

Introduction

Rik Peels and Martijn Blaauw

1 Ignorance and Epistemology

Epistemology is traditionally understood as the theory of knowledge and the theory of what is necessary for knowledge, such as reliability or epistemic justification. Matthias Steup, for instance, in his Epistemology entry to the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* gives two definitions of ‘epistemology’.¹ On the narrower definition, it is the study of knowledge and justified belief, while on the broader definition, it is the study of issues having to do with the creation and dissemination of knowledge in particular areas of inquiry. Ignorance, at first glance, seems to be the *opposite* of knowledge or, at least, something quite close to its opposite.

It is not surprising, therefore, that epistemologists have hardly paid any attention to ignorance. None of the major epistemology handbooks, for instance, devotes a chapter to it.² And in the vast epistemological literature of the last twenty years or so, the topic of ignorance is virtually absent. The only area where ignorance enters the discussion is in debates on radical scepticism.³ Interestingly, ignorance has received attention in areas of philosophy *other than* epistemology. This illustrates, if nothing else, at least that the concept is useful in philosophical discussion.

In ethics, for instance, it is quite common to distinguish between acting *in* ignorance and acting *from* ignorance, since there is a fierce debate on whether or not it is necessary to act from ignorance in order for one’s ignorance to count as an excuse for one’s action or whether acting in ignorance suffices for that.⁴ However, this debate concerns the relation between one’s mental state of ignorance and one’s actions, and as such does not seem to count as belonging to an ‘epistemology of ignorance’.

¹ See Steup (2005). ² See, for instance, Audi (2011); Moser (2005).

³ See, for instance, Unger (1975).

⁴ See Guerrero (2007, pp. 63–64); Houlgate (1968, pp. 112–113); Rivera-López (2006, p. 135); Zimmerman (1997, p. 424).

Also, in discussions about facts and norms, ignorance is an important topic. One can be ignorant about facts and about norms – and thus also about epistemic norms. *Factive* ignorance is ignorance of certain facts about one's or other people's circumstances, such as the room's temperature or a person's criminal track record. *Normative* ignorance is ignorance of certain standards, principles, or norms, such as *moral* standards and *epistemic* standards.⁵ However, the fact that one can be ignorant about epistemic norms does not mean that this type of ignorance counts as belonging to an 'epistemology of ignorance'.

This leaves much of the territory unexplored, though. An obvious question is, of course, what ignorance *is*. The dominant, standard view that we find tacitly assumed in much of the literature and hardly ever defended in any detail is that ignorance is the lack or absence of knowledge.⁶ Remarkably, we also find an alternative view in the literature, even though, again, it is not spelled out in detail. On this alternative view, ignorance is the lack or absence of true belief.⁷ The difference between the two views is that on the standard view, a true belief that falls short of knowledge is also ignorance, whereas on the new view it is not. In fact, it seems that intermediate positions are possible as well, such as the thesis that ignorance is the lack of *reliably formed* true belief or the absence of *justified* true belief.⁸

Epistemic questions regarding ignorance are, however, not confined to the question of what the nature of ignorance is. Here are some other questions about ignorance that, it seems, epistemologists are especially suited to answer:

- What is the difference between ignorance as *absence* of knowledge and ignorance as *lack* of knowledge?⁹
- What kinds of ignorance are there? Is ignorance in the case of false belief, for instance, crucially different from ignorance in case one cannot even grasp the proposition in question?
- In what respect does ignorance as not knowing the answer to a question differ from ignorance as to whether something is true?

⁵ E.g., Harman (2011).

⁶ Driver (1989, pp. 373–376); Fields (1994, p. 403); Flanagan (1990, p. 422); Houlgate (1968, p. 109); Unger (1975, p. 93); Zimmerman (1988, p. 75; 2008, ix).

⁷ Goldman (1986, p. 26); Goldman and Olsson (2009, pp. 19–21); Guerrero (2007, pp. 62–63); Rivera-López (2006, p. 135); Van Woudenberg (2009, p. 375).

⁸ In a short exchange with Pierre Le Morvan, we have tried to put on the agenda the issue of what the nature of ignorance is. See Le Morvan (2011, 2012, 2013); Peels (2010, 2011a, 2012).

⁹ For an answer to this question, see Haas and Vogt (2015, pp. 18–19).

- Are there such things as ignorance-how and ignorance-of in addition to ignorance-that (propositional ignorance)? If so, how do these relate to propositional ignorance?
- How is ignorance related to other propositional attitudes, such as suspension of judgement and doubt?
- To what extent is ignorance context-dependent?
- Does ignorance come in degrees?
- Does ignorance have any epistemic value?
- What is the relationship between ignorance and assertion?
- How does ignorance relate to epistemic justification?
- Is there such a thing as group ignorance? If so, how should it be understood?
- When is ignorance rational?¹⁰ Do the rationality conditions for ignorance differ from those of belief?

One may object that, even though these questions are interesting and even though epistemologists are well suited to answer them, they do not belong to the domain of *epistemology* proper, since ignorance is as remote from knowledge as anything could possibly be. This objection, however, fails to acknowledge that the scope of epistemology has significantly broadened during the last few years. Epistemologists pay attention to all sorts of propositional attitudes, such as hope, trust, faith and doubt, to such phenomena as insight and understanding, to epistemic virtues, such as wisdom, intellectual thoroughness and open-mindedness, and to epistemic vices, such as dogmatism and gullibility. In some cases, there is a clear connection with knowledge, but in many others, there is not. (We see the same pattern in other philosophical disciplines. Metaphysics studies that which exists – but a very interesting question is *what does not exist* – if only because the answer to this question can illuminate what existence is.) There is no reason, then, to think that philosophical reflection about ignorance does not belong to the domain of epistemology.

2 Ignorance beyond Epistemology

We have shown that the discussion about ignorance deserves a proper place in epistemology. However, ignorance is also a crucial theme in other philosophical disciplines and even beyond philosophy. The various perspectives on the epistemic dimensions of ignorance offered in this book

¹⁰ It is widely acknowledged that ignorance can be rational. For an overview, see Somin (2015).

can be helpful for debates in these other fields. In this section, we will give four examples to illustrate this claim.

First, in *A Theory of Justice*, John Rawls provides a social contract account of justice in which the concept of ignorance plays a crucial role.¹¹ The core idea is that in our reasoning about the fundamental principles of justice, we should imagine ourselves to be free and equal persons who should jointly come to agree upon and commit themselves to certain core principles of justice. In order to guarantee that everyone's reasoning is maximally impartial, everyone is supposed to be ignorant of their personal social and historical circumstances. They *do* know certain general facts, such as interests people generally have and facts about psychology, biology, physics, and so on. But, due to their so-called *veil of ignorance*, they do not know what their personal circumstances will be. According to Rawls, imagining ourselves to be in such a situation helps us establish the principles of justice that we all ought to embrace. A thorough analysis of the epistemic dimensions of ignorance can help us to get a firmer grip on exactly what kind of ignorance the veil of ignorance requires. If ignorance is lack of knowledge, for instance, then Gettierized true belief will count as ignorance but, it seems, this is *not* the kind of ignorance that Rawls has in mind. So, what kind of ignorance is it? And is a certain *degree* of ignorance required here?

Second, it is widely acknowledged in the philosophical literature that ignorance sometimes counts as a *moral excuse*.¹² Ethicists have paid significant attention to whether blameworthy ignorance can also excuse or whether only blameless ignorance excuses,¹³ and whether one is excused only if one acts *from* ignorance or also if one acts *in* ignorance.¹⁴ These are important questions, but there are further questions to be asked about ignorance as a moral excuse that have to do with the *epistemic* dimensions of ignorance.¹⁵ Imagine, for instance, that I *falsely believe* that the chocolate cake in front of me contains no poison whatsoever and that I am blameless for holding that belief. It seems that in that case, my ignorance that the chocolate cake is poisoned excuses me for giving it to my friend.

¹¹ See Rawls (1971).

¹² See, for instance, Brandt (1969, p. 349); Fischer and Ravizza (1998, pp. 12–13); Goldman (1970, p. 208); Rosen (2003, pp. 61–62); Smith (1983, pp. 543–571); Zimmerman (2008, pp. 169–205).

¹³ According to some philosophers, blameworthy ignorance provides a *full* excuse (e.g., Ross 1939, pp. 163–164). Others argue that it provides only a *partial* excuse (e.g., Beardsley 1979, p. 578). And still others claim that it provides *no* excuse at all (e.g., Kornblith 1983, pp. 35–36). Smith (1983, pp. 548–551), distinguishes between these three views.

¹⁴ The former is claimed or suggested by, for instance, Donagan (1977, pp. 128–130) and Zimmerman (1997, p. 424). The latter view is advocated by, among others, Houlgate (1968) and Rosen (2008, 598n).

¹⁵ For an exploration of two of these questions, see Peels (2014).

Compare this situation to one in which I *suspend judgment* on the proposition that the chocolate cake is poisoned. In this situation as well the cake is poisoned, so, again, I am ignorant that it is. It seems that in this scenario, my ignorance does *not* excuse me, at least not fully. Whether or to what extent ignorance provides a moral excuse, then, seems to depend on what kind of ignorance is involved. Hence, a thorough exploration of the epistemic dimensions of ignorance will shed light on the conditions under which ignorance excuses.

Third, in several traditions that are partly philosophical, partly religious, ignorance plays a crucial role. One of these is the so-called *apophatic* tradition.¹⁶ One of the core ideas in this tradition is that we are necessarily ignorant of the transcendent or God in particular. We find ideas along these lines with certain Neo-Platonists, such as Plotinus, Porphyry, Proclus, and Iamblichus. We find it in the writings of Jewish and Christian Medieval philosophers, such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, John Scotus Eriugena, Maimonides, and Meister Eckhart, but also in the works of Islamic Medieval philosophers, such as Ibn al Arabi and Jalal al-Din Rumi. Nicholas of Cusa even wrote an entire book in which he defends the idea that there is such a thing as ‘learned ignorance’ about God: *De docta ignorantia* (1440 CE). Recently, the apophatic tradition has gained popularity and has been defended by employing the modern tools of analytic philosophy.¹⁷

Fourth, we see that in our current digital society, with its focus on big data and data mining, what can be known (and what can be known *about persons*) expands explosively. All our personal data are readily available to be ‘mined’ through the various online traces we leave in the digital world. Posts on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram can be collected to construct a view on a persons’ identity. In this way, people are being known by others even though they have not intentionally tried to achieve this. It is a by-product of our digital lives. The interesting consequence is that ignorance becomes a very important concept. For we do not want to be known by others in ways that we cannot control. We want to protect our privacy, and privacy can be defined in terms of ignorance.¹⁸

These are just a few cases that illustrate the relevance of ignorance in the broader context of philosophy. It would not be difficult to add examples: some kind of ignorance is required for employing certain *methods in scientific inquiry*, such as Randomized Controlled Trials in medicine studies, according to some philosophers science itself is *driven*

¹⁶ For an exposition of the relation between the apophatic tradition and ignorance, see Franke (2015).

¹⁷ See, for instance, Jacobs (2015). ¹⁸ See, for instance, Blaauw (2013).

by ignorance,¹⁹ ignorance can count as a *legal excuse*, ignorance plays a crucial role in *risk management*, and so on.²⁰ In fact, there is a field, called *agnotology*, that investigates culturally induced ignorance or doubt, in particular the kind of ignorance induced by the publication of misleading or inaccurate scientific data, such as those regarding the tobacco industry.²¹ Such ignorance may be the result of governmental suppression, media neglect, or yet something else. Agnotology focuses on how these cultural influences induce ignorance, but it does *not* study what ignorance is, in what varieties it comes, and other epistemic dimensions of ignorance.

In another volume, entitled *Perspectives on Ignorance from Moral and Social Philosophy* (Rik Peels, ed., 2016), several moral, social, cultural, and legal issues regarding ignorance are explored.²² In this volume, we confine ourselves mostly to the conceptual groundwork by exploring the epistemic dimensions of ignorance. Indeed, it is our aim in this volume to put the notion of ignorance on the epistemological agenda, by showing that there are a lot of non-trivial and interesting relations between ignorance and knowledge that warrant a thorough epistemological investigation of this concept.

3 Outline

Finally, let us introduce the essays in this volume. The first four essays map a terrain that has not received much attention in the philosophical literature, namely the nature of ignorance, the varieties of ignorance, degrees of ignorance, and the relation between ignorance and the closely related propositional attitude of doubt.

The opening essay by Pierre Le Morvan and Rik Peels explores the nature of ignorance, that is, it explores what it is to be ignorant. More specifically, it discusses two rival accounts of what are individually necessary and jointly sufficient conditions for being ignorant. These two accounts can be found in the literature and have recently received further articulation and defence. On the first view, called the Standard View, ignorance is the lack or absence of knowledge, whereas on the second view, called the New View, ignorance is the lack or absence of true belief. Rather than defending a particular account of ignorance, the essay spells out each of these two views in more detail and provides an overview of the main arguments for each of them. The reader will notice that the

¹⁹ See Firestein (2012). ²⁰ For further examples, see Gross and McGoey (2015).

²¹ For a recent introduction to agnotology, see Proctor and Schiebinger (2008).

²² See Peels (2016).

controversy on the nature of ignorance will return in most of the other contributions to this volume.

In the second paper, Nikolaj Nottelmann discusses varieties of ignorance divided according to kind (what the subject is ignorant of), degree (the degree to which the subject is ignorant), and order (such as whether or not one is ignorant of one's ignorance). It provides analyses of notions such as factual ignorance, erotetic ignorance (ignorance of answers to questions), and practical ignorance (involving absence of know-how). After that, it discusses the interrelations between those kinds, arguing against so-called intellectualists that at least some instances of practical ignorance seem dissimilar in important respects to instances of the former kinds. Nottelmann also argues that we do not have strong reasons for regarding practical ignorance as a graded phenomenon, even if practical knowledge is. Finally, it is brought out that even if so-called Socratic ignorance, that is, first-order ignorance without second-order ignorance, is an important concept, still ignorance absolved only above the second order is of marginal significance.

In the third chapter, Berit Brogaard criticizes the Standard View, on which ignorance is lack of knowledge-that. She argues that this view is incorrect since lack of sufficient justification for one's true belief or lack of belief does not necessarily amount to ignorance. Her argument rests on linguistic considerations of common uses of 'ignorant' and its cognates. The phrase 'is ignorant of', she argues, functions differently grammatically and semantically from the phrase 'does not know', when the latter is used propositionally. 'Is ignorant of' does not have a genuine propositional use but is best understood as equivalent to 'is not knowledgeable of'. She further argues that 'knowledgeable' and 'ignorant' are relative gradable expressions. Relative gradables typically are associated with an implicit or explicit standard of comparison, give rise to borderline cases, and trigger the Sorites Paradox in their unmarked form. From these linguistic considerations, it follows that being ignorant admits of degree, and that one can fail to be ignorant despite lacking true beliefs concerning the propositions constituting a particular subject matter. The proposed treatment of knowledgeability and ignorance of facts and subject matters lends itself to an alternative reply to the problem of scepticism, which Brogaard calls the 'simple response'. Finally, she argues that ignorance can also reflect incompetence with respect to a particular activity. She defends the view that the latter is a case of lacking a particular kind of ability-involving knowledge-how, viz. practical knowledge of how to perform the activity in question.

In the fourth contribution to this book, Erik Olsson and Carlo Proietti discuss how ignorance relates to doubt. Both notions have received little

attention from epistemologists, let alone the relation between the two. They start out by identifying what they consider to be the main conceptual ingredients of these two propositional attitudes. They then propose a semiformal account within the possible worlds framework of epistemic and doxastic logic. The upshot is that while ignorance can be construed as the absence of knowledge of any of the alternatives under scrutiny, doubt is a very special kind of ignorance. They develop two specific proposals for how to capture special features of doubt in their framework. One centres on the notion that doubt, as opposed to ignorance, requires maximum plausibility of opposing alternatives. The other is based on the assumption that, for an agent to doubt a proposition, she must entertain the question whether that proposition is true on her research agenda.

The next three essays discuss ignorance in relation to contemporary debates in epistemology: ignorance and contextualism, ignorance and arguments against anti-intellectualism, and the epistemic value that ignorance could have.

Michael Blome-Tillmann defends contextualism against the sceptic's claim that our ignorance about the external world is universal and ubiquitous. *Prima facie* convincing arguments have been produced in support of scepticism and a lively philosophical debate has emerged ever since Descartes introduced such an argument in his *Meditations*. In this chapter, Blome-Tillmann considers one such argument for our ignorance about the external world and outlines how *Epistemic Contextualism*—a contemporary view about the semantics of 'knowledge'-attributions—aims to resolve the threat posed by the argument. After discussing the contextualist's take on our alleged ignorance about the external world, he considers contemporary objections to contextualism that have proven influential in the recent literature. Along the way the paper discusses the issue of whether ascriptions of 'ignorance' are context-sensitive and develops a problem for absence-of-true-belief accounts of ignorance that have been popular in the recent literature.

On anti-intellectualism, whether a subject knows that *p* depends not only on traditional truth-conducive factors, but also on the stakes for her. Now, two of our most important sources of knowledge are testimony and memory. Thus, it would be problematic for any view of knowledge if it were in tension with the idea that these sources yield knowledge. For, it would leave us much more ignorant than we ordinarily take ourselves to be. In her chapter, Jessica Brown defends anti-intellectualism against the claim that it interrupts the transmission of knowledge by memory and testimony, and makes a demand of stakes-sensitivity on our practices that we do not meet. She argues that, when properly formulated, anti-intellectualism is not incompatible with plausible principles concerning

the transmission of knowledge by memory and testimony. Further, she argues that there is a plausible reading of the stakes-sensitivity requirement which is compatible with anti-intellectualism and imposes no more work on us than would likely be imposed by the rival intellectualist view. She, thus, provides a defence against the objection that anti-intellectualism implies that we are significantly more ignorant than we normally think.

A third issue that has been hotly debated in the recent epistemology literature is the topic of epistemic value. The aim of Duncan Pritchard's paper is to relate some of the key themes in this literature to the specific topic of ignorance. In particular, he explores an important ambiguity in the very notion of epistemic value, and also examines how best to understand a distinctively epistemic kind of value. While there is often a straightforward epistemic disvalue to ignorance, he delineates some interesting cases in which ignorance is valuable, and valuable moreover in a manner that, he argues, is specifically epistemic.

The final three essays discuss the epistemic dimensions of ignorance in relation to issues that go beyond the purely cognitive, namely religious epistemology, hermeneutical injustice, and racial insensitivity. We have included these essays, even though they are not confined to the epistemic dimensions of ignorance. This is because religious epistemology is typically part of epistemology, the epistemology of race has interesting things to say on collective ignorance in its relation to individual ignorance, and group belief and group knowledge have recently become big issues in epistemology.²³

In his essay, Justin McBrayer provides a broad taxonomy of the various roles that ignorance plays in the religious life. He assumes the Standard View on ignorance, which says that ignorance is lack of knowledge. This means that many people will be religiously ignorant in all sorts of ways. The religious life, McBrayer argues, is shaped as much by ignorance as by knowledge, both when it comes to religious theory and religious practice. Moreover, ignorance can be marshalled as evidence both for and against specific theoretical conceptions of the divine, but it is not decisive in either case. He also argues that certain kinds of ignorance are compatible with a life of religious virtue and religious faith. He concludes that religious ignorance need not paralyze us in the sense that one can live, hope, and worship as a theist, despite, or maybe even partly because of, our ignorance regarding the supernatural realm.

Miranda Fricker's contribution to this volume focuses on the relation between ignorance and injustice, especially hermeneutical injustice.

²³ See, for instance, De Ridder (2013); Mathiesen (2006).

Hermeneutical injustice is a specific kind of injustice, namely the kind that occurs when hermeneutical marginalization results in someone being unable to understand her own experience and/or render it intelligible to some significant social other. According to Fricker, the focus on ignorance as opposed to knowledge, just like the focus on injustice as opposed to justice, inverts the normal perspective taken in Anglo-American philosophy. She welcomes the inversion, because she takes it to bring to light some of the ways in which our epistemic practices can go wrong without the subject realizing it. In her paper, Fricker revisits both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice from the point of view of ignorance. However, her focus is mostly on discussions of *motivated ignorance* as a means of exploring one of the pressures that can perpetuate ignorance created by hermeneutical injustice. She does so principally in relation to the idea of ‘white ignorance’ as first put forward by Charles Mills. In the broad, ‘white ignorance’ is a label for a kind of motivated ignorance on the part of white people considered as a privileged racial class vis-à-vis the experiences and perspectives of black people. Fricker defends a certain view of how white ignorance relates to ‘wilful’ or motivated forms of hermeneutical injustice.

In the final essay of this volume, José Medina explores the relation between ignorance and racial insensitivity. In his paper, he offers an analysis of racial ignorance as a kind of insensitivity or numbness that reflects on the affective and cognitive aspects of people’s inability to respond to racial injustices. His analysis highlights three key features of racial insensitivity: as an *active* (self-protecting) kind of ignorance, as a form of *meta*-ignorance, and as a form of *self*-ignorance. On the basis of this analysis, he argues for a robust notion of *shared* epistemic responsibility that can successfully handle issues of complicity and bystander responsibility. On Medina’s view, until the epistemic responsibilities breached in racial ignorance are repaired, complicity with racial injustices cannot be uprooted. He argues that taking responsibility for epistemic injustices must begin with the *acknowledgment* of one’s epistemic positions and relations, and with the *acknowledgment* of the epistemic privileges and epistemic limitations one has. He analyses several real-life examples as illustrations of epistemic failures and epistemic successes in racial relations, developing a critical discussion of the epistemic dimension of racial micro-aggressions and of what he calls micro-resistance. The paper concludes with a proposal for an ethics and pedagogy of discomfort, which exploits experiences of epistemic discomfort for the facilitation of ethical growth and the expansion of epistemic sensibilities.

We think that the contributions to this volume present a very nice overview of the relevance of ignorance to epistemological investigation