

You of All People: Acquaintance, Wrong Action, and Blame

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§1 Introduction

It is widely agreed that one's degree of blameworthiness for performing a wrong action is lower under conditions of non-culpable ignorance than under conditions of knowledge. However, we might also ask whether there are conditions under which one's degree of blameworthiness is *higher* than it would be under conditions of (mere) knowledge. To see the interest of this question, compare two simple cases of torturing an innocent person that have just one relevant difference:

KNOWLEDGE: S knows that torture is morally wrong, and why, but S is not acquainted with the wrongness of torture. Despite knowing that it is wrong, S proceeds to torture A.

ACQUAINTANCE: S* knows that torture is morally wrong and why, and moreover, S is acquainted with the wrongness of torture. Despite being acquainted with the wrongness of torture, S proceeds to torture A.

In both cases, the torturer knows that what he is doing is wrong and knows why it is wrong. But only in one case is he acquainted with the wrongness of torture. Is the acquainted torturer more, less, or equally blameworthy than the unacquainted torturer? Intuitively, he is *more* blameworthy. Thus, it seems that one's blameworthiness for performing a wrong action is heightened by acquaintance with the wrongness of that action—especially, acquaintance with what *makes* the action wrong.

We will largely take it as a *datum* that the acquainted wrongdoer is, all else equal, more blameworthy than the unacquainted wrongdoer. Our aim in this paper is to explain *why* this is the case. On our view, acquaintance heightens blameworthiness because acquaintance with the wrong-making features of actions puts us in a position to possess those features as reasons for action in a way that the unacquainted cannot.

In §2, we begin by considering candidate explanations of why acquaintance heightens blameworthiness. In doing so, we distinguish between different kinds of acquaintance that are often run together in the literature: objective-, agent-, and patient-acquaintance. Each of these candidate explanations is plausible with regard to some cases, but none of them captures the full range of cases, especially once we distinguish between the different kinds of acquaintance.

In §3, we develop our positive proposal. We argue that there are two ways of possessing a reason—intellectual possession and phenomenological possession. On our proposal, acquaintance heightens blameworthiness because it uniquely puts us in a position to phenomenologically possess the reasons against performing the wrong action. Given the plausible connection between blameworthiness and the failure to respond to the reasons we have, phenomenological possession of the reasons against wrong action heightens blameworthiness.

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

In §5, we consider and respond to what we take to be some natural objections to our view. In §6, we offer brief concluding remarks.

§2 Three candidate explanations

In this section, we canvass some initially attractive explanations of the fact that blameworthiness for wrong action is heightened by acquaintance with what makes the action wrong. We argue that although each of these explanations contains something insightful about acquaintance and blameworthiness, none of them can fully explain why acquaintance heightens blameworthiness.

As we will argue, the inadequacy of these explanations becomes clear when we consider the different ways in which one might become acquainted with the wrong-making features of actions. Much of the literature on moral acquaintance focuses on examples when one becomes acquainted with a wrong action by witnessing it. One commonly used example that fits this form is from Orwell's 'A Hanging,' in which an Anglo police officer in Burma witnesses a Burmese man being hanged.¹

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

The literature on moral acquaintance has tended to run together these different kinds of acquaintance. Perhaps this is because moral acquaintance tends to be modeled on aesthetic acquaintance, and the most natural examples of the latter are ones involving observer-acquaintance. We contend that the differences between the three kinds of acquaintance are normatively significant—especially, the difference between observer- and patient-acquaintance. As we will show, one problem with the three candidate explanations we consider is that they cannot explain intuitive differences between observer-acquaintance cases and patient-acquaintance cases.

§2.1 *Acquaintance yields moral understanding*

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

According to Hills, moral understanding requires not just knowing the reasons why something is wrong, but also having a 'grasp of the reasons why' that is constituted by a range of abilities. These abilities include the ability to explain why something is wrong and the ability to make the appropriate

¹ [add references]

moral judgments in similar cases. In general, in order to understand why something is wrong, one must be able to use the reasons why it is wrong in various forms of moral reasoning. Thus, one might think that what explains why acquaintance heightens blameworthiness is that acquaintance provides this kind of moral understanding, and moral understanding heightens blameworthiness for wrong action.

We find the claim that moral understanding heightens blameworthiness very plausible. It *does* seem like the torturer who *understands why* torture is wrong is more blameworthy for torturing than the torturer who merely knows that it is wrong. And if (as Hills claims) knowing why something is wrong is not sufficient for understanding why it is wrong, then it seems like the torturer who understands why torture is wrong is also more blameworthy than the torturer who merely *knows* why it is wrong.

Unfortunately, the above story cannot explain why acquaintance heightens blameworthiness. This is because acquaintance is neither necessary nor sufficient for moral understanding. Of course, there can be cases where acquaintance does provide moral understanding, and in such cases, it may be that this is one of the features that heightens blameworthiness. But there can also be cases where acquaintance does not provide such understanding. In such cases, acquaintance still seems to heighten blameworthiness.

Moreover, there can be cases of moral understanding without acquaintance. In such cases, it seems that the addition of acquaintance still heightens blameworthiness (all else equal). For example, consider the following pair of cases:

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

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

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

The key point here is that the explanation in terms of moral understanding depends on the thinking of acquaintance as simply a route to moral understanding. But it seems that acquaintance can heighten blameworthiness without providing moral understanding. Moreover, even if acquaintance sometimes provides moral understanding, it is clearly not the only way of achieving moral understanding. For example, one could come to understand the wrongness of torture through philosophical theorizing. But while this may be normatively significant, it would not be so in exactly the same way that become acquainted with the wrongness of torture would be.

Finally, the moral understanding proposal fails to explain differences in blameworthiness *within* the range of cases of acquaintance. It is plausible that although observer- and patient-acquaintance both heighten blameworthiness, patient-acquaintance heightens blameworthiness more than observer-acquaintance (at least, in many cases). There seems to be something especially condemnable about the person who has experienced the wrongness of torture from the inside and still goes on to torture others.² But the difference in normative significance between observer- and patient-acquaintance is not plausibly construed as a difference in moral understanding, for there is nothing about patient-acquaintance in particular that would grant the acquainted the abilities that are (according to Hills) constitutive of moral understanding.

§2.2 *Acquaintance provides evidence*

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

Like the first proposal, this proposal is highly plausible. It seems right to say that the more evidence one has that something is wrong, the more blameworthy one is for doing it. And in some cases, it seems acquaintance will provide such evidence. For example, acquaintance with torture provides very strong evidence that it is wrong, in the form of evidence that torture causes terrible physical and emotional suffering. Because this evidence puts the acquainted in a better epistemic position with regard to the wrongness of torture, it is plausible to think that he would then be more blameworthy for going on to himself torture someone.

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

This point becomes especially salient when we consider that evidence is that which justifies, or provides reason for, our beliefs. If evidence that torture is wrong is that which justifies, or provides reason for, our beliefs, then it is clear that for any piece of evidence that torture is wrong, acquaintance is not the only way of acquiring that evidence. This is because whatever reasons for believing torture is wrong that one might become acquainted with (such as “torture causes terrible suffering”), one could possess those same facts as reasons to believe that torture is wrong without acquaintance.

Furthermore, like the moral understanding proposal, the evidence proposal cannot explain why patient-acquaintance seems to heighten blameworthiness more than mere observer-acquaintance. Of course, someone who has experienced the wrongness of something like torture from the inside does

² One might object that in some cases of patient-acquaintance, the acquainted person's having suffered a moral wrong seems not to heighten blameworthiness, but to do precisely the opposite. We address this objection in §5.3.

seem to be in a better epistemic position with regard to torture than someone who has merely witnessed the wrongness of torture. But this difference in epistemic position is not suitably captured by the thought that patient-acquaintance provides more, or different, evidence than observer-acquaintance. It seems to simply misidentify the special normative significance of patient-acquaintance to say that what being tortured does is provides one with stronger or additional evidence to believe that torture is wrong.

§2.3 *Acquaintance provides additional reasons*

Because moral acquaintance seems to provide access to moral reasons, perhaps it is by providing access to *additional* reasons that acquaintance heightens blameworthiness. According to this proposal, the unacquainted agent necessarily lacks at least one of the reasons that bears on the action—even if the agent has other moral reasons that bear on it. The acquainted agent, however, has a *sui generis* reason accessible only *via* acquaintance, and so that agent’s blameworthiness for failure to act accordingly is heightened to that extent.

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

Unfortunately, it is not plausible that acquaintance always provides additional reasons whenever it also heightens blameworthiness. Suppose that the unacquainted agent knows that torture is wrong because of the particular character of the suffering and humiliation that it causes, though the agent has no acquaintance with what such suffering and humiliation is like. This knowledge seems to provide unacquainted access to the very same reason that the acquainted agent possesses *via* acquaintance. Rather, it seems that acquaintance provides a distinctive *way* or *mode* of accessing reasons that very well may be available otherwise (though we leave it open whether such reasons are *always* available in both acquainted and unacquainted modes).

In the same vein, this proposal fails to explain differences in blameworthiness *within* the range of cases of acquaintance. Recall the distinction between observer- and patient-acquaintance. Although both are forms of acquaintance that heighten blameworthiness, it seems that (at least, in many cases) patient-acquaintance heightens blameworthiness more than observer-acquaintance. We are scandalized by the torturer who has witnessed much torture; but we are even more scandalized by the torturer who knows what torture is like from the inside, from the perspective of one who has been tortured. Rather than think of these two kinds of acquaintance as providing *different* reasons, whose difference explains variation in blameworthiness, it is more natural to think of them as providing different kinds of access to the very same reasons. We will now turn to laying out just such an account.

§3 The phenomenological possession account

So far, we have considered three candidate explanations for why acquaintance heightens blameworthiness. We think all of these proposals rely on plausible principles and get something right about certain cases of moral acquaintance. However, as we have shown, none of these proposals gets to the heart of why acquaintance *in particular* heightens blame. Furthermore, none of them has been able to explain the difference in normative significance between observer- and patient-acquaintance.

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

§3.1 *Phenomenological possession*

First, it will be important to say something about what it is to possess a normative reason. If a normative reason is just a consideration that counts in favor of or against doing something, then there are normative reasons everywhere. For example, it's plausible to think that every reason *why* torture is wrong is a consideration that counts against torturing, and thereby a normative reason *not* to torture. But we might fail to *possess* such reasons; for example, if we have no idea that torture causes terrible suffering, it is plausible that we would not have that fact as a reason not to torture.

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

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

Lord has a complex story about what it takes to be in a position to use a normative reason as the reason it is, which we will not discuss here. And we will remain neutral on whether being able to use a reason requires the complex machinery of Lord's account, or (for example) just being able to base one's action on it. All we need to get our account off the ground is the claim that in order to possess a normative reason, one must be able to use that reason to act, or be in some sense guided by it in acting.

Our central claim is that acquaintance yields a distinctive kind of reason-possession because it puts us in a position to use reasons in a distinctive mode. The kind of access to normative reasons that

we get from acquaintance is thus different from the kind we get from other ways of possessing reasons, such as moral reasoning and testimony (though the latter is controversial)³. To see how this is so, let us return to our original cases involving two torturers. Recall that both torturers not only know that torture is wrong, but also know what makes it wrong. The difference between them is that the former, S, is not acquainted with what makes torture wrong, while the latter, S*, is.

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

Now, let us imagine that S knows through reliable testimony that torture causes terrible suffering. Furthermore, through thorough theorizing, S has come to understand both that this fact contributes to the wrongness of torture, and that it's thereby a reason not to torture. However, because he is not acquainted with torture, he lacks access to what torture is like.

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

When someone uses reasons in the ways in which both S and S* are able to use R, we will refer to this as using reasons in the intellectual mode. When someone uses reasons in the ways that only S*, who has acquaintance, is able to use R, we will refer to this as using reasons in the phenomenological mode. While both S and S* are able to use R in the intellectual mode, only S*, in virtue of his acquaintance with R, is able to use R in the phenomenological mode.

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

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

³ For a discussion of whether normative testimony can provide reasons, see Wodak (ms).

§3.2 *Why phenomenological possession heightens blameworthiness*

Consider the following principle:

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

We think that this principle is highly plausible, especially given the assumption that non-culpable moral ignorance can exculpate. It seems that if S does not have R as a reason not to □, then the fact that R is a reason does not bear on whether S is blameworthy for □ -ing. Of course, this does not entail that S is not blameworthy for □ -ing, because he could be blameworthy in virtue of something else.

Now, consider the following extension of POSSESSION-BLAME₁:

POSSESSION-BLAME₂: If S and S* are both blameworthy for □ -ing in virtue of failing to respond to some reason R not to □, but S*'s failing to respond to R makes S* blameworthy in a way that S is not, then S* possesses R in a way in which S does not.

POSSESSION-BLAME₂ is a plausible extension of POSSESSION-BLAME₁ to cover cases in which agents possess the same reasons in different ways. It says that just as there is a connection between possessing a reason and being blameworthy in virtue of failing to respond to it, there is a connection between possessing a reason in a particular way and being blameworthy in a particular way for failing to respond to it.

Finally, consider the following extension of POSSESSION-BLAME₂:

POSSESSION-BLAME₃: If S and S* are both blameworthy for □ -ing in virtue of failing to respond to some reason R not to □, but S* is blameworthy in $n+1$ ways while S is only blameworthy in n ways, then S* is more blameworthy than S.

POSSESSION-BLAME₃ asserts a connection between the ways in which an agent is blameworthy and the degree to which she is blameworthy. It says that the more ways in which someone is blameworthy for the same thing, the greater the degree to which she is blameworthy for it. We think this final principle is also highly plausible.

POSSESSION-BLAME₃ entails that if both S and S* are blameworthy for failing to respond to R partly in virtue of intellectually possessing R, but only S* is additionally blameworthy for failing to respond to R partly in virtue of phenomenologically possessing R, then S* is more blameworthy than S. Since acquaintance yields phenomenological possession, this can explain why, all else equal, acquaintance heightens blameworthiness.

Our account also explains why patient-acquaintance often seems to heighten blameworthiness more than mere observer-acquaintance. Because different kinds of acquaintance have not been distinguished in the literature, little attention has been paid to the fact that different kinds of acquaintance grant access to different sets of phenomenological features of the objects of acquaintance. For example, while observer- and patient-acquaintance with torture each might put us in touch with the fact "it causes suffering" as a reason not to torture, they obviously do not put us in

touch with the very same phenomenological features of that fact. While observer-acquaintance puts us in touch with what that suffering is like from the outside, patient-acquaintance puts us in touch with what that suffering is like from the inside. Although we have not said much about it, agent-acquaintance seems to put us in touch with yet other phenomenological features of the fact—e.g., what torture is like from the second-personal perspective of the one who tortures.

We contend that because of the above, patient-acquaintance with the wrongness of some act is a stronger form of acquaintance than mere observer-acquaintance. Correspondingly, patient-acquaintance with the wrong-making features of an act yields a stronger form of phenomenological possession than mere observer-acquaintance. We can gloss this by saying that while observer-acquaintance yields weak phenomenological possession, patient-acquaintance yields *strong* phenomenological possession. And finally, strong phenomenological possession (all else equal) heightens blameworthiness more than weak phenomenological possession does. This explains why patient-acquaintance (all else equal) heightens blameworthiness more than mere observer-acquaintance.

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

§4 Applications

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

§4.1 *Acquaintance and testimony: their normative significance*

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

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

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

§4.2 *Aesthetic acquaintance*

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

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

We think our proposal about why moral acquaintance heightens blameworthiness carries over to the aesthetic case. It seems like we are most aesthetically blameworthy for failing to respond to an object's aesthetic features when we are acquainted with those features (as opposed to when we simply *know* that the object has these features). We offer an analogous explanation of this data: insofar as aesthetic acquaintance leads to the phenomenological possession of aesthetic reasons, it makes us more blameworthy for failing to respond to those reasons.

Interestingly, the connection between acquaintance and blameworthiness may be even stronger in the aesthetic case than in the moral case. For it seems that without acquaintance, we may not be blameworthy *at all* for failing to form the relevant attitudes. To see this, consider a case in which one learns through aesthetic testimony all the beautiful-making features of a particular artwork, but is not acquainted with any of them. Without acquaintance, there would be something positively *odd* about admiring that artwork on the basis of those features. Given this fact, it would seem inappropriate to blame someone in this situation for failing to admire that artwork. Thus, it might be that phenomenological possession does not just *heighten* aesthetic blameworthiness but is actually *necessary* for it.⁴

Our proposal also helps to shed light on an important *disanalogy* between moral and aesthetic acquaintance. While the distinction we have made between the three different kinds of acquaintance is natural in the moral case, it does not have an obvious analogue in the aesthetic case. Standard

⁴ We might even make the yet stronger claim that phenomenological possession (and thus, acquaintance) is necessary for admiration to be the fitting response to an object. For an argument for this claim, and the more general claim that a wide range of affective attitudes require acquaintance in order to be fitting, see Singh (ms).

cases of aesthetic acquaintance resist being broken up into cases of observer-, patient-, and agent-acquaintance. This is important because it helps explain why discussions of moral acquaintance that model it on aesthetic acquaintance have failed to distinguish between the different kinds of moral acquaintance. So, this disanalogy between moral and aesthetic acquaintance gives us reason to be cautious about modeling moral acquaintance on aesthetic acquaintance in our theorizing.

§4.3 *Proximate and distant wrongs*

Finally, our proposal has implications for a longstanding debate in moral theory. Peter Singer has famously argued that mere proximity to (or distance from) suffering people does not affect our obligations toward them.⁵ From relatively simple principles, Singer defends surprisingly stringent demands on our charitable activity toward distant people. Singer notes that his argument “takes... no account of proximity or distance.” According to Singer, this is a principled neglect and needs no serious defense:

I do not think I need to say much in defense of the refusal to take proximity and distance into account. The fact that a person is physically near to us, so that we have personal contact with him, may make it more likely that we *shall* assist him, but this does not show that we *ought* to help him rather than another who happens to be further away. If we accept any principle of impartiality, universalizability, equality, or whatever, we cannot discriminate against someone merely because he is far away from us (or we are far away from him).⁶

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

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

§5 **Objections**

In this section, we discuss a few objections to our account that we think are likely to arise. The first objection asks why the explanation we have given cannot simply be appropriated by a defender of

⁵ Peter Singer. 1972. “Famine, Affluence, and Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 1(3): 229–243.

⁶ Singer, 232 (emphasis original).

one of the proposals we rejected. The second objection claims that our account only explains the data insofar as it explains why it is more psychologically difficult to ignore the wrongness of an act when it is staring us in the face. The third, and perhaps most serious objection to our account is that is that it has the disturbing implication that victims of certain kinds of life-altering trauma are more, rather than less, blameworthy for going on to inflict it on others.

§5.1 *Alternative proposals revisited*

Defenders of the proposals we rejected in §2 might respond to our proposal by claiming that it can be easily appropriated to support a more sophisticated version of their views. It is particularly easy to see how a defender of the explanation in terms of moral understanding might respond in this way. We can imagine a defender of this view saying something like the following: on Hills' account, moral understanding involves a range of abilities to use the reasons why an action is right or wrong in one's moral reasoning. If phenomenological possession is a matter of being able to use reasons in a way one would not otherwise be able to, then this seems like a kind of moral understanding. Therefore, the phenomenological possession account is compatible with a more sophisticated version of the understanding view, according to which acquaintance heightens blameworthiness because it yields a special kind of moral understanding.

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

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

§5.2 *Mere psychology?*

Apart from appeal to examples, we have done little to defend what we regard as a *datum*—that acquaintance heightens blameworthiness. But this is precisely where someone might lodge the following skeptical complaint: we are really only entitled to a *psychological* version of the *datum* that says that we in fact typically react more negatively toward wrongdoers who are acquainted with the wrongness of their actions. To be sure, the acquainted torturer scandalizes us more than the unacquainted torturer, but there is no reason to think that this has any normative significance. Our revulsion toward acquainted wrongdoers, the skeptic might argue, belongs alongside that do not require or admit of rational justification.

While it is always possible to simply deny that certain moral intuitions are probative, we regard this denial as especially implausible in our case. As the title of our paper is meant to suggest, the normative significance of our intuitive judgments seem to be deeply embedded in our moral discourse and practice. Phrases of the form “You of all people should know better than to □” say much more than simply, “Your □-ing really repulses me,” because they make an explicit reference to access to the moral facts. Were we building our account on the basis of examples that really were nothing more than, say, disgust reactions, the psychological objection would be considerably more powerful. But that is not what we have done, so we see little reason to take our intuitive starting points less seriously than any other moral intuitions.

§5.3 *Acquaintance as an excuse*

Perhaps the most serious objection to our account involves the observation that, at least sometimes, acquaintance seems to do the exact opposite of what we say it does, namely, it *decreases* blameworthiness. Without getting into the sordid details, we can think of plenty of cases where suffering certain wrongs makes a victim more likely to perform those wrongs themselves. In these sorts of cases, it seems odd to heap blame, and hence further burden, on the victim—after all, their propensity to harm others is itself a result of their own victimization. It might be objected, then, that at least in these sorts of cases, we have things exactly backwards.

Here we take a page from the previous objection: the sorts of cases at issue here involve contingent features of human psychology and behavior. The fact that some experiences have an enormous, deleterious causal impact on one’s moral and other capacities is a contingent, psychological fact. Hence, these cases qualify as *exceptions to the rule*, in the intuitive sense of that cliché. Rather than think of them as counterexamples to our proposal, we think that these cases are instances where the phenomenon we identify is *defeated* by countervailing considerations.

We can illustrate the point by considering a somewhat exotic counterfactual. Consider the commonplace view that knowledge heightens blameworthiness: all else equal, someone who knows that □-ing is wrong and proceeds to □ is more blameworthy than someone who does not know that □-ing is wrong and proceeds to □. But now suppose that there is a certain cluster of actions which are such that, due to contingent features of human psychology, are extremely difficult for humans to resist doing *precisely when they know that they are wrong*. Would the existence of such actions *falsify* the commonplace view relating knowledge to blameworthiness? We think not. Rather, these cases are just ones where the commonplace view is blocked or defeated by an excusing condition. And this is exactly what we want to say about putative counterexamples to our account.

§6 **Concluding Remarks**

Our aim in this paper has been twofold. Our primary aim has been to highlight an underexplored fact (acquaintance heightens blameworthiness) and explain it. To that end, we have defended the *phenomenological possession account* and demonstrated the inadequacy of some of its most plausible rivals. Furthermore, we have outlined how this account bears additional fruit in several areas of normative theory. Our secondary aim has been to complicate the standard picture of moral acquaintance. Whereas philosophers have typically given unified accounts of acquaintance, we contend that, at least in the moral case, it is also important to think about at least three distinct kinds of acquaintance. This suggests a further research program in itself. For example, we have said very little about moral agent-acquaintance: acquaintance with the moral properties of an action by way of performing that action. What are the features of agent-acquaintance with right and wrong actions?

You of All People

Does agent-acquaintance with wrong actions heighten blameworthiness in the way that, we argue, observer- and patient-acquaintance does? It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer such questions. But we take ourselves to have shown at least that they are important areas for further research on the normative significance of acquaintance.

[add bibliography]