case, where he is akratic, he will be responsible (or so we may grant for the sake of argument); in the latter case, where there is ignorance, whether he is responsible or not will depend on whether or not his ignorance is culpable.⁹ But his ignorance will be culpable only if he is responsible for some earlier failure that gave rise to that ignorance. And he will be responsible for that earlier failure again only if either that was a case of clear-eyed akrasia—some knowing failure in the management of his opinion—or this failure was itself a result of culpable ignorance, which latter would again require a previous akratic episode with regard to epistemic duties (to make this ignorance culpable), and so on. So we don't get culpability until we arrive at a relevant episode of clear-eyed akrasia—either in the present action or in antecedents that contributed to the ignorance involved in the present action. As Rosen puts it: “The agent is culpable for his bad action only if that bad action is, or derives from, an episode of genuine akrasia. . . . Culpable bad actions have a distinctive sort of causal history—an inculcating history—in which the act either is, or derives from, an episode of genuine akrasia.”¹⁰ But now if, as he claims, we are never warranted in confident attributions of clear-eyed akrasia, then we are not warranted in confident attributions of responsibility or blame for bad actions.

II. ATTRIBUTIONS OF AKRASIA

As noted earlier, there are two main points of entry for resisting this argument. The more difficult is to challenge steps vi and vii (and ultimately even step iii), blocking the inference even to the subconclusion in step viii about the need for present or past akrasia in order to have responsibility. I will take that up in Section IV. The easier point at which to defuse the argument is at step ix. Even if the first eight steps of the argument are granted, the general skeptical conclusion is not reached unless we grant the very strong claim in step ix that we generally lack justification for attributions of clear-eyed akrasia. Why does Rosen think we always lack such justification?

This is the weakest link in the argument, supported only by general considerations about the “opacity of the mind.” These are based largely on Rosen's reflection on his own case, where he confesses to being unable ever to identify genuine akrasia with any confidence, either in

9. Rosen grants, for the purposes of this argument, that ignorance fails to excuse if it is indeed culpable, and he settles for raising skeptical worries about our knowledge of the culpability of ignorance. There are, however, interesting questions about whether even culpable ignorance might mitigate responsibility. See Smith, “Culpable Ignorance.”

10. Rosen, “Skepticism about Moral Responsibility,” 308–9.

himself or in others.¹¹ The chief obstacle is to distinguish clear-eyed akrasia from “impostors” that still incorporate sufficient ignorance to support the relevant worries about responsibility. One such impostor is what Rosen refers to as “ordinary weakness of will,” where this is meant to imply a loss of confidence in the correctness of one’s prior normative judgment, so that one actually changes one’s normative assessment such that it favors the bad action, and thus acts out of at least temporary normative ignorance. This is the sort of failing that was cited by Eric Poehlman, for example, in connection with the notorious case of scientific fraud at the University of Vermont: altering data, he claimed in court, had come to seem to him to be the right thing to do, given all the people in his lab depending on him for salaries and the need to secure grants to pay those salaries.¹² (This sort of failing, where it genuinely occurs, may seem better described as weakness of conviction than as weakness of will. But let us set that aside and follow Rosen’s usage for present purposes.¹³)

Another potential impostor is a failure to access one’s relevant normative knowledge at the time of acting, so that one again acts in ignorance of the balance of reasons against the action, even though in some sense the knowledge was possessed. Sometimes it may even be indeterminate whether the agent possessed the relevant normative knowledge at the time of acting and failed to access it or just lacked it. In any case, the existence of these alternative possibilities together with “the real limitations on our access to the causal histories of human actions and to the states of knowledge and opinion that underlie them” leads Rosen to conclude that, while God or a superpsychologist might confidently identify an episode of genuine akrasia, “as a matter of fact we are never entitled to any significant confidence that the bad act under consideration satisfies the necessary condition we have identified [i.e., of being genuinely akratic or stemming from an earlier akratic episode].”¹⁴

These epistemic difficulties, however, are exaggerated. Consider, first, akrasia in connection with the bad action itself and as viewed from the first-person perspective—from which, following Rosen, I will offer some of my own quasi-autobiographical reflections. I often know such

11. *Ibid.*

12. See Jeneen Interlandi, “An Unwelcome Discovery,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 22, 2006, sec. 6, 98.

13. Rosen distinguishes “ordinary weakness of will” from the sort of clear-eyed akrasia he is interested in by saying that “the ordinary moral weakling . . . may initially judge that A is the thing to do, but when the time comes to act, loses confidence in this judgment and ultimately persuades himself (or finds himself persuaded) that the preferred alternative is at least as reasonable” (“Skepticism about Moral Responsibility,” 309).

14. *Ibid.*

things as that I really shouldn't be digging into a heaping bowl of full-fat Belgian Chocolate ice cream given my cholesterol levels and the fact that I've had two helpings already this week. And I know this perfectly well even at the moment I am doing it, as it is transparently imprudent according to standards I myself accept, even taking all things—such as my present enjoyment—into account. I'm just not sufficiently motivated by these normative thoughts, instead giving into gustatory temptation. Each instance may be no big deal in itself, given the long-term and statistical nature of the health issues, but I nonetheless know that it is not what I should be doing here and now. Similar points will be familiar to anyone who has procrastinated on a project, knowing well even at the time that the substitute activities (e.g., playing Internet chess, reading a magazine) were not what there was most reason to be doing, but being drawn to them out of fear of or resistance to working on the project.

It is, of course, also possible to deceive oneself at the moment of acting, so that one truly believes that the balance of reasons genuinely favors the action, and thus act out of temporary normative ignorance. But the fact that such cases of self-deception are possible does not imply that we cannot often know that this is not what is happening and that we are instead just acting badly out of self-indulgence, fear, laziness, greed, resentment, and so on. Nor is it difficult to find good evidence for this.

One form of evidence that we are indeed acting akratically (in my sense, throughout, of clear-eyed akrasia) is the experience of guilt or shame that we sometimes feel even while acting. This will often be mild, as in routine cases of overindulgence or procrastination, and may be overlooked; in more serious cases, there will also be psychological pressures to suppress such feelings, especially after the fact: it is more comfortable to tell oneself that one's thinking just got clouded and that it really seemed the right thing to be doing at the time. But often we do feel the guilt or shame—and in serious cases, even anguish that may spoil any real enjoyment we would otherwise take in the activity—even as we act. In those cases, we have at least strong *prima facie* evidence that the act was not done out of normative ignorance, either general or temporary: if it had been, then we would think, at least at the time of acting, that we were acting well and therefore that we had nothing to feel guilty about or ashamed of.

The presence of guilt or shame at the time of acting is therefore often good evidence of akrasia, which diminishes the plausibility of general skepticism about attributions of akrasia (step ix of the argument). Such evidence naturally remains fallible. People can feel shame even for things they don't actually judge to be wrong, simply out of psychological conditioning; in that case, shame is compatible with acting

in accordance with one's best judgment about reasons. Or, again, if an agent believes that she is in a genuine moral dilemma (it makes no difference here whether she is correct about this) where every option available to her remains wrong, she may feel guilt whatever she does, even though she has not acted against her better judgment and so has not acted akratically. Nonetheless, the presence of guilt and shame at the time of acting can often provide strong evidence of akrasia, since it will often be clear that one does not take oneself to be in a moral dilemma, that one does endorse standards that condemn the action, and that the guilt or shame in so acting stems precisely from that.

I have been focusing on the first-person case, but once we see that there is often no epistemic problem with attributing akrasia to oneself in connection with a bad action, we can easily extend the point to second- and third-person cases. Again, this is not to deny that deception is possible or even that it is common here. Indeed, the possibilities for deception are compounded: not only might the agent deceive herself into thinking that a bad action is good, or alternatively that a genuinely akratic action was really instead just a case of normative ignorance, but she may also deceive others along the latter lines. And, again, there are obvious psychological and social pressures to do so. It is often less unflattering to one's character to plead temporary confusion and ignorance ("my mind was clouded") than to admit to having done something one knew better than to do, especially in significant moral cases where an admission of akrasia indicates a failure to be sufficiently attached to important values. Nonetheless, the same point from before holds: the fact that such forms of deception are possible does not imply that we are never justified in confident attributions of akrasia to other people.

The simplest reason for this is that sometimes people are honest about their failings and will come out and admit that they knew better, even at the time of acting, and felt ashamed even as they acted. Sometimes this is because, although it might be tempting to plead normative ignorance, it would actually be more embarrassing to do so and often simply incredible. Someone who has committed a particularly egregious act of adultery, for example, and is trying to explain himself to his spouse might find it hardly more credible to plead normative ignorance than it would be to plead circumstantial ignorance ("I didn't realize it wasn't you!"¹⁵), and in any case it might reflect so badly on his values if he really thought at the time that the act was justified that it wouldn't help. So people are sometimes honest with themselves about having acted akratically—against their better judgment, giving in to temptation—and are honest with others about it, too. Absent any special reason to doubt

15. Aquinas discusses this most unfortunate blunder to illustrate exculpating circumstantial ignorance in *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q 19, art. 6.

their sincerity, their testimony and accompanying emotions can constitute perfectly good evidence that they acted akratically.

The second kind of akrasia distinguished at the beginning of this section is akrasia not in connection with the bad act itself but in connection with a prior failure to fulfill relevant epistemic duties, which led one later to perform the bad action out of ignorance, either circumstantial or normative.¹⁶ This is no doubt epistemically murkier, since it involves attributions of akrasia to people's past actions. But even here things are not nearly as bad as Rosen claims.

Consider (to take one of Rosen's own cases) a doctor who orders her patient to be given a transfusion with the wrong blood type, being mistaken about the patient's true blood type. She acts out of circumstantial ignorance. Whether she is culpable for the harmful action thus depends on whether her ignorance was culpable. This, in turn, will depend on whether her failing to double-check the chart, say, was culpable. It will be culpable if this amounted to a culpable failure to discharge procedural epistemic obligations.¹⁷ But was that failure culpable?

Suppose that she simply had a mental lapse and the thought about double-checking just never occurred to her at the relevant time. In a sense, Rosen argues, she is at that time again acting from ignorance: she knows in general that one should always double-check a chart, but she fails to know at this moment that she should be double-checking this chart. Let us further suppose that this is not the sort of thing that has ever happened to her before and that doctors are normally entitled to rely on working memory for such things as remembering to double-check charts. In that case, it does not seem that she has culpably violated any procedural epistemic obligations. We may therefore have a case in which she cannot legitimately be held morally responsible for this particular bit of ignorance and therefore is not morally blameworthy for her harmful action.¹⁸

It is not always like this, however. Suppose instead that she was a forgetful person and that she often failed on her own to remember to do things like double-checking charts. She should in that case have made arrangements for others to back her up, double-checking before

16. As Rosen notes, all ignorance is, or implies, normative ignorance inasmuch as even ordinary circumstantial ignorance leads to a failure to appreciate the truth about the balance of reasons in connection with the action ("Skepticism about Moral Responsibility," 304). I shall follow him in distinguishing between this sort of derivative normative ignorance and basic normative ignorance, such as ignorance of moral principles, which latter will be discussed further below.

17. Smith gives a similar example involving a doctor administering what turns out to be a harmful treatment ("Culpable Ignorance," 543, 548).

18. See Rosen, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility," 312 n. 11. Whether she can legitimately be held legally responsible is another matter, which I shall set aside.

carrying out her orders. But she didn't. Is she culpable for that failure? Again, there will no doubt be tricky cases here where we won't be sure what to say. But there also may be no mystery here at all: in many cases she will know perfectly well that she failed to set up this safety arrangement because she was embarrassed or was trying to cut corners and gambled that it wouldn't result in disaster, and she might even come right out and admit it (though probably not in court). This is a kind of mistake people make all the time. One knows one ought to check the radon levels in the house or the brakes on the car, but there are other things to do and other bills to pay, and one never gets around to it, instead gambling that it will probably be okay. Again, there is incentive to try to hide such choices or to rationalize them away, especially if things go badly. But at least often people know in their own cases when they have been negligent, knowing better the whole time, and even know quite clearly why they have behaved this way.

There is, then, no skeptical problem in those cases, either in the first-person case or in the second- or third-person case when the agent is honest with others. And often we have enough circumstantial evidence to attribute *akrasia* even where someone is not honest about it. Sometimes the alternative of ignorance is just so implausible that the principle of charity requires the attribution of *akrasia*: she knew she should have arranged for the backup—she's not stupid, after all—but she wanted to avoid the cost, or the embarrassment, and so she took a chance. This is further supported by evidence of trying to hide the behavior at the time, not wanting to get caught cutting corners in this way: the agent's having taken such concealing measures shows that she knew at least that the gamble she was taking would be considered wrong by others. This may not conclusively reveal *akrasia*, since the agent may believe that her actions are justified while recognizing that others won't see it that way and so she hides her actions merely for pragmatic reasons.¹⁹ But at least often she will have no such story to tell about others' normative views being mistaken in the relevant respects; in the absence of any such story, her concealing behavior is good evidence that she knew what she was doing was wrong, and so she was acting akratically.

There are no doubt further complications that could be considered here. The bottom line, however, is that nothing in Rosen's general reflections about the existence of other forms of weakness in agency supports his conclusion, which he takes to be "obvious," that "in any

19. This may have been true in Poehlman's case, for example: he took steps to hide his data tampering not (if he is to be believed) because he knew that the data tampering was wrong but because he recognized that others would regard it that way and his purposes would thus be thwarted if it were brought to light. His hiding his bad behavior was thus consistent with his acting nonakratically.

real case it will be impossible to resolve this question [about whether an act involves or traces back to an akratic episode] with any confidence.²⁰ There are plenty of real cases—involving both our own actions and those of others—in which we can know, by any reasonable epistemic standards, that an action involves or traces back to an episode of akrasia. We should therefore reject the strong claim in ix, and therefore the inference to the final general skeptical conclusion.²¹

III. REFOCUSING AND STRENGTHENING THE ARGUMENT

So far, however, nothing has been said against the argument up through step viii, which, if sound, still yields the striking result that in every case of responsibility for a bad action, either the bad action itself is akratic or there is an episode of akrasia in the past that accounts for the relevant circumstantial or normative ignorance in the performance of the non-akratic bad action. But this is still a very strong condition to meet, and it seems likely that often it will not be met in cases where we normally attribute responsibility, particularly in cases involving basic normative ignorance. So the argument can be revised from the original general skeptical argument to a more limited, but deeper, metaphysical argument against the existence of moral responsibility in a certain important range of cases by replacing steps ix and x with the following:

- ix'. But in many cases of bad action involving basic normative ignorance there is no earlier episode of genuine akrasia in connection with any antecedent failure to fulfill epistemic duties or to manage normative opinions to which the current normative ignorance can be traced.
- x'. Therefore, in such cases, which include many central cases in which we typically attribute responsibility, the agent is not in fact responsible for the action.

To illustrate, consider Mr. Potter, a powerful businessman who holds false moral views. He takes certain business practices—such as liquidating Bailey's Building and Loan and sticking it to the poor families of Bedford Falls—to be "permissibly aggressive," when in fact they're

20. Rosen, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility," 308.

21. Our knowledge of the occurrence of akrasia does not, of course, approach anything like Cartesian certainty. This is not a problem, however, as Rosen is not relying on such overblown epistemic standards in his argument. If he were, then the obvious response would be just to grant the argument right up through step ix, and even the first part of the conclusion, and then simply to reject the final part of the conclusion about suspending judgments of responsibility: for there is no reason to think we should suspend our judgment about something just because we lack Cartesian certainty. Thanks to Jim Klagge for this point.

“reprehensibly ruthless.”²² This leads him to do bad things, though he doesn’t understand that he’s acting badly, which means that he’s acting out of a certain kind of ignorance. He’s fully aware of all the circumstances, but he applies flawed normative principles or weightings and comes up with bad decisions. Is he culpable for his bad actions?

As with circumstantial ignorance, Rosen argues, this will depend on whether his normative ignorance is itself culpable; only then will he be derivatively responsible for his bad actions in Bedford Falls. If not, then, just as with nonculpable circumstantial ignorance, he must be excused. But if his ignorance is culpable, then why is that? As before, it must be because he was earlier culpable for some failure to discharge some procedural epistemic obligations—a failure that led to his present ignorance. So the question is whether there is such a culpable failure to meet epistemic obligations in his relevant past. And, according to Rosen, that requires that there be some failure to discharge epistemic obligations despite knowing at the time exactly what those obligations were—that is, an akratic failure to discharge epistemic obligations. In other words, Potter’s current normative ignorance must be “the upshot of some prior bad action done *in full knowledge of every pertinent fact or norm*,” in this case, norms governing the management of his opinions about what is appropriate in business.²³

The problem, then, is that many such cases of normative ignorance don’t seem to meet this condition. In some cases (though not, I think, the present one as I’m imagining it), the agent may in fact have been adequately reflective and careful all along, but it is just a hard case that even reasonable and adequately reflective people can go wrong about.²⁴ In such cases, the agent did everything that could reasonably be asked of him in reflecting: he was not negligent in the management of his opinion. So how, Rosen asks, can he be blamed for his normative ignorance and hence for his behavior?

In other cases, more likely including the present one, it is not a

22. This case, based on Frank Capra’s *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946), is a development of a more generic case discussed by Rosen, “Skepticism about Moral Responsibility,” 305.

23. *Ibid.*, 308, my emphasis.

24. *Ibid.*, 305. When I say that Potter’s case does not plausibly fall into the category of genuinely “hard cases” in morality, I mean this in relation to his cultural context, which I am taking to be roughly our own. Something can in this sense count as a hard case in one cultural context or time but not in another. Slavery, for example, is even further from being a hard case at present, but, as discussed in a note below, it may have been a genuinely hard case for someone in Aristotle’s circumstances, where even reasonable efforts at critical reflection may not have sufficed to make the moral facts clear. We might also speak of some cases as intrinsically hard cases, meaning that they remain difficult even for ideally informed and reflective agents because of a real balance of competing legitimate moral considerations. I shall here mostly set aside cases of widespread, culturally based moral ignorance.

matter of a genuinely hard case, but the agent may have been raised badly, given skewed values early on, and never taught to reason soundly about such matters, so that, despite his best efforts at reflection, he still gets things wrong. Potter has never, say, really grasped the importance of putting oneself in others' shoes or considering an impartial perspective in the course of deliberation. He is not completely amoral, but his reflection is stunted in certain ways, we may suppose, and has been since his days of youth, when he was taught that the ways of his equally ruthless father were good enough and that more searching forms of reflection are for sissies and philosophers.

The question is, therefore, whether Potter is culpable for these failures in his efforts at reflection that have led to his current normative ignorance—whether they represent akratic failures. And the problem is that, at each stage, he seems to be operating already from a fairly broad-based normative ignorance, never having anything we would describe as “full knowledge of every pertinent fact or norm” related to epistemic obligations. It looks, then, like we may be able to trace his current normative ignorance back indefinitely without finding anything that counts as a genuine akratic episode of failing to fulfill epistemic obligations. This remains true even if he has failed even to make efforts to reflect adequately, where this failure of effort traces back to a poor upbringing in which he was never taught the importance of reflection in the first place. Once again, it is hard to find an episode of genuine akrasia in the etiology of the current normative ignorance, where the agent flies in the face of full knowledge of relevant epistemic norms, in the negligent mismanagement of his opinion.

According to the revised argument, then, the agent is not responsible or blameworthy for his behavior in such cases: the behavior is certainly bad, but it is in accord with the agent's blameless normative (mis)understanding of things, and so this is just another example of action done out of nonculpable ignorance. Such cases, however, cover much of the worst behavior we are typically concerned to hold people responsible or blameworthy for. Thus, the revised argument presents a powerful challenge to our common thinking and practice surrounding moral responsibility for bad actions on the part of people acting from significant normative ignorance.

IV. ANSWERING THE CHALLENGE: AN ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNT OF CULPABLE IGNORANCE

There is no doubt something compelling in the intuition at the core of this argument, that it is unfair to blame someone for an action done out of ignorance that he cannot fairly be blamed for having. This is something we already accept when it comes to circumstantial ignorance, and Rosen is on solid ground in extending the point to include nor-

mative ignorance as well: if circumstantial ignorance can excuse when it is not one's fault, then it seems that the same should be said for normative ignorance—*pace* Aquinas, who held that, while circumstantial ignorance can excuse, "ignorance of the general principles of law" does not, since one is obligated to know them.²⁵ As Rosen points out, even if it is true that one ought to know something, including moral principles, it is always at least a further question whether one is culpable for failing to know what one in some sense ought to know, just as it is a further question whether one is culpable for failing to do what one ought to do.²⁶ So if it can happen that one is blamelessly ignorant not merely of circumstances but of relevant normative truths, then such ignorance should excuse just as circumstantial ignorance does. The question is just when, if ever, normative ignorance is genuinely not one's fault. In particular, we need to ask whether the lack of a relevant episode of clear-eyed akrasia in the etiology of an agent's normative ignorance is really sufficient to make that ignorance blameless (or, equivalently, whether akrasia is really necessary for culpable ignorance), as Rosen claims.

I shall argue that, while people are not always responsible for their normative ignorance, they usually are in the sorts of cases we are typically concerned with—such as that of the ruthless businessmen or, as I will consider later, that of misguided and overconfident politicians—and this does not require meeting any condition as strong as Rosen's.²⁷

25. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q 6, art. 8, in *Treatise on Happiness*, ed. John A. Oesterle (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 79. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1113b35–1114a2, though Aristotle here adds the condition that the law not be difficult to know. This leaves it open that ignorance of the law might excuse in cases where the law is unreasonably difficult for a person to know.

26. Rosen, "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility," 312 n. 8. For example, it may be the case both that a doctor ought to have known about a certain side effect of a procedure, since it had been described in a medical journal supplement, and that she is not culpable for her failure to know this, since her nurse accidentally disposed of the supplement before she saw it. See Smith, "Culpable Ignorance," 548.

27. I shall focus on fairly central and familiar cases of contemporary bad behavior done from moral ignorance in what Calhoun refers to as "normal moral contexts," as opposed to "abnormal moral contexts," which are trickier. (See Cheshire Calhoun, "Responsibility and Reproach," *Ethics* 99 [1989]: 389–406.) This is partly because (like Calhoun) I do not wish to go as far in rejecting mitigated responsibility in cases of widespread cultural ignorance as Michele Moody-Adams does, e.g., in "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance," *Ethics* 104 (1994): 291–309. Moody-Adams denies that culturally based widespread ignorance (e.g., in the case of historical agents) can constitute a serious impediment to moral responsibility. While it is true that appeals to what she calls the "inability thesis" based on cultural limitations are often spurious, Paul Benson has made a good case that some such claims, properly formulated, have considerably more merit than Moody-Adams allows. See Paul Benson, "Culture and Responsibility: A Reply to Moody-Adams," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 32 (2001): 610–20. For a similar criticism that Moody-Adams is

Specifically, we do not need to find some relevant past failure done “in full knowledge of every pertinent fact or norm”—some akratic episode in which the agent knowingly acts with “negligence or recklessness in the management of his opinion.”²⁸ The true condition for culpable normative ignorance is weaker, which means that the argument is to be resisted already at steps vi–viii (and ultimately even earlier).

We may begin by motivating the intuition that Rosen’s condition is too strong. Consider Potter again. Our question is whether he is culpable for the moral ignorance that leads to his bad actions. The natural and non-question-begging way to address this question is to ask:

R: What, if anything, could the agent reasonably (and hence fairly) have been expected to have done in the past to avoid or to remedy that ignorance?²⁹

It is by getting clear about this that we discover what it is reasonable, and hence fair, to blame the agent for now, which is what culpability is about. Rosen’s view, then, if it is to have any real pull, must be understood as addressing and answering R. His answer amounts to saying that the claim that Potter could reasonably have been expected to have avoided or remedied his ignorance depends for its truth on there having been earlier points where Potter acted badly in the management of his opinion despite “full knowledge of every pertinent fact or norm” about appropriate forms of reflection and deliberation.³⁰ The first step in resisting Rosen’s argument is thus to pry these two things apart, showing that we can defend relevant claims of reasonable expectation without appealing to such strong attributions of akrasia.

Let us imagine that, while Potter may have been raised with an impoverished moral outlook, he has received a good general education and has since been exposed to lots of other views and challenges to the outlook he has grown comfortable with and that he is capable of understanding them as such. He has, after all, lived right in the same town with Peter and George Bailey for years, which means that the opportunity for improved normative understanding was clearly present in his

too quick to attribute affected ignorance even in cases of widespread culturally based ignorance, see Tracy Isaacs, “Cultural Context and Moral Responsibility,” *Ethics* 107 (1997): 670–84.

28. Rosen, “Skepticism about Moral Responsibility,” 304.

29. See Benson, “Culture and Responsibility,” 613–14.

30. As an alternative strategy, Rosen could perhaps try just rejecting the relevance of R altogether, developing his appeal to akrasia independently of it. As will become clear later, however, this would just undermine any real motivation for that appeal.

social context (even if viewed by him mostly as a source of annoyance).³¹ The question, then, is why such opportunities were not taken. Suppose that the answer is that they were not taken because of a cavalier dismissal of the relevant considerations, viewpoints, and arguments—an easy labeling and dismissing of them as “socialist” or “liberal,” without honest reflection open to the possibility that they may point to blind spots in his own views.

There are two possibilities here, nicely distinguished by Aquinas. First, this might be a case of “affected ignorance,” where “one wills not to know in order to have an excuse” for wrongdoing.³² Perhaps Potter has repeatedly waved off opportunities for moral education because he senses that it would threaten the comfortable and self-serving worldview to which he is attached, and so he chooses repeatedly to shield himself from what might disturb it. In that case (which is different from how it was described earlier in illustrating the revised challenge), we seem to have something close to *akrasia* after all: to the extent that the ignorance is truly affected, the agent knows he is deliberately keeping himself in the dark, and, in at least most cases, this will imply knowing that he is failing to fulfill legitimate epistemic obligations. So, in that sort of case, Rosen would concede that Potter is responsible for his affected ignorance. Let us, then, set this sort of case aside.³³

The second kind of case, which is what is relevant for critical en-

31. This case thus contrasts with a case such as ancient Greek views on slavery. As Benson points out, in the latter case, “the very practice of slavery typically limited severely the evidence about slaves’ moral dignity that some in the society, especially aristocrats like Aristotle, could be expected to have access to. . . . His aristocratic social circumstances may have occluded his access to good evidence about the rational capabilities of persons subjected to enslavement, thus preventing him from being able to discern those capabilities” (Benson, “Culture and Responsibility,” 611). Without going into the merits of this particular claim, I think it is clear that it would be implausible to claim any similar cultural occlusion of relevant evidence in the case of the contemporary ruthless businessman, for reasons I go on to develop in the text.

32. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, Q 6, art. 8.

33. For an argument that many cases of wrongdoing stemming from normative ignorance involve affected ignorance and are thus culpable, see Moody-Adams, “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance.” Moody-Adams seems, however, sometimes to conflate Aquinas’s idea of affected ignorance with the other form of ignorance he distinguishes from it (described below in the text). For example, the fourth form of affected ignorance Moody-Adams distinguishes (301–2)—where an agent fails to acknowledge her fallibility and so is ignorant of this and thus led into further ignorance (e.g., bigotry) and error (e.g., suppressing protest of bigotry)—is not really affected ignorance in Aquinas’s sense: it is not ignorance resulting from a choice to remain ignorant as such (as in her examples of deliberately making sure one does not get certain unwanted information or Aquinas’s example of wanting an excuse to continue sinning), but ignorance resulting from bad choices exhibiting a certain character defect, such as delusions of infallibility. The latter sort of ignorance will be important to my discussion below.

agement with Rosen's view, is described by Aquinas as a case of ignorance that occurs "when [a person] does not actually consider what he can and should consider (this is ignorance of evil choice, arising either from passion or habit) or when [a person] does not take care to acquire the knowledge which he ought to have"—not deliberately in order to remain in ignorance, as with affected ignorance, but because other motivations tempt him into failing in this way.³⁴ Perhaps Potter's complacency, self-indulgence, and arrogance have led him to dismiss competing views and arguments as naive and foolish, without adequate critical reflection on his own views, and he remains quite confident that he is in the right, just retaining and compounding his moral ignorance as time goes by. This case is interesting because Rosen's account implies that, since there is no *akrasia*, the moral ignorance Potter accumulates is nonculpable. Yet the far more intuitive—and, I think, correct—thing to say here is that it is plainly culpable, and it is not hard to see where we should look in defending this claim (though it will take some work to show that we can successfully avoid the original worries).

There seem to be three factors in play here that make most of us confident that Potter's moral ignorance is culpable, despite the lack of *akrasia*:

- There were no relevant limitations in his social context or in his capabilities that should have made the necessary broader reflection and information gathering impossible or unreasonably difficult for him.
- The failure of adequate reflection and information gathering was instead the result of voluntary exercises of vices such as overconfidence, arrogance, dismissiveness, laziness, dogmatism, incuriosity, self-indulgence, contempt, and so on.
- He could thus reasonably have been expected to take steps that would have eliminated that ignorance, by refraining from exercising those vices and instead taking advantage of the epistemically relevant opportunities available to him.

Now Rosen will no doubt hasten to point out that the appeal to these vices and their exercise will do no work unless the agent's possession or at least exercise of those vices is itself culpable, and this leads us right back to worries about ignorance. So no sooner will we have gotten the above intuitive thoughts out then Rosen will offer the following objection. Unless Potter was fully *akratic* in making the vice-related, epistemically debilitating choices that increased and reinforced his moral ignorance, he must at least have thought he was behaving well—which is to say, he must already have been ignorant about the

34. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q 6, art. 8.

status of his character traits and choices. And this brings us back to steps iii–v of the argument: he is not originally responsible for those bad choices and is derivatively responsible for them only if he is originally responsible for what led to his ignorance about his character traits and choices. But the same problems will reappear at each earlier stage, leading precisely to the worry in the modified argument about whether the conditions for responsibility are ever fully satisfied in this case.³⁵

The first part of this objection is correct: it is indeed necessary that the agent's possession, or at least exercise of, those vices in making the epistemically debilitating choices is itself culpable. Our question, though, was what is necessary for culpability here, and, in thinking about this, we should resist Rosen's move of passing the buck of responsibility every time we come across a bad choice involving ignorance, forcing us to look further in the past for some point where there is bad behavior without any relevant ignorance. It is enough for culpability if Potter made his epistemically debilitating choices—cavalierly dismissing opposing arguments, insulating himself from open, critical discussion or relevant sources of information, and so on—out of indulgence of vices, in a context where he could reasonably have been expected to know better and to do a better job of informing himself morally, given his capabilities and culturally available opportunities. If akrasia is relevant at all, it is so only indirectly insofar as it may sometimes figure into determining reasonable expectations. But if we seem to have sufficient grounds for claims about reasonable expectations without it, then a continued insistence on the akrasia-involving condition will lack any justification or force in itself.

The question, then, is whether the lack of akrasia gives us any good reason to doubt the above claims about reasonable expectation. Since Potter was not acting with clear-eyed akrasia and thought he was in the right, should we say that he couldn't reasonably have been expected to do better with respect to his epistemic obligations? No doubt certain factors may have made it difficult for him to educate himself morally. For example, if he spent all his time smoking cigars at the Ruthless Capitalists Club surrounded by people who shared his views and with whom his fortunes were intertwined, this would make it harder for him to discover his mistakes. But that in itself was a choice, and we may rightly judge that the context of that epistemically debilitating choice was such that he could reasonably have been expected to have known better than to make it.

35. Rosen would presumably want to press this line of objection against the sort of defense of responsibility for character traits recently offered by Jonathan Jacobs in *Choosing Character: Responsibility for Virtue and Vice* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), an account with which I am largely sympathetic.

It would be disingenuous, for example, to claim on his behalf that, given his views, he couldn't reasonably be expected to appreciate the importance of broader, critical engagement with people outside of his narrow, elite social sphere. As an educated businessman, he would surely have understood the importance of genuinely critical reflection in other spheres, such as analysis of stock market and interest rate trends, and the epistemic dangers of relying for such information on only one firm or group of analysts with vested interests without taking opposing argument seriously. Presumably, then, he would have insisted on high standards of critical reflection in the sphere of his work, and yet he did not make the obvious extension to the moral sphere—the recognition that one is unlikely to arrive at an accurate moral view by uncritically accepting the received opinion of a narrow group of people with vested interests in a certain set of answers and insulating oneself from open, critical discussion incorporating different points of view and forms of experience.

The fact, then, that Potter firmly believed he was in the right, and so was ignorant of relevant moral truths, does not stand in the way of our saying that he could reasonably have been expected to have done a better job of informing himself morally. Rosen's akrasia-involving condition is thus too strong. This is not to deny that there is still some knowledge condition operative here. If Potter were so debilitated that he did not even know the general epistemic importance of subjecting one's beliefs to critical scrutiny, so it could not reasonably be expected to occur to him that his behavior with regard to his moral beliefs was epistemically irresponsible, then we might indeed have to look further into the past to uncover and assess the etiology of this inability, just as Rosen insists.

This knowledge condition, however, is much weaker than what Rosen appeals to in connection with akrasia. As I've described the case at hand, the agent does satisfy the general knowledge condition above: he knows from other areas of his life the importance of subjecting one's beliefs to critical scrutiny and what counts as effective critical scrutiny and what does not; he does not act akratically, however, since he fails to apply this general knowledge to the case of regulating his moral beliefs and so does not see that he is acting badly with respect to the management of his moral opinion. So he fails Rosen's condition for responsibility for his epistemically debilitating choices, but he satisfies the weaker one I have suggested, since his satisfying the weaker knowledge condition, along with the other factors mentioned, is enough to make it reasonable to have expected better of him.

Perhaps it seems problematic that the vices Potter exhibits in his epistemically debilitating choices may trace back to his childhood and may be largely a result of moral (bad) luck, casting doubt on his re-

sponsibility for them. But for healthy, socialized people in a contemporary open society, character traits are not merely given but are formed, reformed, and continuously shaped by our choices from the point of moral maturity onward. This is the sense in which Aristotle claimed that we are responsible for our characters, and it applies equally to subsequent exercises of character even if some aspects of character remain ineliminable vestiges of childhood.³⁶ Once again, then, we do not need an episode of clear-eyed akrasia: it is enough that Potter could reasonably have been expected, in the circumstances, to take steps that would have corrected his moral ignorance and improved his character but that he instead chose to behave in ways that merely indulged and reinforced his character defects. By doing so, he thus incurred responsibility both for continued exercises of those dispositions (as well as their becoming hardened in his character) and for the normative ignorance that was preserved or grew and eventually led to the bad business practices we were originally concerned with.

Someone might object that Potter's early character traits effectively determined his later choices, so that it was not after all open to him to make better choices, improving himself and eliminating his moral ignorance: given his background and his actual beliefs, it really wasn't possible for him to behave other than he did, and it would therefore be unreasonable to expect this. But Rosen is explicitly not relying on any such deterministic premise in his argument, nor does it come into the modified argument. To bring in such considerations would be just to fall back on the more traditional, metaphysically based arguments against moral responsibility, which are not relevant to the present debate.

Perhaps Rosen could attempt to drive a wedge between the intuitive idea of what can reasonably be expected of someone and the idea of what he is culpable for: even granting that it would have been reasonable to expect Potter to avoid or to remedy his ignorance, he is not culpable for failing to avoid or to remedy his ignorance, since that would require akrasia. But the question then is why we should accept such a close link between culpability and akrasia in the absence of any claim to be thereby capturing the idea of reasonable expectations. The appeal to the need for akrasia may have seemed compelling when taken to be an account of when we can say that someone who acted badly could reasonably have been expected to have done better. But once that connection is severed, it is hard to maintain any intuitive pull for the idea that akrasia is necessary for responsibility, as noted earlier.

To return to the argument, then, we should in fact reject premise iii already and maintain that, in at least some cases, there is original responsibility for a bad action even where there is ignorance of the

36. See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1114a3–1114b25; and Jacobs, *Choosing Character*.

balance of reasons against it. In Potter's case, for example, even if we speak of derivative (rather than original) responsibility for his current business practices (i.e., he's responsible for them because he's responsible for what earlier led to the ignorance from which he now acts), we should insist on stopping the backward progression and speak of original responsibility for his epistemically debilitating choices, even though they were made in ignorance of the fact that they were bad.³⁷ That is, in the case of his epistemically debilitating choices, he is directly responsible for them for the reasons I've given and not because he was even earlier responsible for something else that led to them. Premise iii is false.³⁸

I propose, then, that the proper condition for culpable ignorance is weaker than Rosen's and should instead be formulated as follows:

CI: Ignorance, whether circumstantial or normative, is culpable if the agent could reasonably have been expected to take measures that would have corrected or avoided it, given his or her capabilities and the opportunities provided by the social context, but failed to do so either due to akrasia or due to the culpable, nonakratic exercise of such vices as overconfidence, arrogance, dismissiveness, laziness, dogmatism, incuriosity, self-indulgence, contempt, and so on.³⁹

37. Why not throw out the original/derivative distinction altogether and just say from the start that Potter is originally responsible for his bad business practices? The reason is that we cannot understand why he is culpable for these actions without appeal to the fact that he is operating from ignorance that is culpable because at various times in the past it would have been reasonable to expect him to have done certain epistemically relevant things differently. He is responsible for the bad present behavior only because he is responsible for something else in the past. By contrast, I have argued that, when we are assessing those earlier epistemically debilitating choices themselves, things are different: we can understand the relevant claims about reasonable expectation without appeal to reasonable expectations in connection with even earlier past behavior.

38. It will not do to claim that premise iii is just stipulative. One cannot just stipulate what is in fact a substantive claim that the only way to be directly responsible for a bad action (as opposed to being responsible for it by being responsible for something else) is to do it despite knowing the balance of reasons against it. And if one did that, treating "originally responsible" as a technical term subject to that stipulation, then this would just raise new difficulties for premise i, which would now just leave out some relevant possibilities in a question-begging way (namely, the possibility argued for in the text, of direct responsibility for certain epistemically debilitating choices without akrasia).

39. This account shares the "root idea" sketched by James Montmarquet that "a certain quality of *openness* to truth- and value-related considerations is expected of persons and that this expectation is *fundamental*, at least in the following regard. The expectation is not derivative of or dependent upon one's (at the moment in question) judging such openness as appropriate (good, required, etc.)—just the opposite: it would include a requirement that one be open to the need to be open, and if one is not open to this, one may be blameworthy precisely for that failure." See James Montmarquet, "Zimmerman on Culpable Ignorance," *Ethics* 109 (1999): 842–45, 845. The vices cited in CI above are relevant precisely because their exercise violates the condition of openness.

In cases where akrasia is involved, the cause of the akrasia may well be some of those same vices appealed to in the second disjunct. The point is just that akrasia needn't always be involved: it is enough if there is a culpable exercise of such vices behind the failure to become properly informed. Since we can reasonably expect people with normal capabilities and social opportunities not to indulge such vices at the expense of fulfilling their epistemic obligations, we can reasonably hold them responsible for ignorance that results from such behavior and hence for bad actions that stem from that ignorance.

V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that skepticism about moral responsibility for bad actions, whether in Rosen's original form or in the revised form described in Section III, is unjustified. Not only are attributions of akrasia often perfectly warranted, but even where there is no akrasia in the etiology of a bad action, there may be responsibility for the action. I have tried to show this in a fairly abstract way through the examination of Rosen's argument and some hypothetical cases, leading to an alternative account of culpable ignorance that avoids deflationary implications for attributions of moral responsibility. As is often the case, however, it can also be useful to supplement abstract philosophical argumentation with a reminder of concrete real-life cases that demand a sensible verdict, as a kind of reality check on our theorizing. In my own case, it would be only half joking to say that what initially convinced me that an akrasia-based account could not be right was the fact that it would let our worst politicians off the hook far too easily. It is worth just a brief illustration of this to underscore the lack of credibility of an akrasia-based position and to provide some final intuitive support for the alternative vice-based approach I have defended, making clear why it matters.

Consider the much criticized behavior of the George W. Bush administration with respect to the Iraq war, environmental policy, economic priorities, failures in disaster preparedness and response, the politicization of agencies, or the erosion of civil liberties and of church/state separation. It may be quite unclear, as in Potter's case, whether episodes of clear-eyed akrasia are implicated in the bad decisions made by the agents in question.⁴⁰ On a view such as Rosen's, this alone should inhibit us from assigning substantial blame, despite everything else we now know about these cases. Yet it is overwhelmingly clear to most of us that a great deal of blame is appropriate here, and the reasons for this point straightforwardly to the factors I have highlighted. At the heart of the behavior in question is what has been described as the "faith-based

40. Those who deny that the decisions in these spheres have largely been bad ones can, as always, find another example for illustrative purposes.

presidency” of a chief executive who is widely characterized by those involved with him (including politically friendly sources) as possessing unusual degrees of both incuriosity and certitude.⁴¹ There is a growing body of evidence that this is someone who “values loyalty above expertise,” has “a preference for advisers whose personal fortunes are almost entirely bound up with his own,” and “likes to surround himself with obsequious courtiers,” shutting out or attacking—with the help of those close to him—dissenting voices and sources of information that cannot be counted upon to support conclusions already held with a confidence bearing little relation to the available evidence.⁴²

To the extent that these qualities have promoted circumstantial and moral ignorance and influenced political decision making, and to the extent that the agents in question have had sufficient social and educational opportunities to have avoided much of this ignorance, the ignorance and resulting bad actions are culpable on the account I have offered. Even if there was no full-blown akrasia, it is enough, according to CI, if there were culpable exercises of such vices as “disdain for contemplation or deliberation, an embrace of decisiveness, a retreat from empiricism, a sometimes bullying impatience with doubters and even friendly questioners,” where it would have been reasonable to expect people not to have exercised those vices and to have behaved in more epistemically responsible ways.⁴³ It is this that explains why we rightly hold the agents in question accountable for their mistakes despite the fact that they may have been acting according to their own deeply held beliefs rather than akratically. Like Potter, given their capacities and opportunities, they could reasonably have been expected to have avoided the circumstantial and normative ignorance underlying their actions by refraining from indulging the above vices in the course of their deliberation and decision making.

Having made the case for significant attributable moral responsi-

41. This is a major theme of Bob Woodward’s *State of Denial: Bush at War, Part III* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006) and also of Ron Suskind’s “Without a Doubt,” *New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, sec. 6, 44–106. Suskind characterizes a “faith-based presidency” as one in which “open dialogue, based on facts, is not seen as something of inherent value. It may, in fact, create doubt, which undercuts faith. It could result in a loss of confidence in the decision-maker and, just as important, by the decision-maker.”

42. Paul Krugman, “Questions of Character,” *New York Times*, October 14, 2005, Editorial Desk, 25. (Krugman is here quoting his own words from 2000, making the point that these impressions are not new.) See also Suskind, “Without a Doubt,” and Woodward, *State of Denial*, for detailed discussion and a variety of examples. Bruce Bartlett, a former domestic policy adviser and treasury official in previous Republican administrations, summed up similar criticisms this way (quoted by Suskind, 46): “This is why he dispenses with people who confront him with inconvenient facts. He truly believes he’s on a mission from God. Absolute faith like that overwhelms a need for analysis.”

43. Suskind, “Without a Doubt,” 49.

bility, however, it is important not to go too far, and the worries of skeptics help to remind us of important qualifications. First, there are surely cases of brainwashing and indoctrination so extreme that a person could not reasonably have been expected to gain the relevant normative knowledge and exhibited no culpable vice at any stage in failing to take steps to get it. Second, it seems plausible that there are cultural and historical contexts where the relevant knowledge isn't reasonably available and where it therefore makes sense not to blame people for certain practices even while recognizing them to be nonrelativistically wrong. Third, there are plenty of genuinely hard cases in morality where it would be naive to suppose that everyone who tried could reasonably be expected to come to the correct answer, even on the assumption that there is one. This point should be salient to philosophers in particular, who remain deeply divided on important normative issues despite being, as a group, exceptionally reflective and open to critical discussion. A consequentialist and a deontologist, for example, may each think the other to be morally mistaken in her conclusion about some issue; it is not clear, however, that either should think the truth obvious enough that the other should be blamed for her moral ignorance or for bad actions stemming from it, given that she displays no less intellectual integrity in her reflections. And, fourth, in addition to morally hard cases, there are also cases that turn on background facts that are difficult enough to discern that virtuous, reasonable, and reflective people can disagree about them. Here, again, it seems that people may differ blamelessly in their moral beliefs and decisions, even if some are mistaken.

The question to come back to is always what we can reasonably expect a person to know, or to take steps to know, given his or her social context and basic capabilities and given the level of difficulty of the knowledge in question. This allows for much more responsibility than an *akrasia*-based account does, but it still leaves plenty of room for doubts about responsibility in borderline cases of indoctrination, cultural or historical ignorance, diminished capabilities, and epistemic difficulty. A virtue of Rosen's argument is that it alerts us to all of this, as well as to the plausible implication that, in such cases, it will not be one's fault if one comes to an incorrect factual and/or moral understanding of things and acts wrongly. Through no fault of one's own, a wrong action may just never come to seem wrong to one, and so one cannot reasonably be blamed for it.

The real question thus becomes this: Where do we draw the line between such genuine hard cases, where we must withhold blame for false beliefs and resulting wrong actions, and cases where people ought to know better and are culpable for not doing better at finding out the truth? This still presents a deep challenge insofar as we lack any clear or general criteria for drawing that line. And if we are not sure where

to draw that line, then it will sometimes be hard to say where we should be confident in attributing blame and where we should withhold it. This doesn't saddle us with Rosen's skepticism, or even with the radically scaled back responsibility implied by the modified argument, since, if what I have argued is right, there remain plenty of clear cases of responsibility, with or without akrasia. But there will also be plenty of cases where it is unclear whether such attributions are warranted, and that in itself should give us pause.