IGNORANCE

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Article summary
Until recently, epistemology has largely neglected ignorance, focusing on knowledge and what is necessary for knowledge, such as epistemic justification. However, over the last twenty years or so the tendency to neglect ignorance has changed, especially in several debates at the intersection of ethics and epistemology. This may come as a surprise, as one might think that ignorance is simply the absence of knowledge and that since the philosophical literature displays an extensive discussion on knowledge, ignorance doesn’t deserve significant philosophical attention. As we shall see below, though, it turns out to be philosophically challenging to spell out exactly what ignorance is and that even if it is absence of knowledge, ignorance merits philosophical attention of its own in a wide variety of philosophical debates.

Ignorance is an important concept in at least four different philosophical areas. First, in epistemology, the core questions regarding ignorance are what the nature of ignorance is, what varieties of ignorance there are, and whether ignorance has any epistemic value. Several issues in the philosophy of religion, such as negative theology, which says that we are inevitably ignorant of the divine, also touch on ignorance.

Second, there are moral dimensions to ignorance. Some philosophers have argued that certain moral virtues, such as modesty, entail ignorance. Ignorance can be a moral excuse. And the fact that ignorance itself sometimes excuses one for one’s ignorance leads to the so-called tracing problem (see Section 4 below).

Third, the concept of ignorance plays a significant role both in criminal and civil law and, as a result of that, in the philosophy of law. Ignorance can provide a legal exculpation: because one was ignorant, one did not commit a crime in the first place. Ignorance can be a legal excuse: one did commit a crime, but one is not guilty for it because one was ignorant. And ignorance can count as an inculpation: one is culpable for committing a crime because of one’s ignorance.

Fourth, several topics in social philosophy and the philosophy of science involve the notion of ignorance. Agnotology studies culturally induced ignorance, such as the ignorance brought about by the tobacco industry about the effects of smoking. Social forces and hermeneutical frameworks make certain interpretations of and by minority groups possible or impossible and, thereby, lead people to remain ignorant about them. Debates about privacy refer to the obligation of other people to remain ignorant about certain facts about one’s personal life, especially since the considerable increase of possibilities for removing such ignorance by accessing a person’s traces in the digital world. Quite a few philosophers of technology have argued that societies should aim at collective ignorance regarding particular technologies that have been or might be developed, such as possibilities for making weapons of mass destruction, given the enormous potential social harms involved.
1. The nature of ignorance
One of the main epistemological questions regarding ignorance is what it is. On the Standard View, ignorance is lack or absence of knowledge. This view is often tacitly assumed by writers who use the notion of ignorance (e.g. Zimmerman 1997, 424). More recently, though, it has been defended in detail, for instance, by Pierre Le Morvan (2011; 2012). On an alternative view that other philosophers embrace (e.g. Goldman and Olsson 2009, 19-21), ignorance is lack or absence of true belief. I have defended this view myself (e.g. Peels 2014). It has been dubbed the ‘New View’. Most adherents of both the Standard and New Views agree that when it comes to ignorance of propositions, one can only be ignorant of true propositions. The two views agree that someone is ignorant when she disbelieves a true proposition, suspends judgment on a true proposition, or has never even remotely considered a true proposition. Thus, when someone falsely believes that Dublin is the capital of Iceland, she is ignorant that it is not the capital of Iceland. When someone suspends judgment on the proposition that humans have detected gravitational waves, she is ignorant that they did. And anyone living in the 14th century was deeply ignorant of the fact that the atomic number of gold is 79, because they even lacked the concept of ‘atomic number’.

The Standard and New Views disagree, though, on those cases in which someone believes a true proposition without knowing it. On the Standard View, such a person is ignorant, whereas on the New View, she is not. Thus, on the Standard View, a mere true belief, a reliably formed true belief that falls short of knowledge, a Gettierized belief, and so on, will all be instances of ignorance. For example, imagine that Driscoll believes that there is a sheep in the field because he thinks he sees one, but that it is a person cleverly disguised as a sheep, whereas somewhere else in the field, hidden behind a rock, there is indeed a sheep. On the Standard View of ignorance, Driscoll is ignorant that there is a sheep in the field. On the New View, Driscoll is not ignorant of that truth (nor does he know it), even though he is ignorant of other truths, such as that the sheep is hidden behind a rock. For several arguments in favour of the Standard View and the New View, see Peels and Blaauw (2016).

These are the two views on the nature of ignorance that can be found in the literature. But, of course, other options are theoretically possible – even though they haven’t been defended in the literature yet – such as the view that ignorance is the absence of reliably formed belief in a true proposition or the absence of a justified true belief. This is an issue that needs further inquiry.

2. Varieties of ignorance
The discussion in the previous section suggests that we can distinguish at least three varieties of ignorance in accordance with the mental attitude one has towards a true proposition: disbelieving ignorance (one has a false belief), suspending ignorance (one suspends judgment on a true proposition), and deep ignorance (roughly: one has never even remotely considered the proposition). According to the Standard View, there is a fourth variety: unwarranted ignorance (true belief that falls short of knowledge).

A second way to distinguish varieties of ignorance focuses on the kinds of true propositions that one is ignorant of: factive and normative propositions. It is quite common in ethics, for instance, to distinguish factive from normative ignorance (e.g. Harman 2011). Factive ignorance is ignorance of certain facts about the world, such as the number of polar bears in Canada. Normative ignorance is ignorance of certain
norms, standards, or obligations, such as people’s moral obligation to not kill for fun or people’s epistemic obligation to believe in accordance with the evidence (if people do indeed have such an obligation). On normative realism, normative ignorance will be a particular kind of factive ignorance, for on normative realism, there are normative truths or normative facts. The distinction between factive and normative ignorance is important, for it is sometimes claimed (e.g. Harman 2011) that moral ignorance never or hardly ever provides an excuse whereas factive ignorance quite frequently does, and, of course, that claim is tenable only if moral ignorance differs from factive ignorance.

A third way to distinguish varieties of ignorance also focuses on the object of ignorance. It rightly notes that in epistemology, it is quite common to distinguish between propositional knowledge (knowing that $p$), procedural knowledge (knowing how to $\phi$), and knowledge by acquaintance (knowing $X$). It suggests that it would be quite natural to make parallel distinctions for ignorance: there is ignorance of truths, such as the truth that Antarctica is the largest desert on earth, ignorance of how to do something, such as play the tuba, and ignorance of non-propositional phenomena, such as countries, smells, tastes, and people. Whether ignorance does indeed come in these varieties has hardly been explored yet.

Another yet unexplored distinction is that between individual ignorance and group ignorance. Group ignorance is a theme in the so-called ‘epistemology of race’ (see below), but its exact relation to individual ignorance has not been analysed yet. Social epistemology has addressed how collectives, such as groups of scientists, as well as boards and institutions, can have beliefs and knowledge and how that relates to the relevant cognitive subjects, such as board members (e.g. De Ridder 2013). The question whether the relation between individual ignorance and collective ignorance is analogous to that between individual belief and collective belief (or individual knowledge and group knowledge) is one that remains to be addressed.

This might not exhaust the options when it comes to the varieties of ignorance. One might think that there is also a crucial difference between ignorance of the truth-value of a proposition and ignorance of the proposition itself (Le Morvan 2011; 2012) and between ignorance of a proposition and ignorance as not knowing the answer to a question.

3. Further issues in the epistemology of ignorance
As I pointed out in the Introduction, ignorance has largely been neglected in epistemology. This may be because ignorance is usually understood as the opposite of knowledge – again, this is the Standard View – while, according to many contemporary analytic philosophers (e.g., Steup (2005)), epistemology is concerned with the study of knowledge and what is necessary for it. The term ‘ignorance’ has been used in debates on radical scepticism, but normally only to indicate the epistemically devastating consequences of scepticism: we would be ignorant of pretty much anything regarding the external world (e.g. Unger (1975)).

Yet, in addition to the nature and varieties of ignorance, there seem to be several issues in epistemology in which ignorance plays a crucial role. First, one might wonder whether ignorance sometimes has epistemic value. Duncan Pritchard (2016) has recently argued that it does. Among the candidates are: ignorance of misleading defeaters; the ignorance involved in intellectual humility; and the ignorance implied by believing certain truths rather than others when the former are epistemically more important than the latter—one cannot believe every truth after all: there are way too many of them.
Second, the concept of ignorance is crucial to several debates in religious epistemology. To give just one example: according to negative theology, human concepts fall short of the true nature of the divine. Consequently, we are necessarily ignorant about who or what God truly is. However, we can have knowledge – and express that knowledge by way of assertions – of what the divine is not. We can understand something of who God is, though without acquiring knowledge about who God is, by knowing what God is not. Advocates of this tradition include Plotinus, Maimonides, Ibn al Arabi, and contemporary analytic philosophers, such as Jonathan Jacobs. For more on this, see Franke (2015). Other issues in the philosophy of religion are such things as whether or not the lack of evidence and the ensuing ignorance of the divine provide a good reason to think that God does not exist, since one might think that a perfectly good God would prevent human ignorance regarding his own existence—see McBrayer (2016).

There are many other epistemological questions regarding ignorance that have hardly received any attention from philosophers. Among the other question are these: Does ignorance come in degrees? How does ignorance relate to assertion? Under which conditions is ignorance rational and do those conditions differ from those of belief? How does ignorance relate to other propositional attitudes, such as doubt and uncertainty? And how is ignorance related to epistemic justification?

4. Ignorance in ethics

Ever since Aristotle (2003, 123-129, 299-305), it has been acknowledged that ignorance can sometimes be an excuse. In other words, one's ignorance can block blameworthiness for something, such as an action or the consequence of an omission, or maybe even a belief (Van Woudenberg 2009). One is blameless for giving one’s friend poisoned chocolate pudding if one was ignorant that it was poisoned—at least, if that ignorance is itself blameless. However, it is highly controversial exactly when ignorance excuses. Two questions have taken centre stage in the debate. First, does ignorance count as an excuse only if one acts from ignorance or does acting in ignorance suffice (e.g. Zimmerman 1997, 424)? In other words, does it suffice if one is ignorant or is it also necessary that that ignorance somehow plays a motivational or other kind of causal role? Second, does ignorance excuse only if one is blameless for it or can culpable ignorance also excuse—or maybe partially so (e.g. Smith 1983, 548-551)? However, further questions can be asked about ignorance as an excuse. Does disbelieving a true proposition (a particular kind of ignorance) excuse to the same extent as suspending judgement on a true proposition (another kind of ignorance) does? And does ignorance of the fact that one has an obligation excuse to the same degree as ignorance as to how to meet that obligation? (e.g. Peels 2014)

An issue in ethics that has received less attention is how moral character relates to ignorance. Of course, moral character requires knowledge of certain things, such as knowledge of important moral norms, but one might suspect that it also requires certain kinds of ignorance. Among those who have defended this thesis is Julia Driver (1989, 2001). She has argued that certain moral virtues entail a particular kind of ignorance—and moral virtues are, of course, constitutive of moral character. For example, she argues that modesty implies that one is ignorant that one is modest. Among the other alleged ‘virtues of ignorance’ that she mentions are blind charity, which, according to her, sees the good but not the bad in other people, and not holding a grudge against people. Exactly which kinds of ignorance these moral virtues entail, however, needs specification and further discussion.
That ignorance excuses leads to an important problem, which is now called the
Tracing Problem. It seems that if one should not have been ignorant, one has violated
an obligation vis-à-vis one’s ignorance. Now, if one has violated such an obligation,
one did so either from weakness of will (against one’s better judgement) or from
ignorance. However, many philosophers take it that acting from weakness of will is rare (e.g., Zimmerman 2008). If one acts from ignorance rather than weakness of will, one is either excused by such ignorance or blameworthy for it. One is blameworthy
for that ignorance only if one violated an earlier obligation, and one did so either from weakness of will or from ignorance. And so the regress gets started. It would follow
that people are almost always excused for their ignorance and, hence, that people are
significantly less often blameworthy than most people believe. The Tracing Problem
has received substantial attention lately, but it is not clear that a plausible solution has been put forward (Rosen 2004; Peels 2016).

Other debates in ethics in which ignorance plays an important role are: What
kind of ignorance, if any, does moral responsibility require? Does it require, for
instance, that if one has no alternative one is ignorant that one has no alternative? Can ignorance only ever excuse or can it also justify? Is it morally worse to make people
hold certain false beliefs (a particular kind of ignorance) than to prevent them from
holding certain true beliefs (another kind of ignorance)? And what should one do if
one is ignorant as to which source of normativity (e.g. morality or prudence) is
applicable in one’s situation?

5. Ignorance in philosophy of law

Many laws state that one is to be punished only if one acted mens rea, that is, from a
guilty mind. There are many mental states that count as ‘having a guilty mind’. Culpable ignorance is one of them. Thus, one can be legally punishable for acting
from culpable ignorance (Smith 2011). This, however, raises many questions. For, when should we count ignorance as legally culpable? This is an issue that transcends
the philosophy of law, as it also concerns other dimensions of the normative realm:
how do moral, professional, prudential, and epistemic obligations with respect to
ignorance and the absence of ignorance (if there are such obligations) or with respect
to belief-influencing actions, such as evidence-gathering, relate to each other? More
work needs to be done on this topic, for an account of how these obligations relate
to each other can inform the debate about when we should hold people legally
accountable for their ignorance and when we shouldn’t.

As Larry Alexander (2016) points out, the notion of ignorance plays other
important roles in the law. In criminal law, ignorance is crucial in at least three
different ways. First, it can exculpate by negating the existence of a mental state that is
required to establish the commission of a particular crime. Second, it can excuse because it can render one blameless for committing a specific crime. Third, it can be incriminatory because something might seem innocent conduct and turn out to be an
attempt to commit a crime if that person turns out to be ignorant of certain things that we took her to know. As to civil law, according to Alexander, the fact that one was
ignorant hardly ever implies that one did not consent when consent is legally required
for something or other. For example, when it comes to gifts and bequests, the donor’s ignorance generally is immaterial to the validity of the transfer.

6. Ignorance in social philosophy and philosophy of science

Ignorance plays a pivotal role in various debates in social philosophy and philosophy
of science. First, there is the field of so-called agnotology. For an introduction to this
field, see Proctor and Schiebinger (2008). Agnotology studies culturally induced ignorance or doubt, especially the ignorance that is created or maintained by the publication of misleading or inaccurate scientific data. Well-known examples are the influence of the tobacco industry and climate scepticism. For more examples, see Oreskes and Conway (2010). Due to media neglect, governmental suppression, or yet other forces, people remain ignorant or in doubt about something. It would be worthwhile to connect the recent epistemological scrutiny of ignorance to classical debates in agnotology.

Second, the concept of ignorance plays a core role in the epistemology of race. It is widely acknowledged nowadays that certain groups in society, especially racial minorities, suffer not merely from certain acts of oppression, but also from what Miranda Fricker has called ‘testimonial injustice’ and ‘hermeneutic injustice’ (2007). Testimonial injustice takes place when a speaker receives an unfair deficit from a hearer because of a prejudice on the hearer’s part. Hermeneutic injustice occurs when social structures represent minorities wrongly, which also leads to unjust interpretations by these minorities of their own experiences, such as the way in which African-minorities suffer from interpretative frameworks that don’t do justice to who they are and what they experience. More recently, Fricker (2016) and Medina (2016) have explored these concepts in more detail in relation to the notion of collective ignorance.

A third field in social philosophy to which the concept of ignorance is crucially relevant is that of privacy (for more on the relation between the two, see Blaauw 2012). Over the last few decades, we have seen an increase in the possibilities for data mining. What we can know about people, based on the traces they leave in the digital world via their posts on Twitter, Facebook, and other social media, their email accounts, and their Google searches, expands explosively. Many people are concerned about these developments and think that they have a right to privacy, that is, to other people’s being ignorant of these things.

Finally, an important question in social philosophy and the philosophy of technology is to what extent we should aim at ignorance rather than knowledge of certain technologies. Of course, certain technologies have greatly contributed to well-being, but, then, others, such as weapons of mass destruction, have been and could be again extremely harmful to humankind. Seumas Miller (2016), for instance, has argued that we sometimes have an obligation to be or become collectively ignorant regarding certain nuclear technologies.

Among further issues in social philosophy in which ignorance is a core concept are: risk taking; what one should do in situations in which one is ignorant and in which an expert provides testimony but in which one has some reason to not completely trust the expert, as is often the case in medicine, science, commerce, law, and politics; which obligations not to be ignorant we have when it comes to practices of public commemoration and how we determine their scope; the role of ignorance in scientific research—Stuart Firestein (2012), for instance, argues that ignorance is the engine of science.

References and further reading

(Explores the various roles ignorance plays in criminal and civil law.)

(Provides an ethical theory and discusses when ignorance excuses.)

(Provides an account of privacy partly in terms of ignorance.)

(Addresses the issue of what is needed for a research group to have scientific knowledge about something.)

(Identifies a couple of moral virtues, zooms in on modesty, and argues that it entails certain kinds of ignorance.)

(Provides a consequentialist defence of moral virtues, arguing that what counts is what good they bring about, and that that sometimes entails a certain ignorance.)

(Argues that ignorance rather than knowledge drives science.)

(Spells out the relation between concept of ignorance and the apophatic theological tradition.)

(Introduces the concept of epistemic injustice in the epistemology of race.)

(Argues that social ignorance issuing from hermeneutical injustice is likely to be bad, because it is likely to be conserving ignorance that sustains unequal social relations.)

(Explores the value of knowledge in comparison with true belief on reliabilism.)

(Argues that if someone kills a living organism under normal circumstances, knowing that she is ignorant of the moral status of that living organism, she is blameworthy for that act.)

(Distinguishes factive from normative ignorance and argues that moral ignorance hardly ever provides an excuse.)


Oreskes, N., and E.M. Conway (2010) *Merchants of Doubt: How a Handful of Scientists Obscured the Truth on Issues from Tobacco Smoke to Global Warming*, New York: Bloomsbury Press. (Provides several cases studies in agnotology, explaining how various groups of scientists intentionally kept people ignorant on issues such as the effects of smoking.)

Peels, R. (2014). ‘What Kind of Ignorance Excuses? Two Neglected Issues’, *Philosophical Quarterly* 64.256, 478-496. (Defends an account of when ignorance provides a moral excuse and distinguishes various kinds of ignorance.)

Peels, R. (2016a). *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*, New York: Oxford University Press. ( Discusses when ignorance provides an excuse for holding a belief and aims to solve the tracing problem.)


(Argues that in certain exceptional cases, ignorance is epistemically valuable.)

(Introduces the reader to the field of culturally induced ignorance about issues such as the influence of smoking on lung-cancer.)

(Defends that we rarely know that someone is blameworthy for some act, because one either acts from ignorance or from akrasia, and culpable ignorance traces back to an earlier action, and it is hard to know that someone acted from akrasia.)

(Seminal essay on responsibility for ignorance, in which Smith defends that there are two ways in which one can be blameworthy for ignorance: a derivative and a non-derivative way.)

(Provides an account of how people can be blameworthy for acts even if they act from ignorance and their ignorance does not issue from a prior culpable act or omission.)

(Provides a few definitions of ‘epistemology’ that seem to exclude discussion of ignorance from the realm of epistemology.)

(Frequently uses the word ‘ignorance’ in discussing scepticism, without epistemologically exploring the concept of ignorance.)

(Distinguishes various kinds of ignorance and provides an account of when ignorance excuses one for holding a false belief.)

(Embraces the Standard View on ignorance and explores the relation between ignorance and blameworthiness.)

(Argues that our massive ignorance about the past, the future, ourselves, and the circumstances in which we act has a crucial bearing on which moral obligations we have and what responsibility we bear for our choices.)

Related articles
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