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Exploring the Boundaries of Ignorance: Its Nature and Accidental Features

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Nadja El Kassar is right that different fields in philosophy use rather different conceptions of ignorance. I also agree with her that there seem to be three major conceptions of ignorance: (i) ignorance as *propositional ignorance*, which she calls the ‘propositional conception of ignorance’, (ii) ignorance as *actively upheld false outlooks*, which she names the ‘agential conception of ignorance’, and (iii) ignorance as *an epistemic practice*, which she dubs the ‘structural conception of ignorance’.

It is remarkable that nobody else has addressed the question before of how these three conceptions relate to each other. I consider it a *great* virtue of her lucid essay that she not only considers this question in detail, but also provides an account that is meant to do justice to all these different conceptions of ignorance. Let us call her account the *El Kassar Synthesis*. It reads as follows:

Ignorance is a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in her beliefs – either she has no belief about *p* or a false belief – and her epistemic attitudes (doxastic attitudes, epistemic virtues, epistemic vices).¹

My reply to her insightful paper is structured as follows. First, I argue that her synthesis needs revision on various important points (§2). After that, I show that, despite her ambition to capture the main varieties of ignorance in her account, there are important kinds of ignorance that the El Kassar Synthesis leaves out (§4).

I then consider the agential and structural conceptions of ignorance and suggest that we should distinguish between the *nature* of ignorance and its *accidental features*. I also argue that these two other conceptions of ignorance are best understood as accounts of important accidental features of ignorance (§5). I sketch and reply to four objections that one might level against my account of the nature and accidental features of ignorance (§6).

I conclude that ignorance should be understood as the absence of propositional knowledge or the absence of true belief, the absence of objectual knowledge, or the absence of procedural knowledge. I also conclude that epistemic vices, hermeneutical frameworks, intentional avoidance of evidence, and other important phenomena that the agential and structural conceptions of ignorance draw our attention to, are best understood as important accidental features of ignorance, not as properties that are essential to ignorance.

Preliminaries

Before I explore the tenability of the El Kassar Synthesis in more detail, I would like to make a few preliminary points about it that call for some fine-tuning on her part. Remember that on the El Kassar Synthesis, ignorance should be understood as follows:

¹ El Kassar 2018, 7.

El Kassir Synthesis_{version 1}: Ignorance is a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in her beliefs – either she has no belief about p or a false belief – and her epistemic attitudes (doxastic attitudes, epistemic virtues, epistemic vices).²

It seems to me that this synthesis needs revision on at least three points.

First, a false belief *is* an epistemic attitude and even a doxastic attitude. Moreover, if – as is widely thought among philosophers – there are exactly three doxastic attitudes, namely belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment, then *any* case of ignorance that manifests itself in a doxastic attitude is one in which one lacks a belief about p or one has a false belief about p .

After all, if one holds a false belief and that is manifest in one's doxastic attitude, it is because one holds a false belief (that is the manifestation). If one holds no belief and that is manifest in one's doxastic attitudes, it is because one suspends judgment (that is the manifestation). Of course, it is also possible that one is deeply ignorant (e.g. one cannot even consider the proposition), but then it is simply not even manifest in one's doxastic attitudes. The reference to doxastic attitudes in the second conjunct is, therefore, redundant. The revised El Kassir Synthesis reads as follows:

El Kassir Synthesis_{version 2}: Ignorance is a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in her beliefs – either she has no belief about p or a false belief – and her epistemic attitudes (epistemic virtues, epistemic vices).

What is left in the second conjunct after the first revision is epistemic virtues and vices. There is a problem with this, though. Ignorance need not be manifested in any epistemic virtues or vices. True, it happens often enough. But it is not necessary; it does not belong to the essence of being ignorant.

If one is ignorant of the fact that Antarctica is the greatest desert on earth (which is actually a fact), then that may simply be a fairly cognitively isolated, single fact of which one is ignorant. Nothing follows about such substantial cognitive phenomena as intellectual virtues and vices (which are, after all, dispositions) like open-mindedness or dogmatism. A version that takes this point into account reads as follows:

El Kassir Synthesis_{version 3}: Ignorance is a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in her beliefs: either she has no belief about p or a false belief.

A third and final worry I would like to raise here is that on the El Kassir Synthesis, ignorance is a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in her beliefs—and, as we saw, on versions 1 and 2, in her intellectual character traits (epistemic virtues, epistemic vices). I find this worrisome, because it is widely accepted that virtues and vices are *dispositions* themselves, and many philosophers have argued this also holds for beliefs.³

² El Kassir 2018, 7.

³ E.g. Schwitzgebel 2002.

If so, on the El Kassar Synthesis, ignorance is a disposition that manifests itself in a number of dispositions (beliefs, lack of beliefs, virtues, vices). What sort of thing is ignorance if it is a *disposition to manifest certain dispositions*? It seems if one is disposed to manifest certain dispositions, one simply *has* those dispositions and will, therefore, manifest them in the relevant circumstances.

Moreover, virtue or the manifestation of virtue does not seem to be an instance or exemplification of ignorance; at most, this seems to be the case for vices. Open-mindedness, thoroughness, and intellectual perseverance are clearly *not* manifestations of ignorance.⁴ If anything, they are the opposite: manifestations of knowledge, insight, and understanding. An account that takes these points also into account would therefore look as follows:

El Kassar Synthesis version 4: Ignorance is an epistemic agent's having no belief or a false belief about *p*.

It seems to me that version 4 is significantly more plausible than version 1. I realize, though, that it is also a significant *revision* of the original El Kassar Synthesis. My criticisms in what follows will, therefore, also be directed against version 1 of El Kassar's synthesis.

Propositional, Objectual, and Procedural Ignorance

On the first conception of ignorance that El Kassar explores, the propositional one, ignorance is ignorance of the truth of a proposition. On the Standard View of ignorance, defended by Pierre Le Morvan and others,⁵ ignorance is lack of propositional knowledge, whereas on the New View, championed by me and others,⁶ ignorance is lack of true belief.

I would like to add that it may more suitable to call these 'conceptions of propositional ignorance' rather than 'positional conceptions of ignorance'. After all, they are explicitly concerned with and limit themselves to situations in which one is ignorant of the truth of one or more propositions; they do not say that *all* ignorance is ignorance of a proposition.

More importantly, though, we should note that ever since Bertrand Russell, it has been quite common in epistemology to distinguish not only *propositional* knowledge (or knowledge-that), but also *knowledge by acquaintance* or *objectual knowledge* (knowledge-of) and *procedural* or *technical* knowledge (knowledge-how).⁷

Examples of knowledge by acquaintance are my knowledge of my fiancée's lovely personality, my knowledge of the taste of the Scotch whisky Talisker Storm, my knowledge of Southern France, and my knowledge of the smell of fresh raspberries. Examples of

⁴ Julia driver (1989) has argued that certain *moral* virtues, such as modesty, imply some kind of ignorance. However, moral virtues are different from epistemic virtues and the suggestion that something *implies* ignorance is different from the idea that something *manifests* ignorance.

⁵ See Le Morvan 2011. See also various essays in Peels and Blaauw 2016; Peels 2017.

⁶ See Peels 2010; 2014; 2019. See also various essays in Peels and Blaauw 2016; Peels 2017.

⁷ See Russell 1980, 3.

technical or procedural knowledge are my knowledge of how to navigate through Amsterdam by bike, my knowledge of how to catch a North Sea cod, my knowledge of how to get the attention of a group of 150 students (the latter, incidentally, suggests that know-how comes in degrees...).

Since ignorance is often taken to be lack of knowledge, it is only natural to consider whether there can also be *objectual* and *technical ignorance*. Nikolaj Nottelmann, in a recent piece, has convincingly argued that there *are* such varieties of ignorance.⁸

The rub is that the El Kassir Synthesis, on all of its four versions, does *not* capture these two other varieties of ignorance. If one is ignorant of how to ride a bike, it is not so much that one lacks beliefs about *p* or that one has false beliefs about *p* (even if it is clear exactly which proposition *p* is). Also, not knowing how to ride a bike does not seem to come with certain intellectual virtues or vices.

The same is true for objectual ignorance: if I am not familiar with the smell of fresh raspberries, that does not imply any false beliefs or absence of beliefs, nor does it come with intellectual virtues or vices. Objectual and procedural ignorance seem to be *sui generis* kinds of ignorance.

The following definition *does* capture these three varieties of ignorance—one that, for obvious reasons, I will call the ‘threefold synthesis’:

Threefold Synthesis: Ignorance is an epistemic agent’s lack of propositional knowledge or lack of true belief, lack of objectual knowledge, or lack of procedural knowledge.⁹

Of course, each of the four versions of the El Kassir Synthesis could be revised so as to accommodate this. As we shall see below, though, we have good reason to formulate the Threefold Synthesis independently from the El Kassir Synthesis.

The Agential and Structural Conceptions of Ignorance

According to El Kassir, there is a second conception of ignorance, not captured in the conception of propositional ignorance but captured in the conception of *agential* ignorance, namely ignorance as an actively upheld false outlook. This conception has, understandably, been particularly influential in the epistemology of race. Charles Mills, whose contributions to this field have been seminal, defines such ignorance as the absence of beliefs, false belief, or a set of false beliefs, brought about by various factors, such as people’s whiteness in the case of white people, that leads to a variety of behavior, such as avoiding evidence.¹⁰ El

⁸ See Nottelmann 2015.

⁹ If the Standard View on Ignorance is correct, then one could simply replace this with: Ignorance is a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in lack of (propositional, objectual, or procedural) knowledge.

¹⁰ See Mills 2015, 217.

Kassar suggests that José Medina, who has also contributed much to this field, defends a conception along these lines as well.¹¹

The way Charles Mills phrases things suggests a natural interpretation of such ignorance, though. It is this: ignorance is the lack of belief, false beliefs, or various false beliefs (all captured by the conception of propositional ignorance), *brought about* or *caused by* a variety of factors. What these factors are will differ from case to case: people’s whiteness, people’s social power and status, people’s being Western, people’s being male, and people’s being heterosexual.

But this means that the agential conception is not a conception of the *nature* of ignorance. It grants the nature of ignorance as conceived of by the conception of propositional ignorance spelled out above and then, for obvious reasons, goes on to focus on those cases in which such ignorance has *particular causes*, namely the kinds of factors I just mentioned.¹²

Remarkably, much of what El Kassar *herself* says supports this interpretation. For example, she says: “Medina picks out a kind of ignorance, active ignorance, *that is fed* by epistemic vices – in particular, arrogance, laziness and closed-mindedness.” (p. 3; italics are mine) This seems entirely right to me: the epistemology of race focuses on ignorance with specific, contingent features that are crucially relevant for the debate in that field: (i) it is actively upheld, (ii) it is often, but not always, disbelieving ignorance, (iii) it is fed by epistemic vices, etc.

This is of course all perfectly compatible with the Standard or New Views on Ignorance. Most people’s ignorance of the fact that Antarctica is the largest desert on earth is a clear case of ignorance, but one that is *not* at all relevant to the epistemology of race.

Unsurprisingly then, even though it clearly *is* a case of ignorance, it does *not* meet any of the other, contingent criteria that are so pivotal in critical race theory: (i) it is not actively upheld, (ii) it is deep ignorance rather than disbelieving ignorance (most people have never considered this statement about Antarctica), (iii) it is normally not in any way fed by epistemic vices, such as closed-mindedness, laziness, intellectual arrogance, or dogmatism.

That this is a more plausible way of understanding the *nature* of ignorance and its *accidental* features can be seen by considering what is widely regarded as the opposite of ignorance: knowledge. According to most philosophers, to know a particular proposition *p* is to believe

¹¹ See Medina 2013.

¹² El Kassar in her paper mentions Anne Meylan’s suggestion on this point. Anne Meylan has suggested – and confirmed to me in personal correspondence – that we ought to distinguish between the state of being ignorant (which is nicely captured by the Standard View or the New View) and the action or failure to act that induced that state of ignorance (that the agential and structural conceptions of ignorance refer to), such as absence of inquiry or a sloppy way of dealing with evidence. I fully agree with Anne Meylan’s distinction on this point and, as I argue in more detail below, taking this distinction into account can lead to a significantly improved account of ignorance.

a true proposition *p* on the basis of some kind of justification in a non-lucky (in some sense of the word) way. That is what it *is* to know something, that is the nature of knowledge.

But in various cases, knowledge can have all sorts of *accidental* properties: it can be sought and found or one can stumble upon it, it may be the result of the exercise of intellectual virtue or it may be pretty much automatic (such as in the case of my knowledge that I exist), it may be morally good to know that thing or it may be morally bad (as in the case of a privacy violation), it may be based primarily on the exercise of one's own cognitive capacities or primarily on those of other people (in some cases of testimony), and so on. If this is the case, then it is only natural to think that the same applies to the opposite of knowledge, namely ignorance, and that we should, therefore, clearly distinguish between its nature and its accidental (sometimes crucially important) features:

The nature of ignorance

Ignorance is the lack of propositional knowledge / the lack of true belief, or the lack of objectual knowledge, or the lack of procedural knowledge.¹³

Accidental, context-dependent features of ignorance

Willful or unintentional;
Individual or collective;
Small-scale (individual propositions) or large-scale (whole themes, topics, areas of life);
Brought about by *external* factors, such as the government, institutions, or socially accepted frameworks, or *internal* factors, such as one's own intellectual vices, background assumptions, or hermeneutic paradigms;
And so on.

According to El Kassar, an advantage of her position is that it tells us *how* one is ignorant (p. 7). However, an account of, say, knowledge, also need not tell us *how* a particular person in specific circumstances knows something.¹⁴ Perceptual knowledge is crucially important in our lives, and so is knowledge based on memory, moral knowledge (if there is such a thing), and so on.

It is surely no defect in all the many accounts of knowledge, such as externalism, internalism, reliabilism, internalist externalism, proper functionalism, deontologism, or even knowledge-first epistemology, that they do not tell us *how* a particular person in specific circumstances knows something. They were never meant to do that.

Clearly, *mutatis mutandis*, the same point applies to the structural conception of ignorance that plays an important role in agnotology. Agnotology is the field that studies how various

¹³ The disjunction is meant to be inclusive.

¹⁴ One might react to this by claiming that the reliabilist and the virtue epistemological accounts *are* accounts of knowledge that tell us something about *how* someone knows. This seems misguided to me. All they tell us is that there must have been *some* mechanism or a variety of mechanisms that brought about the belief in question and that are reliable. Exactly *which* mechanisms were involved, how they worked, and all sorts of other things relevant for understanding *how* one knows are not included in these accounts of knowledge (and are not even meant to be included).

institutional structures and mechanisms can intentionally keep people ignorant or make them ignorant or create different kinds of doubt. The ignorance about the effects of smoking brought about and intentionally maintained by the tobacco industry is a well-known example.

Again, the natural interpretation is to say that people are ignorant because they lack propositional knowledge or true belief, they lack objectual knowledge, or they lack procedural knowledge. And they do so *because* – and this is what agnotology focuses on – it is intentionally brought about or maintained by various institutions, agencies, governments, mechanisms, and so on. Understandably, the field is more interested in studying those accidental features of ignorance than in studying its nature.

Objections and Replies

Before we draw a conclusion, let us consider El Kassar's objections to a position along the lines I have suggested.¹⁵ First, she suggests that we lose a lot if we reject the agential and structural conceptions of ignorance. We lose such things as: ignorance as a bad practice, the role of epistemic agency, the fact that much ignorance is strategic, and so on. I reply that, fortunately, we do *not*: those are highly important, but contingent features of ignorance: some cases of ignorance have them, others do not. This leaves plenty of room to study such contingent features of ignorance in critical race theory and agnotology.¹⁶

Second, she suggests that this account would exclude highly important kinds of ignorance, such as ignorance deliberately constructed by companies. I reply that it does *not*: it just says that its being deliberately constructed by, say, pharmaceutical companies, is an accidental or contingent feature and that it is not part of the *nature* of ignorance.

Third, Roget's Thesaurus, for example, lists knowledge as only one of the antonyms of ignorance. Other options are cognizance, understanding, competence, cultivation, education, experience, intelligence, literacy, talent, and wisdom. I reply that we can make sense of this on my alternative, threefold synthesis: competence, cultivation, education, intelligence, and so on, all come with knowledge and true belief and remove certain kinds of ignorance. Thus, it makes perfect sense that these are mentioned as antonyms of ignorance.

Finally, one may wonder whether my alternative conception enables us to distinguish between Hannah and Kate, as described by El Kassar. Hannah is *deeply* and *willingly* ignorant about the high emissions of both carbon and sulfur dioxides of cruise ships (I recently found out that a single cruise trip has roughly the same amount of emission as seven million cars in an average year combined). Kate is much more open-minded, but has simply never considered the issue in any detail.

¹⁵ See pp. 4-5 of her paper.

¹⁶ As Anne Meylan has pointed out to me in correspondence, it is generally true that doxastic states are not *as such* morally bad; whether or not they are depends on their contingent, extrinsic features.

She is in a state of suspending ignorance regarding the emission of cruise ships. I reply that they are both ignorant, at least propositionally ignorant, but that their ignorance has different, contingent features: Hannah's ignorance is deep ignorance, Kate's ignorance is suspending ignorance, Hannah's ignorance is willing or intentional, Kate's ignorance is not. These are among the contingent features of ignorance; both are ignorant and, therefore, meet the criteria that I laid out for the nature of ignorance.

The Nature and Accidental Features of Ignorance

I conclude that ignorance *is* the lack of propositional knowledge or true belief, the lack of objectual knowledge, or the lack of procedural knowledge. That is the *nature* of ignorance: each case meets this threefold disjunctive criterion. I also conclude that ignorance has a wide variety of accidental or contingent features. Various fields have drawn attention to these accidental or contingent features because they matter *crucially* in certain debates in those fields. It is not surprising then that the focus in mainstream epistemology is on the nature of ignorance, whereas the focus in agnotology, epistemology of race, feminist epistemology, and various other debates is on those context-dependent features of ignorance.

This is not at all to say that the nature of ignorance is more important than its accidental features. Contingent, context-dependent features of something may be significantly more important. For example, it may well be the case that we have the parents that we have essentially; that we would be someone else if we had different biological parents. If so, that is part of our nature or essence.

And yet, certain contingent and accidental features may matter more to us, such as whether or not our partner loves us. Let us not confuse the nature of something with the accidental features of it that we value or disvalue. If we get this distinction straight, there is no principled reason not to accept the threefold synthesis that I have suggested in this paper as a plausible alternative to El Kassar's synthesis.¹⁷

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