

Why is “I did not know” not a sufficient excuse for poor behaviour in the Christian ethical tradition?

Introduction

In everyday life, people often explain their actions by saying, “I did not know it was wrong.” Taken at face value, this might seem like a fair excuse, as it suggests they did not intend to do anything wrong. A lot of people believe that if someone does not have bad intentions, they shouldn’t be blamed for the consequences of their actions. It can feel unfair to hold someone responsible for something they were unaware of, especially if no harm was intended. But, because of this thinking, ignorance is sometimes used to avoid guilt or punishment for their actions.

Nonetheless, within the Christian ethical tradition, this defence is generally not deemed an adequate defence. Christian teaching tells us that people are created with the ability to recognise right from wrong through their conscience and reasoning, and that we bear responsibility for developing this understanding over time. This perspective suggests that individuals are expected to make every effort to learn what is good and avoid what is wrong, rather than simply claiming I didn’t know.

This essay will examine why “I did not know” isn’t considered an adequate excuse or justification for poor behaviour in the Christian ethical tradition. There are three main reasons. Firstly, moral knowledge is believed to be available to all through reason and conscience. Secondly, ignorance is something that we can avoid. Thirdly, the Christian ethical perspective on sin shows that individuals are responsible not only for their actions but also for their moral awareness. The essay will examine situations where ignorance might reduce blame. But, while ignorance can sometimes lessen responsibility, it generally does not fully forgive it.

Moral understanding and natural law

One of the main reasons why ignorance is not accepted as a sufficient excuse is the belief that all human beings have access to basic moral understanding. This principle is essential in Natural Law Theory¹, especially in the work of the Christian philosopher Thomas Aquinas.²

He writes that, ‘good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided’.³ It is claimed that this is the most fundamental principle of morality. He then asserts that this principle is self-evident and can be understood through reason. This implies that moral knowledge is not exclusive to religious people. Instead, it is something that all normal people can recognise.

Aquinas⁴ also explains that this basic principle gives rise to other moral rules, such as preserving life and living in society.

¹ Lewis Ayres, Medi Ann Volpe, and editor. Oxford University Press, *The Oxford Handbook of Catholic Theology*, in *Catholic Theology*, Oxford Handbooks Online (Oxford University Press, 2015).

² Martin Cyril D’Arcy and Aberystwyth former location. United Theological College, *Thomas Aquinas, Leaders of Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 1944).

³ Thomas and Dominicans. English Province., *The ‘Summa Theologica’ of St. Thomas Aquinas. Part 1 [2], QQ XXVII-XLIX*, New impression (Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1937).

⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I (2), QQ. XXVII-XLIX.

These are not difficult ideas, and most people can understand them. Because of this, it is difficult to claim complete ignorance of moral truth. This idea is held in the Bible. The Apostle Paul writes, 'they show that what the law requires is written on their hearts.'⁵

This implies that moral awareness is part of human nature. Even people who have not been taught religious principles or ethics still have some understanding of right and wrong.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church too emphasises the importance of conscience 'Moral conscience enjoins him at the appropriate moment to do good and to avoid evil.'⁶

This displays that we have an internal monitor that helps us judge our actions. As a result, Christian ethics holds that individuals can recognise wrongdoing, even if they do not always act upon that perception.

Conscience and Responsibility

Although conscience helps people recognise moral truth, Christian ethical tradition also teaches that conscience must be developed. People are not born with a full moral understanding, but they are expected to develop it over time.

The Catechism explains that 'Conscience must be informed and moral judgment enlightened.'⁷

This means that all of us, as individuals, have a responsibility to learn what is right and wrong. We should reflect on our actions, listen to advice, and try to improve our understanding. Because of this, ignorance is often not accepted as an excuse. If someone has failed to develop their conscience, then their ignorance is their own fault.

This idea is supported by another statement in the Catechism 'This ignorance can often be imputed to personal responsibility'.⁸

This shows that individuals are accountable for their own ignorance. A person might avoid examining their own actions, dismiss advice, or refuse to learn new things.

They may prefer to remain in their own little world rather than examine their behaviour or listen to others who challenge them. In this context, ignorance is not just accidental but can be a matter of choice. Therefore, Christian ethical tradition considers not only whether someone knew something was wrong but also whether they should have known and if they made any effort to learn what is right.

Types of ignorance

Christian ethics makes an important difference between various types of ignorance.

This helps to understand why ignorance is not always an excuse. Invincible ignorance⁹ refers to ignorance that a person cannot overcome. For example, an individual not exposed to certain moral ideas may not be fully accountable.

The Catechism once more states, 'If the ignorance is invincible, the evil committed by the person cannot be imputed to him.'¹⁰

⁵ Romans 2:15 (NIV)

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (Chapman, 1994).

⁷ *Catechism*, para 1783.

⁸ *Catechism*, para 1791.

⁹ Immanuel. Kant and J. M. D. Meiklejohn, *The Critique of Pure Reason*., 1st ed. (The Floating Press, 2009).

¹⁰ *Catechism*, para 1793.

This shows that Christian ethical tradition admits that some people may not be fully responsible for their actions. Nevertheless, most ignorance is considered unnecessary, meaning it could have been overcome.

Aquinas¹¹ argues that ignorance does not excuse wrongdoing when it results from negligence.

This requires that if someone could have learned what is right but chose not to, they are still responsible. This distinction is important because it shows that ignorance is not always treated in the same way. But, in most cases, it is not enough to completely explain behaviour.

Sin and moral understanding

Another reason why ignorance isn't a good enough excuse comes from the Christian Ethical view of sin. In Christianity, sin isn't just about breaking the rules; it reflects the moral state of a person.

Augustine¹² explains that sin arises when the will turns away from what is good. This shows that wrongdoing isn't only due to a lack of knowledge; it is often a matter of personal choice. Understanding this can help promote empathy and help bring about positive change.

This idea is supported by Jesus' teaching,

For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander.¹³

This shows that bad behaviour comes from inside the person, not just from ignorance.

Pope John Paul II states,

Conscience is not an independent and exclusive capacity to decide what is good and what is evil.¹⁴

Our conscience is strongest when directed by the truth. When someone ignores the truth, their moral scope can become less clear, leading them to justify their actions or pay less attention to how their behaviour affects others. Over time, this can cloud their sense of right and wrong. But this change doesn't happen overnight; it occurs gradually through repeated choices. It's also important to remember that this ignorance arises from those past choices, not as an excuse to do something wrong.

¹¹ Thomas and Province., *The 'Summa Theologica' of St. Thomas Aquinas. Part 1 [2], QQ XXVII-XLIX.*

¹² Augustine and Thomas Williams, *On Free Choice of the Will*, New Books 21.02.11 -07.03.11 (Hackett, 1993).

¹³ *Matthew 15:19*

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), para 56

Jesus in the Bible

Jesus' teachings suggest that ignorance does not entirely absolve someone's actions, though it may lessen their accountability.

In Luke's Gospel, Jesus says:

That servant who knew his master's will be beaten with many blows. But the one who did not know will be beaten with few blows.¹⁵

This reveals that while ignorance can affect how much blame someone is given, it does not fully excuse them from responsibility.

Simultaneously, Jesus shows compassion. On the cross, he says, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing.'¹⁶

This suggests that when people are unaware, they might deserve a bit more understanding and forgiveness. Their lack of knowledge may mean they did not fully understand the impact of their actions or the seriousness of what they were doing. It's important to remember that this doesn't make their actions okay. Wrong behaviour is still wrong, even if it was done in ignorance. We should always attempt to be compassionate, even when holding people accountable for their actions.

Analysis

The Christian ethical perspective that ignorance alone doesn't fully justify our actions has several positive aspects. It promotes responsibility by reminding us to consider our actions carefully rather than just making excuses. This encourages accountability and personal development, motivating us to reflect on our behaviour and to aim for improvement.

Another important aspect is its focus on taking responsibility instead of avoiding it. It encourages us to recognise what is right and to try our best to act accordingly. If ignorance were always overlooked, it could become too tempting for people to justify their actions, which might harm the moral and ethical fabric of our society, something that almost everyone cares about. This view can also be questioned. Not everyone has equal access to moral understanding, and some people may genuinely find it difficult to grasp certain moral values. People are influenced by their upbringing, culture, and education, which can shape their beliefs about right and wrong in very different ways. Because of these factors, it may sometimes seem unfair to expect the same level of responsibility from everyone.

MacIntyre¹⁷ argues that Moral thinking is shaped by society rather than being created in isolation.

This suggests that some individuals may struggle to recognise what is right. Furthermore, today's moral problems can be difficult. It is not always clear what the correct course of action is, even for those striving to act responsibly.

¹⁵ Luke 12:47–48.

¹⁶ Luke 23:34

¹⁷ Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue : A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

Conclusion

In the Christian ethical tradition and daily life, saying 'I didn't know' usually isn't considered a good excuse for such behaviour. Overall, this argument is convincing because people are expected to learn right from wrong, and ignorance is often something that could have been avoided. That's because all of us are expected to understand right and wrong through reason, conscience, and education, all of which, hopefully, help guide us in making better decisions. We're seen as responsible for seeking the truth and living by it, so simply claiming ignorance often isn't enough to avoid blame. This idea underlines that moral understanding is part of our responsibilities, not just something voluntary. Of course, there are numerous times when ignorance cannot be avoided, but often, it's the result of personal choices, such as not listening to advice, avoiding thinking, or failing to learn from past experiences. The concept of wrongdoing reminds us that we are accountable for our moral understanding, not just our actions. It emphasises the importance of developing a well-informed conscience over time. At the same time, the Christian ethical tradition recognises that in some cases, ignorance might reduce our responsibility, especially when someone genuinely had no reasonable way of knowing better. But this usually does not entirely remove us from accountability. Instead, it instructs us to treat others with fairness and kindness, respecting both their intentions and efforts. In conclusion, the Christian ethical tradition emphasises the importance of moral responsibility and urges us to consider our choices carefully, reminding us that ignorance is not usually a valid excuse.

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