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The Thing That Should (Not) Be: On André J. Abath's Ways of Knowing

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Abstract: In "Knowing What Things Are", A. Abath's account of knowledge has two main features. Firstly, it is inquiry-based or erotetic: knowledge is to be understood in terms of answers to questions of the form "What is x?" Secondly, it is contextualist:

answers to questions of the form "what is x?" are dependent on contextual factors, as they should be evaluated as true and satisfactory given the specific purposes (or goals) of an inquiry. Here I focus on the contextualist component of Abath's account. I argue that there is a tension between the descriptive account Abath advocates in chapters 1-5 and the normative account developed in chapters 6-7. I argue, in particular, that Abath's contextualism faces trouble when applied to knowledge of strongly social kinds and moral/political obligations, which are inherently normative.

André J. Abath's *Knowing What Things Are* is an elegant, insightful, breathtaking effort to defend a view on knowledge and make an original contribution to the recent developments of the literature on epistemology. The book is engaging, thought-provoking, full of lively examples and, for the most part, convincingly argued. It contains much to offer to our understanding of knowledge. As such, it should be of interest to a wide variety of philosophers. Although I have a lot of sympathy for the view developed in the book, there are some crucial points where I part company with Abath. My focus here will be on these.

1. A word about the overall project

Contrary to what one might expect from a book on contemporary epistemology, *Knowing What Things Are* offers neither a traditional conceptual analysis nor a semantic thesis about 'know' nor a comprehensive theory of knowledge—although it can shed light on all these tasks. Abath is interested in making sense of ordinary ascriptions of knowledge (and, by extension, uses of the word 'know') about mundane (kinds of) things—things that can be acknowledged to be real given any sufficiently liberal ontology. Such ascriptions are informed by what epistemic agents are doing when they inquire into things. I take it then that Abath is providing us with both an *explanation* of what we are doing when we ascribe knowledge of (mundane)

things to epistemic agents and an overall thesis about the *nature* of knowledge according to which getting to know things amounts to a sort of (successful) *practice of inquiring*.

Abath's account has two main features. Firstly, it is *inquiry-based* or, as he likes to put it, *erotetic*. That is to say, knowledge of what a thing is is to be understood "in terms of our knowledge of answers to questions of the form "What is *x*?"" (p. 3)[1]. Thus, this sort of epistemological account takes "the activity of inquiry—the activity of finding things out by means of questioning and answering to questions—as central to our cognitive and epistemic lives" (p. 26).

Secondly, it is (diehard) *contextualist*. That is to say, answers to questions of the form "what is x?" are dependent on context in that they should be evaluated as true and satisfactory (or false and unsatisfactory) given the contextual factors that apply to them (p. 4). Prominent among these contextual factors lie the specific purposes (or goals) of an inquiry. Putting all that together, one can be said to know what a thing is whenever one has true and satisfactory answers to a question about such a thing, by which it is meant that they meet one's contextually specified purposes and *ipso facto* close an inquiry. Thus, knowing what things are amounts to carrying out inquiries successfully. As a result, there are as many *ways of knowing* as there are contextualized inquiries answering to our purposes.

I am passing over many details of Abath's erotetic view as they are not relevant to my discussion of chapters 6 and 7. But since what I will have to say about those chapters is related to one of those main features of Abath's account—namely, *contextualism*—I had better mention briefly some of my reservations about it and indicate how I intend to approach the issue.

Abath claims that the sort of inquiry-based approach he develops is exemplified by the kind of erotetic method adopted by Socrates and Plato (p. 1; 3). But this is questionable. For Socrates and Plato, the erotetic approach

[1] All page references in the body of the text are to *Knowing What Things Are* unless otherwise noted.

is nothing more than a *method* as a means to knowledge. But Abath's inquiry-based approach, as he forcefully argues, is not a method of inquiry into knowing something. Rather, the *inquiry itself* is a way of knowing—that is, carrying out successfully a particular inquiry amounts to knowing (or a way of knowing) things. In this sense, Abath's erotetic view seems modelled, not on Socrates and Plato, but on traditional *pragmatism*[2].

But this now raises a question for Abath's erotetic view. There is no necessary connection between pragmatism and contextualism, no straightforward relation between interpreting knowledge in terms of inquiry and bringing in contextualism. From a pragmatist standpoint, any instance of inquiry may be part of *ideal* inquiry in the process of development and achievement of knowledge. Accordingly, there may be true or false, good and bad, justified and unjustified answers to questions and purposes, and the criteria for assessing them would not be given (only) by context but by their role and contribution to ideal inquiry. All instances of inquiry would be steps toward ideal inquiry and no particular instance of it would come up in isolation.[3]

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[2] That Abath's view qualifies as a version of pragmatism is supported by the fact that purposes are partly *practical* by their very natures. They set up *ends* to be satisfied through some activity. This is so even if such purposes are epistemic in *content*. Thus, there should be no "independent" realm of epistemology, no entirely non-practical way of knowing a thing.

[3] Some sort of ideal inquiry as the regulative end of belief/knowledge is a common interpretation of Peirce's and James' views. See, for example, Hookway (1985) and Jackman (1998). Putnam (1981) also seems to endorse a version of it in his brand of pragmatism. If one finds the notion of ideal inquiry metaphysically suspicious, there are other down-to-earth alternatives suitable to pragmatism: any instance of inquiry might be part of the activities of a unified virtuous epistemic agent or of a stable coherent body of beliefs in reflective equilibrium or of

The closest Abath comes to answering that question can be found, as far as I can see, in his discussion with Braun (p. 35 ff.). But I remain unconvinced. Abath may be right in saying that Braun's inquiry-based *invariantist* position does not offer any advantage over his contextualist erotetic view as to a choice between "the ignorance that subjects may display [about purposes] [and] the mistakes they can make [about a true answer to a question], when it comes to evaluating the truth-value of knowledge-wh ascriptions" (p. 39). But this seems to miss the main point at stake. The point is what seems more plausible as an overall picture of knowledge and most coherent with an overtly pragmatist (inquiry-based) account. This is a *general theoretical* question, one which I suspect cannot be answered by resorting to intuitions drawn from particular examples—as Abath does in his arguments against Braun. Intuitions drawn from examples can bend us toward all sorts of directions. As should be clear, this is not exactly an objection to the erotetic view developed in the book. But it reveals that contextualism does not come as cheap as Abath seems to think, and would require independent defence.

Now, at this point I must confess that I haven't been persuaded by the recent contextualist wave. At least not the sort of contextualism advocated by people like DeRose (1995) and Cohen (1999) that inspires Abath's view and usually goes by the name of 'epistemic contextualism' or 'semantic contextualism', sometimes 'indexical contextualism'. (From now on, I will simply refer to this view as 'contextualism', omitting not only the fact that there are versions of contextualism applied to many linguistic domains other than epistemology, but also the fact that there is no consensus among specialists as to the very definition of 'contextualism'.) Firstly, I am not sure about what exactly a context—for those contextualists—is. It sounds to me a philosophical term-of-art used to convey a variety of different intuitions. Secondly, I have doubts as to whether

practically useful information to holistic projections in our dealings with the world.

many contexts of use of a word—in the case at issue, uses of 'know'—are anything more than… contexts of use. That is to say, many ways of using a word that seem more naturally explained by variations of full-blown pragmatics. For one thing, contextualism is certainly not a comprehensive theory of knowledge.

But there seems to be something even more pressing about contextualism. It seems to face a dilemma: either there must be something that *unifies* all the uses of 'know' to make it possible to compare different contexts (as to degrees of demandingness or doubts, shifting-standards, communicative tasks, etc.)—in which case there is strong pressure for a *non-contextualist* reading of what semantically unifies them—or there really are different and independent contexts of use of 'know'—in which case there seems to be no room left for comparison among them. The latter option makes it a real possibility that people may be simply talking past each other in their different uses of 'know'.[4]

Be that as it may, I will not press those points here. I grant Abath all that he argues for in chapters 1-5, including his contextualism. On the other hand, it strikes me as crystal clear that Abath abandons (or needs to) the contextualist spirit of his erotetic view in chapters 6 and 7 (or, at least, contextualism is no longer relevant for the main points advanced in those chapters). I think he rightly does so, given that contextualism is ill-suited to deal with normativity, which is the terrain explored by chapters 6 and 7. Abath starts telling us a (descriptive) story about what a thing is (chapters 1-5) but ends up telling us a (normative) story about what a thing should (not) be (chapters 6 and 7). This is a problem if only because the normative leap is not possible without facing squarely the alleged is-should (or is-

[4] Of course, there is no novelty here. Objections along those lines can be found in a variety of different views: not only in the perhaps most radical (global) attack on the contextualist programme, Cappelen and Lepore (2005), but also in more moderate views. To mention but a few: Bach (2005), Davis (2004), Rysiew (2005).

ought) gap[5]—about which Abath says very little. But perhaps the gap can be somehow crossed or closed, one might say. Yet the problem remains for Abath as there is no convincing way of doing it from a contextualist perspective. Contextualism is blind to the gap.

2. Strongly social kinds and the normative gap

Abath begins chapter 6 by drawing a distinction between what he calls 'strongly social kinds' and other social kinds (supposedly "weaker" ones).

Any social kind is arguably mind-dependent. But, according to Abath, some social kinds exist independently of the *attitudes* of subjects *toward them*. As he puts it: "recessions can only exist given that there are communities and communitarian practices (…), but it is not the attitudes of subjects *toward recessions* that make recessions exist" (p. 79). This makes economic recession a social kind of the "weaker" type. There are, as it were, "objective social facts" (which hold independently from subjects' attitudes) that make statements about economic recession true.

Things are different, according to Abath, when it comes to a social kind like *permanent resident*. In this case, "the kind is dependent on the attitudes of subjects toward it" (p. 80). Being a permanent resident depends on, for example, to say the least, state officials having certain attitudes toward the candidate for being a permanent resident. More generally, what a permanent resident is "is largely determined by institutions" (p. 80). This sort of dependence on *subjects' attitudes* toward them (be they institutional or not) is what Abath means by the distinctive feature of *strongly* social kinds. Abath's preferred examples of such kinds are *marriage*, *woman* and *race*.

Abath tells us that strongly social kinds are a problem for the erotetic view because "the views offered by the relevant

[5] Since Abath makes no strict distinction between 'shoulds' and 'oughts', I will not distinguish them either.

institutions on what a given kind is strike us as simply wrong" (p. 77). So, the views offered by the relevant institutions are disputable and "far from consensual" (p. 77). At first sight, this is a bit confusing for the reader. After all, up to this point in the book we have been told all along that inquiry-based questions have true and false, right and wrong, answers *within* a context. Someone who proposed that water is CO_2 would be "clearly wrong" when the relevant context is given by the scientific inquiry about the chemical structure of water.[6] So, simply saying that there are true and false, right and wrong, answers is not enough to distinguish cases of strongly social kinds from the other sorts of cases discussed previously in the book.

Now, I would like to suggest that what makes strongly social kinds a problem for Abath's erotetic view is their *normativity* or relation to a normative question. But why is normativity a problem? Abath never tells us explicitly, but I suspect that it is a problem because *contextualism* seems unable to deal with normativity.

Why are strongly social kinds normative? Well, they should involve a question about what is the *right, better or best* purpose to follow and, as a consequence, the *right, better or best context* from which to speak of a strongly social kind. (From now on, I will omit this qualification and simply refer to the *right* purpose or context.) Thus, Abath claims, a conception of marriage that is restricted to a union of a man and a woman sounds *wrong* because it is not sufficiently inclusive. As such, it is *unjust* for not satisfying the (*right*) purpose of *social justice* (p. 81). This selfsame purpose applies, according to Abath, to knowing what woman and race are. As a result (of acknowledging the need to satisfy the purpose of social justice as the right purpose to know those strongly social kinds), Abath urges us to aim for *erotetic amelioration*, a

[6] I would add that someone who thinks that water is CO_2 is wrong in *any context* and does not know what water is. But I put aside this complication, as it would force me to go through the details of Abath's claim that someone may know what a thing is even if she has false beliefs about it.

normative task: "our answers regarding what such kinds are may have to be improved relative to previous answers, having social justice in mind" (p. 78).

As the idea of amelioration makes clear, we need to be able to *compare* purposes and contexts to say which ones are right. But how can contextualism provide conceptual resources to compare contexts so as *adjudicate among* them? Indeed, there seems to be no way, on a contextualist account, for a normative concept such as 'right' to be applied *among contexts* as a way of *comparing* and *adjudicating* them. If this is a correct diagnosis, Abath's efforts to make room for amelioration in his erotetic view are otiose. So, let us see this in more detail. There are three points worth making.

Firstly, we need to ask why we should satisfy the purpose of *social justice* in order to know what marriage, woman and race are. Even accepting that knowing what marriage, woman and race are is to be understood as an answer to a question formulated primarily from a *social* perspective (as Abath advocates), this is not yet to say that it should satisfy the purpose of *social justice*. At first sight, it would seem more plausible to say that we need to know something more general or basic (even if from a social perspective) about those strongly social kinds before we can ask whether a particular social configuration about them is socially (un)just. This is so not only for metaphysical or conceptual reasons related to supervenience. More importantly, to make knowing those strongly social kinds dependent on satisfying the purpose of social justice seems to give rise to the uncomfortable situation in which someone who thinks about them in *socially unjust* ways would not be thinking about marriage, woman and race at all. This would be undesirable insofar as we want to criticize those people. Alternatively, it would seem more plausible to say that one may know what marriage, woman and race are, but has socially unjust thoughts, attitudes and behaviour about them. This is why we criticize them.

Perhaps Abath means that there are no non-normative questions about those strongly social kinds because they are *irreducibly normative*. In that case, there would not be a more general or basic non-normative social perspective from

which to know them. But, if so, normative perspectives in conflict with social justice would need to be rejected as *inappropriate* in some sense. Now, the problem is that this is a result contextualism seems unable to accommodate. After all (and this is our second point), why not ask those questions (about what those strongly social kinds are) from the perspective of *social stereotypes* or *conventional institutions* or *communitarian ties* or *traditional/conservative values* or *social efficiency* or even the perspective of *social injustice*? Any of these perspectives seem to bear on purposes which, in turn, may give rise to an inquiry and a context. From a contextualist theoretical background, they should be as appropriate as the purpose of social justice.

Perhaps Abath is assuming that advancing social justice is a purpose we all share. This would give him some reason for preferring social justice to other purposes. However, if this is read as a *descriptive* statement about human beings' purposes and concerns, it sounds unreasonably optimistic. As a *normative* statement about what we all should aim, care about or advance, as far as I can see, it lacks defence in Abath's book, and we should not expect contextualism to provide it.

Thirdly, the contextualist commitments of Abath's erotetic view throughout chapters 1-5 would *not* seem to recommend that we move toward erotetic amelioration. It would apparently recommend that we acknowledge that there are as many contexts as there are different purposes in trying to answer questions about what marriage, woman and race are. So, according to this contextualist spirit, there should be as many ways of knowing what those strongly social kinds are as there are contexts and purposes for talking about them. Nothing like erotetic amelioration as a *normative* requirement is present in chapters 1-5. There the only thing that matters is context in a *descriptive* sense. No normative justification is required for the purposes and contexts that set forth the epistemic tasks in chapters 1-5. So, the normative turn in chapter 6 (also in chapter 7, as we will see below) needs explaining.

It is a common criticism of contextualism that it falls short of explaining disagreement.[7] Although I cannot argue for the point here, that criticism is directly related to the sort of normative difficulty to which Abath's view seems to fall prey. It is not clear how different purposes (in trying to know what a strongly social kind is) can be in disagreement given that they seem to give rise to different standards of evaluation and, as such, different contexts. If it is not clear how they can be in disagreement, it is not clear how anyone (with one purpose) can demand anything from any other (with another purpose).

In sum, if Abath wants to hold that there are some "clearly wrong" answers to a question about what strongly social kinds are, he needs to abandon contextualism and argue instead that there are *right* purposes from which to raise that question. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, there is a true answer available as to *what a thing should (not) be*, no matter if two individuals make use of different standards (and purposes) for answering the same question. In this sense, contextualism has vanished from the picture.

Finally, developing the same point in a further direction, we should notice that Abath contends that philosophers and social scientists—in a word, *specialists* on social affairs—are central to the project of erotetic amelioration. Abath suggests that their views should have priority when trying to answer questions about what strongly social kinds are (p. 81 ff.). But why so? Why should we follow or take advice from specialists in trying to know what marriage, woman and race are? And why does Abath think that *natural* scientists' purposes and contexts have *no* priority in relation to other purposes and contexts when it comes, for example, to knowing what water is (as put forward in chapters 1-5)? That's surprising. Not only social specialists seem more open to contestation than natural scientists, it is far from clear that social specialists are in a better position to answer social normative questions than laypeople—whereas natural

[7] See, for example, MacFarlane (2014: especially chapter 8), Richard (2004), Davis (2004).

scientists *do* seem indeed to be in a better position than laypeople to know what water is. Anyway, on a contextualist account, there seems to be no room for conferring such a priority to social specialists. The specialist's context should be seen as only one possible context among many, as providing us with one among many ways of knowing—as stated in chapters 1-5.

3. Conventional and moral/political obligations

Chapter 7 is mainly about things we *should* know given our social situations and positions. These situations and positions, Abath argues, give rise to obligations attached to them. According to one type of obligation, we should know something given certain voluntary commitments we make. For example, "a doctor who treats premature infants should be up to date with the relevant literature" (p. 108). The obligation applies to the doctor given the fact that the doctor has voluntarily signed on to exercise that professional role. In doing this, the doctor becomes committed "to a package of obligations (or duties), fixed by the institutions of which the role is a part" (p. 110).

According to another type of obligation, there are things we should know, irrespective of voluntary commitments, which impinge on us given the social roles we happen to occupy in our social situations. For example, "we are bound to certain obligations (…) simply because we are citizens of a given country" (p. 114). We have not signed on to be citizens. We are simply born citizens in a certain society. One example of an obligation as a citizen is "to comply with the country's laws" (p. 114). Assuming that the country's law requires of me as a citizen to vote, I should know what voting is, what an election is, what a candidate is, etc. (pp. 115-116).

Let us call, for the time being, those types of obligations 'social'. Now, Abath argues, *ignorance* of things one should know in those conditions—that is, things one should know given one's social obligations (be they the consequence of voluntary acts or not)—is typically *culpable* or *blameable* (p. 106).

The first thing to notice is that there are two 'shoulds' here. One 'should' is arguably *practical*, constituted by one's social obligations themselves, as a result of either voluntary commitments or social roles. These obligations establish how one is supposed to *act* by giving the agent an *end*: the doctor should follow the rules of her professional code; the citizen should follow the laws of her country. The other 'should' is arguably *epistemic*—what Abath calls 'epistemic obligations' (p. 107): one should *know* things in order to comply with one's social obligations. Notice also that there is a straightforward connection between the two. The epistemic 'should' is dependent and *justified* only on the supposition of the practical 'should'. Now, if so, it looks like we have a piece of old *instrumental practical rationality*: to satisfy one's end (in this case, given by one's social obligations), one should (or ought to) pursue the necessary means to it (in this case, have knowledge as a way of complying with one's obligations).

However, there is a problem with that. If the relation between those two 'shoulds' is correctly explained as a piece of instrumental *practical rationality*,[8] the consequence is that there is *no* genuinely epistemic 'should' (or 'ought')—contrary to our initial suggestion and to what Abath claims. The two 'shoulds' would be *practical* throughout. True, there is an epistemic task involved: coming to know things so as to comply with one's social obligations. Still, this (instrumental) 'should' is primarily practical. Knowing things is something one should *do* as (part of) a means to complying with one's social obligations.

Thus, if Abath wants to make room for the idea that social obligations give rise to genuinely *epistemic* obligations, Abath needs to interpret the *whole relation* as epistemic. Accordingly, although social obligations may have practical *consequences* (and we expect that!), they should be also a matter of belief/knowledge. So, we should drop Abath's dichotomy social obligations/epistemic obligations, and call them both

[8] Actually, the relation might be *constitutive* instead of instrumental. But this would not affect my point.

epistemic. In this way, practical rationality would be a version of epistemic rationality. By making this amendment to the discussion of chapter 7, Abath can maintain that what he calls 'epistemic obligations' are indeed epistemic, although instrumental to further epistemic obligations (the ones we are calling 'social').

Now, that reveals something else: the discussion of chapter 7 is as much about the social obligations as about the instrumental ones. Granted, knowing things in order to comply with one's social obligations is part of one's epistemic obligations and is, to a certain extent, a task one may independently accomplish. However, since the instrumental obligations have no point without the social obligations that justify them, knowing the latter is more fundamental than knowing the former. So, in what follows, I will concentrate on the social obligations rather than the instrumental ones.

We need first to ask about the *nature* of such social obligations. Abath seems to be talking about *conventional* obligations (or, at least, obligations that could well be interpreted as purely conventional) until he considers the case of the citizen who might justifiably refuse to follow the conventional obligations attached to her by the social role she occupies in her society. If the rules of her society are "unjust"—like, for example, the rules of the Nazi regime (p. 114)—she might justifiably refuse to obey them. She might do so, according to Abath, on the basis of *moral/political* obligations (p. 115).[9] At this point, Abath makes it clear that he understands morality/politics as going beyond convention. This distinction is not wholly uncontentious, but I will not pursue the point. The important thing to bear in mind is that, for Abath, moral/political obligations can be in conflict with conventional ones.

Given that distinction, a comment is in order with respect to the type of moral/political obligations Abath relates to *social roles*. It is very contentious to associate one's

[9] Since Abath does not make a clear distinction between moral and political obligations, I will call them 'moral/political'.

moral/political obligations (in the absence of voluntary commitments) to the social roles one occupies for being born into them or for happening to be in a given social situation. Versions of social role theory have been criticized for tending to reify conservatism, for passing over social conflicts and social dynamics, for implying a controversial form of social functionalism, etc. It is very debatable that someone has a moral/political obligation, say, of fidelity to a country simply in virtue of the fact that she was born in it. Of course, that depends on the sort of theory about morality/politics we have in mind. However, it is not clear that social role theory can deliver what Abath wants. Social role theory coheres nicely with *conventional* obligations, but it is doubtful that it does so with moral/political obligations (as Abath understands them as distinct).

Having said all that, we are now in a position to ask about the relation of moral/political obligations with other commitments of Abath's erotetic view. A natural question is how to make sense of Abath's claim that moral/political obligations can conflict with conventional ones on the assumption of contextualism. As far as I can tell, if we assume contextualism, it is not possible to make the sort of normative judgment Abath makes about the example of the citizen. Similarly to what we have seen about chapter 6, it does not seem to be possible to make that sort of normative judgement from the perspective of moral/political concerns, if we take these concerns as just giving rise to one context among many possible others. In other words, there seems to be no way Abath could make sense of the priority he is conferring on moral/political concerns over conventional ones, assuming a contextualist theoretical background.

If we assume the sort of contextualism defended in chapters 1-5, we seem to have at least two distinct purposes and contexts here: on the one hand, conventional ones and, on the other hand, moral/political ones. (Surely, there could be others: prudential, aesthetic, even immoral and anti-political, etc.) Assuming contextualism, why should we prefer morality/politics to convention as a way of answering our social purposes and inquires? As we have seen before, Abath's erotetic view seems to fall short of answering what

justifies prioritizing one purpose and context over possible others. Again, contextualism is a *descriptive* theory of what to make of purposes we actually have and contexts we are situated in, not a *normative* theory for adjudicating among these. Contextualism provides us with *no* normative guidance among purposes and contexts.

I will finish with a comment about the topic of *epistemic justice*. As we have pointed out, Abath claims that, typically, people are culpable or blameable for their ignorance regarding the moral/political obligations that apply to them, including not knowing how to comply with them. However, Abath also claims that some people are excusable for their ignorance. This is so because their social conditions make them unable to know and comply with their obligations. They are *blameless* in this respect. Part of the explanation is that they are victims of epistemic injustice: being deprived of some epistemic good makes it impossible (or very unlikely) for them to know certain things.

That seems correct as far as it goes. But when Abath tries to apply it to the case of Daniel (p. 118 ff.)—who, as a citizen, is obliged to pay income taxes but does not know it because he has had a tough life as a working class person—my intuitions tend to diverge from Abath's. I find the example too unrealistic. Maybe we could fix the example. But, actually, there is a general point to be made.

All depends on the conditions for *blame*. These, Abath acknowledges, are fuzzy (p. 111). I agree. But I cannot see how we could advance in this topic without some theory of responsibility. Drawing conclusions from intuitions about particular examples is not a promising methodology. So, I am not sure what to say about Abath's example. But some points are worth mentioning.

As Abath admits (p. 119), there is a sense in which Daniel still should (or ought to) know about taxes. The obligation is not cancelled by his ignorance. Indeed, according to a common conventional legal principle (*ignorantia juris non excusat*), the law assumes that everyone in a society knows it given its publicity. Assuming that some version of it could be provided as a moral/political principle, I think Abath is right in saying that Daniel could be in some sense not

blameable, even if his obligation is still valid. As some authors have put it, the right thing to say about these cases is that 'blame' implies 'can', not that 'ought' implies 'can' (Sinnott-Armstrong 1984).

However, even to say that 'blame' implies 'can' is questionable to a certain extent. Think about the drunk driver who causes a car crash. We blame him for the crash despite the fact that he *could not* avoid it (given his drunkenness). We arguably blame him because he put himself in a situation in which he could not comply with his obligations as a driver: he decided to drink and drive (Sinnott-Armstrong 1984, pp. 250-251). If we press the case further, our intuitions may start to go astray. What if the driver has not been well-educated about civic and social responsibilities, has been raised in an alcoholic environment and has had a tough life (just as Daniel) as a working class person? Would we say that these conditions make him blameless? I am not sure. Without some theory of responsibility any attempted answer sounds to me a shot in the dark.

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