

# “Grasping” Morality<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. A vital theoretical posit

Elinor Mason’s *Ways To Be Blameworthy* offers something from which the literature on agency and responsibility could greatly benefit: a distinction between varieties of blame, and correspondingly between varieties of blameworthiness. Mason’s taxonomy helps to systematize a broad range of tempting intuitions about blame and blameworthiness that are otherwise difficult to fit together into a single, coherent theory. For example: when someone who acts wrongly is so deeply in the grip of a false moral view that they have no compunction whatsoever about what they are doing, being utterly convinced that it is the right thing to do, *but* they are this way as the result of hideous brainwashing from early childhood, it can be difficult to know how to react to them. On the one hand, they seem a paradigm of blameworthiness – a moral monster, as it were. On the other, there is a clear sense in which it is *not their fault* that they have their monstrous character and perform their horrific actions, given the brainwashing. And if none of this is their fault then it is hard to see how they can be blameworthy for it. Enter Mason: we solve this and related puzzles by distinguishing ways to be blameworthy and then simply saying that many people are blameworthy in one way but not in another way.

Mason’s key distinction is between “ordinary” blame and blameworthiness and their “detached” counterparts.<sup>2</sup> We do not blame people like the brainwashed wrongdoer in the ordinary way in which we blame our nearest and dearest, according to Mason, but in a distinct, “detached” way. Ordinary blame and detached blame differ in the conditions under which they are appropriate – hence the distinction between ordinary and detached *blameworthiness* – and in the responses that we expect when we engage in them. Specifically, Mason holds that ordinary blame applies only to agents who act subjectively wrongly – or, as she glosses it, who act wrongly “by their own lights” (pp.25, 27). Mason thinks this because she holds that ordinary blame involves “acting as a proxy for [the agent’s] own conscience... simply reminding her of what she already knows to be the case” (p.105). The idea is that ordinary blame involves an expectation that, on reflection, our blamee will come to agree with us that she acted wrongly, and will then feel remorse, become

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<sup>1</sup> Note: This is the “abridged” version of this paper, modified to fit *Philosophical Studies*’ space constraints. A full version, which includes a proposal for how Mason can avoid the problem that I describe here, is available on my website.

<sup>2</sup> The final chapter before the conclusion also introduces a third type of blameworthiness: “extended” blameworthiness. I will not discuss that here.

motivated to make amends, and so forth. By contrast, if someone acts objectively but not subjectively wrongly, Mason holds that we cannot expect them on reflection to agree that their behavior is wrong. As a result, she says, we can only subject them to a sort of blame that is "detached", insofar as it is something that "we apply... without expecting a response" (p.131).

I have added the qualifier "on reflection" because Mason allows that it may not be immediately obvious to a target of ordinary blame that she has indeed acted wrongly by her own lights. Mason says that the agent must have "background knowledge that [her] act is morally problematic, even if that knowledge [is] not at the forefront of the mind" at the exact time at which she acts (103). And Mason maintains that "[f]or most of us, when we act wrongly without full awareness, it is just that we didn't bother thinking: it would not take much at all for us to admit that the act was problematic" (p.90). Mason also allows that someone who acts wrongly by her own lights may need to have the wrongness of this action not merely pointed out to her, but carefully explained. She says that "it may take some convincing [the agent], or even educating her", and that in some cases we are ignorant of the wrongness of our acts because "we turn away from hard questions and undesirable answers", in which case "we can be brought around to seeing that we have been acting wrongly by our own lights, but it may take some patience" (104). Nonetheless, Mason insists, for ordinary blame to make sense it must be the case that the agent's own moral beliefs *do* in fact impugn her action, such that we can point this out to her – perhaps with some argument or rhetoric, some coaxing and cajoling, or the use of some pedagogical skills – and expect her eventually to agree. If we cannot expect such a thing (say, due to the brainwashing), then we can only blame in the detached way.

It is in pairing the distinction between ordinary and detached blame with that between subjective and objective wrongdoing that Mason introduces one of the book's most central concepts: that of "grasping" capital-M Morality. The capital M designates something that Mason variously refers to as "the true Morality" (pp.19, 31) or "the correct value system" (pp.32, 37), and as "the values we share" (p.6) or "the broad view we all more or less agree on" (p.36) or "the broad moral system that we share" (p.77). Mason thus assumes not only that there are common threads running through the diversity we find in people's moral beliefs – on which I will say more shortly – but also that this common core is a correct reflection of the moral facts. With these assumptions in hand, Mason defends an account of subjective obligation according to which the content of subjective obligation is just that "An agent should try to do well by Morality" (p.47). She emphasizes that this means that "acting subjectively rightly [and wrongly] is indexed to a specific value system" (p.34) – namely, capital-M Morality, which is stipulated to be not only *our* shared moral system but also *the correct* moral system. The notion of "grasping" Morality is then what ties subjective obligation to ordinary blame, on Mason's picture: she says that "an agent who does not have a grasp of Morality does not have any subjective obligations, and as a result is never praise- or blameworthy in the ordinary way" (p.75). So, what most fundamentally unifies cases of people who can be blamed only detachedly on Mason's view is *not* that they did not act subjectively wrongly, but rather that they fail to grasp Morality; on this view, someone's failure to grasp Morality is what makes it the case that she does not act subjectively wrongly, which in turn makes it the case that she can only be blamed in a detached way.

Notice that this introduces a complication to Mason's "acted wrongly by their own lights" gloss on the nature of subjective wrongdoing. On Mason's complete picture, someone's acting wrongly by their own lights is necessary but insufficient for them to act subjectively wrongly. It is also necessary that *their* lights be *our* lights, which are also *the correct* lights. It is necessary, in other words, that they grasp Morality. Similarly, Mason's remarks about the communicative function of ordinary blame must be understood in the context of her views that this type of blame applies only to agents who act subjectively wrongly and that agents who fail to grasp Morality have no subjective obligations. When Mason writes of blamers "reminding" blamees of what they already know, this must be understood as the reminder of someone who grasps Morality *for* someone else who grasps Morality *about* Morality's content. Ordinary blame is an activity that can only be engaged in from one grasper to another, so to speak. To understand exactly who is able to blame and be blamed in the ordinary way, then, we must further examine Mason's central theoretical posit: the idea of grasping Morality.

## 2. So, what *is* grasping Morality?

Unfortunately, Mason does not say a massive amount either about what Morality is or about what grasping is. That is because she thinks that there is considerable vagueness here, such that a precise analysis cannot be given. We hear that Morality is "a broad value system that covers a spectrum of philosophical and non-philosophical views about rules, principles, and intrinsic goods", and also that it is "the best version of our current value system, a cleaned-up version of common sense morality, the highest common denominator rather than the lowest" (37). But we do not hear anything about how the cleaning-up process works (reflective equilibrium? Some sort of idealization?), nor how the metaphor of the highest common denominator is to be understood (supervaluation over the cleaned-up versions of people's actual beliefs? Something less formal?). So, it is unclear precisely what the content of Morality is – or, in other words, precisely what one grasps when one grasps Morality. Mason also tells us that "Grasping Morality in my sense does not necessarily involve grasping every facet of Morality. So there is vagueness at the boundaries, it is not always clear when someone is 'in' and when they are 'out' of the moral community" (38). Later in the book, she adds that people in our moral community are "the people we interact with, the people we learn from, the people we have personal relationships with" (82). Since Mason uses the phrase "the moral community" to refer to all and only those who grasp Morality, this is suggestive, indicating that Mason assumes that most of the people around her are not vague borderline cases but rather are among those who determinately succeed in grasping Morality.

That's all Mason tells us, at a general level, about what grasping Morality involves.

We get more clues by way of examples. Mason tells us that "Kantians and Utilitarians disagreeing about trolley cases do not (usually) think their opponent is a moral monster, they take themselves to be disagreeing within a larger framework on which they basically agree" (p.37). The idea here is that all parties to trolley disputes – the Utilitarians and the Kantians – are within our moral

community and count, despite their disagreements, as grasping Morality. Mason then tells us that Huckleberry Finn is a borderline case, somewhere within the vague area, since his instincts seem decent but he believes that it is morally permissible to enslave people (pp.39, 59-60). Later she adds that it can be indeterminate whether someone who thinks that gay sex is a sin is thereby placed outside the moral community or is simply someone with a "blind spot" (p.176). However, Mason takes the case of a dictator's son who has been thoroughly indoctrinated, and who now happily spies on his friends in support of his father's regime, to be a paradigm case of someone who fails to grasp Morality and cannot be blamed in the ordinary way (pp.122, 154-157).<sup>3</sup> And she says the same about someone who "has been raised in an entirely sexist environment, which of course has shaped the evidence that is available to him", who now "sincerely believes that women are too silly to be allowed any power or responsibility" and who for this reason forbids his wife from reading books (pp.116-117). Concerning this case, Mason says that "there is no point in blaming him in the ordinary way" and that he "stands outside our moral community" (p.117), but that he is still properly subject to detached blame since he acts objectively wrongly.

I confess to finding these puzzle pieces difficult to fit together. As far as the examples go, I assume that deeply-ingrained racism, deeply-ingrained homophobia, and deeply-ingrained sexism are roughly as big of a moral deal (so to speak) as one another, so I struggle to see why it would be that the latter places someone determinately outside of the moral community but the former two just make them a vague borderline case.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, I think that several Kantians and Utilitarians would strenuously resist the idea that they are disagreeing within a broad framework on which they basically agree. And I think they would have a point; if one person holds that morality is all about preventing suffering while another holds that it is all about respecting agency, then it is hard to see them as fussing over the details of a broad framework that they share.<sup>5</sup> More generally, philosophers disagree about all sorts of things, including fundamental moral principles and accounts of the ultimate bearers of moral significance as well as judgments about the moral status of particular actions. Many deny that the correct value system is "a cleaned up version of common sense morality". So, the idea that we all share a broad framework might be a tad optimistic, depending on who *exactly* is included in the "we" and what *exactly* sharing a framework amounts to. Similarly, the idea that "the people we interact with, the people we learn from, the people we have personal relationships with" are all people who grasp Morality may be optimistic. Speaking for myself, I have interacted with and learned from plenty of hardcore Kantians and Utilitarians, and I maintain personal relationships with people who harbor deeply-ingrained biases that I don't think I can change their minds about.

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<sup>3</sup> The example is based on Susan Wolf's (1987) example of "JoJo", but Mason adds some twists of her own.

<sup>4</sup> It might be that Mason thinks that Huck's good instincts *compensate* for his deeply-ingrained racist beliefs, pushing him into borderline territory. If so, one wants to hear more about how compensation works. I see no compensating factor in Mason's example of homophobia.

<sup>5</sup> In our session at the Pacific APA Mason suggested to me that Morality is basically all about doing right by sentient beings. But some Kantians reject this; they think it's all about doing right by *rational* beings. What "doing right by" amounts to will be fundamentally different depending on whether it's sentience or rationality that you have in mind.

One thing that is clear is that Mason allows that people can count as grasping Morality – as being determinately *in* the moral community, rather than being a vague borderline case – even though their moral understanding is imperfect. Mason readily acknowledges this possibility, though she doesn't discuss many examples of it. What she says is the following:

[I]t is possible that an agent could be non-culpably ignorant of some moral fact, without being outside our moral community. How likely this is depends on how coherent Morality is. If Morality is a set of independent principles, it would be very easy to non-culpably miss some. If it is a set of closely related directives, supported by an underlying rationale, then it is much less likely that an agent could non-culpably miss some moral fact (p.41).

[O]n my account... it is possible that an agent could meet the threshold for moral knowledge and yet not know everything about Morality. So it is possible that an agent could be non-culpably ignorant of a moral fact... Given that, in general, Morality is fairly coherent, it would be surprising to come across someone who had missed an important part. However, assuming that it is possible, such an agent would have the simple excuse of ignorance, and would not be blameworthy (pp.89-90).

It is unclear to me how many people fall into this category, since it is unclear how wrong you can be while still grasping Morality overall rather than being a vague borderline case. But I don't think that Mason can afford to be *quite* as ecumenical on this point as she presents herself as being. That is because, if philosophers and ordinary folk with massively divergent moral views all count as grasping Morality, then Morality cannot be all that coherent. The simpler and more unified it is, the more people determinately fail to grasp it, given the actual diversity in our moral beliefs. Since Mason is committed to the idea that "we" by-and-large share this framework, then, the best option for her is not to leave open the question of how coherent Morality is but to emphasize that it is not particularly coherent; there is an enormous variety of morally significant things and different folks each count as grasping Morality in virtue of their being roughly correct about some of the things – though not necessarily the same ones as each other. But, if that is right, then it is not at all "surprising" to come across someone who grasps Morality overall but has nonetheless missed an important part. To use Mason's own example,<sup>6</sup> someone could grasp Morality although she sincerely believes that, while it is usually wrong to hurt people, there is a blanket exception for hurt by offense. This is not unlikely or surprising. Or, just to throw more examples out there, perhaps someone who grasps Morality overall could still be mistaken about when she has the standing to interfere in others' personal affairs, about the conditions under which she is released from a promise, about who has a right to be provided with what sorts of information, about which student excuses are good enough to grant extensions on their papers and which are not, et cetera.

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<sup>6</sup> This example is drawn from the work of Nomy Arpaly (2002), though again Mason adds some twists of her own.

Let's say that agents who determinately succeed in grasping Morality, despite having missed an important part, have *gappy grasps*. There are gaps in their grasp, but they grasp nonetheless.

The possibility of gappy grasps creates a problem for Mason's view. I spell out this problem in the next section.

### 3. The problem

Recall that Mason holds the following:

- a) Agents who grasp Morality act subjectively wrongly (when they act wrongly), whereas agents who fail to grasp Morality can only act objectively wrongly.
- b) Someone is blameworthy in the ordinary way iff they act subjectively wrongly and they have no excuse, whereas someone who only acts objectively wrongly can only be subject to detached blame.
- c) Agents who grasp Morality can be blameworthy in the ordinary way, whereas agents who fail to grasp Morality can only be subject to detached blame.

...with (a) and (b) jointly explaining (c).

Now, consider someone who grasps Morality overall and yet has a significant gap in her grasp – the details don't matter as long as the case has the right shape, so just imagine whatever case you like. Suppose that the precise bit of Morality about which your agent is mistaken pertains to an action that she performs and explains why it is wrong, such that she mistakenly believes her action to be permissible when (to repeat) it is wrong. This agent does *not* act wrongly by her own lights. She grasps Morality, so *usually* when she acts wrongly she acts wrongly by her own lights. But not this time; this time her action falls in the gap, and she believes that it is permissible. To be clear: how often this can happen depends on how coherent Morality is, as Mason acknowledges, but I have argued that she should say that Morality is not especially coherent, in which case this sort of thing presumably happens frequently. Even if Mason doesn't follow me in emphasizing the disunity of Morality, though, she still must hold that cases with this structure *can* occur, since she holds that people can have gappy grasps. To deny the possibility of such a case would be to deny the possibility of gappy grasps, thereby restricting the moral community to those who are morally omniscient. And that is not a very appealing view.

Mason has two options for what to say about cases in which someone with a gappy grasp acts in a way whose wrongness is explained by precisely the bit of Morality that she fails to grasp. Here are the options:

- Option 1. Say that the agent can be blamed for the action in the ordinary way.
- Option 2. Say that the agent cannot be blamed for the action in the ordinary way.

Those are the only options.

Mason's discussion of gappy grasps indicates that she favors option (2); she says that "such an agent would have the simple excuse of ignorance, and would not be blameworthy" (*op. cit.*). But, as an argument for option (2), this is weak. The notion of a "simple excuse" is a technical term that Mason introduces earlier in the book by saying that "an agent has a simple excuse when her agency is not impaired, but it is blocked" (p.22), and citing "unavoidable ignorance" and "sudden paralysis" as examples of the relevant sort of agency-blocking factors. And there is no reason to think that gappy grasps always involve *unavoidable* ignorance. On the contrary, there are usually plenty of things that someone with a gappy grasp could do to fill in the gap and plenty that she could have done to avoid developing it in the first place. Gappy grasps are also not remotely analogous to paralysis. So it is hard to see how the concept of a simple excuse applies in these cases. Moreover, Mason invokes the notion of a simple excuse when discussing a case of a man who routinely litters and does not know that this is wrong; she says that he "does *not* have a simple excuse" because "he would not disown his action" (p.113, my emphasis). I am not sure exactly what Mason has in mind when she writes of disowning one's action. But I gather that the litterer would not disown his action either because he did it on purpose or because he does not think that it is wrong (or perhaps both). And all of this applies to people with gappy grasps who act in a manner the wrongness of which is explained by the bit of Morality that they fail to grasp; they do what they do on purpose and do not think that it is wrong. So, if the litterer does not have a simple excuse, then, *contra* Mason's claim about the case, it looks as though the agent with a gappy grasp cannot have a simple excuse either. But if they don't have a simple excuse, that gets rid of Mason's stated reason to take option (2).

If agents with gappy grasps aren't *ipso facto* excused from wrongdoing that falls in the gap, then option (2) is inconsistent with the claim – central to Mason's picture – that agents who grasp Morality and act wrongly without excuse are blameworthy in the ordinary way. Since we are talking about people who determinately succeed in grasping Morality, Mason's claim (c) entails that they can properly be subject to ordinary blame. And claim (c) is entailed by claims (a) and (b), which are also central components of Mason's picture. So she cannot give up claim (c) without major revisions to the whole picture. Although Mason herself seems to endorse option (2), then, it looks as though she would be wise not to do so.

Suppose Mason takes option (1) instead. This is a better fit with the overall picture defended in the book, according to which someone acts subjectively wrongly and can be properly subject to ordinary blame just in case she grasps Morality. Option (1) is consistent with claims (a–c), which is helpful for Mason.

Recall, though, that Mason also accepts the following:

- d) Agents who act subjectively wrongly act wrongly by their own lights.
- e) In ordinary blame, we are simply reminding the agent of the wrongness of her action.

Option (1) is consistent with claims (a–c). But it is inconsistent with claims (a–e). To see this, notice first that claims (a) and (d) jointly entail that agents whose wrongdoing falls in the gap act wrongly by their own lights. And that is false. On the contrary, as I emphasized earlier, these agents are by stipulation in precisely the circumstances in which they *don't* act wrongly by their own lights (although they do act objectively wrongly). Likewise, claims (c) and (e) together entail that these agents can be subject to a kind of blame in which we are simply reminding them of the wrongness of their actions. And that too is false. For, again by stipulation, we are dealing with precisely the cases in which agents with gappy grasps *cannot* be "reminded" of the wrongness of their action because they do not know (and may never have known) that it is wrong. We cannot remind someone of something they do not know (and may never have known). So, since ordinary blame is just a reminder – as Mason holds that it is, per claim (e) – it turns out that these agents *cannot* be subject to ordinary blame after all.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, since subjective wrongdoing involves acting wrongly by one's own lights – per claim (d) – it turns out that these agents do not act subjectively wrongly after all. But claims (d) and (e) are not optional details of Mason's view; they are elucidations of the concepts of subjective wrongdoing and of ordinary blame as she understands them. So, like claims (a–c), Mason cannot give up on them without major revisions to the whole picture. Option (1) is also a tough pill for Mason to swallow, then.

This looks bad for Mason. To sum up, the problem is that she wants to accept all of the following:

- a) Agents who grasp Morality act subjectively wrongly (when they act wrongly), whereas agents who fail to grasp Morality can only act objectively wrongly.
- b) Someone is blameworthy in the ordinary way iff they act subjectively wrongly and they have no excuse, whereas someone who only acts objectively wrongly can only be subject to detached blame.
- c) Agents who grasp Morality can be blameworthy in the ordinary way, whereas agents who fail to grasp Morality can only be subject to detached blame.
- d) Agents who act subjectively wrongly act wrongly by their own lights.
- e) In ordinary blame, we are simply reminding the agent of the wrongness of her action.
- f) Gappy grasps are possible.

...But she can't, because these claims are jointly inconsistent. If gappy grasps are possible then it is possible for there to be cases in which someone acts wrongly but the wrongness of her action evades her grasp, lying within the gap. These agents do not act wrongly by their own lights and our blame of them is not a mere reminder, notwithstanding the fact that they do grasp Morality. So Mason's picture entails both that they do and do not act subjectively wrongly, and that they both can and cannot be blameworthy in the ordinary way. That is a straight-up contradiction. So something, somewhere, has to give.

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<sup>7</sup> Mason might say that the stipulations that someone (a) grasps Morality and (b) acts wrongly jointly suffice to show that, deep down, she does know that what she is doing is wrong. This would mean that the agent *does* act subjectively wrongly and that our blame *is* a mere reminder. But it is incorrect. When someone has a gappy grasp of Morality, her moral beliefs do not encompass the bits of Morality that evade her grasp. That's what it is for there to be a gap.

In closing, let me observe that there is another kind of puzzle case in the vicinity that is effectively the opposite of the kind of case that we have been considering. Imagine that someone has several enormous gaps in her understanding of Morality, sufficient for her to determinately fail to grasp Morality overall – that is, not to be a vague borderline case, but to be determinately on the “out” side of the vague area. But imagine that, on one occasion, this agent performs an action that is wrong and whose wrongness is entirely explained by the bits of Morality that she does understand. To repurpose one of Mason’s examples: take the guy who fails to grasp Morality in virtue of his believing that women are too silly to be allowed any power or responsibility and suppose that he tortures some kittens, knowing full well that this is wrong. By stipulation, this agent fails to grasp Morality. So claim (a) entails that he can only act objectively wrongly, not subjectively wrongly, and claim (c) entails that he can only be blamed in the detached way. But this guy understands exactly why it’s wrong to torture kittens. The part of Morality that evades his grasp has nothing to do with the wrongness of torturing kittens, which we may suppose that he grasps perfectly. And torturing kittens is what he’s doing. So why would he not be subject to ordinary blame?

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