IGNORANCE

A PHILOSOPHICAL STUDY

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To our son Lovis, with love.
I wrote this book in his first year.
He was born completely ignorant of the wonders and challenges of life,
yet he has taught me more about them than anyone else.

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Acknowledgments

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Finally, to my wife, Marjolijn, go the profoundest thanks of all for her sustaining love and support. She has borne with my obsessive interest in ignorance with patience and good humor.

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Introduction

We Need to Know More about Ignorance

Introduction

Figure 1.1 shows a painting by eighteenth-century British artist David Martin that can be viewed by the public at Scone Palace in Perth (Scotland). In the course of time, I have come to admire it, not just for its intricate beauty but also for what it tells us about ourselves. For almost two centuries, the painting's title was *The Lady Elizabeth Finch Hatton*. It was assumed that the black figure was "just a slave."

It was only in 2018 that the British television program *Fake or Fortune* discovered and revealed the true story behind the painting. The black woman, Dido Elizabeth Belle, was born in 1761 from a white father, Sir John Lindsay, and a black African enslaved woman. When Sir Lindsay returned to the United Kingdom from the West Indies, he took Dido Belle along, who befriended her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray. Dido Belle stayed with Lindsay's uncle Lord Mansfield, who treated her as an equal. For instance, she assisted in the house's administration and was properly paid for that. That was, of course, completely unique at the time. In 1799, the family decided to have a painting made of both Elizabeth and Dido in which they are portrayed as equals, almost as sisters. Upon the discovery of the story behind the painting, its title was rightly changed into *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay (1761–1804) and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (1760–1825), c. 1778*. So-called white ignorance, which had been brought about in the course of time by biases about

Figure 1.1 The painting *Portrait of Dido Elizabeth Belle Lindsay (1761–1804) and her cousin Lady Elizabeth Murray (1760–1825), c. 1778*, by David Martin. Image reproduced from Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dido_Elizabeth_Belle#/media/File:Dido_Elizabeth_Belle.jpg.

blacks as slaves, by forgetting, and by not sharing their stories, had now been replaced with historically accurate knowledge. More than that, the painting now does justice to the person and life of Dido Belle. The painting, then, has a lot to do with ignorance, but not in the way one might initially think.

This is just a single example of ignorance; we will see numerous others in this book, such as ordinary ignorance of mundane facts, ignorance that is intentionally brought about in others to mislead them, and ignorance that one cannot express. Yet even this single case raises a host of questions about ignorance. We were ignorant

of the fact that Dido Belle was Elizabeth's equal, but were we also ignorant of certain norms or values here, as the case clearly involves white ignorance? In what sense were we ignorant as a group and whom does the group comprise? Is such group ignorance different from the ignorance of individuals? Were we only ignorant of facts and truths or also ignorant of Dido Belle herself? Were we all ignorant in the same way, or does ignorance come in degrees and varieties that differ from person to person? Was anybody to blame for our ignorance in this case, were none of us, or were we perhaps all? How should we construe ignorance in this example—was it just the lack of knowledge, or was it something more than that? This list of questions could easily be extended.

This book provides an in-depth exploration of ignorance in its many dimensions. It might come as a surprise to some that a philosophical book is entirely devoted to the study of ignorance. After all, *philosophy* means something like "love of wisdom" or "love of knowledge." I fully agree that philosophers should seek knowledge and understanding. Yet, the focus on these epistemically valuable states could easily lead to the neglect of ignorance, which is, in a sense, their opposite. When I say this, obviously I do not mean that philosophers should aim at ignorance. What I mean is that they should aim at knowledge and understanding *about ignorance*. As we shall see, philosophy has often fallen short in this regard. This study is an attempt to make good on this and to show what can be gained from that.

The introductory chapter is structured as follows. First, I briefly sketch the history of the study of ignorance. We will see that there is a lack of serious study of ignorance: apart from the apophatic tradition in the ancient world and the Middle Ages and the more recent fields of agnotology, philosophy of race, and feminist philosophy, ignorance itself has received little philosophical attention. I then lay out how the field that one would expect to have studied ignorance in detail—namely, epistemology—has failed to do so. I also explore why this could be the case. After that, I explain what is new

about this book and how this fills the important gap in the study of ignorance: it develops and applies an epistemology of ignorance. Finally, I give a brief overview of the chapters ahead.

A Brief History of the Philosophical Study of Ignorance

Remarkably, the history of philosophy does not display a careful study of ignorance. Of course, philosophy's history is vast, and numerous authors have touched on ignorance in one way or another. Yet an extensive treatment of ignorance is rare. In this section, I present several examples that I have selected which illustrate this claim.

Socrates famously argued that we need to become aware of the pervasiveness of ignorance in our lives. Socrates is presented as himself claiming ignorance about a wide variety of issues, especially of physical matters, in various dialogues, such as the *Apology* 19c5–8, 21b2–5, d2–6, the *Phaedo* 96aff., and the *Republic* book 5. However, Socrates also claims to be ignorant about such things as knowledge (in the *Theaetetus*) and ethical matters. The latter is not to say that Socrates claims to be ignorant of *any* ethical matter. He is rather certain of various ethical truths, such as the alleged truth that it is worse to commit a wrong than to suffer a wrong. He just claims ignorance of what he considers to be *important* ethical matters (*Euthydemus* 293b8), issues such as what courage is (in the *Laches*), what temperance is (in the *Charmides*), what piety is (in the *Euthyphro*), and what virtue in general is (in the *Meno*). This raises challenging questions about the exact relation between what Socrates claims to know and what he claims to be ignorant of (thus Bett 2011). Important for the issue under consideration, though, is that Plato's dialogues show that in ancient philosophy, ignorance was already on the philosophical horizon. Yet, what Socrates did *not* do was study ignorance itself, nor did his pupil Plato do that,

even though he *did* carefully analyze knowledge, its relation to true belief, and various other epistemic phenomena.

If we turn momentarily to the Indian philosophical tradition, we notice that the notion of ignorance also plays a crucial role in Hinduism and Buddhism. Here, philosophy and religion cannot be distinguished that easily from one another. The focus is on ignorance as a metaphysical misunderstanding rather than as ordinary factive ignorance that can easily be removed by accurate perception.

In Hinduism, *avidyā* (ignorance or, as some translate it, unwisdom) is the opposite of *vidyā* (knowledge, understanding, perception). The word occurs in the *Upanishads*, for example, in the *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad* 1.2.8–9. *Avidyā* is a common property among the ancient Indian schools, like *karma* and rebirth. Ignorance can take the form of a denial or misconception of *Ātman* (soul or self). *Avidyā* is not merely lack of knowledge, but fundamental and recalcitrant ignorance about the phenomenal world: it is to think that the mundane reality we perceive is the only and ultimate one. This constitutes a failure to perceive that the spiritual reality of Ātman-Brahman is the ultimate reality beyond our perceivable and temporal world. The concept of ignorance is particularly prominent in Advaita Vedanta, an important school of Hindu philosophy. The ignorance of not seeing the ultimate oneness behind our pluriform reality, the ignorance of making distinctions where there is only oneness, can be overcome in multiple stages, such as *śravaṇa* (listening to sages), *manana* (reflection on teachings), and *svādhyāya* (study of holy texts).[1]

In Buddhism as well, *avidyā* is not the mere absence of knowledge or a lack of information, but a positive misconception, or illusion, or misguided view of reality. There is ignorance about fundamental features of reality, like the Three Marks of Existence (*tilakkhaṇa*): impermanence (*aniccā*), non-self (*anattā*), and

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[1] For more on this, see Wayman (1957).

unsatisfactoriness or suffering (*dukkha*).[2] Such ignorance includes ignorance about "self," because according to Buddhism, there is only non-self (this is crucially different from Hinduism, then). There is further ignorance, though, such as ignorance of the Four Noble Truths (*cattāri ariyasaccāni*). Ignorance of these kinds of things sustains the "cravings," attachments, and false beliefs that sustain *dukkha* and should, therefore, be overcome. One can do so by cultivating knowledge, virtue, and wisdom. These come about by way of scriptural study, meditative training (*jhāna*), and other forms of spiritual training, ideally within the structures and disciplines of the monastic community (see Harvey 2013, 62–71).

Moreover, the Buddha advises people to avoid certain kinds of questions. These are thought not to be worthwhile because they are not conducive to enlightenment.[3] They are called open or un-answered questions and concern issues related to cosmology, per-sonal identity, and life after death. Note that these questions are not necessarily unanswerable. It is just that the wise person—someone who realizes which sorts of knowledge and understanding matter and which do not—will consider them as "undetermined" (*avyākatā*) and will put them aside (*ṭhapita*) or reject them (*paṭikkhitta*). The Buddha maintained a "Noble Silence" (*ariya tuṇhībhāva*) about these questions. In other words, the Buddha urges us to pursue strategic ignorance in these cases (we return to the notion of strategic ignorance in chapter 7).[4]

Hence, ignorance is a central concept in Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. The focus, however, is on what kinds of things one can but should not be ignorant of. The study of *avidyā* is embedded in a wider soteriological conception of human life: we are trapped in *saṃsāra*, the perpetual cycle of rebirth, and in *karma* (action) and *dukkha* (suffering). We should aim to achieve "release" by

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[2] A classic statement for the latter is the *Dharmapada* 277–279.

[3] See *Digha Nikaya* 9 and, for a list of such questions, *Majjhima Nikaya* 633.

[4] For more on the epistemological doctrine that we should avoid certain kinds of questions, see Hick (1995, 105–118).

overcoming our attachments, cravings, and false beliefs that sustain this condition of entrapment. Indian philosophical accounts of ignorance, then, do not explore exactly what ignorance is, what varieties there are, or how it relates to other mental states.[5]

Let us return to the Western tradition. In the centuries following the Socratics, ignorance came to play a crucial role in the so-called *apophatic* tradition in philosophy and theology. Here, the idea is that one cannot properly say of God or the divine or the supernatural what it *is*, but that we can properly say what it is *not*. We are, then, inevitably ignorant of the divine. This tradition goes back to Plato (e.g., in his *Parmenides*), resonated in the works of Neoplatonists like Proclus, Plotinus, and Damascius, flourished in the Middle Ages (especially in the writings of Maimonides, Eckhart, and Nicholas of Cusa), and has left important traces in the works of such twentieth-century philosophers and theologians as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Simone Weil, and Franz Rosenzweig. Of course, it has also influenced various religious traditions, for example, Kabbalistic Judaism and Mahayana Buddhism.[6] Works in the apophatic tradition frequently appeal to the notion of ignorance, such as Nicholas of Cusa's famous *De docta ignorantia* (*Of Learned Ignorance*), written in 1440. Yet, the apophatic tradition did not study *ignorance itself*. It did not explore what it is to be ignorant, in what varieties it comes, and so on. Rather, it studied what we are ignorant of and what we need not be ignorant of, as well as what we can properly say and what we cannot properly say about the divine.

In the Middle Ages, some philosophers and theologians paid attention to ignorance even apart from issues related to negative theology. Aquinas is one of them in exploring the relation between ignorance on the one hand and evil and sin on the other.

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[5] For helpful suggestions on ignorance in Hinduism and Buddhism, I thank Victor van Bijlert, Ian Kidd, and Clyde Missier.

[6] For an overview, see Franke (2015).

In *De malo* he defines *ignorance* as "the opposite of knowledge." He also distinguishes between nescience, which is simply the absence of knowledge, and ignorance, which is at least sometimes not merely the absence but the privation of knowledge. Ignorance, however, need not be sinful: it is sinful only in those cases in which one should have known. Thus, everyone should know the truth of the Ten Commandments, and bishops should know certain things that pertain to their office. Closely related to this is the fact that ignorance can be both voluntary and nonvoluntary.[7] These remarks are representative of how the Scholastics are interested in ignorance: the focus is on a theological issue, such as how ignorance relates to sin. The nature and varieties of ignorance themselves are not explored in any detail.

Nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher James Ferrier has also discussed ignorance. The second part of his *Institutes of Metaphysic* is devoted to agnotology, the theory of ignorance (see Ferrier [1854] 2001). He presents ignorance as a privation, not merely as the absence of something, but as the actual lack of knowledge. Ignorance, then, is a shortcoming. Moreover, it is always, in principle, something that can be overcome by some intellect. If something cannot possibly be known, one is not ignorant of it. Ferrier also argues that the noumenal world—the world as it is in itself—cannot be known, not the subject in itself nor the object in itself. Because they cannot possibly be known, one cannot be ignorant of these things.[8] Ferrier suggests that ignorance should be distinguished from nescience: we do not know the opposites of necessary truths (because they are necessarily false), but we are not ignorant of them either. Ferrier's theory of ignorance gained attention and received criticism already in his own time (e.g., Cairns 1856, 24).

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[7] See Aquinas, *De malo*, q. 3: "On the causes of sin," art. 6: "Whether ignorance can be the cause of sin?," art. 7: "Whether ignorance is a sin?," and art. 8: "Whether ignorance excuses sin or diminishes it?" (Aquinas [1270] 2001).

[8] For a helpful overview of Ferrier's theory of ignorance, see Keefe (2007).

In the final decades of the twentieth century, three fields of philosophical research emerged that would pay attention to ignorance itself, specifically to certain features of ignorance (and not merely the thing that one is supposed to be ignorant of): these fields are agnotology, feminist philosophy, and the philosophy of race. They study contingent but important features, such as the extent to which ignorance is intentionally brought about or maintained, how ignorance on a group level can be strengthened by biases, how ignorance serves certain moral and political purposes, and how ignorance can come with meta-ignorance.[9]

The field of 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 skepticism (see Oreskes and Conway 2010; Proctor and Schiebinger 2008a). Nowadays, agnotology continues to flourish and makes up much of, for instance, the recent *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (see Gross and McGoey 2015).

Feminist philosophy has also brought the importance of ignorance to our attention. As Marilyn Frye and others have shown by a wide variety of case studies, ignorance about women and about issues related to women is frequently intentionally created or maintained, such as ignorance about natural abortifacients, ignorance about the clitoris, and ignorance about female orgasms (see Frye 1983; Tuana 2004).

As to the philosophy 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 (2007) has called testimonial injustice and

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[9] In the same time period, we also find volumes beyond philosophy that seem to be about ignorance, such as the (1978) book *Encyclopaedia of Ignorance*, edited by Ronald Duncan and Miranda Weston-Smith. Closer scrutiny reveals, though, that such volumes are usually about the things we know and the things we do not know rather than about ignorance itself.

hermeneutical injustice. Testimonial injustice takes place when a speaker receives an unfair deficit of credibility from a hearer because of a prejudice on the hearer's part. Hermeneutical injustice occurs when some substantial domain of a person's social experience is obscured from collective understanding due to continuous and wide-ranging hermeneutical marginalization. Hermeneutical marginalization takes place when one participates unequally in various practices through which social meanings are generated.[10] When it comes to racial minorities, hermeneutical injustice occurs when, for instance, social structures represent minorities wrongly, which also leads to unjust interpretations by these minorities of their own experiences. For instance, African American minorities suffer from interpretative frameworks that do not 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 group ignorance, white ignorance in particular.

We should note, then, that ever since these fields saw the light of day, they have zoomed in on various contingent features of ignorance that take center stage in certain societal phenomena. Agnotology has focused on ignorance that is intentionally brought about or maintained by others for financial or ideological reasons. The philosophy of race and feminist philosophy have studied how certain kinds of ignorance work on a group level, how they are fueled by biases, how they relate to various epistemic injustices, and how they can be overcome. Ignorance *itself*, however, has not received that much attention in these debates. Compare it to this: one can study scientific knowledge without analyzing knowledge itself, and one can explore New Atheist belief without saying much about belief itself. It is time to turn to ignorance itself.

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[10] This is almost identical to Fricker's own definitions; see Fricker (2007, 6, 154).

The Neglect of Ignorance in Epistemology

One would expect the notion of ignorance, which is after all a core phenomenon in our cognitive lives, to have been rigorously analyzed, especially by epistemologists. Surprisingly, this is not the case. Epistemology has traditionally focused on knowledge and what is necessary for knowledge, such as belief and epistemic justification. The term *ignorance* was used in debates on radical skepticism, but normally only to indicate its epistemically devastating consequences: we would be ignorant of pretty much anything regarding the external world.[11]

Fortunately, epistemology's scope has substantially broadened over the last three decades or so. It now provides substantial scrutiny of such things as the epistemic virtues and vices, various social epistemic phenomena (e.g., testimony, disagreement, biases, and group attitudes), and propositional attitudes like hope and faith. Yet, ignorance remains remarkably understudied by epistemologists. Why has ignorance been neglected for so long?[12] At least three potential reasons come to mind.

First, some epistemologists have suggested that epistemology simply *is* the study of knowledge (e.g., Steup 2005). If that is correct, then it is simply not within the purview of epistemology to canvass ignorance. But as the many examples given above of issues that have broadened epistemology show, few epistemologists nowadays embrace such a narrow conception of epistemology.

Second, ignorance has often been considered to be something privative, not something that has an important nature of its own. The idea was that ignorance is the lack of knowledge, so if we understand what knowledge is, we thereby understand what ignorance is. This is remarkable. On the one hand, it is not at all clear

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[11] For example, the title of Unger (1975): *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*.
[12] Cynthia Townley has also pointed out that there is in philosophy an "excessive love of knowledge" and, with others, calls it "epistemophilia," a love that has come at the cost of neglecting ignorance (Townley 2011, xii).

that ignorance is indeed simply the lack or absence of knowledge. In fact, in chapter 3 I will give several reasons to think that this is not the case. That ignorance cannot be understood purely privatively has also already been suggested by scholars in agnotology in recent decades. On the other hand, even if ignorance is purely privative, how would it follow that it does not deserve study of its own? Ever since Augustine, a number of theologians and philosophers have argued that evil is nothing over and above the absence of good (*privatio boni*). Yet, this has not prevented them from carefully and fruitfully elaborating on the nature and varieties of evil in relation to human free will and God's providence and omnibenevolence.

Third, ignorance was for a long time widely considered to be something negative, something to be avoided. As various philosophers and scientists have pointed out over the last two or three decades, though, this is only true for some cases. Ignorance often comes with something epistemically suboptimal: a failure to know. It can be morally bad as well, for example, when one is ignorant of the things that matter most to one's children or spouse. And it can be bad in further ways, such as in cases of anosognosia, a pathological condition in which a person is unaware of an obvious personal disability, debilitation, or injury. In many other cases, though, ignorance is benign and sometimes even desirable. Here are some examples. Some people prefer to be ignorant about the genetic diseases they have or might have. Archeologists may intentionally keep people ignorant about an excavation site's exact location for fear of looting. Dutch biologists, for fear of mass tourism, keep the public ignorant about where the pictures of the wolves that recently entered the country have been taken. We might want some scientific and military information to be classified so that most people remain ignorant about it.[13] We can have randomized controlled trials and the ensuing robustness of results only if we deliberately

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[13] According to Galison (2008, 39), five to ten times the size of accessible information may be classified.

bring about or maintain ignorance. We may desire to be ignorant of certain cases of extreme evil and suffering that take place in the world—and perhaps rightly so. We might try to become or remain ignorant about specific faulty character traits of our partners or try to forget certain things they did or said. We may choose to keep young children ignorant about certain sexual issues, at least up to a certain age. The idea then that ignorance only has negative value is clearly untenable.

In all fairness, there have been a couple of exceptions over the last ten years or so to the neglect of ignorance. A handful of philosophers have started to ask and answer various specifically epistemological questions about ignorance. Nadja El Kassar (2018, 2019) has explored whether the conceptions of ignorance in agnotology and the philosophy of race show that the conception of ignorance as lack of knowledge is incomplete. Pierre Le Morvan (2011b) has argued that ignorance is lack of knowledge rather than lack of true belief. Nikolaj Nottelmann (2015, 2016) has defended the view that there is not only propositional ignorance but also objectual and practical ignorance. Duncan Pritchard (2021) has argued that ignorance is the lack of true belief or the lack of knowledge that issues from the violation of a duty to inquire. René van Woudenberg (2009) has explored which varieties of ignorance there are. There are even three monographs devoted to ignorance. In *Ignorance: On the Wider Implications of Deficient Knowledge*, Nicholas Rescher (2009) explores whether there can be ignorance that is inevitable. In *A Defense of Ignorance*, Cynthia Townley (2011) argues convincingly that ignorance can play various positive roles. Among other things, she argues that epistemic interdependence entails certain kinds of ignorance and that various epistemic virtues, such as intellectual humility and trust, also come with ignorance. And Daniel DeNicola, in his (2017) book *Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know*, explores a wide variety of issues pertaining to ignorance, such as the ethics of ignorance and willful ignorance.

I myself have published exploratory articles on the nature, the varieties, and the ethics of ignorance (e.g., Peels 2010, 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2014), and I have edited two volumes on ignorance, the one studying the epistemic dimensions of ignorance and the other the moral and social dimensions of ignorance (see Peels and Blaauw 2016; Peels 2017b). This book differs from these two edited volumes and the other literature I mentioned in that it develops a full-blown epistemology of ignorance that is integrated and internally consistent, and it applies that epistemology of ignorance to various current debates in philosophy. In the book, I shall also regularly engage this other recent, emerging work on ignorance.

A New Approach to Ignorance

In a *New York Times* article, New America fellow Jamie Holmes stresses that theories of ignorance are as much needed as theories of knowledge, but that we have only just started developing the former:

> The study of ignorance . . . is in its infancy. This emerging field of inquiry is fragmented because of its relative novelty and cross-disciplinary nature. . . . But giving due emphasis to unknowns, highlighting case studies that illustrate the fertile interplay between questions and answers, and exploring the psychology of ambiguity are essential. Educators should also devote time to the relationship between ignorance and creativity and the strategic manufacturing of uncertainty. . . . Our students will be more curious—and more intelligently so—if, in addition to facts, they were equipped with theories of ignorance as well as theories of knowledge. (Holmes 2015)

I think this observation by Holmes is spot-on. In this book I develop a theory of ignorance. Slightly more precisely, I develop and

apply a full-blown epistemology of ignorance. Rather than working with a primitive and underdeveloped notion of ignorance—for example, ignorance as lack of knowledge—this book actually fleshes out in detail the many epistemic dimensions of ignorance.

What I have in mind are such things as the following questions and issues. What *kinds* of ignorance are there? So far, most attention has gone to propositional ignorance—that is, ignorance of facts or truths. But it is quite common in epistemology to think, for instance, that in addition to propositional knowledge, there is also objectual and practical knowledge, and a widespread view says that these are not reducible to propositional knowledge. If that is true, might there also be objectual and practical ignorance? What is the *nature* of ignorance? For example, is ignorance the lack of knowledge, or the lack of true belief, or the lack of true belief that one would have had if one had met one's epistemic obligations to inquire? How does ignorance of facts or individual propositions relate to ignorance on some topic (say, quantum mechanics), and how does ignorance on certain topics relate to being an ignoramus—that is, an ignorant person? If you hold a false belief but also believe that you should not hold that belief because it is irrational, do you still count as ignorant? What *varieties* of ignorance are there? For instance, should we distinguish between disbelief, suspension of judgment, and not even being able to grasp a proposition? Individuals can be ignorant, but it seems groups of people can be ignorant as well. What is it for groups to be ignorant? Can we use elements of existing accounts of group belief, group justification, or group knowledge (e.g., De Ridder 2013) to construe an account of group ignorance? And what are *degrees* of ignorance? In other words, what is it for one person or group to be more ignorant or to be less ignorant than another person or group?[14]

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[14] I take these to be the most important epistemological questions about ignorance that one can ask in developing an epistemology of ignorance. This is not to deny that there are further interesting epistemological questions about ignorance, such as whether

Not only does this book *develop* an epistemology of ignorance, but it also shows in detail the value of such an epistemology of ignorance by *applying* it, both to contemporary philosophical debates in which the notion of ignorance plays a crucial role and to new venues of research in various fields of philosophy.

Overview of the Book

Part 1, that is, chapters 2–6, provides an epistemology of ignorance. Chapter 2 gives an analysis of the different kinds of ignorance: propositional, objectual, and practical. These are, roughly, ignorance of truths, the lack of acquaintance with something, and the lack of knowledge of how to do something, respectively. I argue that so-called erotetic ignorance—that is, not knowing the answer to a question—is a real phenomenon, but that it can be reduced to propositional ignorance. Moreover, I assess whether ignorance as lack of understanding and ignorance as lack of wisdom should be distinguished as further kinds of ignorance. I also defend the distinction between the nature and the accidental properties of ignorance and argue that we ought to keep this distinction in the back of our minds in considering conceptions of ignorance in various philosophical debates, such as those of agnotology and the philosophy of race (to which I return in chapters 7 and 8). Finally, I assess Nadja El Kassar's rival conception of ignorance and defend the view that my threefold analysis of ignorance in terms of propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance needs no revisions in light of her alternative analysis.

Chapter 3 zooms in on propositional ignorance. One might think that the question of what propositional ignorance amounts to has an obvious answer: to be propositionally ignorant is to *lack*

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ignorance can have epistemic value (this issue has already been addressed by others, though; see DeNicola [2017, 23]; Pritchard [2016a]).

propositional knowledge (this is the Standard View). It turns out, though, that things are not that simple. There is at least one rival to this seemingly obvious view, namely, the New View, on which ignorance is *lack of true belief*. Moreover, a recent view challenges both the Standard View and the New View. Here the idea is that ignorance is lack of true belief or lack of knowledge *that issues from the violation of a duty to inquire*. This chapter sketches the Standard and New Views and considers in detail various considerations for each of them. After that, it explores whether ignorance implies the violation of a duty to inquire, as Duncan Pritchard has argued. I argue that the New View is the most plausible one of these views.

Chapter 4 studies the varieties of ignorance. I argue that there are six of them, which can roughly be characterized as follows. First, there is disbelieving ignorance: one disbelieves a true proposition. Second, there is suspending ignorance: one suspends judgment on a true proposition. Third, there is undecided ignorance: one has not yet formed an attitude toward a true proposition because one was distracted in some way. Fourth, there is unconsidered ignorance: one fails to believe a true proposition merely because one has never considered it. Fifth, there is deep ignorance: one has never considered a particular true proposition, and one would not immediately believe it upon considering it. Sixth, there is complete ignorance: one cannot even grasp the true proposition in question. Moreover, I spell out the difference between first- and second-order ignorance. Finally, I show how distinguishing these varieties of ignorance can be helpful in developing a philosophical thesis or argument that appeals to ignorance.

Chapter 5 explores what it is for a group to be ignorant. I provide two case studies: fundamentalist and white ignorance. On the basis of these instances of group ignorance, I formulate six desiderata that an account of group ignorance should meet. Subsequently, I argue that existing accounts of group belief, group justification, and group knowledge cannot easily be transposed to group ignorance.

I then lay out what I call the Dynamic Account of group ignorance and reply to several objections that might be leveled against it.

Chapter 6 is the final chapter in my epistemology of ignorance. It covers how ignorance can come in degrees. I start with a brief metaphysical exploration of what degrees are in the first place. I argue that there are at least three ways in which something can come in degrees: it displays the determinable–determinate relation, it stands in the type–token relation, or it is constituted by stereotypical properties. I then consider how propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance could come in degrees. Finally, I also explore in what sense group ignorance admits of degrees.

In part 2, that is, chapters 7–12, I employ my epistemology of ignorance to enlighten several important debates that involve the notion of ignorance. It is only natural first to return to the fields in which the notion was first developed in some more detail: agnotology, feminist philosophy, and the philosophy of race. In chapter 7, I explore how my epistemology of ignorance bears on the notion of strategic ignorance in agnotology. I argue that strategic ignorance can be seen as a conception of ignorance that focuses on various contingent properties of ignorance, whereas my account is an account of the nature of ignorance. This means that the two are perfectly compatible. Moreover, I argue that the New View on ignorance better fits with agnotology. Subsequently, I explore strategic ignorance on a group level: In what sense is a group ignorant in stereotypical cases of agnotology? This is an important issue, for whereas stereotypical cases of group belief and group knowledge are cases in which that belief or knowledge is brought about by key members of the group, agnotology focuses on situations in which group ignorance is created or maintained by persons *outside the group*. After that, I turn to the different kinds of ignorance that I distinguished in chapter 2: Do agnogenetic practices aim at objectual and practical ignorance as well? I also address the question of whether the strategic ignorance that plays such a crucial role in agnotology is disbelieving, suspending, undecided,

unconsidered, deep, or complete ignorance. I argue that it is usually a combination of some of these and that specifying which ones are involved can make a crucial difference to debates in agnotology. Finally, I explain how agnotology can gain from taking the notion of degrees of ignorance on board.

Chapter 8 goes on to explore white ignorance as the concept is used in feminist philosophy and the philosophy of race. First, some have suggested that the philosophy of race employs a rival notion of ignorance to the conception of ignorance, especially the propositional one, developed in chapters 2 and 3. I argue that this is not the case and that the two notions are complementary. Next, I explore whether white ignorance can be an instance of each of the six varieties of ignorance that I distinguished in chapter 4, or only of some of them. Finally, I show how the philosophy of race benefits from an account of group ignorance, such as my Dynamic Account, developed in chapter 5.

Chapter 9 explores ignorance in education. It is widely thought that education should aim at positive epistemic standings like knowledge, insight, and understanding. I argue that, surprisingly, in pursuit of this aim, it is sometimes necessary to also cultivate ignorance. I examine several types of cases. First, in various circumstances, educators should present students with defeaters for their knowledge so that they come to lack knowledge, at least temporarily. Second, there is the phenomenon of scaffolding in education, which might involve the educator quite properly ensuring that the student is ignorant of certain kinds of information. Third, aiming at understanding often leads to suspension of judgment and, thereby, temporary ignorance. Fourth, if ignorance is lack of true belief, as a number of commentators have claimed, then in those cases in which students believe something truly without knowing it and teachers show that they lack knowledge, students may abandon that belief and thus become ignorant. In examining the role of ignorance in education, I explore exactly which kinds of ignorance are valuable in teaching situations and draw attention

to important epistemic differences between ignorance on different levels.

Chapters 10 and 11 concern the moral dimensions of ignorance. Chapter 10 looks at ignorance as an excusing condition. The philosophical literature displays a lively debate on the circumstances in which ignorance excuses. Yet, two important questions are often overlooked. First, which varieties of ignorance excuse? I argue that disbelieving, deep, and complete ignorance fully excuse, while undecided, unconsidered, and suspending ignorance do not. Second, ignorance of what counts as an excuse? I discuss four candidates: ignorance of one's obligation, ignorance of one's ability to meet that obligation, ignorance of how to meet that obligation, and lack of foresight regarding that obligation. I argue that we can give a satisfactory account of exculpatory ignorance only if we pay attention to these two neglected issues, which can both profit from an epistemology of ignorance.

Chapter 11 investigates when ignorance is culpable. The notion of culpable ignorance is an important one in ethics, epistemology, law, and the philosophy of law. Yet, it is not clear when ignorance is culpable: When is it the case that someone could and should have known better? I defend the idea that there are multiple roots of culpable ignorance: acting from *akrasia*, acting against one's dormant and tacit beliefs, and acting while suspending judgment on relevant propositions. An epistemology of ignorance clarifies how each of these options is different from the others. What all of them have in common is that the culpable act that led to ignorance does not match one's relevant doxastic attitudes. I argue that this implies a substantial revision of the Origination Thesis and explain how the Influence View on responsibility for belief can do justice to our intuitions in these cases, whereas rival views, such as doxastic compatibilism and attributionism, cannot do so to the same extent.

Chapter 12 explores to what extent ignorance is assertable. More specifically, can one properly assert that one is ignorant with respect to some specific proposition *p*? I examine whether each of

the six varieties of ignorance that I distinguished in chapter 4 is assertable. I defend the view that only two—suspending ignorance and undecided ignorance—are assertable, at least *de dicto*; the other four—disbelieving ignorance, unconsidered ignorance, deep ignorance, and complete ignorance—are not. It turns out, though, that they are unassertable for crucially different reasons. I subsequently look at when group ignorance rather than individual ignorance can properly be asserted. Finally, I apply my argument to two issues. First, the debate about whether there is inexpressible ignorance has focused entirely on various kinds of propositions or facts that are supposed to be such that one cannot express ignorance with regard to them. It has failed to pay attention to the various attitudes that ignorance can consist in. Second, the Transparency View as an account of self-knowledge may be true for belief and some other mental states, but not for various kinds of ignorance.

In the epilogue, I look backward and forward. An epistemology of ignorance can make more precise, enlighten, or even resolve various crucial debates that involve the notion of ignorance. I show that the list of topics I treat in this book is rather small or even dwarfs in comparison to a more comprehensive list of philosophical issues that involve the notion of ignorance. I surmise that applying an epistemology of ignorance as developed in this book to these other issues can be as fruitful. Again, we need to know more about ignorance.

PART 1
THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF IGNORANCE

2

Kinds of Ignorance

Introduction

Ignorance has gained attention in epistemology only recently. It had been thought, or maybe merely assumed, that ignorance does not deserve much discussion because it seems to be something like the antonym or opposite of knowledge, the mere absence or lack of something else that is epistemically valuable. That idea has lately been questioned, though, especially in other fields, such as agnotology and the philosophy of race. Consequently, a few epistemologists have started to analyze ignorance and to map its conceptual relations to other mental states.

In this chapter, I address the question of what ignorance *is*. I do so by laying out what the *nature* of ignorance is—that is, which properties are essential to being in a state of ignorance. I argue that there are three sorts of ignorance. There is propositional ignorance: roughly, not knowing certain truths. There is objectual ignorance: roughly, not being acquainted with something. And there is practical ignorance: roughly, not knowing how to do something.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I spell out what propositional ignorance, objectual ignorance, and practical ignorance amount to. Next, I argue that erotetic ignorance—roughly, not knowing the answer to a question—is a real phenomenon, but that it is reducible to propositional ignorance. Suggestions that ignorance should be understood in terms of lack of understanding or lack of wisdom are also wanting. After that, I suggest that we should distinguish between the nature and the accidental properties of ignorance and that we ought to keep this distinction in the back of

our minds in considering conceptions of ignorance in various philosophical debates. Finally, I assess Nadja El Kassar's rival conception of ignorance and defend the view that my threefold analysis of ignorance in terms of propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance needs no revisions in light of her alternative analysis.

Propositional Ignorance

In considering what the nature of ignorance could be, philosophers have mostly delved straight into ignorance of propositions, such as ignorance of a fact, ignorance of a truth, ignorance of a true statement, ignorance of a true proposition, ignorance that a certain state of affairs obtains, or some such thing.[1] This is called *propositional* or *factive* or *factual ignorance*, and it is traditionally thought to be the antonym or opposite of *propositional knowledge*, *factive knowledge*, *factual knowledge*, or *knowledge-that*. For example, I know that my colleague is in her office, that Abuja is the capital of Nigeria, that Harlem in New York City is named after the Dutch city of Haarlem, and that eighty-three is a prime number. Similarly, someone can be ignorant as to whether her colleague is in her office, ignorant that Abuja is the capital of Nigeria, ignorant of the fact that Harlem is named after Haarlem, and ignorant whether or not eighty-three is a prime number. It is, of course, also possible to be propositionally ignorant *of a particular topic*, such as the replication crisis in social psychology or Dutch architecture in the 1930s. This is often referred to as *topical ignorance*, and it consists in ignorance of a large number of true propositions on a particular topic.

Note the differences between the grammatical constructions that are used here for ignorance ascriptions: "ignorant *as to whether*,"

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[1] In this chapter, I will put metaphysical issues largely aside to fully focus on the epistemology of ignorance. My claims should be understood as not carrying any heavy metaphysical baggage regarding the relations between facts, truths, and propositions.

"ignorant *that*,"[2] "ignorant *of the fact that*," and "ignorant *whether*." Whereas "ignorant that *p*" and "ignorant of the fact that *p*" conversationally imply that *p* is true, no such thing is implied when "ignorance as to whether" or "ignorant whether" is used. Thus, if Indonesia has the largest Muslim population of all countries in the world (which is a fact, as things stand), one can be ignorant as to whether this is the case, ignorant that this is the case, ignorant of the fact that this is the case, and ignorant whether this is the case. But when it comes to the proposition that Congo has the largest rainforest on earth (which is a falsehood: Brazil does, for the time being at least), one can be ignorant as to whether this is the case and ignorant whether this is the case, but one *cannot* be ignorant that this is the case (because it is not) or of the fact that this is the case (because it is not a fact).

This is important, for it means that one can be propositionally ignorant only of *truth*—that is, true propositions. Of course, if one is ignorant as to whether *p* or ignorant whether *p*, one is ignorant of the truth-value of a proposition: one is ignorant of whether or not *p* is true. But, again, it is a *truth* that the proposition in question is true, or it is a *truth* that the proposition in question is false. In these cases, then, one is ignorant of the truth about the truth-value of the propositions involved. Some philosophers have argued that one can also be ignorant of *false* propositions. I return to that suggestion in the following section.

Exactly how propositional ignorance is to be analyzed—among other things, whether it is indeed the opposite of knowledge—is a matter of controversy. Some take it that ignorance is lack of knowledge, whereas others have argued that it is lack of true belief. Still

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[2] Some philosophers, such as Berit Brogaard (2016, 59), have claimed that sentences with "ignorant that" are not strictly grammatical. However, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition 2c of *ignorant*, it can be used in sentences with a subordinate clause—for example, "I am ignorant that I ever made you this offer." The construction has also been used by numerous philosophers, e.g., Ginet (1975, 16): "It is conceivable that *S* should have been in doubt or ignorant that *p*" and Hyman (2006, 900): "For a verb-phrase of the form 'is ignorant that *p*' consists of a psychological verb followed by a 'that' clause."

others have suggested that it is the lack of true belief that follows from a violation of a duty to inquire. This issue will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, which answers the question of what the nature of *propositional* ignorance is.

Now, the attention that has recently been given to propositional ignorance should not blind us to the fact that it is not the *only* kind of ignorance. Ever since Bertrand Russell, it has been quite common in epistemology to distinguish, in addition to propositional knowledge, objectual knowledge and practical knowledge (see Russell 1980, 3).[3] There is good reason to think that, similarly, we can distinguish objectual ignorance and practical ignorance in addition to propositional ignorance. Let me explain.

First, there is *knowledge by acquaintance* or *objectual knowledge* (*knowledge-of*), such as my knowledge by acquaintance of my wife's character traits, my knowledge of the taste of the Scotch whiskey Talisker Storm, my knowledge of Southern France, and my knowledge of the smell of fresh raspberries. Second, there is *practical* or *technical* or *procedural knowledge* (some call it *knowledge-how*[4]), such as my knowledge of how to navigate through Amsterdam by bike, my knowledge of how to catch North Sea cod, my knowledge of how to sail the Adriatic Sea, and my knowledge of how to get and keep the attention of a group of two hundred students (the latter, incidentally, suggesting that know-how comes in degrees; I return to that in chapter 6). There has been much debate about how knowledge by acquaintance and practical knowledge are to be understood, but the majority view seems to be that they are at least *not* reducible to propositional knowledge.[5]

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[3] For an overview of these kinds of knowledge by one of those epistemologists, see Lehrer (2000, 5). For an influential account of the distinction between propositional and practical knowledge, see Ryle (1945, 4–16; 1973, 28–32, 40–41).

[4] Personally, I prefer to talk about *practical knowledge* rather than *knowledge-how*, for, as Paul Snowdon has convincingly argued, there are instances of knowledge-how that are not instances of practical knowledge. See Snowdon (2004, 7).

[5] Many epistemologists have accepted the distinction between these three kinds of knowledge. There are a few exceptions, though. Some philosophers contend that both

I draw attention to this distinction that Russell made because if he is right, perhaps we can make a similar distinction between three kinds of ignorance: propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance. If we assume from the very outset that all ignorance is propositional ignorance, we might miss something crucial. In fact, some epistemologists, such as Berit Brogaard, Daniel DeNicola, and Nikolaj Nottelmann, have already claimed that there *are* such different kinds of ignorance (see Brogaard 2016; DeNicola 2017, 23–25; Nottelmann 2015).[6] Let us explore what they would amount to.

Objectual Ignorance

To be objectually ignorant would be to *not* be acquainted with an object, to *not* know an entity. An example adduced by Nikolaj Nottelmann (2015, 497) is that one can be ignorant of French cuisine, but the list is, of course, endless. I can be ignorant of the Indonesian island of Sulawesi, for instance, because I have never been there and because I know next to nothing about its languages, customs, geography, flora, fauna, and history. And I can be ignorant of Chilean wine if I have never tasted it and do not know even the basics about Chilean wine.

We should note that, like propositional ignorance, objectual ignorance is *factive*, at least in some sense of the word. Above, we saw that one can be ignorant of a proposition only if that proposition is true. Similarly, one can be ignorant of an entity only if that entity

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objectual and practical knowledge are reducible to factual knowledge, or that they are a subspecies of factual knowledge. For some tentative arguments in favor of this thesis, see Snowdon (2004), and for an elaborate, mainly linguistic defense of it, see Stanley and Williamson (2001). For a good linguistic note on Stanley and Williamson's article, see Rumfitt (2003).

[6] Brogaard distinguishes propositional ignorance, ignorance of a subject matter, and practical ignorance. Ignorance of a subject matter, she points out, can be explained in two ways, namely, as propositional ignorance (ignorance of a large number of propositions) or as objectual ignorance.

truly exists. As Nottelmann (2015) rightly points out, for instance, one cannot be ignorant of the present king of France, because there is no such king. I *can* be ignorant of the *president* of France because there is one. I cannot be ignorant of French military endeavors in Botswana because there are none and there never have been any. I *can* be ignorant of the military endeavors of France in Mali because there have been several.

That objectual ignorance is factive does *not* mean that if someone is ignorant of a large number of propositions, those propositions must be true. As Berit Brogaard (2016, 71) rightly points out, someone can know a lot about Greek mythology and, thus, not be ignorant of Greek mythology, even though most or all the propositions that Greek mythology consists of are false. Stephen Fry, for instance, who is well known for his books *Mythos* and *Heroes*, is highly knowledgeable and not at all ignorant about the many myths regarding, say, Jason's heroic deeds. To say that Jason never existed, and that Fry is therefore ignorant of Greek mythology, is clearly misguided.[7]

An objection to the idea that there is not only propositional but also objectual ignorance is that this simply does not match how we actually use words like *ignorant* and *ignorance*. Whereas we *would* say things like "I don't know much about my new colleague" and "I'm not familiar with French cuisine," we would *not* say "I'm ignorant of my new colleague" or "I'm ignorant of French cuisine."[8]

This objection fails as a general objection against the idea of objectual ignorance simply because we *do* sometimes use sentences that imply objectual ignorance. Here are some examples:

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[7] Alternatively, one might suggest that the propositions that Greek mythology consists of should be understood in a different way, not as making factual (metaphysical, historical) claims about the world. In that way, they could be true after all.

[8] Pierre Le Morvan and I have pointed this out in Le Morvan and Peels (2016). There, we draw attention to the fact that we do not say things like "Xavier is not at all ignorant of Paris because he has lived there for more than 20 years" or "She is not ignorant of Albert since she moved to Oxford."

- He is ignorant of many social customs.
- She is ignorant of French.
- The boy is ignorant of the world.
- It is clear that he is ignorant of the latest German scholarship.

The objection may be refined, though. In many cases in which we *would* say that we do not know some entity, we would *not* say that we are ignorant of that entity. We can say that I do not really know my cousin, but we would not say that I am ignorant of my cousin; we would simply say that I do not really know my cousin. I think this is right. However, all that follows from this objection is that not all cases in which an epistemic subject lacks knowledge by acquaintance of an existing entity are cases of objectual ignorance. It does *not* follow that there is no such thing as objectual ignorance—there is, as the above four examples show.

How do we distinguish those cases in which lack of objectual knowledge comes with objectual ignorance from those in which it does not? This is a challenging issue that requires further philosophical work. For the sake of space, I will not take up that work here. For the point I want to make here, it suffices that there are indeed cases of objectual ignorance, no matter how exactly they are to be delineated from cases of lack of objectual knowledge that are not cases of objectual ignorance.

Another argument against the idea that objectual ignorance is a distinctive kind of ignorance is that because objectual *knowledge* is reducible to propositional knowledge, objectual *ignorance* is probably reducible to propositional ignorance. The view that objectual knowledge—and practical knowledge, as we will discuss it in the next section—can be reduced to propositional knowledge is called *intellectualism*. It has been defended by, among others, Jason Stanley, Timothy Williamson, and Berit Brogaard (see Brogaard 2008, 2009; Stanley and Williamson 2001). That objectual knowledge cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge has been argued ever since Gilbert Ryle (1945)—for instance, by Alva Noë

(2005, 287)—and is called anti-intellectualism. Here, I will not delve into that debate because the debate does not concern ignorance specifically but a general issue of reduction. At least all those who acknowledge objectual and practical knowledge should also acknowledge objectual and practical ignorance.

One final thing about objectual ignorance. As I pointed out above, some philosophers have suggested that one can also be ignorant of falsehoods—that is, false propositions. The point they try to make has everything to do with objectual ignorance. Let me explain.

An example of what these philosophers have in mind is this. Take the proposition that in March 2020, Europe decided to cancel all flights from and to the United States due to COVID-19. This proposition is false: the United States decided to cancel all flights from and to Europe rather than the other way around. Now take Genghis Khan, the great leader of the thirteenth-century Mongolian empire. He did not know this proposition about what Europe would do in March 2020. One might even think that he was *ignorant* of this false proposition. After all, Genghis Khan lacked the conceptual repertoire to even grasp *p*.

Among those who have claimed that one can be ignorant of false propositions is Pierre Le Morvan (see Le Morvan 2011a, 2011b, 2012, 2013, 2015, 2019, 2020; Le Morvan and Peels 2016). In fact, he claims that *he himself* has knowledge of various false propositions, such as the proposition that platypuses are native to Tanzania—although he hastens to add that he does not believe it. What is going on here, according to Le Morvan, is that knowledge *of p* does not share all the necessary conditions with knowledge *that p* and that, similarly, ignorance *of p* does not share all the necessary conditions with ignorance *that p*. One can know or be ignorant that *p* only if *p* is true, but one can know of *p* or be ignorant of *p* even if *p* is false. Genghis Khan's ignorance of the proposition that Europe would cancel all flights from and to the United States in March 2020, then, is objectual rather than propositional ignorance, and Le Morvan's

knowledge of the proposition that platypuses are native to Tanzania is objectual rather than propositional knowledge.

It seems to me Le Morvan is right that we can be objectually ignorant of certain propositions, even false ones. But we should be careful to draw the right conclusions from this. First, at most *objectual* ignorance can be ignorance of falsehoods—propositional ignorance cannot. More specifically, at most *objectual* ignorance *of propositions* can be ignorance of falsehoods—propositional ignorance cannot. Second, we never express objectual ignorance of false propositions by using clauses like "ignorant that," "ignorant of the fact that," "ignorant as to whether," or "ignorant whether." If we say that some person is ignorant *that p* or *of the fact that p*, we conversationally imply that *p* is true. And if we say that someone is ignorant *as to whether p* or ignorant *whether p*, we conversationally imply that that person is ignorant of the truth-value of *p*. Rather, we would say that one cannot even grasp something, that one is unable to consider something, that one lacks the conceptual repertoire to think about something, or some such thing. Third, is objectual ignorance of false propositions really ignorance of falsehoods? It seems to me somewhat confusing to say something like that. Rather, objectual ignorance of a false proposition is *ignorance of a proposition, which is a falsehood*. After all, what matters for the ignorance here is not at all whether the proposition is true or false but whether or not one is able to *grasp* the proposition, to understand that *that* (whatever that is) is what it says.

Practical Ignorance

One is in a state of practical ignorance, roughly, if one lacks practical knowledge. For example, one can be ignorant of how to speak Mandarin (Nottelmann 2015, 497), of how to prevent whiplash injury, of how to deal with a child in an asthma attack, and of how to use pop-up blockers. Again, it seems such ignorance is in an

important sense factive; one can only be ignorant of how to use pop-up blockers if there actually *is* a way to use them. If there is no such way, then there is nothing to be ignorant of.

Whether or not someone is practically ignorant in some specific regard can matter a lot. If I suffer from COVID-19, it matters whether the person taking care of me knows how to deal with the virus or is ignorant as to how to deal with it. It also matters on a more everyday basis. Imagine that as an IKEA manufacturer, you build a bookcase that the client should be able to put together herself. Now, you want to know whether the client is able to do so. The problem is that for you, it is rather difficult to see how complex it is for others, who are not as experienced as you are, to put the bookcase together themselves. It might even have become impossible for you to accurately gauge that, as you cannot remove your practical knowledge. Given that some people are practically ignorant, such ignorance is crucial in getting to know how difficult it is for most people to put the bookcase together.

Now, as with objectual ignorance, we do actually correctly use phrases with *ignorant* and *ignorance* that refer to practical ignorance. Here are some random examples that can be found online: Sam is ignorant of how to operate a forklift, Pam is ignorant of how to calm a crying baby, we are both ignorant of how to splint a leg, I am completely ignorant of how to set up streaming on my TV, and some people are ignorant of how to change the oil in their car.

Practical ignorance is different from objectual ignorance in that it seems that *every* case of lack of practical knowledge is also a case of practical ignorance—of course, as long as there *is* a way to do the thing in question (as I said, practical ignorance is factive). Every sentence using the clause "do not know how to" can be replaced *salva veritate* with a sentence using the clause "ignorant as to how to."

If practical *knowledge* is not reducible to propositional knowledge, then practical *ignorance* is not reducible to propositional ignorance either. This is important for various debates in philosophy.

As we shall see in chapter 7, for instance, agnotology misses something crucially important if it takes for granted that all strategic ignorance is propositional ignorance—in other words, that all situations in which a group of people intentionally makes or keeps another group of people ignorant are situations of propositional ignorance. As we shall see, there are also situations in which people intentionally keep others ignorant of *practical* knowledge. And as we shall see in chapter 10, one is sometimes excused not so much by *propositional* ignorance as by *practical* ignorance.

Erotetic Ignorance

Some authors have distinguished, in addition to propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance, what they call "erotetic ignorance" or "ignorance-wh": ignorance of answers to questions (e.g., Haas and Vogt 2015, 18; Nottelmann 2016, 33; Rescher 2009, 29). For instance, I can be ignorant of who came to the party: I do not know the right answer to the question of who came to the party. Presumably, questions have, at least sometimes, multiple correct answers. For example, the question of which famous building can be found in Berlin has multiple correct answers: the Reichstag, the Brandenburger Tor, the Jüdisches Museum Berlin, and so on. Someone who is ignorant as to which famous buildings can be found in Berlin, or at least someone who is completely ignorant, knows *no* correct answer to this question.

Now, it seems to me that erotetic ignorance reduces to propositional ignorance. After all, the correct answers to questions are true propositions, such as the proposition that the Pergamonmuseum is a famous building in Berlin.[9] This is not entirely uncontroversial, though. Torsten Wilholt has leveled the following objection against this reduction:

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[9] For a similar point, see Nottelmann (2016, 44).

> If I conceive of a particular piece of ignorance as an item of non-knowledge—that is, a true proposition that I do not yet know—then it seems that I would only be able to direct my epistemic efforts at such an item if I already knew it—and knew it to be a true proposition. What this shows is that our conscious ignorance in the present sense cannot be understood as a set of true propositions lying out there, waiting to be discovered. Instead, our conscious ignorance is best understood as a set of *questions*. (Wilholt 2020, 199)

Nottelmann replies to this objection that I cannot sensibly claim ignorance of a particular fact, but that I can sensibly claim ignorance of the correct answer to a question—whatever the correct answer may be—and that that is a case of propositional ignorance. I agree with Nottelmann on this point, but I would add that the objection does not even get off the ground: being ignorant of *p* and *expressing* or *asserting* one's ignorance of *p* are simply two rather different things. Obviously, from the fact that I cannot assert my ignorance of *p*, it does not follow that I am not ignorant of *p*. In chapter 12, we shall see several examples of this.

Another argument against the idea that erotetic ignorance reduces to propositional ignorance has been put forward by Nicholas Rescher (2009, 28–29). His point is that we cannot properly say of a specific fact that we are ignorant of that fact, whereas we *can* properly say that we are ignorant of the right answer to a specific question. However, my reductive account of erotetic ignorance in terms of ignorance of a larger number of propositions nicely explains why this is the case. After all, by saying that one is ignorant of the correct answer to a specific question, one indicates that one is ignorant of *a number of propositions* (both affirmative and negative) rather than a specific one. Also, we should, again, not confuse being ignorant with expressing that one is ignorant. One can well be ignorant of a specific fact even if one cannot *express* that one is ignorant of that specific fact. I conclude that Rescher's objection gives us no

reason to count erotetic ignorance as an additional kind of ignorance that does not reduce to propositional ignorance. This means that the view I have defended so far can be summarized as follows:

> *The nature of ignorance:* to be ignorant is to be in a state of propositional ignorance (i.e., to lack propositional knowledge or to lack true belief), to be in a state of objectual ignorance (i.e., roughly, to lack objectual knowledge), or to be in a state of practical ignorance (i.e., to lack practical knowledge).

Ignorance and Understanding

Ignorance is the absence of an epistemically desirable state. So far, we have focused on the epistemically desirable state of knowledge, and in the next chapter we will encounter justification and warrant, two desirable states that are often thought to be entailed by knowledge. But one might think that there are other epistemically valuable states that are equally relevant here. Maybe the two most important candidates are understanding and wisdom. Could we not understand ignorance in terms of the lack or absence of these? In this and the following section, we will explore this.

There are many things that we can understand: the natural world, other people, texts, languages, concepts, fields of study, institutions, and much more. The philosophical literature provides numerous accounts of what understanding (or a specific kind of understanding, such as understanding a law of nature) amounts to. For our purposes, it is important to note that there are two kinds of accounts: those that reduce understanding to knowledge and those according to which understanding entails knowledge but is also more than that. We can be brief about the former: if understanding is reducible to knowledge, then the account I have provided so far will do, for it is cashed out in terms of lack of knowledge. Philosophers

supporting the latter account, though, claim that understanding goes beyond knowledge. According to Jonathan Kvanvig (2018, 699), for instance, to understand something is to grasp or see explanatory and conceptual connections between different pieces of information involved in the subject matter. According to Peter Lipton (2009), to understand something is to grasp certain causal relations. And according to Stephen Grimm (2014, 2021), understanding concerns dependence relations more generally. These are just a few examples: the literature abounds with further accounts of understanding.

Here is the problem, though. Imagine that someone knows Sally but does not understand her. Would we say that she is ignorant of Sally? No—we would just say that she knows Sally but does not (fully) understand her. Or imagine that someone knows that the second law of gravity holds but that she does not *understand* that it holds. Would we say that she is ignorant? More specifically, would we say that she is ignorant that the second law of gravity holds? Of course not. She fails to understand that it holds but because she knows that it holds, she is not ignorant that it holds. This is not to deny that, if someone knows that the second law of gravity holds but fails to understand that it holds, she is ignorant of *some* things. For instance, that person fails to grasp the connections that explain why it holds, so she may well be ignorant *of those*. In other words, lack of understanding comes with certain kinds of ignorance, but it is not the case that ignorance *is* lack of understanding.

Ignorance and Wisdom

When it comes to wisdom, things are a little different. One can know that *p*, lack knowledge that *p*, or be ignorant that *p*, but one cannot be wise that *p* or have wisdom that *p* or lack wisdom that *p*. Nor can one have wisdom about *X* in the way one can be knowledgeable about *X* or be ignorant about *X*. What *does* seem possible,

though, is that one is a wise person (or not) the same way as one can be an ignorant person (or not). Should we say, then, that in at least some cases, to be an ignorant person is to be a person who lacks wisdom?

That does not seem right. Imagine that Ivory is not exactly wise but not foolish either. She lives a normal, decent life, but you would probably not consult her if you sought wisdom for a particularly challenging personal relational problem. Would it follow that Ivory is ignorant or that she is an ignorant person? It seems not. It is just that she is not particularly wise. This shows that ignorance cannot be the absence of wisdom.

What if someone not merely lacks wisdom but actually has something like its opposite, such as foolishness? Would we call that person ignorant? It seems we would. But note that we have now abandoned the suggestion that ignorance is lack of wisdom and are zooming in on a case in which someone is actually foolish. Such a person fails to know a wide variety of important social, prudential, and moral truths and counts as ignorant in virtue of that. Hence, this lends no support to the idea that ignorance is lack of wisdom either.

The Nature of Ignorance and Its Contingent Properties

To say that all ignorance is propositional, objectual, or practical is not to say that there are not any further, valuable conceptions of specific *kinds of ignorance* or conceptions of specific *ways of being ignorant*. Ignorance can be willful, guilty, blameless, strategic, active or passive, externally induced or resulting from self-deception, individual- or group-based, intended, unintended, based on racist presuppositions, local or global, irrelevant, and so on. Specific fields of research may address ignorance that has one or more specific features. In chapters 7 and 8—on strategic ignorance and white

ignorance, respectively—we will see several examples of that. Yet, what I would like to stress here is that these fields study specific *cases of ignorance* and might, therefore, work with rather specific conceptions. That they work with specific conceptions, however, does not mean that they disagree with the view on ignorance as laid out in this chapter, namely, that all ignorance is propositional, objectual, or practical. That is because this chapter provides a view on what it *is* to be ignorant, whereas various conceptions of ignorance focus on different, contingent properties of ignorance— properties that ignorance may or may not have.

Compare it with knowledge, which is widely regarded as the opposite of ignorance. According to most philosophers, to know a particular proposition p is to believe a true proposition p on the basis of some kind of justification in a nonlucky way in some of the many senses of the word *luck*. That is what it *is* to know something, that is the nature of knowledge. But knowledge can have all sorts of contingent or 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 spontaneous and 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 it may be based primarily on the exercise of other people's cognitive capacities (as in some cases of testimony); and so on. In fact, some fields of research focus on knowledge *with specific contingent properties*, such as expert knowledge, or knowledge that issues from the violation of an obligation to respect someone's privacy, or the technical knowledge that comes with the development of weapons of mass destruction.

It is only natural, then, to think that the same applies to what is, in some sense that will be further explored in the next chapter, the opposite of knowledge, namely, ignorance. If so, we should clearly distinguish between its nature and its contingent but sometimes crucially important features, as displayed in table 2.1.

Table 2.1 The nature and contingent features of ignorance

The nature of ignorance	The contingent features of ignorance
Ignorance is the lack of propositional knowledge/ the lack of true belief, or the lack of objectual knowledge, or the lack of practical knowledge	• Willful or unintentional • Individual or collective • Small-scale (individual propositions) or large-scale (whole themes, topics, areas of life) • Brought about by *external* factors (e.g., the government, institutions, or socially accepted frameworks) or *internal* factors (e.g., one's own intellectual vices, background assumptions, or hermeneutical paradigms) • And so on

Some philosophers may object to my account of the nature of ignorance by saying that it does not tell us *how* one is ignorant (see El Kassar 2019, 34). It does indeed not do that, but I do not see how that counts against my view as an account of *what it is to be ignorant*. An account of, say, knowledge also need not tell us *how* a particular person in specific circumstances knows something.[10] 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 (e.g., 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—they were merely meant to answer the question of what knowledge is.

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[10] One might react to this by claiming that reliabilist accounts and epistemic-virtue 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).

A Rival View: El Kassar on Ignorance

According to Nadja El Kassar, we need to go beyond propositional ignorance as the absence of true belief in or knowledge of a proposition. She suggests that we need to take into consideration the conceptions of ignorance found in agnotology and the philosophy of race. Above, I have suggested that this is misguided because, although these fields focus on various important but contingent features of some instances of ignorance, they do not give us reason to expand an analysis of ignorance beyond propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance. I return to this point in more detail in chapters 7 and 8. Yet, even if her criticisms of existing conceptions of ignorance are problematic, it may still be worthwhile to consider her own conception in more detail and see whether there is something to be learned from it.[11] According to El Kassar, ignorance should be understood as follows:

> *El Kassar Thesis₁*: 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). (El Kassar 2018, 306)[12]

It seems to me that this thesis needs revision on at least three points. First, a false belief *is* an epistemic attitude and even a doxastic attitude. Moreover, it is widely thought among philosophers that there are exactly three doxastic attitudes, namely, belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment. If this is right, 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

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[11] For some of my criticisms, see also Peels (2019).
[12] The distinction between different versions of El Kassar's thesis is, of course, my own.

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 completely ignorant (i.e., one cannot even consider the proposition), but then one's ignorance is simply not even manifest in one's doxastic attitudes. The parenthetical reference to doxastic attitudes in the second conjunct is, therefore, redundant.

El Kassar replies that what she has in mind with *doxastic attitudes* is really meta-attitudes; that is, attitudes about one's first-order ignorance (see El Kassar 2019, 31). Even that will not work, though. First-order ignorance can come with pretty much anything: false belief about that first-order ignorance, suspension on that second-order ignorance, true belief about that first-order ignorance, or knowledge about that second-order ignorance, to mention just a few examples. There is nothing on the second-order level that distinguishes first-order ignorance from other first-order propositional attitudes. The revised El Kassar Thesis reads as follows:

> *El Kassar Thesis$_2$*: 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. But there is a problem with this. 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 nature or essence of being ignorant. Rather, it is one of its contingent properties. If one is ignorant of the fact that bullfrogs do not sleep (which is actually a fact), then that may simply be a fairly cognitively isolated, single fact of which one is ignorant. Nothing follows from it about such substantial cognitive phenomena as intellectual virtues (e.g., open-mindedness) and vices

(e.g., dogmatism), which are, after all, dispositions. A version of El Kassar's thesis that takes this point into account reads as follows:

> *El Kassar Thesis₃*: 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 Kassar Thesis, 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 (e.g., Schwitzgebel 2002). If so, on El Kassar Thesis₃, 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 that, 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.[13] 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 Thesis₄*: ignorance is an epistemic agent's having no belief or a false belief about *p*.

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[13] 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.

It seems to me that version 4 is significantly more plausible than version 1. Note, though, that we have now ended up with an account of ignorance that is entirely propositional in nature: to be ignorant is to have no belief or to have a false belief about *p*. We saw that this overlooks objectual and practical ignorance. If someone is ignorant of how to ride a bike, this does not mean that she lacks beliefs about *p* or that she 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 the absence of beliefs, nor does it come with intellectual virtues or vices. Objectual and practical ignorance seem to be sui generis kinds of ignorance. Moreover, as we shall see in the next chapter, El Kassar's conception also overlooks important varieties of propositional ignorance. Another problem with El Kassar's thesis it that it does not require that *p* be true—above, we saw that propositional ignorance requires truth. The final and most important problem with this understanding of ignorance is that, now that we have fine-tuned it, it offers no clear advantage over the view of ignorance that I have defended in this chapter.

El Kassar objects that my conception does not enable us to distinguish between two different epistemic situations, which she refers to as Hannah's and Kate's situations. Hannah is *deeply* and *willingly ignorant* about the high emissions of both carbon and sulfur dioxides of cruise ships. That their emissions are high cannot be denied: an average cruise ship has the same amount of emission as millions of cars combined. Yet, Hannah is deeply and willingly ignorant of this because she shuns all evidence in support of such claims. Kate is much more open-minded, but she has simply never considered the issue in any detail. She is in a state of *suspending ignorance* regarding the emission of cruise ships. I reply that Hannah and Kate are both ignorant—at least propositionally ignorant—but that their ignorance has different, contingent features: Hannah's ignorance is deep

ignorance, whereas Kate's ignorance is suspending ignorance;[14] Hannah's ignorance is willing or intentional, whereas Kate's ignorance is not. These are among the contingent features of ignorance. However, both Hanna and Kate meet the criteria that I laid out for the nature of ignorance and are, therefore, ignorant. Again, we can perfectly well distinguish between these two cases and study these features in detail. It simply does not follow that we should reformulate my account of the nature of ignorance.

Conclusion

I conclude that ignorance is (i) the lack of propositional knowledge or the lack of true belief, (ii) the lack of objectual knowledge, or (iii) the lack of practical knowledge.[15] 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 features because they matter crucially in certain debates in those fields. We will see more examples of that from agnotology, the philosophy of race, and feminist philosophy in chapters 7 and 8.

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 be that origin essentialism is true, which means that it is essential that we have the parents that we have, that we would be someone else if we had different biological parents. If so, then that is part of our nature or essence. And yet, certain contingent

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[14] We will consider the varieties of ignorance—the different ways in which one can be ignorant—in more detail in chapter 4.

[15] If the Standard View on ignorance, on which propositional ignorance is the lack of propositional knowledge, is correct, then one could simply replace this with something along the following lines: ignorance is a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in the lack of (propositional, objectual, or practical) knowledge.

and accidental features may matter more to us, such as whether or not our parents actually love 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 reason to reject the threefold understanding of ignorance that I have defended in this chapter.

This is not to deny that in ordinary parlance, we may use words like *ignorance* and *ignorant* in a broader way. *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*. On my alternative, threefold synthesis, this is no surprise because 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*.

As we saw, the concept of propositional ignorance plays a crucial role in my analysis. But we have postponed any substantial discussion of what it is. In the next chapter, we shall delve into this.

3

The Nature
of Propositional Ignorance

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I argued that one is ignorant when one is propositionally ignorant or objectually ignorant or practically ignorant. Objectual ignorance can be understood as the lack of objectual knowledge, and practical ignorance is the lack of practical knowledge. But what exactly is it to be propositionally ignorant? In other words, what is the nature of propositional ignorance? To say that a particular person's ignorance is culpable or blameless, self-induced or the result of manipulation, deep or superficial, and small-scale or large-scale is to say something valuable. However, it does not yet answer the question of what ignorance *consists in*. Can we say something general that applies to *all* cases of propositional ignorance—is there something that they have in common in virtue of which they are instances of ignorance?

Before we delve into this, we may ask why it matters in the first place what the nature of propositional ignorance is. Epistemologists may want to know this because ignorance, like knowledge, understanding, rationality, and epistemic virtue, is a central epistemic phenomenon in our cognitive lives. It will, therefore, be of intrinsic value to understand what ignorance is. Yet, I believe that grasping the nature of ignorance will also be of interest to philosophers who are not particularly interested in the kind of conceptual analysis that epistemologists are fond of. This is because one's understanding of ignorance sometimes makes a crucial difference in

debates far beyond the confines of epistemology. We will see in the second part of this book that it matters to such issues as whether we should sometimes aim at ignorance in our students, when ignorance excuses, when one's ignorance is culpable, and whether ignorance is assertable.

One might think that the answer to our question is obvious: to be propositionally ignorant is to *lack propositional knowledge* (this is the Standard View). It turns out, though, that things are not that simple. There is a rival to this seemingly obvious view, namely, the New View, on which ignorance is *lack of true belief*. Moreover, a recent view challenges both the Standard and New Views. Here the idea is that ignorance is lack of true belief or lack of knowledge *that issues from the violation of a duty to inquire*. This chapter first sketches the Standard and New Views and then considers in detail various considerations for each of them. I explain why I favor the New View, even though I feel the force of the Standard View. After that, I explore whether ignorance implies a violated duty to inquire, as Duncan Pritchard has argued. Finally, the chapter addresses the objection that an account of ignorance should be able to explain why ignorance has negative epistemic value.

The Standard and New Views on Ignorance

The Standard View on propositional ignorance says that it is the lack or absence of *knowledge*.[1] Thus, the word *ignorance* is the antonym of *knowledge*, and ignorance is the complement or contradictory of knowledge. I call this the Standard View because it has been widely adopted, particularly in analytic philosophy, and was

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[1] Some authors, such as Jens Haas and Katja Vogt, distinguish between the mere absence of something and the lack of something, where the latter denotes a state where something is missing that should be there (e.g., Haas and Vogt 2015, 18). Here, I will treat the two terms synonymously.

taken for granted until recently. Michael Zimmerman adopts it when he says:

> Ignorance . . . is a failure to know what is true. To know what is true, one must believe it (something that involves having a certain level or degree of confidence in it) and do so with adequate justification. Thus ignorance can come about in one of two ways: either by way of failure to believe the truth or by way of believing it without adequate justification. (Zimmerman 2008, ix)

Among its many other adherents are Daniel DeNicola (2017, 199–202), Lloyd Fields (1994, 403), Susan Haack (2001, 25), and Pierre Le Morvan (2011a, 2012, 2013; see also Rescher 2009; Vogt 2012). The Standard View needs a bit of qualification, though. For instance, the computer I am using to type these words does not have any knowledge; however, it does not follow that it is ignorant. For one to be ignorant, one should be an epistemic subject. Also, it is false that the coronavirus originated in Columbia; yet nobody is ignorant of the fact that the coronavirus originated in Columbia. One can only be ignorant of facts or truths, as we saw in the previous chapter.[2]

The New View says that ignorance is the lack or absence of *true belief*. Among the adherents of the New View is René van Woudenberg:

> *S is ignorant with respect to p*, when
>
> (iiia) S neither believes nor disbelieves p, even though he has entertained p (rational ignorance).
> (iiib) S never so much as entertained p and accordingly neither believes nor disbelieves p (deep ignorance).
> (iv) S has the false belief that not-p.

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[2] These points are also made by Nottelmann (2016, 34–35).

Each of these conditions is sufficient for ignorance.

There is a way to connect and summarize the three suffi-
cient conditions for ignorance by saying, as Alvin Goldman has
done, that ignorance is "the absence of true belief"; after all,
each of these conditions entails the absence of true belief.[3] (Van
Woudenberg 2009, 375)

The New View is also embraced by Alvin Goldman, Alexander
Guerrero, and myself.[4] Now, let us consider the Standard and New
Views in some more detail. The Standard View says that proposi-
tional ignorance is the lack of propositional knowledge. However,
there are at least five different ways in which a cognitive subject S
can lack propositional knowledge that p is true:

(i) p is false.
(ii) S disbelieves the true proposition p.
(iii) S suspends belief on the true proposition p.
(iv) S neither believes that p nor disbelieves that p nor suspends
belief on the true proposition p.
(v) S believes the true proposition p, but S's belief that p lacks
warrant (where warrant is that which turns true belief into
knowledge).

The Standard and New Views agree that if one of the situations in
(i)–(iv) obtains, we have a case of propositional ignorance. Let me
explain.

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[3] In more recent work, Van Woudenberg uses the New View on ignorance to give an
account of the interpretation of texts in terms of removing certain kinds of ignorance.
See Van Woudenberg (2021).

[4] See Goldman (1986, 26); Goldman and Olsson (2009, 19–21). Admittedly, Goldman
seems to identify true belief with knowledge in various passages, so that he could in
principle embrace both the New and Standard View. See also Guerrero (2007, 62–63);
Peels (2010, 2011a, 2012, 2014); Van Woudenberg (2009, 375). The New View is also tac-
itly embraced by Marcia Baron (2017, 59) and accepted by Michael Zimmerman in his
more recent work (Zimmerman 2017, 78–79).

As to (i), imagine that Ariadne falsely believes that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo in 1799 (this actually happened in 1815). It follows, on most accounts of knowledge, that Ariadne does not know that Napoleon lost the battle in 1799. Exactly what is Ariadne's ignorance here, though? It seems that she is not ignorant that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo in 1799, because that is false. Fortunately, there are various plausible options here. For instance, Ariadne is ignorant as to whether Napoleon lost that battle in 1799, and she is ignorant of the fact that Napoleon lost the Battle of Waterloo in 1815. As to (ii) and (iii): if someone disbelieves or suspends judgment on the true proposition that 113 is an emergency number in South Korea to report spies, she is ignorant of this. As to (iv), if someone neither believes nor disbelieves nor suspends judgment on the true proposition that a duel among three people is called a truel, she is ignorant of this.

Therefore, the Standard and New Views disagree only on whether instances of (v) also count as cases of ignorance. In other words, they diverge on whether one is ignorant that p if one truly believes but fails to know that p. On the Standard View, one is ignorant in such cases, whereas on the New View, one is not.

Now, there is a view on knowledge, defended by Crispin Sartwell, on which knowledge simply *is* true belief.[5] Various philosophers have argued that there is indeed a rather weak sense of *knowledge* on which knowledge is mere true belief.[6] But virtually all philosophers take it that there is a stronger sense of *knowledge* on which knowledge is much more than that and requires justification, being based on good evidence, being reliably formed, or some such thing. Also, it requires an antiluck condition so as to make sense of Gettier scenarios. In what follows, therefore, I will take it that

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[5] See Sartwell (1991, 1992). For critical discussion, see Le Morvan (2002).
[6] See Goldman (2002a, 2002b) and Goldman and Olsson (2009). For critical discussion, see Le Morvan (2005, 2011a).

knowledge is more than mere true belief. Thus, the Standard and New Views disagree on the nature of ignorance.

Arguments for the Standard View

I will now proceed to discuss three considerations in favor of the Standard View: one from common usage, one from its unifying power, and one from the possibility of ignorance of falsehoods.[7]

First Argument: Common Usage

One might think that the idea that ignorance is lack of knowledge has considerable support from how the term *ignorance* is commonly used. Of course, philosophical questions about the nature of something can hardly ever be settled conclusively merely by common parlance. However, taking Wittgenstein's well-known advice seriously, one might think that it is at least wise to consider how the term is used ordinarily.

A natural place to start is the *Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of the word *ignorance*: "The fact or condition of being ignorant; want of knowledge (general or special)."[8] English is not unique in this regard: definitions of cognates of *ignorance* as antonyms of cognates of *knowledge* prove widespread. In fact, in numerous languages spanning several distinct linguistic families, a cognate of *ignorance* is constructed as an antonym of a cognate of *knowledge*. Table 3.1 presents some examples.

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[7] Some of the arguments in this and the next sections are based on Le Morvan and Peels (2016).

[8] *Ignorance* is also defined in terms of the lack of knowledge in the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, and the *Collins Dictionary*. The current meaning of *ignorance* as an antonym of *knowledge* squares well with its etymology: the Latin *ignosco* derived from *in* (the opposite of) and *gnosco* (know).

Table 3.1 *Ignorance* as antonym of *knowledge* in various languages

Language	*Knowledge* cognate	*Ignorance* cognate
Burmese	aasipanyar	kainnmaehkyinn
Chinese	zhīshì	wúzhī
Danish	viden	uvidenhed
Finnish	tieto	tietämättömyys
Hebrew	yediah	i yediah
Hindi	jñāna	ajñāna
Malagasy	fahalalana	tsy fahalalana
Russian	znaniya	neznaniye
Turkish	bilgi	bilgisizlik

Common usage thus provides some evidence that *ignorance* functions as an antonym of *knowledge* in English and likewise for cognates in numerous other languages.[9] Yet, as we all know, such linguistic data provide little evidence from a purely conceptual point. The English word *believe* derives from the German word *belieben*—that is, "to love." Yet, nobody would suggest that to believe something implies a loving affection of some kind toward that thing. The etymology of contemporary English words, though interesting, cannot be taken to provide substantial evidence in a controversy over the right conceptual analysis of something.

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[9] The Standard View is also maintained by such linguists as Stephen Levinson, who notes that "*not ignorant* logically implies *knows* (because ignorance and knowledge are contradictories)" (2000, 208).

Second Argument: Unified Theorizing about Ignorance

On the Standard View, ignorance has no substantive and positive nature of its own. Because ignorance is purely privative and negational, its nature is completely determined by its contrast with the nature of knowledge. The relationship between ignorance and knowledge proves analogous to the relationship between darkness and light: darkness is the absence or want of light. Ignorance also proves analogous to evil understood in Augustinian terms as having no substantive nature of its own: it is just the privation or absence of good (Augustine 2009, 43). If ignorance thus has only a privative or negational nature relative to knowledge, then this nature is only properly comprehensible in contrast with the latter. Therefore, every conception of knowledge automatically yields by negation a conception of its complement ignorance and theorizing about both is thereby unified. To the extent that one finds such unification attractive, it counts in favor of the Standard View and against the New View.

In the previous chapter, we saw that there is propositional, objectual, and practical knowledge as well as propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance. For instance, Fred can be ignorant that monotremes are egg-laying mammals, Olivia can be ignorant of the taste of mangoes, and Sam can be ignorant of how to calm a crying baby. The Standard View has a simple and unifying verdict in such cases: they are all cases of ignorance because they are all cases of lack of knowledge.

It seems to me we can be brief here. It is true that unification would be helpful, but something's being helpful hardly provides evidence in favor of its truth. Alternatively, one might say that a *unified* account is a *simpler* account, and that simplicity counts in favor of something's truth. Below, I return to the issue of unification and simplicity.

Third Argument: Ignorance of Falsehoods

The idea of the third argument is that one can be ignorant of false propositions but that the New View cannot accommodate such ignorance. After all, on the New View, one is ignorant only if the proposition in question is true and one lacks a true belief.

Again, our reply can be quite brief. When the adherent of the New View says that ignorance is the absence or lack of true belief, that is short for something like this: ignorance of p's truth is the lack of true belief in an epistemic subject when p is true. Of course, there is also such a thing as not being acquainted with a proposition—say, because one lacks the relevant concepts. In chapter 2, I called this objectual ignorance. Objectual ignorance of X is (roughly) the lack of objectual knowledge of X in an epistemic subject when there is an X. This third argument, then, seems directed against a straw-man version of the New View. As pointed out above, this might leave worries about whether the New View can provide a unified account of ignorance untouched. I therefore return to that worry below.

Arguments for the New View

Let us now turn to the New View, on which ignorance is lack of true belief. If the view is correct, then cases in which one holds a true belief without having knowledge are never cases of ignorance—whether they are cases of Gettierized justified true belief, mere justified true belief, or even mere true belief. Of course, one could slightly revise the view so that, say, the absence of justified belief counts as ignorance, but here I zoom in on the suggestion that ignorance is the lack of true belief.

First Argument: True Belief That Falls Short of Knowledge

Let us first consider some ways in which one can believe truly that *p* and yet fail to know that *p*, and then consider whether they count as cases of being ignorant that *p*.

Let us start with cases that just fall short of knowledge, such as Gettier cases. They do not seem to be cases of ignorance. Here is an example that can be used to illustrate the point. Imagine that Sam enters his living room and that he looks at the clock. The clock tells him that it is 7:00 p.m., so Sam comes to believe that it is 7:00 p.m. He knows that the clock normally works perfectly fine. However, unbeknownst to him, the clock stopped working twenty-four hours ago. Is Sam ignorant that it is 7:00 p.m.? The adherent of the New View might suggest that it is implausible that Sam is ignorant in such a case. Of course, there are *other* propositions of whose truth Sam *is* clearly ignorant, such as that the clock stopped working twenty-four hours ago and that the clock is unreliable on this particular occasion. However, Sam does not seem to be ignorant of the truth of the proposition that it is 7:00 p.m. *itself*, even though he lacks knowledge of it.

Next, even cases of mere true belief might not seem to be cases of ignorance. Consider Alfred from Columbia, Missouri, who believes—contrary to all the evidence—that he is going to be the next president of the United States. He thus comes to believe proposition *q*: "The next president of the United States currently lives in Columbia, Missouri." As it turns out, the next president is Ms. Howard, a congress member living in Columbia, Missouri, whom Alfred has never heard of. In this case, although Alfred believes truly, he does not know that *q*. Is he ignorant that *q* is true? It might seem that he is not. Again, there are all sorts of truths in the neighborhood of *q* that he *is* ignorant of, and it is hard mentally to isolate *q* from all those other truths. Examples of such true propositions are "Ms. Howard is going to be the next president of the United

States," "Ms. Howard lives in Columbia," and "The next president is currently a congress member." We may be inclined to think that Alfred is ignorant that q is true because we know that he is ignorant of all these other propositions. If we focus on q, however, it seems that Alfred is *not* ignorant of q.

Now, imagine that knowledge is indeed true belief that satisfies some further conditions to provide an anti-Gettier codicil. If cases of true belief just falling short of knowledge, like Sam's case, and cases of mere true belief, such as Alfred's case, do not count as cases of ignorance, then in-between cases will probably not count as cases of ignorance either. Here is why. If, on the one hand, such cases *had* a property that would make them cases of ignorance, then it seems to adherents of the New View that Gettierized true belief would also have that property and, therefore, be a case of ignorance. If, on the other hand, such cases *lacked* a property that would make them cases of ignorance, then it seems mere true belief would also lack that property and, therefore, be a case of ignorance. Thus, if both cases of mere true belief and cases of true belief just falling short of knowledge are *not* cases of ignorance, then we can safely assume that in-between cases are not cases of ignorance either.

Not all people may share these intuitions about our two examples, though, so let us consider two further arguments for the New View.

Second Argument: Ignorance Excuses

Ever since Aristotle, it has been widely thought among philosophers that ignorance provides an excuse for wrong actions or omissions for which one would otherwise be blameworthy.[10] Imagine that it is Claire's birthday and that Sam gives her a chocolate cake that,

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[10] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.13–27, 3.5.7–12, 5.8.3–12. For more recent examples, see Brandt (1969, 349); Fischer and Ravizza (1998, 12–13); Goldman (1970, 208); Rosen (2003, 61–62); Smith (1983, 543–571); Zimmerman (2008, 169–205).

unbeknownst to him, has been poisoned by Claire's jealous cousin. It seems clear that in such a case Sam's ignorance excuses him for offering Claire the poisoned cake—unless, maybe, his ignorance was blameworthy. In some cases, ignorance counts as a full excuse: it removes *all* blameworthiness. In other cases, it is merely a partial excuse: it reduces the degree of one's blameworthiness, but it does not block blameworthiness altogether.[11] If, for instance, Sam suspends judgment on whether the chocolate cake is poisoned and still gives it to Claire, he is less blameworthy than if he is aware (believes truly) that the cake is poisoned, but he is still blameworthy.

In chapter 10, we will have a much closer look at ignorance as an excuse. Here my point is this: any kind of true belief that falls short of knowledge does *not* excuse.[12] It does not even provide a *partial* excuse. However, as long as it is blameless, ignorance excuses. It follows, by a simple *modus tollens*, that ignorance cannot be the lack of knowledge.

Let us elaborate on the earlier example to illustrate the point. Sam has baked Claire a birthday chocolate cake, and he can now give it to her or not. It seems to adherents of the New View that it does not make any difference to the degree of his blameworthiness whether Sam *knows* that it is poisoned or merely *truly believes* that it is poisoned: in both cases he is blameworthy to an equally high degree and not at all excused. For whether he knows or rationally believes or merely believes that the cake is poisoned does not make an important difference to his phenomenology: in all these cases, he sincerely thinks that the cake is poisoned; that is how reality appears to him.

If, as many epistemologists believe, there are degrees of belief, and if degrees of belief are to be spelled out in terms of level of conviction or amount of certainty, then maybe one is more

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[11] For some examples, see Peels (2014).

[12] Thus also Baron (2017, 58): "If you believed that the child to whom you served peanut butter (causing her to become very ill) has an allergy to peanuts but did not *know* she did, that you did not know is not exculpatory."

blameworthy if one is *certain* that the cake is poisoned than if one is merely *fairly convinced* that the cake is poisoned. Notice, though, that such varieties in degree of belief are not necessarily correlated with whether one knows, believes on strong evidence, believes on weak evidence, or believes without any evidence. In principle one could, quite irrationally, be one hundred percent sure without having any reasons or evidence. Thus, even though the degree to which one holds a particular belief may make a difference to the extent to which true belief excuses, whether one *knows* or *justifiedly* believes (and so on) that it is poisoned does not make a difference to that.

Adherents of the New View would stress that the suggestion here is *not* that a true belief that the cake is poisoned renders one blameworthy *to the highest degree possible*. Maybe someone who believes truly that the chocolate cake is poisoned and gives it to her friend in order to do wrong for wrong's sake is even more blameworthy than someone who gives the poisoned cake to her friend merely because she is scared of the poisoning cousin (thus, for instance, Beardsley 1979, 577). In such cases, however, it seems that one's evil intention *adds* something to the degree of one's blameworthiness. Whether one believes or knows that the chocolate cake is poisoned makes no difference to the degree of one's blameworthiness: in both cases, one is not excused at all, not even partially.

Because, as we said, ignorance is widely acknowledged as an excuse, whereas it seems that true belief that fails to be knowledge does not excuse, ignorance cannot be just the absence of knowledge. What the discussion of ignorance in this section suggests is rather that ignorance is the lack of true belief.

Of course, one could propose to revise the widespread view that blameless ignorance excuses and say that, while *most* varieties of blameless ignorance excuse, *some* varieties of ignorance, such as blameless mere true belief, do not. The New View, however, implies that *all* ignorance of the relevant propositions counts as at least a

partial excuse, and this captures the intuitions about excusing ignorance that, it seems, are widespread among philosophers.

Third Argument: Ignorance Comes in Degrees

Let us now turn to what is perhaps the strongest argument for the New View. It is widely acknowledged that knowledge does not come in degrees: either you know something, or you do not. If *ignorance* is the antonym of *knowledge*, then ignorance does not come in degrees either. After all, either you know something or you do not; and if you do not, then you are ignorant. However, it seems that ignorance *does* come in degrees. As Berit Brogaard points out:

> If you don't know that p, you do not know that p simpliciter. You cannot know p a lot, a little or to some extent. Conversely, we can be a little bit ignorant of the fact that p, very ignorant of the fact that p, and ignorant of the fact that p to some extent. (Brogaard 2016, 57)

This is not merely a suggestion. It is confirmed by the fact that "to be ignorant of" is a gradable expression, like "to be mindful of" or "to be knowledgeable of," whereas "to know that" is not. Degree morphology (e.g., degree modifiers and comparative morphemes) shows that this is case. It is perfectly fine to use expressions like "is more ignorant of the fact that," "is too ignorant of the fact that," and "is just as ignorant as to whether," but it is ungrammatical to use phrases like "does not know enough the fact that" and "does not know that fact as much as."

We can be even more specific. As Brogaard has argued in detail, "to be ignorant of," like "to be knowledgeable of" and unlike "to know," has three morphological features that show why it is a moderately relative expression. First, it is a moderately relative gradable adjective: "S is ignorant" does not quantify over degrees

in semantics, but "*S* is quite ignorant" and similar expressions do. Second, "to be ignorant of" has an interpretation that depends on discourse-salient standards, which means that there are borderline cases. Someone can be highly, moderately, or a little ignorant of the fact that her boyfriend is going to propose to her. Third, locutions like "is ignorant of" trigger sorites paradoxes, both in the presence and in the absence of a modifier. For instance, if *S* notices one hundred salient signs that her boyfriend is about to propose to her, she is not ignorant. If someone who notices *n* salient signs that her boyfriend is going to propose to her is not ignorant of this fact, then someone who notices *n*−1 salient signs to this effect is not ignorant of this fact either. That would mean that someone who notices zero such signs is not ignorant either—which is clearly false.

Now, in the previous chapter, I argued that *objectual ignorance* (at least, as lack of acquaintance) and *practical ignorance* (at least, as lack of ability) are the antonyms of *objectual knowledge* and *practical knowledge*. In this chapter, I have argued that *propositional ignorance* is not the antonym of *propositional knowledge*. Does it not count in favor of the Standard View that it provides a unified account of ignorance—namely, ignorance as the absence or lack of knowledge? I do not think it does. The point about degrees that I have drawn attention to here helps to explain why there is a principled difference between propositional knowledge on the one hand and objectual and practical knowledge on the other. The former is nongradable, whereas the latter are gradable. Either you know that *p* or you do not. But you can know *X* better or know better how to *φ* than someone else. Ignorance, I suggested here, comes in degrees—we will explore this in much greater detail in chapter 6. This explains why *ignorance* is the antonym of *knowledge* for objectual and practical knowledge (which also come in degrees), while it is *not* the antonym of *propositional knowledge* (which does not come in degrees).

Ignorance and the Duty to Inquire

Recently, Duncan Pritchard (2021) has argued that what I call the Standard and New Views[13] are both deficient in one crucial regard: they lack a normative condition. He proposes that we understand ignorance as the lack of true belief or the lack of knowledge *where one could and should have had a true belief or knowledge*. Pritchard agrees that the Standard View is in trouble, partly because cases of Gettierized true belief that *p* do not seem to be cases of ignorance that *p*, even if they are not cases of knowledge either. On the other hand, says Pritchard, it seems that if someone accepts a belief merely from gullibility, that person is still ignorant, even though the New View would rule that she is not.

One could say, then, that Pritchard's Normative View on ignorance is a rival of the Standard and New Views. Alternatively, one could interpret Pritchard's proposal as an attempt to *improve* the Standard or the New View. Whether it is an attempt at fine-tuning depends on what one considers to be the fundamental epistemic good that people could and should strive after: Is it true belief or knowledge? Here, we zoom in on what matters for our purposes: Is Pritchard right that ignorance requires a normative condition, and if so, what is it?

To see whether he is right, let us consider in some more detail the kinds of cases he adduces in favor of the view that one is ignorant only if one manifests an intellectual failing of some kind.[14] He sketches three kinds of scenarios. First, one is not ignorant of *pointless truths*, such as the number of grains of sand on the beach or the

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[13] He calls both standard accounts. I prefer to use the term *Standard View* for the idea that ignorance is lack of knowledge because, as we saw, that is and has been the dominant view in the literature.

[14] He first levels these three cases as arguments against the Standard View of ignorance (on which ignorance is lack of knowledge) but then goes on to say that "what the cases just considered demonstrate is that there is a normative dimension to ignorance, in the sense that it implies a specific kind of intellectual failing on the subject's part" (Pritchard 2021, 115).

number of blades of grass on one's front lawn. This is also clear from the fact that if one stumbles upon some pointless truth and thereby comes to truly believe or even know it, it does not seem right to say that one has *removed one's ignorance* or even that one's ignorance *has been removed*. In fact, even if, by carefully studying all the grains of sand on the beach, one comes to know their exact number, one did not remove one's ignorance. Rather, one did not know, and now one does know.

Let us assume Pritchard is right that one is not ignorant in these cases. Pritchard takes it that scenarios like these suggest that one is ignorant only if one has a duty to inquire. After all, one does not have a duty to count the number of grains of sand on the beach. Imagine that in some remote scenario, a geologist *does* have a duty to count them but fails to do so; then it seems rather plausible to say that she is *ignorant* of the exact number of grains of sand on the beach.

Let us now turn to a second kind of case provided by Pritchard. There are also truths that we cannot discover, truths that are *practically unknowable*. Take the issue of what Caesar had for breakfast on the day he crossed the Rubicon. Unless we have further circumstantial evidence—something like textual evidence to the effect that Caesar always had some bread, two eggs, and a few grapes for breakfast during his years as military leader in Gaul—it seems there is no way we can know what he had for breakfast on that day. Thus, there is a practical boundary to what we can know here. Yet, it seems false to say that we are *ignorant* of what Caesar had for breakfast on the day he crossed the Rubicon.

What follows from this scenario? Well, it seems to follow that someone who is ignorant of a proposition that cannot be known (say, because it is too distant in the past) is not ignorant of that proposition. We might want to say that she does *not know* the truth about it, but we would not want to say that she is *ignorant* of it. Pritchard suggests that we are ignorant only if we have a duty to inquire, and that seems to take care of this case. After all, it is a

widely accepted Kantian dictum in ethics that *ought* implies *can*—even though (unsurprisingly) it is rather controversial among philosophers exactly how this is to be understood. In any case, we could say that one has a duty to inquire about *p* only if one *can* actually inquire about *p*. It would follow that, as one does not have a duty to inquire about Caesar's breakfast, one is *not* ignorant of what Caesar had for breakfast on the day that he crossed the Rubicon.

Let us now consider the third kind of case provided by Pritchard. There are truths that cannot be known or believed *for structural reasons*: there are certain epistemic boundaries that we cannot cross. It is merely contingent that we do not know what Caesar had for breakfast on the day he crossed the Rubicon—he could simply have written that down. It is significantly less contingent (but not exactly metaphysically necessary either) that we do not know various truths concerning the behavior of particles on a quantum level. These truths are not so much *practically* as *structurally unknowable* for us. For example, you cannot at the same time know precisely both the current position of a particle and its momentum.[15] However, it seems that we are not *ignorant* of such truths either. In cases of structural limitations to what we can know, we speak of a lack of knowledge, not of a lack of ignorance. Another case mentioned by Pritchard is this: we do not *know* the propositions that Wittgenstein (1969) famously called hinge propositions, such as the proposition that our doxastic mechanisms are by and large reliable. However, it seems wrong to say that we are, therefore, ignorant of them. They are simply not truths that we can know or be ignorant about.

Again, Pritchard's duty, at least complemented with an "ought-implies-can clause," seems to take care of cases like this. I have no duty to inquire whether proposition *p* about the exact location and momentum of an elementary particle in quantum mechanics is true

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[15] Plenty of further examples of things that we are necessarily ignorant of are provided by Rescher (2009).

because I cannot possibly know whether *p* is true. And I do not have a duty to inquire whether our hinge propositions are true because I cannot *know* whether they are true. As a philosopher, I may have a duty to reflect on hinge propositions, but that is a different matter. The idea that we cannot know hinge propositions is, of course, controversial. Many common-sense philosophers would say that we *do* know a wide variety of hinge propositions, such as that I exist, that there is an external material world, that our doxastic mechanisms are by and large reliable, and that things cannot come into existence without a cause.[16] Now, Pritchard does not take sides on whether hinge propositions can be known; rather, his point is that *if* they cannot be known, it seems we are not ignorant of them either. He suggests that we can understand this situation as follows: because I do not have a duty to inquire whether or not hinge propositions are true, I am not ignorant as to whether they are true or not, even though I lack knowledge and even though I lack true belief. That, Pritchard suggests, is exactly the result we want.

Is it, though? I have my doubts. First, note that in none of these scenarios it seems to be the duty itself that explains why we would not say that someone is ignorant about a particular proposition. Rather, it seems to be various elements or conditions *entailed by a duty*, such as a value or significance condition or the possibility to come to know something. Second and even more importantly, there are stereotypical situations in which someone is ignorant and in which she clearly has *not* violated any kind of intellectual duty. Take the many cases from the field of agnotology (we will consider various cases in much more detail in chapter 7). The very idea on which that entire discipline is built is that people can be ignorant not because *they* have violated an intellectual duty to investigate but because *others* have violated a duty to inform them properly. For example, the tobacco industry can—and still does—intentionally

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[16]   See, for instance, various essays in Peels and Van Woudenberg (2020).

keep a large proportion of the population ignorant about the health effects of smoking.

What these two points jointly suggest is that what matters to whether or not we are ignorant of something are one or two things entailed by the duty to inquire, *not* the alleged duty to investigate itself. The two candidates are a significance condition and a possibility condition. I would like to suggest that the significance condition will do the job. Let me explain this by reconsidering each of the three scenarios sketched by Pritchard.

First, maybe I am not ignorant of the number of grains of sand on the beach, even though I do not know it either nor even hold a true belief about it. This could be because it does not *matter* what the number of grains of sand on the beach is—at least, it does not in any way matter *to me*. A geologist who has a duty to investigate this but fails to do so *is* ignorant of the number of grains of sand because to him it is significant, it matters, it is of value to know that.

Maybe we are not ignorant of what Caesar had for breakfast because it does not really matter whether it was one or two eggs, bread, or yoghurt, or yet something else. Compare this with the following scenario. Imagine that there is not, and will never be, enough evidence to reasonably believe that *Homo sapiens sapiens* committed a genocide on *Homo sapiens neanderthalensis*. Of course, whether or not we—humans—did *does* matter to such things as our identity, the way we think of ourselves, various religious narratives about a fall and the first murder among humans: such a genocide would be a horrible, but important part of history. If we did do this, and we would forever lack sufficient evidence to know that we did this, it does not seem implausible at all that we are inevitably ignorant of this horrendous black page in our history. Again, then, the significance condition seems to make sense of scenarios like these.

As to the things that are structurally impossible for us to know (for instance, certain truths of quantum mechanics and various hinge propositions), I would say that things depend on the details of the situation. If these truths are utterly irrelevant, the significance

condition can explain why we may not say that we are ignorant of them. The exact location and momentum of a particular elementary particle is irrelevant to most of us. It seems, though, that some of these truths are of value, at least of epistemic value. It may matter to someone in quantum mechanics what the exact location and momentum of a specific particle is. Various hinge propositions may matter to many of us. Yet, Pritchard might suggest[17] that it simply sounds odd to say that we are ignorant of the hinge propositions when they are simply not in the market for knowledge. That may be true but note that the New View can explain this intuition. After all, we truly believe that there is an external world, that we can know the world, that other people have minds, and so on, even if we do not know these propositions; and because we hold true beliefs about these things, we are not ignorant of them.

However, Pritchard suggests that even if something is of significance, the very fact that it structurally cannot be known rules out ignorance. But why think that? The idea that there is such a thing as *necessary ignorance* has been advocated by many in the literature. To commit oneself along the lines just suggested seems to be to take a position in this debate without any substantial argument. Here are some considerations in favor of the idea that necessary ignorance is possible: (i) Imagine that we damage a person's brain so that there is no way she can come to know who her parents are— say, she cannot even form the concept of parent. It does not at all seem counterintuitive to say that we have *made sure* or *guaranteed* that she remains ignorant as to who her parents are. And that is not only because she lacks knowledge and true belief but also because *it matters who a person's parents are*. That suffices for ignorance. (ii) There is good reason from physics to think that there is a principled boundary to our knowledge of what goes on in other light cones in the universe. Now, imagine that there is another civilization much like ours in another light cone. Its members have institutions for

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[17] This is what Pritchard suggested to me in personal correspondence.

learning, religion, and an appreciation of truth, beauty, and goodness. However, because they are in another light cone, we cannot possibly come to know who they are and what they do, and vice versa. Why should we not say that we are *necessarily ignorant* of the existence and nature of the other civilization?

Even if I am mistaken about this, one could suggest that ignorance requires, in addition to lack of knowledge or lack of true belief, a significance *and a possibility condition*. One is ignorant *only if one can in principle* know or truly believe. Thus, even if the significance condition is insufficient to solve the problems that Pritchard draws our attention to, it seems that we do not need something as strong as a duty condition; a possibility condition will do.[18] One may suggest that combining a significance condition with a possibility condition reduces my account to Pritchard's account, but there is good reason to think that it does not. After all, not every scenario in which we *can* know or truly believe that *p* and in which knowing or truly believing that *p* is of value is also a situation in which we have a duty to inquire about *p*. It is valuable and possible for an average person to know many truths from cultural history and science, yet she does not, as such, have a duty to know them.

The Epistemic Badness of Ignorance

An important objection that has been leveled against the Standard and New Views is that they cannot explain why ignorance is prima facie epistemically bad. Even if one adds the normative assumption that knowledge or true belief is epistemically good, it does not

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[18] An additional reason one might have to add a possibility condition to an account of ignorance is that one might think that young children and people with severe mental limitations are not *ignorant* of, say, current Indian politics. They do not know about it, but because they *cannot* know, they are not exactly ignorant either. My account, however, is focused on relatively normal, healthy, properly functioning adults. There is, therefore, no need to revise my account of ignorance to make sense of such cases.

follow that the absence of it is epistemically bad. Badness, after all, is distinct from merely the absence of goodness.

Anne Meylan (2020), for instance, suggests that Pritchard's account in terms of a duty to inquire *is* able to explain why ignorance is prima facie epistemically bad, even though she adds that it cannot explain this along the lines suggested by Pritchard. She rightly suggests that Pritchard's account seems committed to something like this:

> Being ignorant of the true proposition that p is non-instrumentally, epistemically bad because it entails a failure to inquire into p (where p is not a pointless truth). (Meylan 2020, 443)

But exactly why is this epistemically bad? Meylan goes on to discuss two suggestions:

> (1) The failure to inquire into p involved in the ignorance of the true proposition that p is an instrumentally, epistemically bad thing because it leads to the absence of epistemically good states (to the absence of knowledge or the lack of true belief).
> (2) The failure to inquire into p involved in the ignorance of the true proposition that p is non-instrumentally, epistemically bad: it does not derive its badness from the badness of its effects. (Meylan 2020, 443, 444)

According to Meylan, (1) will not do the job. After all, it displays an argumentative gap: it simply does not follow from some absent thing's goodness that its absence is bad—for all we know, it may just be neutral.

So, what *is* bad about ignorance? Meylan suggests something along the lines of (2) by arguing that ignorance displays *epistemic insouciance*: "The failure to inquire into p involved in the ignorance of the true proposition that p is non-instrumentally, epistemically bad because it is the manifestation of an epistemic vice, namely,

the vice of epistemic insouciance" (Meylan 2020, 444). Adopting Quassim Cassam's (2018) account of epistemic insouciance and citing him on this point, Meylan says that people who have this vice "lack concern about the facts" or are indifferent as to "whether their beliefs and statements have any basis in reality" (2020, 445). The failure to inquire is one important manifestation of the epistemic vice—the intrinsically epistemically bad character trait—of insouciance.

I agree with Meylan that the manifestation of an epistemic vice, including that of insouciance, is intrinsically epistemically bad. Yet, her account faces two problems. First, in the previous section, I argued that Pritchard is mistaken in thinking that all ignorance issues from the violation of a duty to inquire. Meylan simply takes Pritchard's Normative View on ignorance for granted. Second, why should we think that ignorance *as such*—rather than specific cases of ignorance with specific properties, such as being willful—is a manifestation of the epistemic vice of insouciance? Even if ignorance always issues from a culpable failure to inquire, it does not follow that every failure to inquire is due to insouciance. One may have due regard for truth but be *too scared* to inquire. One can value alethic matters but *overestimate one's own cognitive capacities*, so that one often falsely believes that further inquiry is not needed because one has already accurately assessed the situation.

Can the New View, as I have laid it out above, explain the prima facie epistemic badness of ignorance? Well, *is* it prima facie epistemically bad to be ignorant? Here, it seems to me that it depends on the variety of ignorance in question, an issue we will address extensively in the next chapter. Among the varieties of ignorance is what I call *disbelieving ignorance*: one disbelieves a true proposition and thus has the false belief that *p*. This is clearly prima facie epistemically bad because falsehood has intrinsic epistemic disvalue (if it does not, then nothing does). However, as we shall see, there are further varieties of ignorance, such as suspending ignorance (suspending judgment on a true proposition) and unconsidered

ignorance (you fail to truly believe and know that *p* simply because you have never considered it). Of course, these are cases in which one fails to believe the truth—therefore, they lack an important epistemic value. It does not follow, as Meylan rightly points out, that they thereby have disvalue. And this is exactly what I would say: *some* cases of ignorance have intrinsic epistemic disvalue, whereas others do not. It is, therefore, not a requirement on an account of ignorance (of what it *is* to be ignorant) to account for the fact that ignorance as such has intrinsic epistemic disvalue—simply because there is no such fact.

Conclusion

I conclude that there is reason to prefer the view that propositional ignorance is lack of true belief over the view that it is lack of knowledge. Cases in which the truth-value of a proposition is utterly irrelevant, even to the relevant cognitive subject, might be boundary cases. If so, one could easily solve that by adding a significance condition to the New View: someone is ignorant of a proposition only if she fails to believe truly that *p* and if *p* is true and of some importance. In opposition to what Duncan Pritchard has argued, there is not sufficient reason to add a condition that says one has a duty to properly inquire about *p*. The lack of true belief leaves ample room for different varieties of ignorance, though. For example, suspending judgment on a true proposition *p* is rather different from disbelieving *p*, and both are quite different from not even being able to grasp *p*. In the next chapter, we consider these varieties of propositional ignorance in more detail.

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Varieties of Propositional Ignorance

Introduction

So far, I have argued that when it comes to the nature of ignorance, there is objectual ignorance, practical ignorance, and propositional ignorance (chapter 2). Zooming in on propositional ignorance, I have subsequently defended that it is probably best to analyze *being propositionally ignorant* in terms of *lacking a true belief that is of significance* (chapter 3). Now that we have a better grip on the nature of propositional ignorance, can we distinguish between different varieties? More specifically, can we distinguish different propositional attitudes that can all rightly be dubbed propositional ignorance (i.e., ignorance of the truth of a proposition)? I think we can: in this chapter, I distinguish six different varieties of propositional ignorance. I also argue that they are mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive: if one is ignorant of a truth or fact, one's ignorance *must* be one and at most one of these varieties.

Now, one may rightly wonder exactly why it matters what these varieties of ignorance are. Analytic philosophers make a living out of construing ever more fine-grained distinctions; for example, between the varieties of faith, different kinds of meaning, and different senses of freedom. What do we gain from yet another set of distinctions?

Briefly: a lot. In the next chapters, we will see that group ignorance works differently depending on exactly which variety of ignorance is involved (chapter 5); that agnotology (chapter 7) and the philosophy of race (chapter 8) are concerned with different varieties of ignorance; that education should sometimes aim at certain varieties

of ignorance but not at others (chapter 9); that some varieties of ignorance fully excuse, whereas others do not (chapter 10); that only some varieties of ignorance lead to a regress worry when it comes to blameworthiness (chapter 11); and that some varieties of ignorance can be expressed or asserted, whereas others cannot (chapter 12). Only if we have a firm grip on the varieties of ignorance can we actually make progress in these debates. For now, I ask the reader to bear with me in exploring the varieties before we actually see how they make a difference in solving various challenges in philosophy.

In this chapter, I first consider in more detail six varieties of propositional ignorance: disbelieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance. As we saw in the previous chapters, there are at least two rival views to the New View that I have defended, namely, the Standard View, on which ignorance is lack of knowledge, and Duncan Pritchard's Normative View, on which ignorance is the lack of true belief that issues from the violation of a duty to inquire. This means that—depending on which view on ignorance one embraces—one could distinguish at least two more varieties of ignorance, namely, true belief that falls short of knowledge and true belief from duty violation. I explore each of these alleged varieties of ignorance toward the end of this chapter. After that, I spell out the difference between first- and second-order ignorance. Finally, I show how distinguishing these varieties of ignorance can be helpful in developing a philosophical thesis or argument.[1]

Six Varieties of Ignorance

Before we consider the six varieties of ignorance that I would like to distinguish, let me briefly explain which two sorting principles I use in coming up with these six varieties. Here is the first principle:

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[1] Parts of this chapter are based on Peels (2014).

> Which attitude does the person in question have toward the true
> proposition in question?

In other words, is it an attitude of disbelief, is it an attitude of
suspending both belief and disbelief, or does the person in question
have no attitude whatsoever toward it? Below, I explain the differ-
ence between suspending judgment and having no attitude at all.
The final category—having no attitude whatsoever—is most vexing
and truly a black box. I will, therefore, apply a second sorting prin-
ciple showing that rather different things fall into the category of
no-attitude ignorance. The principle runs as follows:

> What is the nature of the obstacle to forming an attitude or to
> removing one's ignorance?

In some cases, one just has not been able to seriously consider the
issue; in other cases, one has not even thought of considering the
issue; in yet other cases, although one could consider the issue,
one simply lacks the evidence to get rid of one's ignorance; and in
a final kind of case, one cannot even consider the proposition—for
instance, because one lacks the relevant concepts. Below, I return
to the issue of whether one could also apply the second sorting
principle to disbelieving and suspending judgment on a true
proposition.

Disbelieving Ignorance

The first variety of ignorance we need to distinguish is *disbelieving
ignorance*. One is in a state of such ignorance when one falsely
believes that p (possibly, as we saw in the previous chapter, where
believing that p is of some significance; but I will not repeat this
all the time in this chapter). This is a natural variety of ignorance

to distinguish because disbelief or the belief that not-*p* is widely considered to be a specific propositional attitude of its own.

Of course, if one falsely believes that *p*, one is not ignorant of *p* or of the fact that *p*. After all, in such a case, *p* is false—we saw in chapter 2 that propositional ignorance entails truth. One *is* ignorant, though, of the fact that not-*p*, or, alternatively, one is ignorant as to whether *p*. Thus, someone who falsely believes that Nantes is the capital of France is ignorant of the fact that Nantes is not the capital of France, or, alternatively, she is ignorant as to whether Nantes is the capital of France.

There is something particularly epistemically bad about this variety of ignorance. As William James ([1897] 1979, 24) famously pointed out, there should be two goals in our cognitive lives: to believe the truth and to not believe any falsehoods.[2] This means that when someone is in a state of disbelieving ignorance, things go doubly wrong: that person not only fails to believe the truth but also actually believes a falsehood. As we shall see below, this is what distinguishes disbelieving ignorance from all other varieties of ignorance: in the other cases, one fails to believe the truth, but one does not also believe a falsehood. The double epistemic badness of disbelieving ignorance is, of course, compatible with its being morally good in various ways. We shall see several examples of that in part 2 of this book. Moreover, it is compatible with its being epistemically good in other, more indirect ways—in chapter 9, I argue that this is the case for certain practices in higher education.

Suspending Ignorance

Second, there is *suspending ignorance*. One is in a state of suspending ignorance if one suspends judgment on—and therefore

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[2] More recently, this has been defended by Dretske (1981).

fails to believe and fails to know—a true proposition, such as the proposition that Victoria is the capital of Seychelles.

Now, suspension of judgment is a more complicated attitude than one might initially think. Some philosophers have thought or maybe simply assumed that if one neither believes nor disbelieves that *p*, one thereby suspends judgment on *p*. Yet, several other philosophers have lately argued that this is misguided. Jane Friedman (2013), for instance, has defended that one suspends judgment on *p only if one has actually adopted an attitude toward p*. Here is an example that illustrates the point. Imagine that, upon watching a documentary, you wonder whether the chimpanzee is the most common primate after humans. When you have just started thinking about it, though, the phone rings, you pick it up, and you start a conversation on a completely different topic with the friend who called you. At the time you are having this conversation with your friend, what is your attitude toward the proposition that the chimpanzee is the most common primate after humans? It seems you neither believe it nor disbelieve it. But it seems you do not exactly suspend judgment on it either. After all, you have not had the time to give it some serious thought and take a position on it.

Note that it does *not* follow that you suspend judgment on a proposition *p* only if you have consciously considered whether *p*. Imagine that you have considered and now suspend judgment on the proposition that Greenland has the largest national park in the world (proposition *p*). And imagine that this is because you simply have no clue how large the largest national park in Greenland is. And imagine that that is because you know virtually nothing about national parks. You know that there are large parks in the United States, South Africa, Canada, Greenland, and a few other countries. This is not to say that you would suspend judgment on just any proposition concerning national parks: you would not, for instance, suspend judgment on the proposition that the United States has larger national parks than Luxembourg because you are aware

that Luxembourg is a tiny country. Now, take the proposition that Canada has a larger national park than the United States (proposition q). You have never consciously considered that proposition. And yet, it seems that, given your ignorance about national parks in general and your suspension of judgment on p, you suspend judgment—even if only tacitly so—on q.

This means that there are at least two ways in which someone can be suspendingly ignorant of p when p is true and of some significance. First, it is possible that one has considered the proposition p and adopted the attitude of suspension of judgment toward it. Second, it is possible that one has not considered p, but one can rightly be said to suspend judgment on it in virtue of other propositions that one *has* considered and toward which one has actually adopted the attitude of suspension of judgment.

Undecided Ignorance

Our discussion of suspending ignorance has given us enough material to grasp what *undecided ignorance* is: one is in a state of undecided ignorance if one has considered p but one is then distracted by something and therefore (or for some other reason) one has not actually adopted an attitude toward p. This means that it could well be the case that *if* one were to consider p again, one would believe it, or one would disbelieve it, or one would suspend judgment on it, or—even that is possible—one would still be undecided about it. If for the first time in my life I start to ponder whether Elon Musk's view on the dangers of artificial intelligence is warranted, but I am then distracted by the cries of my one-year-old son, who has fallen off the couch, I am in a state of undecided ignorance about whether Musk's view is warranted. If the obstacle of being distracted was removed, I would form an attitude, such as disbelief, suspension, or belief. Of course, only if I came to believe the true proposition in question would I get rid of my ignorance.

Unconsidered Ignorance

Next, there is *unconsidered ignorance*, which involves a true proposition *p* one has never considered or thought about. Moreover, one cannot be said to tacitly believe it, tacitly disbelieve it, or tacitly suspend judgment on it either. However—and this is crucial—the proposition is such that as soon as one were to consider it, one would believe it. This is why I call it *unconsidered* ignorance. One is ignorant, but *only* because one has not considered the proposition in question. As we shall see in the next section, there are other cases of ignorance in which one also has not considered the relevant proposition. However, in those cases, one is not ignorant merely because one has not considered the relevant proposition—one is ignorant because even if one were to consider the proposition, one would not believe it.

The following example illustrates unconsidered ignorance. Until Bertrand Russell drew his attention to it, Frege never considered the proposition that the property of being non-self-membered was a counterexample to his Basic Law V. When Russell drew Frege's attention to this, Frege realized that it was a counterexample. He tried to meet the problem in various ways but after a while realized that his Basic Law V was untenable. For a long time, Frege was ignorant of the fact that this was a counterexample, but he was ignorant only because he had simply never thought about this counterexample; it had never been brought to his attention.

Or imagine that I am reading one of Agatha Christie's detective novels. I am approaching the end of the novel, but I still have no idea who committed the murder. As soon as I were to consider *p*, the pieces would fall into place and I would straightaway see that *p* is true. But I do not consider the proposition; it just never occurs to me. In this case, I am in a state of unconsidered ignorance toward *p*.

Or take inattentive blindness, for instance, in the famous 2013 invisible-gorilla experiment (see Drew, Võ, and Wolfe 2013). Radiologists were presented with various CT scans of people's

lungs. On one of them (see figure 4.1), there was a dancing gorilla in that person's lungs forty-eight times the size of an average nodule. Yet, eighty-three percent of those radiologists believed these lungs were perfectly fine: they looked only for anomalies that they were familiar with. Of course, if they had considered the proposition that there was a gorilla in the upper right lung, their ignorance would have been removed immediately. But they did not consider that proposition, and they remained ignorant. In fact, more recent research (see Williams et al. 2021) suggests that radiologists display similar inattentional blindness for unexpected abnormalities that are clinically relevant and that occur on a regular basis, such as a large breast mass and lymphadenopathy. Again, presumably, if they had considered the proposition, say, that there was a large breast mass, their ignorance would have been removed. They remained ignorant because of their inattentional blindness due to the focus on seeking lung nodules.
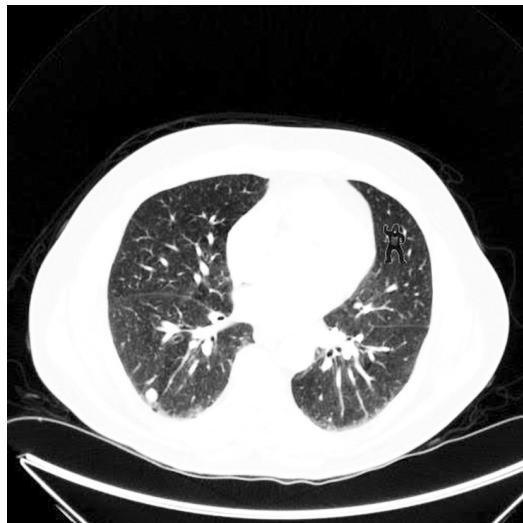
Figure 4.1   The final CT scan in the 2013 invisible-gorilla experiment. Image courtesy of Trafton Drew (Drew, Võ, and Wolfe 2013).

Hence, some ignorance is such that we are ignorant of *p*, but we do not believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment on *p*, and we have not even considered whether *p*, but that ignorance dissolves as soon as—or pretty much as soon as—we consider *p*.

Deep Ignorance

Next, there is *deep ignorance*. One is deeply ignorant of a proposition if one does not believe it, disbelieve it, or suspend judgment on it, and one has never considered the proposition, and one would not believe it upon considering the proposition, even though one *could* consider the proposition. For example, for most people in the world, the proposition that the population of Taiwan is larger than twenty-three million meets these conditions. They are ignorant as to whether it is true; they do not believe it, disbelieve it, or suspend judgment on it; and they have never considered it, nor would they believe it upon considering it (I mean: believe it without first doing some inquiry). Thus, most people are deeply ignorant of it, as it is a true proposition. If they were to consider it, they would probably suspend judgment on it (thus, their deep ignorance would become a case of suspending ignorance), and they would continue to suspend judgment until they had further evidence. Much ignorance is like this: most of us are deeply ignorant of many important facts from history, science, art theory, and the film industry. Here, the obstacle to forming an attitude is that one has never considered the issue. Even if one did, though, there would be a further obstacle, namely, an obstacle to getting rid of one's ignorance, which is one's lack of sufficient evidence. In a sense, then, the obstacle to removing one's ignorance in the case of deep ignorance is bigger than in the case of unconsidered ignorance.

Complete Ignorance

Finally, there is what I call *complete ignorance*. This variety of ignorance meets all the conditions of deep ignorance; in addition to that, the ignorant person in question cannot even *grasp* or *entertain* the relevant proposition.[3] There may be various reasons why one cannot grasp the relevant proposition: one may not have the required intellectual capacity or the relevant background knowledge, one may lack the concepts involved, and so on. For example, twelfth-century people were *completely* ignorant about the truths of general relativity: they could not even grasp the relevant propositions because they did not have the concepts required for that. And I, being just a philosopher, lack the relevant cognitive capacities to grasp several propositions in Japanese mathematician Shinichi Mochizuki's four papers in which he attempts to prove, among other things, the challenging abc conjecture. Maybe if I were to study mathematics for years, I would acquire the relevant concepts and background to understand the conjecture (but given my track record in mathematics, even that seems unlikely). In any case, if I were to succeed, I would still be ignorant of whether the conjecture is true, but I would no longer be completely ignorant of various propositions expressed in Mochizuki's work. After all, I *could* grasp the propositions. And, of course, if I were to acquire the relevant evidence, I might actually believe those propositions and, thus, if they are true, be no longer ignorant of them.

There is a particular philosophical distinction that we need to make here, though, namely, the distinction between ignorance (and belief and knowledge) *de re* and *de dicto*. It seems that, even if I am unable to grasp certain concepts necessary for understanding a proposition, it does not follow that I am completely ignorant about it. Imagine, for instance, that a friend of mine, who works in

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[3] Thus, my variety of complete ignorance seems identical to the first kind of what Jens Haas and Katja Vogt call complete ignorance (2015, 17, 21).

the Mathematics Department, knows all the evidence in favor of the abc conjecture, enough to know that it is true. She then tells me that Mochizuki's proofs of the abc conjecture are valid. On the basis of her testimony, I believe and in fact know that the abc conjecture is true. Because I believe it and it is both true and significant—in fact, I know it is true—I am not ignorant. I know *of that proposition* that it is true, even if I cannot grasp it.

I suggest that the way to make sense of this scenario is to say that I am ignorant *de dicto* regarding the abc conjecture but not *de re*. We might lose sight of this because most cases of belief and knowledge are cases in which we can at least grasp the proposition, even if we cannot provide all the relevant evidence for it—in fact, such beliefs and such knowledge are widespread. Yet, even with belief and knowledge, there are cases in which we cannot grasp the relevant proposition and yet believe it, merely because someone with sufficient epistemic authority tells us it is true. The obstacle here, then, is large, both to forming an attitude (one cannot, as things stand) and to removing one's ignorance (one cannot, as things stand).

Applying the Second Sorting Principle to Disbelieving and Suspending Ignorance

Of course, one could also apply a revised version of the second sorting principle to disbelieving and suspending ignorance. The principle would then merely concern the nature of the obstacle to getting rid of one's ignorance. After all, one has already formed an attitude if one disbelieves or suspends judgment on a true proposition. There would not be an equivalent of undecided ignorance, because one has already formed an attitude. And there would be no equivalent of unconsidered ignorance because one has already considered the issue and formed an attitude. Nor would there be an equivalent of complete ignorance, because one *can* and has indeed

considered the issue. But it might be easy, moderately difficult, truly difficult, or even impossible to remove one's ignorance. Yet such varying obstacle strengths, although interesting, would not give rise to remarkably different varieties of ignorance. In the remainder of this book, we will see, time and again, that the four varieties of no-attitude ignorance (i.e., undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance) *do* truly constitute varieties of ignorance and that the distinctions among them make a crucial difference in various philosophical debates.

Further Varieties of Ignorance?

Now, if the Standard View or Pritchard's Normative View (discussed in the previous chapter) is correct, then the varieties of ignorance that I have distinguished so far are not the only ones. Let us consider what might be thought of as two more varieties of ignorance.

Adherents of the Standard View (on which ignorance is the lack of knowledge) take it that there is a seventh variety of ignorance, which we could call *unwarranted ignorance*. One is in a state of unwarranted ignorance if one truly believes that *p* but fails to know that *p*. One may, for instance, believe a true proposition *p* without having sufficient evidence or maybe even without any evidence. One may truly believe that *p* where that belief is formed in an unreliable way. One may have a defeater for one's true belief that *p*. One's true belief that *p* may be a Gettier case. And so on. A thoroughly revised version of the Standard View (or even of the New View) could have it that only *some* cases in which one has a true belief but no knowledge count as cases of ignorance. One could say, for instance, that mere true belief is a case of ignorance but that Gettier cases—cases in which justified true belief fails to meet some sort of antiluck condition—are *not* cases of ignorance.

In the previous chapter, however, we have uncovered three reasons to think that true belief that falls short of knowledge is not

an instance of ignorance: (1) It contradicts our intuitions about various scenarios of true belief falling short of knowledge; to the extent that those intuitions are not entirely clear, it seems that confusion between a person's attitudes toward different, but closely related propositions can explain why some people feel inclined to ascribe ignorance to someone who has a true belief that falls short of knowledge. (2) It conflicts with the widely accepted idea in moral theory that ignorance, to the extent that it is blameless, always provides at least a partial excuse. We saw (and will see it in even more detail in chapter 10) that true belief does not even provide a partial excuse. (3) There is good reason—including linguistic evidence—to think that ignorance comes in degrees. The New View can do justice to this fact, whereas the Standard View cannot.

This is why I think unwarranted ignorance is not really a variety of ignorance. Yet, it is helpful to have made clear how this alleged variety of ignorance should be construed because in various debates that we will delve into in the ensuing chapters, it is sometimes treated as a variety of ignorance.

If Pritchard's Normative View on ignorance is correct, then there is a further variety of ignorance that I have not distinguished above. This variety obtains when someone holds a true belief that p but in acquiring or maintaining that belief, she has violated some relevant intellectual duty. Thus, she holds a true belief that in some sense she should not have had. According to Pritchard, it follows that she is ignorant as to whether p is true. For instance, imagine someone who believes from wishful thinking she is going to recover from her disease and whose belief is in flat contradiction with all the evidence available to her. Not only does this person fail to know that she is going to recover (even if her belief is true), but she is even ignorant that she is going to recover. Let us call this *ignorance one should not have had*.

In the previous chapter, I have given two reasons for thinking that this is not a case of ignorance: first, various fields, such as agnotology, study cases of stereotypical ignorance in which the

cognitive subject did not violate an obligation to inquire; and second, the cases put forward by Pritchard can be dealt with by adding a significance condition, which renders a duty-to-inquire condition superfluous.

In part 2 of this book, we will return to cases of alleged ignorance one should not have had and see whether the philosophical discussions in which they play a role shed additional light on them.

Objections and Replies

Let me address four objections one may level against my distinctions between the six varieties of propositional ignorance.

First, are these truly *varieties* of ignorance, or should we rather think of them as *ways of being ignorant*? It seems to me that there are two reasons to think that they are truly different varieties. First, if we define ignorance negatively—in terms of absence of knowledge or absence of true belief—we fail to see the distinctions among these different kinds of ignorance. But as soon as we try to define it positively, we run into these varieties, for we will then have to say such things as "ignorance is suspending judgment on a true proposition *p*" or "ignorance is disbelieving a true proposition *p*." Second, there are important differences between these six varieties of ignorance. For instance, in chapter 10 I will argue that they crucially differ when it comes to the extent to which they provide a moral excuse, and in chapter 12 I will argue that they crucially differ with respect to whether one can assert that one is in such a state of ignorance.

Second, one may have worries about what *nondispositional accounts of belief* imply about ignorance. Imagine that there is some true proposition *p* that you have never considered but that you would immediately believe upon considering it, such as the proposition that you are less than 499 feet tall. On some nondispositional accounts of belief, such as Robert Audi's account, you do *not* believe that you are less than 499 feet tall before you have considered it. You merely have a disposition to

believe it (see Audi 1994). Thus, if Audi is right, it follows on the New View that you are *ignorant* of the fact that you are less than 499 feet tall. If there are only these six varieties of ignorance that I distinguished in this chapter, it follows that you are ignorant of many such trivial truths. After all, you lack a true belief regarding the proposition that you are less than 499 feet tall. You merely have a disposition to truly believe it. But it seems false to say you are ignorant of such trivialities.

Note that the Standard View, discussed in the previous chapter, faces the same worry. When ignorance is lack of knowledge, and if knowledge entails belief (as most philosophers tend to think), you lack the belief that you are less than 499 feet tall, and you are ignorant of it. Note that Pritchard's Normative View gives a different verdict. If ignorance is the lack of true belief that you should have had, then someone is not ignorant that she is less than 499 feet tall if she does not believe that but merely has a disposition to believe that. After all, it is not the case that she *should have believed* that she is less than 499 feet tall rather than merely having the disposition to believe that.

I reply that one person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*. In other words, the fact that the nondispositional view on belief has this implication is a good reason—among other reasons—to reject it. I do not merely have a disposition to believe that I am less than 499 feet tall. Rather, it is something I *know* and, therefore, something I believe, even if I have never considered it. It requires a bit of work to explain why I can properly be said to tacitly believe such a thing, while, say, Frege did *not* tacitly believe that the property of being non-self-membered was a counterexample to his Basic Law V, even though he too believed it pretty much as soon as he considered it. Fortunately, the literature provides various plausible ways of spelling this out; for example, in terms of the disposition to be intellectually surprised that p upon considering p, a condition that is met in Frege's case but not in mine.[4]

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[4] For an attempt along these lines, see Peels (2017c, chapter 1).

Third, one may have certain worries about *metabeliefs*. It seems that, say, one can disbelieve the true proposition *p and yet also* believe that one should not *disbelieve* but *believe p*. One may realize, for instance, that one's disbelief that *p* does not match one's evidence base, whereas belief that *p* does.

Some philosophers, such as Charlotte Katzoff (1996), have argued that this scenario is incoherent. Her main criticism is that belief that one should believe that *p* implies that one believes that *p*. It seems to me her criticism is misguided, though. The possibility of epistemic *akrasia* is widely acknowledged in the literature (e.g., Owens 2002). To deny that this is possible is to have an overly rationalistic view of human beings. In fact, examples abound. Some people have had a traumatic experience with an elevator and consequently believe elevators are dangerous, even though they are fully aware that that belief is irrational. Some people find themselves believing in God even though they also believe that, given their total evidence, they should not believe in God. Moreover, some people have implausibly high epistemic standards. Adherents of scientism, for instance, such as Alex Rosenberg (2011), believe that things can only be rationally believed and known if they are based on scientific inquiry. (Unsurprisingly, quite a few of them inevitably find themselves believing things that are *not* based on scientific inquiry.)

So, let us return to the objection. If someone disbelieves the true proposition *p* but also believes that attitude does not match her evidence base, whereas belief that *p* would, does that person count as ignorant? I am inclined to think that she does *not*. Because it is not entirely clear how we should think of such cases, and because they are relatively rare, in what follows I will focus on the vast majority of cases, namely, those in which one's higher-order attitudes match one's first-order attitudes.

Fourth, I have distinguished six varieties of ignorance. Are they jointly exhaustive, and if so, can we *show* that they are? I think it will be hard, if not impossible, to *show* this, but it seems to me there

is at least *good reason* to think they are jointly exhaustive. Going through the following steps shows why.

It seems that for every true proposition one is ignorant of, one has either considered it or not considered it. If one has, one has either adopted an attitude or not adopted an attitude. If one has not, one is in a state of undecided ignorance. If one has, it seems one will either believe it or disbelieve it, or neither believe it nor disbelieve it (i.e., suspend judgment on it). Belief in a true proposition, on the New View, does not count as ignorance. The two genuine varieties of ignorance in such a case are disbelieving and suspending ignorance. If one has *not* considered the relevant proposition, one cannot be in a state of undecided ignorance (which requires that one has considered it), but one can believe, disbelieve, or suspend judgment on the true proposition because, as is widely accepted by epistemologists, these doxastic attitudes can be *dispositional* or *tacit*. Again, these would count as cases of disbelieving and suspending ignorance. What are the options if one has not considered the relevant proposition *and* one does not have a doxastic attitude toward it? There seem to be two main options here: either you *can* consider the relevant proposition, or you *cannot*. If you cannot, your ignorance counts as complete ignorance. If you can, there are, again, two options. Either you would more or less immediately believe the proposition (the main reason you do not believe it is that you simply have not considered it) and thus be in a state of unconsidered ignorance. Or you would not believe it, even if you were to consider it, because you would either suspend judgment on it or disbelieve it, even though you do not currently adopt an attitude toward it. That would count as deep ignorance. This strongly suggests that the six varieties of ignorance are jointly exhaustive, as figure 4.2 shows.

First- and Second-Order Ignorance

So far, we have focused on varieties of ignorance with respect to a cognitive subject's propositional attitude. One can also distinguish
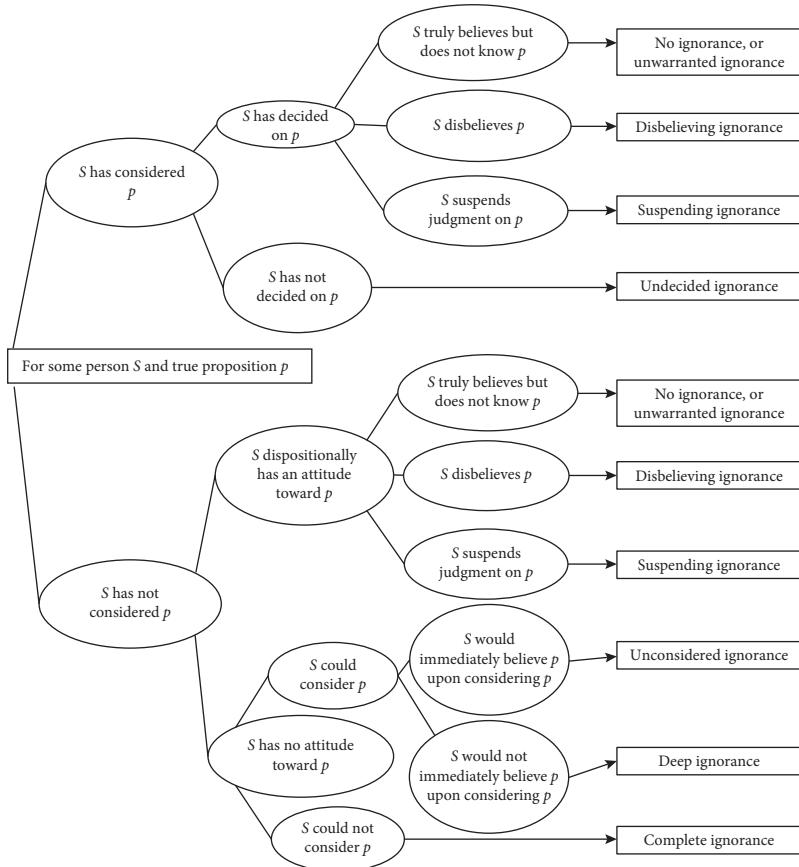
Figure 4.2 The varieties of ignorance.

varieties of ignorance with respect to the proposition itself. As we shall see in the ensuing chapters, there are different distinctions to be made here. The one I would now like to draw attention to is that between first-order and second-order ignorance (and third-order ignorance, and so on, until we have reached a natural limit to what can properly be ascribed to human beings).

When it comes to ignorance, a second-order proposition is a proposition *about one's ignorance*, whereas a first-order proposition is not. Thus, one may be first-order ignorant of the true proposition that in March 2019, the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans celebrated its 125th anniversary by offering a seven-night stay in its presidential suite for free, including private dinners and spa services, to the person who would return the most outrageous item ever stolen from the hotel. At least some people are second-order ignorant about their first-order ignorance of this issue in that they are ignorant of the fact that they are ignorant of this issue. This is because they have never even considered the issue and it does not obviously follow from anything they know. They are deeply ignorant of this fact and of the fact that they are ignorant of this fact. Other people, however, are also ignorant of this fact, but not of the fact that they are ignorant: they are fully aware of that. Imagine that you ask some people in the street whether they know how the Roosevelt Hotel in New Orleans celebrated its 125th anniversary. Most people would realize (and thus know) they are ignorant of how the hotel celebrated this. Such ignorance is sometimes called "conscious ignorance" (Smithson 2008, 210). Yet, other people are neither ignorant nor ignorant of their ignorance (because there is no such ignorance), and you are (now) one of them—at least, if you trust me sufficiently on this point.

Second-order ignorance has also been called "meta-ignorance" (Medina 2016, 180). A well-known and much-discussed example is a specific kind of racial ignorance. Such meta-ignorance comes with "pronounced difficulty in realizing and appreciating the limitations of one's social sensibility and horizon of understanding" (Medina 2016, 183). People who are meta-ignorant about racial issues are often numbed to their own numbness, insensitive to the various blind spots that they have inherited due to privilege and that play a crucial role in their epistemic lives. First-order ignorance without second-order ignorance has been called "Socratic

ignorance" and first-order ignorance accompanied by second-order ignorance "opaque ignorance" (Nottelmann 2016, 54).

The distinction between first- and second-order ignorance matters. As we shall see later, for instance, whether you are to be excused for what you did sometimes depends not only on whether you were ignorant but also on whether you *realized that* you were ignorant. Whether you can properly assert that you are ignorant depends not only on whether you are actually ignorant but also on whether you are *aware that* you are ignorant. What can properly be expected of students in teaching situations depends not only on whether they are ignorant but also on whether they *know* that they are ignorant.

Can all first-order varieties of ignorance be combined with all second-order varieties of ignorance? No, they cannot. If you are completely ignorant of a proposition p so that you cannot even grasp p, you cannot suspend judgment on whether you are completely ignorant of p, at least not *de dicto*. To suspend judgment on the proposition that you are completely ignorant of p, you need, after all, to consider p. And if you are completely ignorant of p, you cannot, by definition, consider p. Also, you cannot be disbelievingly ignorant of the fact that you are unconsideredly ignorant of p. If you are in a state of unconsidered ignorance toward p, you are ignorant that p merely because you have not considered p. If you are in a state of disbelieving ignorance with regard to q, then you falsely disbelieve that q. But it seems that you cannot falsely disbelieve that you are unconsideredly ignorant of p without having considered p.

In the remainder of this book, then, it is important to always keep in mind whether some case involves only first-order ignorance or also second-order ignorance, and which varieties of propositional attitudes are involved, as they cannot all be combined.

Disentangling the Varieties of Ignorance

The distinctions between the varieties of ignorance made in this chapter matter to philosophy. As we shall see in the ensuing chapters, they are instrumental in solving certain problems. Here, I will show it is often necessary to make explicit which varieties of ignorance may be involved in certain philosophical concepts, arguments, or theories, and which not. I will use the notion of veil of ignorance, well known in political philosophy, to do this.

The *veil of ignorance* is a thought experiment that has been used by a wide variety of philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant, Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, and Michael Moehler, to establish what a just society looks like. It is sometimes also called *impartial-spectator theory* or *ideal-observer theory*. It has become especially influential because of John Rawls's use of it in his *Theory of Justice*, published in 1971. It has even had impact in economics; for example, in John Harsanyi's work. Here is how Rawls himself spells out the idea:

> Somehow we must nullify the effects of specific contingencies which put men at odds and tempt them to exploit social and nat-ural circumstances to their own advantage. Now in order to do this I assume that the parties are situated behind a veil of igno-rance. They do not know how the various alternatives will affect their own particular case and they are obliged to evaluate princi-ples solely on the basis of general considerations.
>
> . . . The parties do not know certain kinds of particular facts. First of all, no one knows his place in society, his class position or social status; nor does he know his fortune in the distribu-tion of natural assets and abilities, his intelligence and strength, and the like. Nor, again, does anyone know his conception of the good, the particulars of his rational plan of life, or even the spe-cial features of his psychology such as his aversion to risk or li-ability to optimism or pessimism. . . . The parties do not know the particular circumstances of their own society. That is, they do

not know its economic or political situation, or the level of civ-
ilization and culture it has been able to achieve. The persons in
the original position have no information as to which generation
they belong. (Rawls 1999, section 24)

Others have adopted similar descriptions in spelling out the idea.
Says Spencer J. Maxcy:

Imagine that you have set for yourself the task of developing a
totally new social contract for today's society. How could you do
so fairly? Although you could never actually eliminate all of your
personal biases and prejudices, you would need to take steps at
least to minimize them. Rawls suggests that you imagine your-
self in an original position behind a *veil of ignorance*. Behind this
veil, you know nothing of yourself and your natural abilities, or
your position in society. You know nothing of your sex, race, na-
tionality, or individual tastes. Behind such a veil of ignorance
all individuals are simply specified as rational, free, and morally
equal beings. You do know that in the "real world," however, there
will be a wide variety in the natural distribution of natural assets
and abilities, and that there will be differences of sex, race, and
culture that will distinguish groups of people from each other.
(Maxcy 2002, 19; my italics)

The veil of ignorance is explained in terms of you *knowing nothing*
and *not having information* about such things as your natural
abilities, your position in society, your sex, nationality, race, tastes.
All you know is that you will be one of the many rational, free, and
morally equal human beings and that all the traits just mentioned
are distributed unequally.

The problem with explaining the veil of ignorance in this way
is that it leaves open too many options. After all, ignorance is
explained merely as not knowing. But exactly *what variety or which
varieties of ignorance* are involved? Is it disbelieving, suspending,

unconsidered, undecided, deep, or complete ignorance? And is it first-order ignorance or also second-order ignorance?

Let us start with exploring the varieties of first-order ignorance that it could involve. First, the veil of ignorance does not do its work in many cases in which you are *disbelievingly ignorant*: if you falsely believe that you will be well-off, white, Western, male, heterosexual, and so on (a false belief, because you will be none of these things), you might make the wrong decisions about taxes and societal institutions, choices that favor those who are white, Western, male, and well-off, for instance. Also, if you are *completely ignorant* of the relevant propositions (i.e., you cannot even consider them), you cannot make appropriate decisions about them either. You cannot decide how material wealth is to be distributed as equally as possible if you have got no clue as to what material wealth is. Similar worries arise for *unconsidered ignorance*. If you are ignorant because you simply have not considered the propositions in question, you cannot take the right decisions about them. For taking the right decisions requires that you have given those propositions careful thought. What about *undecided ignorance*? That case is less clear. But if you are undecided, you have not made up your mind yet. And if you have not made up your mind yet, why would you choose a particular distribution? If you take a decision because you are pressured by time (or for some other such reason), then it seems the decision will not be sufficiently stable and may even be arbitrary.

Note that the two alleged varieties of ignorance distinguished by the Standard View and Pritchard's Normative View cannot do the work either. *Unwarranted ignorance* is true belief that falls short of knowledge. But if you hold true beliefs about your future circumstances, you are unlikely to make the kind of unbiased choices that Rawls and others have in mind. *Ignorance from duty violation* (i.e., lack of true belief that you should have had) cannot do the job either: the point of the thought experiment is precisely that you cannot have knowledge about your future circumstances, nor is there an obligation to have such knowledge.

This leaves us with only two of the six varieties of ignorance. The first is *suspending ignorance* (i.e., suspension of judgment toward a true proposition that is of significance). I may consider the proposition that I will be among the richest 1 percent of people on earth—which, I was astonished to find out, I actually am, and many readers of this book are—and then suspend judgment on whether it will be true. The second variety of ignorance is *deep ignorance*: I may never have thought about such propositions as whether I will own a jacuzzi or whether I will be Caucasian. In the thought experiment, I should have considered in detail various *themes*, such as race, sexual orientation, and wealth, to take decisions on their distribution, but I need not have considered in detail every proposition relevantly related to them.

Now, it seems to me that the thought experiment works best if we take it to exclude second-order ignorance. In other words, it works best if we take it to include true belief or knowledge that one is ignorant or—maybe even better—true belief or knowledge that one is in a state of suspending or deep ignorance. The scenario that works best for the thought experiment is a situation in which you are in a state of suspending or deep ignorance regarding your future circumstances *and you realize* that this is your situation. Such a scenario works best because it means you will be aware of your cognitive limitations and of the fact that you need to build your social contract while you are in this cognitively limited situation. Compare this with a situation in which you are also suspendingly or deeply ignorant *but you do not realize* that you are; for instance, because you falsely believe on a second-order level that you are not ignorant. Imagine, for example, that you suspend judgment on whether you will be a white, Western, relatively rich male. Imagine also, however, that on a second-order level, you believe you are too humble when it comes to the reliability of your intuitions about the future. Thus, you suspend judgment on whether your future life will resemble your current life, but at the same time you distrust

such suspension because you believe you underestimate your own intellectual capacities. Of course, this cognitive situation might lead to different decisions than a cognitive situation in which you *know* you are in a situation in which the only rational thing to do is to suspend judgment. Thus, the scenario works best if we combine first-order ignorance with second-order knowledge (or some such mental state with positive epistemic standing).

Disentangling the varieties of ignorance, then, can be helpful in making clear what one's philosophical position, concept, argument, or thought experiment amounts to in the first place. Whenever the concept of ignorance plays a crucial role in a thesis or argument (and as we will see, the list of such theses and arguments is virtually infinite), one needs to make explicit which of the six varieties of ignorance or which disjunction of them one has in mind, and also whether first-order ignorance with or without second-order ignorance is involved. In part 2 of this book, we shall see that distinguishing these varieties of ignorance is helpful not only in making clear what a particular view amounts to but even in answering philosophical questions and solving philosophical problems.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have distinguished six varieties of ignorance: disbelieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance. Of course, further distinctions could be made, such as that between ignorance consisting in true belief based upon insufficient evidence and ignorance consisting in true Gettierized belief. The point, however, is that they seem to fall under one of the six varieties I have distinguished. Moreover, I have explained why I think that two further alleged varieties—unwarranted ignorance and ignorance from duty violation—are not, in fact, varieties of ignorance. Finally, I have illustrated how one can make these

distinctions in a particular case by applying them to Rawls's influ-
ential thought experiment (veil of ignorance). It turned out this ex-
periment works best if the notion of ignorance is severely restricted,
namely, to that of first-order suspending or deep ignorance without
second-order ignorance.

5

Group Ignorance

Introduction

Group ignorance seems a common phenomenon. For example, groups can be ignorant of their privileged situation due to their race or socioeconomic status. Fundamentalist creationist and Jihadist groups can be ignorant of, for instance, the truth of evolutionary theory or the full scope of human rights that women have. Some groups of supporters of Brazilian president Bolsonaro are ignorant of the harmful effects of his international policy and of human-induced climate change. Furthermore, the field of agnotology has drawn our attention to ways in which groups can intentionally maintain ignorance in *others*, such as the successful way in which the tobacco industry kept people ignorant about the health effects of smoking. Another example is the practice of *disciplina arcani*, which was popular in the early church: nonbelievers were kept ignorant as a group about certain elements of the faith, such as the way in which the sacraments were carried out. This practice even has modern-day equivalents. The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer defended the notion, and various movements, such as the Freemasons and other secretive lodges, actually practice it. Yet another example of group ignorance is that, as I write these words in the summer of 2020, humanity as a whole is ignorant about the exact effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the health of populations and long-term economic developments.

This ordinary life experience has been confirmed by serious academic philosophy. Philosophers have developed various concepts and theories that imply there is group ignorance. The notion of

white ignorance refers to white people's ignorance not merely as individuals but also as a group. The availability of particular concepts or the lack thereof, practices of hermeneutical injustices, and various kinds of group epistemic vices determine whether and how white people are ignorant as groups (Mills 2007, 2015; Sullivan 2006; Sullivan and Tuana 2007). In fact, various philosophers, such as Miranda Fricker and José Medina, say *expressis verbis* that there is group ignorance—for instance, white ignorance (Fricker 2016; Medina 2013, 2016). Seumas Miller (2017), in defending that it is sometimes morally obligatory to aim at ignorance of harmful technologies, has argued that there is not only aggregate ignorance—a number of people individually being ignorant—but also group ignorance—a group of people being ignorant in virtue of certain interconnection and interdependence relations.

Over the last twenty years or so, epistemology has gone beyond the Cartesian focus on the individual. We have seen thorough analyses of such things as group knowledge, group belief, and group justification. Remarkably, this has so far *not* led to a careful exposition of group ignorance. This is surprising because, as we just saw, examples of group ignorance abound, and it clearly is of crucial philosophical importance.

There are many kinds of groups. The groups I focus on here are so-called structured groups. These are different from mere collectives. In short, to be structured, a group needs to have some internal organization, a common aim, and cognitive outputs "in the form of representational states" (Carter 2016, 13). This chapter answers the question of what it is for a group to be ignorant *as a group*.

I said there is hardly any work on group ignorance. There are a few exceptions; for instance, a (2019) paper by Chris Ranalli and René van Woudenberg. However, their account concerns ignorance of humanity as a whole and can, therefore, better be considered as an account of collective rather than group ignorance. Collective ignorance is absent as soon as at least one individual knows the thing

in question. The authors do not provide an account of ignorance for groups in general, for it seems implausible that a group is no longer ignorant as soon as one member of the group has knowledge. What an account of group ignorance should take on board is the fact that many different kinds of groups (not merely humanity as a whole) can be ignorant, that an individual group member's knowledge does not at all entail the absence of group ignorance, and that a group is ignorant *as a group* only if further conditions are met, such as conditions concerning epistemic dependence.

Why does it matter what group ignorance is? First, there is, of course, the intrinsic epistemic value of better understanding this widespread phenomenon. Second, we should be able to understand how groups can be responsible for their ignorance. We can do that only if we understand what group ignorance is. This recurs in a wide variety of cases, such as ignorance about climate change, fundamentalist ignorance, and white ignorance. Third, understanding what group ignorance is can help us to better understand how individuals, groups, boards, and institutions can intentionally bring about group ignorance. Fourth, we need to better understand group ignorance to device policies meant to prevent group ignorance that is detrimental. Fifth, ignorance can be an excuse for individuals. It seems not at all unlikely that ignorance can sometimes also be an excuse on a group level. In other words, a group's ignorance may in certain circumstances render it blameless. To get a better grip on that, we need to understand what group ignorance is.

This chapter is structured as follows. First, I zoom in on propositional ignorance, sketch two cases of group ignorance (namely, fundamentalist ignorance and white ignorance), and formulate six desiderata for an account of group ignorance. Subsequently, I argue that we cannot simply transpose earlier work on group knowledge, group belief, and group justification to group ignorance: ignorance is constituted differently, and we need a new kind of account to do justice to group ignorance. Next, I actually provide such an account,

which I call the Dynamic Account.[1] It can make sense not only of propositional group ignorance but also of objectual and practical group ignorance. In providing this account, I argue that, due to the irreducibly multifaceted nature of ignorance, there cannot be a unifying account of group ignorance that takes all varieties of ignorance on board. Finally, I reply to various objections one might level against the Dynamic Account.

Two Cases: Fundamentalist and White Ignorance

In this section I explore two particular cases of group ignorance: fundamentalist ignorance and white ignorance. I take these cases to be representative examples—they are not far-fetched, and they have substantial societal impact. My account of group ignorance, then, should be able to accommodate them.

Fundamentalist Ignorance

The literature rarely uses the word *ignorance* to describe the propositional attitudes of fundamentalist groups. However, it is assumed these groups hold a wide variety of false beliefs and lack important true beliefs. Moreover, the literature grants that fundamentalists hold these beliefs *as groups* (e.g., Ruthven 2004). So, on any plausible account of ignorance, the attitudes of these groups would amount to instances of (often culpable) group ignorance.

Fundamentalist groups hold different sets of beliefs, but some of them are found across multiple fundamentalisms. Here are some examples. Specific texts, especially holy scriptures, are thought to be infallible. Science ought to be treated with mistrust (science

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[1] Part of what I say in this chapter is based on Peels and Lagewaard (forthcoming).

skepticism). There is no substantial distinction between the public and the private realms (see Marty and Appleby 1991a, 1991b; Ruthven 2004; Shupe 2011). Some people are not to receive the same education as others (see Beyerlein 2004; West 2016). Various groups, such as members of the LGBTQI+ community, do not have the same rights as others (see Cunningham and Melton 2013). People from different faiths or races should not be treated similarly (see Rose and Firmin 2016). The narrative of the world's history can be understood in terms of a time of paradise, a fall, and our period of time, in which we have the obligation to restore the original state of affairs. Charismatic fundamentalism, Salafist fundamentalism, neo-Nazism, certain kinds of communism, versions of nationalism, and even left-wing political extremism all embrace at least one—and most of them embrace all—of these beliefs (see Hardin 2002).

Now, it seems that not all members of fundamentalist groups believe these things. Some belong to the group merely because they follow its leaders, because they pursue the same goals, because they share grievances, or because it gives them a sense of belonging. Yet, *the group does believe these things* (see Peels and Kindermann, forthcoming). To the extent that the things they believe are false, the group *as a group* is ignorant. Moreover, the group's propositional attitudes influence those of the individual, so it is important to better understand the ignorance of the group (see Hardin 2002).

Now, let us zoom in: What is it for fundamentalists to be ignorant as groups? The first thing to note is that they are both *factively* and *normatively* ignorant. They are *factively* ignorant because they hold various false factive beliefs, such as that there once was a paradisiacal state—a state in which there was no death for humans and animals (for fundamentalist Christians and Muslims), a state in which Western Europe was populated only by Caucasians (for neo-Nazis), a state before the industrial revolution in which nature was pure and good because it was untouched by humans (for left-wing environmentalist extremists). In addition, fundamentalists are also *normatively* ignorant in disbelieving that homosexuals should have

the same rights as heterosexuals, in falsely believing that people from different races ought to be conferred different rights, and in denying that women must have the right to birth control.

Second, such ignorance comes in different varieties. In the case of fundamentalist ignorance, much of it is *disbelieving* ignorance: it consists in false beliefs. This is true for many beliefs that fundamentalists hold about how science is carried out, what the moral orientation of nonbelievers is, and so on. Some of it is *deep* or even *complete* ignorance, though, such as the ignorance of certain fundamentalist groups of the insights of evolutionary theory or big bang cosmology. They have never considered the relevant propositions and in many cases even lack the concepts to do so.

Third, a common phenomenon within fundamentalist groups is that members believe something on the authority of specific members of the group (see Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1992; Hardin 2002). In fact, that is one thing that makes it a fundamentalist *group*. It is worth exploring whether an account of group ignorance can do justice to that.

Fourth, fundamentalist groups are usually characterized by various intellectual vices, both on the individual and the group level. In fact, the group can maintain the fundamentalist beliefs in question only because of these intellectual vices (e.g., dogmatism, narrow-mindedness, and intellectual hubris).

White Ignorance

Recently, social epistemology has shown an increase of attention for so-called white ignorance and related phenomena (e.g., Bailey 2007; Medina 2016; Mills 2007, 2015; Sullivan 2007). That I use it as a case study should not be taken to imply that I wholeheartedly embrace every particular conceptualization of white ignorance, let alone that I endorse every activist policy meant to counter white ignorance. The woke movement is diverse, and some of its more

extreme wings are highly controversial. At the core of the movement, though, there are important insights about certain kinds of ignorance that white people tend to display due to their often-privileged circumstances. In chapter 8, we will consider white ignorance in more detail. Here, the purpose is merely to use the phenomenon of white ignorance as a case study that provides various desiderata.

Often seen as group phenomenon (Fricker 2016; Medina 2016; Mills 2007, 2015), white ignorance is a form of ignorance among white people that is not coincidental but connected to whiteness (Mills 2015, 217). Here, whiteness is not just one's skin color but a complex constellation of, among other things, skin color, privileged social status, and the colonial history of the West. Examples of white ignorance are widespread deep ignorance about the long-term effects of colonization and the slave trade on the global wealth distribution (Mills 2007), the practice of redlining in the United States, and the false belief that we live in a post-racial society where people of color do not face any distinct challenges.

Note that not *all* white people are ignorant of such facts and that not all group members are ignorant to the same degree. Further, white ignorance can be unconsidered, deep, or even complete. What might be different from fundamentalist ignorance is that white ignorance may not neatly follow the boundaries of social groups: nonwhites can internalize aspects of white ignorance, just like women can internalize sexism (Bailey 2007, 86).

There are at least two reasons to call white ignorance *group* ignorance. First, it involves group agency (El Kassar 2018). White ignorance is active ignorance because it is not the result of epistemic bad luck but the result of epistemic vices. José Medina (2016) describes the related concept of racial ignorance as a form of numbness that involves the inability to respond to racial injustices. This numbness is caused by narrow-mindedness toward the views of people of another race and toward uncomfortable information. White ignorance can be caused by such epistemic vices.

Second, white ignorance is caused by vices on a group level, not merely by those of its members. As Medina (2016, 187) puts it, "although we can say that particular individuals are racially insensitive, the production of insensitivity is a collective enterprise in which there are shared responsibilities." Mills (2007, 2015) stresses that white ignorance is group-based and points out that it should not be seen as an aggregation of individual beliefs of white people but as a perspective or worldview directly related to whiteness. According to Mills (2007, 34), white group interest plays a central causal role in generating and sustaining white ignorance. This seems similar to what Dan Kahan (2017) calls "identity-protective cognition," which indicates the habit of cultural groups to evaluate evidence in a way that mirrors their dominant beliefs. Similarly, Miranda Fricker (2016, 170) points out that white ignorance "names a motivated bias of white people taken as a group that leaves them 'ignorant.'" Fricker frames it as a collective denial in white communities of some truths that it is not in the group's interest to know. Thus, white ignorance is not merely an aggregation of individual cases of ignorance—it is caused by white people being a dominant *group* with a certain identity and history.

Desiderata

Given what we have seen in this section, a plausible account of group ignorance should be able to make sense of the following five features of such ignorance:

(i) Ignorance can cross group lines in the sense that it does not always follow the boundaries of social groups.

(ii) There is often heterogeneity within the group: one person can be more ignorant than another, and some people may not even be ignorant at all.

(iii) Group ignorance can be caused by the group's epistemic vices or virtues, or by the group's epistemic agency.

(iv) At least in some cases, group ignorance is not just the aggregate of individual ignorance.

(v) Some cases are cases of disbelieving ignorance, whereas other cases are cases of unconsidered, deep, or complete ignorance.

As I pointed out in the previous section, group ignorance can come in degrees, so let us add this as a final desideratum:

(vi) Group ignorance comes in degrees.

I return to these desiderata below.

Extrapolating from Group Belief?

To develop an account of group ignorance, a natural initial move is to extrapolate from existing accounts of group belief, group justification, and group knowledge. In exploring whether this can be done, let us focus on group belief. As we shall see below, the reasons why we cannot extrapolate from theories of group belief are also good reasons to think we cannot extrapolate from theories of group knowledge and group justification.

Accounts of group belief fall into two camps: summative and nonsummative views. Summativists deny that it is possible for a group to have a belief while no single member of the group has this belief. Nonsummativist argue that this *is* possible. On summativism, the group's belief is not something over and above the doxastic states of its members (thus also Carter 2015). Hence, there is nothing on the group level that is not also there at the individual level.

If we apply a purely summativist view to group ignorance, the resulting account denies that there is something unique about ignorance on a group level. Ignorance on this view is reducible to the individual ignorance of the group members. This might work for *collectives* and for *some* instances of group ignorance. Imagine a study group whose members are all in a state of disbelieving ignorance: they hold the false belief that the final test has been cancelled. Imagine also that this is due to bad luck: each of them independently and for different reasons misunderstood the teacher. In this case, one could describe the ignorance of the group in terms of the ignorance of its members.

However, summativism does not work for the more important cases of group ignorance, such as fundamentalism and white ignorance. After all, in these cases, it is not merely the ignorance of the members that constitutes group ignorance but rather the complex epistemic dynamic within the group, as well as the equally complex epistemic dynamic between the ingroup and the outgroup. Also, these more complex forms of ignorance are brought about by collective vices—for instance, identity-protective reasoning—and are sustained by group agency. The fierce disagreement with those outside the group also contributes to many cases of group ignorance. Clearly then, such cases of group ignorance cannot be described in purely summativist terms. Summativism cannot do justice to desiderata (iii) and (iv) formulated above. Therefore, I set aside purely summativist views.

On nonsummative accounts, *the group itself* has propositional attitudes that can come apart from those of the group members. On these views, a group has agency, which fits better with our desiderata, (iii) in particular. In the remainder of this section, I present three influential and representative nonsummative views of group belief and then argue that, both individually and jointly, they lack the resources to make sense of all varieties of group ignorance.

Table 5.1 Pettit's Premise-Based Aggregation Account

	Premise 1	Premise 2	Premise 3	Conclusion
Member A	Yes	Yes	No	No
Member B	No	Yes	Yes	No
Member C	Yes	No	Yes	No
Aggregation	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

First, there is the Joint-Acceptance Account, defended by Margaret Gilbert, Daniel Pilchman, and Raimo Tuomela (see Gilbert 1987; Gilbert and Pilchman 2014; Tuomela 1992, 2004). On this account, the group believes that which its operative members jointly accept as the group belief. By *operative members* I mean those members who have the relevant decision-making authority in the group.[2] The individual members need not have a belief about *p*. Their beliefs about *p* are irrelevant—what matters is what is *accepted* as the group belief.

Second, there is Philip Pettit's Premise-Based Aggregation Account (see Pettit 2003). On this view, the belief of the group is not the result of aggregating the beliefs of the group members, as is the case with summativist belief aggregation. Instead, Pettit looks at the *premises* on which the members base their belief. If the judgments on these premises are aggregated, the group's belief can diverge from its members' individual beliefs. This divergence is illustrated in table 5.1. It is stipulated that the individual beliefs (conclusions) of the members are negative if they disbelieve one or

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[2] For a similar definition, see Lackey (2021, 52). Tuomela (1992, 288) originally defined *operative member* as follows: "The operative members in the cases of group actions, group goals, and group beliefs are those actors, goal-formers, and belief-formers by virtue of whom, respectively, actions, goals and beliefs are attributed to groups." The obvious problem with defining *operative member* along these lines is that it would render an analysis of group ignorance circular.

more of the premises. When the individual beliefs of the members are aggregated, the group belief is negative (not-*p*). However, if the premise columns are aggregated, the outcome is positive.

On the Premise-Based Aggregation Account, then, a group believes that *p* if and only if *p* results from the aggregation of the members' votes in the premise columns. Because the group belief is not fully determined by the individual beliefs of its members, the view is nonsummative.

Third, Jennifer Lackey defends what she calls the Agency Account. Strictly speaking, this view is neither summativist nor nonsummativist. Although relatively close to summativist accounts, the Agency Account is crucially different, which is why I elaborate on it under the heading of nonsummativist views. On Lackey's account, a group believes that *p* if and only if a significant percentage of its operative members believe that *p* while the bases of their beliefs do not conflict (see Lackey 2012, 2016, 2021). Which members are the operative members is determined by the rules and regulations of the group. What percentage is significant will depend on the context. Lackey's view focuses on the *agency* of a group, hence the name of the account. This way, the view ties in with nonsummative views. At the same time, the Agency Account connects the group belief to the individual beliefs of its operative members, which is the summative element of the view.

Can these three views make sense of all varieties of group ignorance? It seems they can explain *disbelieving* and *suspending* ignorance because, on all three views, a group can disbelieve that *p* and suspend judgment on *p*. For example, a Mormon fundamentalist group in Utah can disbelieve evolutionary theory, and a Salafist fundamentalist group in Syria can suspend judgment on whether vaccination is actually effective. Let us consider these two cases in this order.

First, it is irrelevant whether or not *all* members of the Mormon group believe evolutionary theory is false: they accept as a group that it is, thereby meeting the conditions of the Joint-Acceptance

Account. The Premise-Based Aggregation Account would say the relevant falsehood is a premise they take for granted in their reasoning. On the Agency Account, a significant number of the operative members disbelieve evolutionary theory, and their bases for this are perfectly compatible and in fact mostly the same, such as a particular literal interpretation of the Book of Mormon.

Second, a group can suspend judgment on the safety of vaccinations. On the Joint-Acceptance Account, the group accepts neither that vaccinations work nor that they do not work (that seems the acceptance equivalent of suspending judgment). On the Premise-Based Aggregation Account, the group does not to take it as a premise in their practical and theoretical reasoning that vaccinations work nor that they do not. There are different ways this could be the case. For instance, in a group of ten members, five presume p and five presume not-p; or one presumes p, one presumes not-p, and eight presume neither p nor not-p. On the Agency Account, a significant number of the operative members can suspend judgment on whether vaccinations work and share their basis for doing so (e.g., suspicion toward medical interventions that prevent diseases because doing so allegedly conflicts with submission to God's eternal plans).

What about *undecided* ignorance? Here, things are a bit more complicated for the three accounts because undecided ignorance does not involve the actual adoption of a doxastic attitude. Take, for example, a right-wing fundamentalist group that has been presented with all the scientific arguments for the Out of Africa hypothesis, which says that originally all humans came from Africa. The group members keep postponing taking a stance on the truth-value of the hypothesis, and because they waver in their judgment, they are undecidedly ignorant of this true proposition. How can the accounts deal with this? The Joint-Acceptance Account needs further qualification to make sense of this. For instance, the members of this group have not jointly accepted the hypothesis, but at least they entered the process of deliberation. Without such further

qualification, this kind of ignorance cannot be differentiated from other varieties (e.g., unconsidered ignorance). The Premise-Based Aggregation Account does not seem able to deal with undecided ignorance, for the Out of Africa hypothesis is not taken as a premise in the group, nor is its denial. An absent premise is not something that can be aggregated. The Agency Account would, like the Joint-Acceptance Account, need a qualification to the effect that, although the operative members do not have a belief, they have started deliberation on the matter.

Let us turn to *unconsidered* ignorance. Here, the group is ignorant merely because its members have never considered whether p. As soon as they were to consider whether p, they would believe the true proposition p. Suppose a governmental task force responding to a pandemic virus outbreak has never considered that in a pandemic it is of paramount importance to order ventilators in time, but upon consideration the task force members would immediately come to believe this true proposition. It seems the three views of group belief cannot accommodate this form of ignorance because, in contrast with disbelieving or suspending ignorance, it does not involve a belief or considered premise. The proposition p does not seem to be something that can be jointly accepted, because for a proposition to be jointly accepted, the group (or at least the operative part of the group) needs to consider it. Hence, the Joint-Acceptance Account cannot account for it. The same goes for the Premise-Based Aggregation Account: if the premises are not considered, they cannot be aggregated. Similarly, the Agency Account cannot accommodate unconsidered ignorance because the operative members have not considered p and so they have no (non)conflicting bases. One could object that a group is in a state of unconsidered ignorance if its operative members do not believe that p but would believe that p as soon as they were to consider p and the bases for their belief that p upon considering whether p would not conflict with each other. However, in that scenario it needs to be explained how a group has unconsidered ignorance *as*

a group because in such a situation, the two conditions for *group* belief—belief by a significant number of the operative members and nonconflicting bases—are absent. The group is, as it were, not tied together. For this, it seems, we need a different account of group ignorance.

Deep and *complete* ignorance are also challenging for the three considered views. These forms of ignorance are especially important varieties when it comes to white ignorance and thus should be accounted for in a plausible account of group ignorance. Suppose a group of privileged white people have never considered that their privilege is (partly) due to their skin color. Or consider a secluded group of privileged white people who have never even heard of the concept *white privilege* and thus (by stipulation) cannot grasp the idea that their skin color plays a role in their privilege. These forms of ignorance are about propositions that are not considered or cannot even be considered due to a lack of relevant concepts. For these varieties, there cannot be an instance of joint acceptance (because a proposition to jointly agree upon is lacking) nor of premise-based aggregation (because premises are lacking). Things are similar for the Agency Account: the operative members do not have a belief on the matter and so they have no (non)conflicting bases. One could object that if there are no bases that can conflict, there are no conflicting bases and, hence, the second condition of the account is met. In that case, the operative members have a lack of true belief and no conflicting bases, which makes them ignorant. However, I do not think this is sufficient for group ignorance because on this line of reasoning, the second condition does not do any work. The condition of the nonconflicting bases in the Agency Account has the function of providing a group with agency. This does not happen if there are no nonconflicting bases. It is not clear how in that case a group is ignorant *as a group* and not merely as a collection of individuals. A random collection of persons (e.g., ten randomly selected red-haired people) also have no nonconflicting bases for their nonexistent beliefs. Hence, I think this objection

fails; the Agency Account cannot accommodate deep and complete ignorance.

I conclude that the three accounts of group belief can only accommodate *some* forms of group ignorance. They cannot accommodate the important examples we are working with because these examples involve forms of ignorance constituted by the fact that the group has not formed an attitude at all.

Of course, one person's *modus ponens* is another person's *modus tollens*. Thus, alternatively, one could conclude these forms of ignorance that cannot be accommodated exist only at the individual level and not for groups. This seems implausible, though, as cases such as fundamentalist and white ignorance are not far-fetched but crucially important examples of group ignorance. If we cannot develop an account of group ignorance based on existing accounts of group belief, then these accounts are not adequate for grounding a full account of group ignorance. Thus, we need to develop a new approach to account for group ignorance.

In this section, I have focused on group *belief*. Before we move on, we should note that if what I have argued is right, then extrapolating from theories of group *justification* or group *knowledge* cannot do the job either. This is because they all identify epistemic phenomena—premise sharing, joint acceptance, common evidence, and so on—that can explain a group's attitude but not the group's absence of attitude nor the subtle differences between various ways of having an attitude.

The Dynamic Account of Group Ignorance

Now that we have seen we cannot simply transpose accounts of group belief to accounts of group ignorance, it is time to provide my own account of group ignorance. Before I do so, let me draw attention to the fact that, so far, we have considered accounts of group belief, justification, and knowledge—which, we saw, were all

propositional. However, in chapter 2, we saw there is also objectual and practical ignorance. This seems equally true for groups: a fundamentalist group, due to radical social isolation, can be objectually ignorant of liberal political policy or even the basic structures of democracy, and a group of white privileged people can be ignorant as to how to set up a series of job interviews in a way that counters racist biases. The account that I provide in this section is meant to capture, mutatis mutandis, all three kinds of group ignorance. For reasons that will soon become clear, I call it the Dynamic Account.

With Thirza Lagewaard, I have previously defended an account of group ignorance in terms of two conditions (Peels and Lagewaard, forthcoming). Condition (i) said a significant number of the group's operative members are individually ignorant of the true proposition p. And condition (ii) said this individual ignorance is the result of a group dynamic—for instance, group agency, collective epistemic virtues or vices, external manipulation, lack of time, interest, concepts, resources, or information, or a combination of these.[3]

The idea was that (i) would ensure the connection between the ignorance of the group and the ignorance of its members. We suggested that what a "significant number" of the group's operative members amounts to will depend on the context. This leaves room for vagueness, but real-life cases of group ignorance are often not clear-cut either. Whenever it is propositional, the ignorance of the operative members can be any of the varieties of ignorance distinguished in chapter 4: disbelieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete. The group members do not all have to be ignorant in the same way: one can be in a state of disbelieving ignorance, while another is in a state of suspending ignorance.

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[3] Mutatis mutandis, the account also applies to objectual and practical ignorance. For instance, a group G is ignorant of an entity X if and only if (i) a significant number of G's operative members are individually ignorant of X and (ii) this individual ignorance is the result of a group dynamic.

The second condition was meant to be an answer to the plight of nonsummativism, to make sure a group is ignorant *as a group*, and to reflect the wide variety in forms of ignorance. When we said that the group's ignorance *is a result* of a group dynamic, we meant the group ignorance is either *brought about* by a group dynamic or *maintained* by it.

I now think this account is incomplete, though. What made me see this were cases of *pluralistic ignorance*, an important notion in social psychology. A situation of pluralistic ignorance obtains when a majority of, or maybe even all, the group members privately reject a norm or an idea but go along with it because they incorrectly assume that most others accept it. A well-known example is Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale about the emperor's new clothes. In that situation, it seems the group is ignorant as a group even though all its members individually know the emperor is naked. A real-life example is a (2020) study showing that the vast majority of young married men in Saudi Arabia privately support women working outside the home but underestimate the degree to which other men support this (see Bursztyn, González, and Yanagizawa-Drott 2020).

One may object that in such cases, the individual members do not really *know* because they believe the majority of people see things differently and know better. That may be right. However, there are also cases in which the individual members *do* seem to know. Imagine that a serious #MeToo case occurs in an army unit. It is not at all a remote possibility that everyone in the group individually *knows* it is wrong but decides not to share it with anyone else because they fear reprisal in one form or another. It seems right to say that in such cases, the group is ignorant as a group (after all, the group does nothing about the situation), even though all its members individually know. For these reasons, I now think that the following account better captures what it is for a group to be ignorant *as a group*:

> *The Dynamic Account of group ignorance*: a group *G* is ignorant of
> a true proposition *p* if and only if (i) either a significant number
> of *G*'s operative members are ignorant of *p* or enough operative
> members of *G* know/truly believe that *p* but *G* as a group fails to
> know/truly believe that *p*, and (ii) this is the result of a group dy-
> namic, such as group agency, collective epistemic virtues or vices,
> external manipulation, lack of time, interest, concepts, resources,
> or information, or a combination of these.[4]

This leaves room for both kinds of situations: those in which the
group is ignorant because a significant number of its operative
members are ignorant due to group dynamics and those in which
the group is ignorant because, even though everybody or almost
everybody knows, there is a group dynamic that brings about group
ignorance.

Importantly, the Dynamic Account meets the six desiderata
introduced earlier in this chapter. First, it focuses on a group's
being ignorant *as a group*, but it does not require group member-
ship for someone to be ignorant in the relevant way. Therefore, it
leaves room for ignorance that does not follow the boundaries of
social groups. For example, it does not preclude some nonwhite
people having white ignorance. Second, it leaves room for het-
erogeneity: one member can be more ignorant than another, and
some members—whether operative or not—might not be igno-
rant at all. The account leaves room for such members to be actively
working against the group's ignorance, so that there is an opportu-
nity for change. Third, the account stipulates that some group ig-
norance is caused by group agency or collective epistemic virtues
or vices. I have included collective epistemic virtues because certain
virtues may come with certain kinds of ignorance (see, for instance,

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[4] Mutatis mutandis, the account also applies to objectual and practical ignorance. For
instance, a group *G* is ignorant of an entity *X* if and only if (i) *G* lacks objectual knowl-
edge of *X* and (ii) this results from a group dynamic.

Driver 1989) or bring about ignorance, such as ignorance of nuclear weapons or ignorance of people's private lives. Fourth, the account says group ignorance is not the aggregate of individual ignorance. Fifth, because no belief or consideration of premises is required, the account can accommodate all six varieties of group ignorance. Sixth, the Dynamic Account leaves room for degrees of ignorance: one group may be more ignorant than another, for instance, if its operative members are mostly in a state of complete rather than undecided ignorance. Or one group may be more ignorant than another if more of its operative members are in a state of ignorance. Exactly how ignorance is supposed to come in degrees needs to be spelled out in much greater detail. It is the topic of the next chapter. At least the Dynamic Account leaves plenty of room for it.

The Dynamic Account can also describe my two working examples of fundamentalist ignorance and white ignorance. On this account, fundamentalist group ignorance obtains when a significant number of the group's operative members are ignorant. This will often be disbelieving ignorance, but it can also be of another variety, and it can even be nonpropositional. Further, such ignorance is often caused by epistemic vices, such as overly relying on a single authority, dogmatism, narrow-mindedness, and intellectual hubris. Similarly, white ignorance occurs when a significant number of the group's operative members are ignorant, often in a deep or complete way. This ignorance is caused by the agency of the group and such vices as identity-protective reasoning and hermeneutical injustice.

Objections and Replies

Let us now consider three objections that might be leveled against my revised Dynamic Account of group ignorance.

First, one may object that the account does not tell us which variety of ignorance a group displays. For example, imagine a group

has ten operative members. One of the operative members is deeply ignorant, two are completely ignorant, three are disbelievingly ignorant, and the remaining four are not ignorant. Now, in what way is the group ignorant? In this case, six of the ten operative members are ignorant. Whether this means the group is ignorant depends on whether six out of ten is a significant percentage for this group. And whether that is the case depends on all sorts of details, such as rules and regulations of the group, which I will not address here. If we assume the group is ignorant in this case, the question remains whether it is deeply, completely, or disbelievingly ignorant.

I reply that an ignorant group does not always need to display just one variety of ignorance. A group can exhibit multiple kinds of ignorance, even in different degrees. For example, the group ignorance may be described as having elements of disbelieving, deep, and complete ignorance. This is not a disadvantage of the Dynamic Account. On the contrary, it reflects the complexities of real-life group ignorance.

Second, one may object that the Dynamic Account is not really a unified account—in opposition to, say, the New View on individual ignorance or Lackey's Agency Account of group belief. Although the account consists of only two conditions, the first condition is a disjunction of two different kinds of situation, and the second condition is mostly a disjunction of many different causes of group ignorance. They may be put together in a single condition, but that does not make it a unified account.

The point is fair: the account is not unified in the way the other accounts—of different phenomena—are unified. Yet, it seems the Dynamic Account is probably the most unified account of group ignorance we can get. This is because group ignorance itself is not really a unified phenomenon but a set of different attitudes, or sometimes precisely the absence of various attitudes, and in some cases even combinations of the two. That a unified account of *individual* ignorance *can* be provided, even though individual ignorance also consists of a set of different attitudes, can be explained

as follows. For individual ignorance, these different attitudes are all captured by phrases like "lack of" or "absence of" knowledge or true belief or some such thing. As we saw, this cannot be done for group ignorance—we would then merely have an account of ignorance of collectives rather than group ignorance. Not only are there vices, virtues, agency, and a lack of time, among other things, but there are also dynamics that are unique to groups, such as belief dependence, groupthink, and differences in ignorance between members. It is only because of these additional group dynamics that the group is ignorant *as a group*.

Third, one may object that a nonunified account of group ignorance—like my Dynamic Account—is not useful because it does not describe a single phenomenon.

I reply that I do not think it is problem that the account is not unified. If group ignorance is not a unified phenomenon, this does not mean we cannot account for it and that the resulting account is not useful. The first condition of the Dynamic Account ensures there is enough similarity between different kinds of group ignorance for them to be captured into a single account: all varieties of group ignorance have at their core either individual operative members who are ignorant or group ignorance despite widespread knowledge among the group's operative members.

What is the account's use? Here are a couple of things that come to mind. It is descriptively accurate when it comes to such crucial cases of group ignorance as fundamentalist and white ignorance. It can explain why some groups are ignorant not merely as collectives but also as groups. It does justice to the many varieties of ignorance that groups, even a single group, can display. It leaves room for the fact that ignorance comes in degrees. It draws attention to the many different dynamics that can underlie group ignorance. We will see how this cashes out in more detail in chapters 7 and 8 when we look at strategic ignorance in agnotology and white ignorance in the philosophy of race.

Conclusion

In this world there is group ignorance. Some cases of fundamentalist and white ignorance are well-known examples of this. Such ignorance comes in many varieties: disbelieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance. Moreover, there is objectual and practical group ignorance in addition to propositional ignorance. However, a compelling account of such group ignorance has been lacking so far. One cannot simply transpose existing accounts of group belief, group justification, or group knowledge because these accounts cannot do justice to the many varieties of group ignorance. What we need is something along the lines of the Dynamic Account of group ignorance that I have defended in this chapter. This account says a group is ignorant if and only if a significant number of the group's operative members are individually ignorant or the group lacks true belief/knowledge and this is the result of a group dynamic. This account can do justice to important features of group ignorance found in cases of fundamentalist and white ignorance, and it seems to withstand important objections and worries.

6

Degrees of Ignorance

Introduction

Various philosophers have pointed out that ignorance comes in degrees. Among them are Berit Brogaard and Nikolaj Nottelmann (see Brogaard 2016; Nottelmann 2016, 51–54). As I noted in chapter 3, Brogaard has also provided threefold linguistic evidence to think that ignorance comes in degrees. However, to say that ignorance comes in degrees is one thing—to explain what it means for ignorance to come in degrees is quite another. To do so is to elucidate *what is going on* when ignorance comes in degrees. I consider this an essential part of an epistemology of ignorance, a part that I provide in this chapter.

To understand degrees of ignorance is not merely of intrinsic value. We will see in the ensuing chapters, when we apply our epistemology of ignorance to various contemporary challenging issues in philosophy, that it is helpful in resolving these debates not merely to posit that ignorance comes in degrees but also to have a handle on how it does so.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I provide a brief metaphysical exploration of what degrees are in the first place. I argue there are at least three ways in which something can come in degrees: it displays the determinable–determinate relation, it stands in the type–token relation, or it is constituted by stereotypical properties. Subsequent sections consider, respectively, how propositional, objectual, practical, and group ignorance admit of degrees.

What Are Degrees?

It is helpful, before we explore whether ignorance comes in degrees and if so, how it does so, to address the question of *what degrees are*. In other words, what is it for something to come in degrees? Elsewhere, I have explored this issue in detail with René van Woudenberg (see Van Woudenberg and Peels 2018). Here, I focus on the main conclusion of our earlier exploration, namely, that there are at least three distinct ways in which something can come in degrees.

First, something can come in degrees because it stands in the determinable–determinate relation. The distinction between determinables and determinates was first made by W. E. Johnson (1964, 174).[1] Determinables are things like height, distance, and color, whereas determinates are such things as 1.74 meters, 3.4 miles, and the hue lapis lazuli blue, which was often used by Johannes Vermeer. For example, the average Dutchman is taller than the average American: these are two determinates of the determinable *height*. The distance between Amsterdam and the most northern point of Norway is greater than the distance between Amsterdam and Moscow: these are two determinates of the determinable *distance*. And the Adriatic Sea is bluer than the North Sea: these are two determinates of the determinable *blue* (as well as of the determinable *color*).

When we reflect metaphysically on this phenomenon, there are at least three important things to be said. First, determinables come in families, and each determinate emanates from a single determinable. Yellow, green, cochineal, and lapis lazuli emanate from color, whereas cadmium yellow, royal yellow, and gold all emanate from yellow. Second, the things that stand in the determinable–determinate relation are properties. The properties of being lime,

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[1] For a more detailed and influential account of the determinable–determinate relation, see Searle (1959).

being seafoam, being emerald, or being olive are all ways of being green. Third, some but not all determinates can be mapped onto a hierarchical scale. Someone who is 1.84 meters tall is taller than someone who is 1.74 meters tall; the person who is 1.84 meters tall has more height. Color is a determinable, and so is red (which is both a determinable and a determinate), but not all the determinates of red can be mapped onto a hierarchical scale. A skin can become redder as it gets more sunburned, but it does not make sense to say that cadmium red is redder than alizarin red or azo red. Thus, the first way for something to come in degrees is for it to stand in the determinable–determinate relation. Below, I return to whether particular kinds of ignorance come in degrees by standing in the determinable–determinate relation.

Second, something can come in degrees because it stands in the right sort of *type–token relation*. This distinction was famously introduced and explored by Charles Peirce (1931–1958, 2:246, 4:423, 6:334, 8:334). Tokens are the concrete instantiations of types. For example, my two copies of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* are both instantiations of the type *Virginia Woolf's novel* "*To the Lighthouse*." My scoring a point in a rugby match and your scoring a point in a soccer match are both tokens of the type *scoring a point in a match*. Instantiations are concrete: they are material entities or events in space and time that have causal powers. Types are abstract entities that lack causal powers. This means the type–token relation is different from the determinable–determinate relation. Among other things, tokens are not properties.

Like some determinates, tokens stand in a hierarchical relation to each other: in the one case, there is always an equal number of tokens as in another case, or there are more or fewer tokens than in another case. I scored fewer points in the last rugby match than my best friend, I have more copies of *The Power and the Glory* at home than a colleague of mine (as I am rather fond of Graham Greene), and my barber and I have won an equal number of Nobel Prizes—none.

Thus, the second way for something to come in degrees is for it to stand in the type–token relation. Below, I return to the issue of whether a particular kind of ignorance comes in degrees by standing in the type–token relation.

Third, something can come in degrees because it is a case of *constitution by stereotypical properties*. This occurs if it constitutes something only if it has enough of certain stereotypical properties.[2] Take wisdom. To be wise, one could argue, is to have enough of the following properties (see Kekes 1983 and Nozick 1989):

- making well-balanced judgments;
- distinguishing between what is central to an issue and what is peripheral;
- acting properly in a wide variety of circumstances;
- practicing the principle of not always saying what one knows but always knowing what one says;
- taking things with a certain amount of equanimity;
- coping with people in various situations, from different walks of life; and
- foreseeing the effects of one's actions.

To say that wisdom is a case of constitution by stereotypical properties is to say that none of these properties, not even a conjunction of them, is necessary or sufficient for being wise. One is wise only if one has *enough of* these properties. Things are complicated here. Some items on the list may themselves come in degrees. Some items may be more central to wisdom than others. In other words, someone's having them may count heavier in favor of someone's being wise than other properties on the list. Also, some items on the list may be constituted by finer-grained abilities. The point is this: wisdom comes in degrees; some persons are wiser than others. And it seems wisdom comes in degrees because one

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[2] For more on stereotypical properties, see Putnam (1975, 169–170).

might have fewer or more wise-making stereotypical properties. Note that this is not a case of the determinable–determinate relation: having one property does not entail being wise, whereas, say, being crimson implies being red. Nor is it a case of the type–token relation: a single token implies the instantiation of the type, but none of these properties implies that being wise is instantiated. Arguably, other cases of constitution by stereotypical properties are intelligence and something's being a game.[3]

Thus, the third way for something to come in degrees is for it to be a case of constitution by stereotypical properties. Below, I return to the issue of whether a particular kind of ignorance comes in degrees in virtue of being constituted by stereotypical properties.

Degrees of Propositional Ignorance

In chapter 2, we saw there are at least three sorts of ignorance that are propositional in nature: ignorance of a single proposition, topical ignorance (e.g., ignorance about the Russian revolution), and erotetic ignorance or ignorance-wh (e.g., ignorance of why the coronavirus spread so rapidly) (thus also Nottelmann 2016, 52). The second and third kinds of ignorance are cases in which one is ignorant of a larger number of propositions, such as all true propositions

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[3] Thus Gottfredson (1997, 13): "Intelligence is a very general mental capability that, among other things, involves the ability to reason, plan, solve problems, think abstractly, comprehend complex ideas, learn quickly and learn from experience. It is not merely book learning, a narrow academic skill, or test-taking smarts. Rather it reflects a broader and deeper capability for comprehending our surroundings—'catching on,' 'making sense of things,' or 'figuring out' what to do." That games do not have necessary and sufficient conditions but should be interpreted in terms of a family resemblance was famously argued by Wittgenstein (1958, paragraph 66): "Consider for example the proceedings that we call 'games.' I mean board-games, card-games, ball-games, Olympic games, and so on. What is common to them all?—Don't say: 'There must be something common, or they would not be called "games"'—but look and see whether there is anything common to all.—For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look!"

about the Russian revolution or all true propositions that jointly provide an answer to the question of why the coronavirus spread so rapidly. In this section, I explore four ways in which propositional ignorance might come in degrees.

Range of Propositional Ignorance

The first way in which ignorance comes in degrees applies to topical and erotetic ignorance, because these kinds of ignorance comprise ignorance of a certain number of propositions rather than ignorance of a single proposition. One can be more or less ignorant of the life of General George Patton, and one can be more or less ignorant of why the Russians and Americans did not fight each other right after the Second World War ended in Europe. In fact, two distinct ways seem to fall under this. On the one hand, one might think that the more propositions one is ignorant of that constitute a topic one is ignorant of, the more ignorant one is. On the other hand, one might think that the more *core* propositions (rather than *peripheral* propositions) one is ignorant of that constitute a topic one is ignorant of, the more ignorant one is. Consider, for instance, the topics of evolutionary theory and why Darwin published his *Origin of Species*. The proposition that evolution is largely based on the mechanism of random mutation and natural selection is a core proposition of evolutionary theory. By contrast, the proposition that Darwin upon his return could not use the turtles he had collected on the Galápagos Islands for his research because they had been eaten by the crew of the *Beagle*, though interesting, is only a peripheral proposition.

One can think of this first way of being propositionally ignorant as a type–token relation. The general type *ignorance of a proposition relevantly related to a topic* is instantiated multiple times. For example, Gustav is ignorant of almost all propositions regarding evolutionary theory, whereas Thomas is ignorant of only some of

them, so that Thomas is less ignorant than Gustav about evolutionary theory. Alternatively, whereas Thomas is ignorant about a smaller number of propositions, Gustav is not ignorant of the core propositions of evolutionary theory. If there are indeed core and peripheral propositions for a particular topic, we might want to say that in that case, Thomas is more ignorant than Gustav, even though Gustav is ignorant of more (peripheral) propositions.[4] Obviously, it follows that ignorance of a single proposition cannot come in degrees in this way; in such cases, there is always just one proposition one is ignorant of.

If I am right that propositional ignorance comes in degrees in the way I just described, this gives rise to all the classical problems regarding degrees and vagueness. For example, if Charles knows all the propositions p_n relevant to evolutionary theory, he is clearly not ignorant about evolutionary theory. One might think that if some person S who knows p_n about X is clearly not ignorant about X, then someone who knows p_{n-1} is clearly not ignorant about X either. And so on, until someone who knows nothing about evolutionary theory is not ignorant about evolutionary theory either, which is clearly false. For our purposes, though, this is *exactly* the result we want: ignorance comes in degrees, which gives rise to a sorites paradox. Sometimes it just is not clear whether someone is ignorant about something or not, even if we have all the facts on the table about what she knows and what she does not know.

Varieties of Ignorance

A second way in which ignorance comes in degrees zooms in on ignorance of a particular proposition rather than ignorance of a

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[4] The type–token relation applies here; the determinable–determinate relation does not. After all, if one is ignorant of *one* proposition relevant to evolutionary theory, it does not follow that one is ignorant of evolutionary theory, whereas if a determinate is exemplified, it follows that the determinable is exemplified as well.

number of propositions. Even ignorance of a single proposition, it seems, can come in degrees. The core idea here is that some varieties of propositional ignorance are, in an important sense, cases in which one is more ignorant than in others, even though one is ignorant in all cases (all varieties of ignorance are truly varieties of ignorance). Remember that in chapter 4, I distinguished six varieties of ignorance:

(1) Disbelieving ignorance: one falsely believes that *p*.
(2) Suspending ignorance: one suspends judgment on a true proposition *p*.
(3) Undecided ignorance: one has considered *p*, but one neither believes nor disbelieves nor suspends judgment on *p* because one has not actually adopted an attitude toward *p*.
(4) Unconsidered ignorance: one does not believe the true proposition *p*, not even dispositionally, but one would believe that *p* as soon as one were to consider *p*.
(5) Deep ignorance: one neither believes nor disbelieves nor suspends judgment on *p*, and one has never considered whether *p*.
(6) Complete ignorance: one neither believes nor disbelieves nor suspends judgment on *p*, and one could not even consider whether *p*.

Now, the suggestion is *not* that each of these varieties of ignorance can neatly be mapped on a scale ranging from a little ignorant to highly ignorant. This is because in each of these varieties, things go epistemically wrong in different ways. When it comes to disbelieving ignorance, for instance, what goes wrong is at least that one fails to believe a true proposition and that one believes a false proposition. Someone who suspends judgment on a true proposition only fails to believe a true proposition; she does not actually believe a false proposition. Someone who is completely ignorant not only fails to believe a true proposition but, as things stand,

cannot believe the relevant true proposition because she lacks the relevant concepts for that. Now, it is not clear how some of these varieties of ignorance relate to each other when it comes to degrees. For instance, is someone who fails to believe a true proposition and believes a false proposition more ignorant than someone who does not believe a false proposition but cannot even grasp the true proposition? This is not clear because different epistemic ends are involved, such as believing the truth, not believing falsehood, being able to consider a proposition, and having formed an attitude toward a proposition. For all varieties of ignorance to be put into a single hierarchy, one would have to assign a particular value to each of the relevant epistemic aims; moreover, those epistemic aims should all be commensurable with one another. It is not clear whether this can be done.

What *is* clear, though, is that at least *some* varieties of ignorance are epistemically worse than others. Someone who is in a state of deep ignorance is further removed from epistemically valuable states like true belief and knowledge than someone who is in a state of suspending judgment toward a true proposition, and someone who is completely ignorant is even further removed from such states. For instance, if the suspendingly ignorant person were to acquire further substantial evidence for the proposition in question, she would come to believe it and would no longer be ignorant, whereas the completely ignorant person would still be completely ignorant because she lacks the relevant concepts or background knowledge to understand the evidence for what it is. All this is because the second sorting principle, which concerns the nature of the obstacle to forming an attitude or to removing one's ignorance, clearly comes in degrees: an obstacle can be easy to remove, hard to remove, or impossible to remove. Also, if the Standard View of ignorance is correct, there are varieties of ignorance that are even closer to epistemically valuable states, namely, true belief that falls short of knowledge or mere justified true belief or Gettierized true belief. Similarly, one might think that a person who suspends

judgment on a true proposition is less ignorant of that truth than a person who falsely disbelieves that proposition.

One may wonder, though, why we should think this gives us good reason to believe that ignorance comes in degrees. Why could we not say that these are all cases of *full ignorance* but that they display various *epistemic deficiencies*? The reason is twofold. On the one hand, it seems our considered verdict in some cases does rule that these varieties come with different degrees of ignorance. Imagine a professor in theoretical physics who has studied quantum mechanics for thirty years and who still ponders the evidence concerning the Ehrenfest theorem. Imagine also that the Ehrenfest theorem is true. Would we say she is *as ignorant* of the truth of the Ehrenfest theorem as a lawyer who does not even know the basic concepts of physics, let alone quantum mechanics? That seems misguided. What *does* seem right is that both of them are ignorant of the truth of the Ehrenfest theorem, for they both do not know it. However, it seems the lawyer is much more ignorant than the physics professor.

How does this relate to the threefold way in which something comes in degrees that we distinguished above? I suggest it is a particular case of the determinable–determinate relation, the determinable being ignorance and the determinates being disbelieving ignorance, suspending ignorance, and so on. After all, the varieties of ignorance imply that one is ignorant, and the varieties mutually exclude each other.

Degrees of Belief

Many epistemologists and decision theorists have suggested, and some have argued, that belief admits of degrees (e.g., Jeffrey 1983; Skyrms 2000). Others disagree, arguing that belief is an all-or-nothing matter: either one believes *p* or one does not believe *p*. What varies is how confident or convinced or certain one is, but

belief is like knowledge: one has it or one does not (e.g., Moon 2017). Imagine that the former group is right. Would that give us further resources to explain how ignorance can come in degrees as well?

Well, as we saw in chapter 4, most varieties of ignorance are not cases of belief: suspending ignorance, unconsidered ignorance, undecided ignorance, deep ignorance, and complete ignorance are all constituted by propositional attitudes different from belief. The Standard and New Views on ignorance both agree, though, that there is also disbelieving ignorance, which amounts to a false belief. If belief comes in degrees, then the doxastic attitude involved in disbelieving ignorance comes in degrees as well. However, it requires an additional argumentative step to show it follows that the *ignorance* constituted by such false belief comes in degrees.

Imagine that a historian and a paleontologist both believe the major reason why the Neanderthals ceased to exist is that most of them were killed by humans, the historian being more convinced of this theory that the paleontologist, who has more doubts. Imagine also that, surprisingly, this theory is false. If belief comes in degrees, we could say the historian believes to a higher degree than the paleontologist that the extinction of the Neanderthals was due to human violence. Would it follow that the historian is *more ignorant* than the paleontologist? More specifically, is the historian more ignorant of the fact that the Neanderthals did not cease to exist due to human homicide?

I have to say it is not clear to me what the answer is. Perhaps, if the historian is utterly convinced whereas the paleontologist barely believes it, we would say that the paleontologist is less ignorant. This may be because ceteris paribus, the paleontologist is closer to believing the truth and, therefore, closer to not being ignorant. After all, he is less convinced that the Neanderthals ceased to exist due to human violence, and he can, therefore, be swayed more easily by evidence to the contrary. I am not confident, though, that

this is correct. It may be wiser to consider this as a boundary case: it simply is not clear whether it is a case of degrees of ignorance.

First- and Second-Order Ignorance

Finally, remember that in chapter 4, I distinguished between first-order and second-order ignorance. Now, one might suggest that someone who is ignorant as to whether p but who is aware of the fact that he is ignorant (let us call him Joseph) is less ignorant than someone else who is also ignorant as to whether p but who is also ignorant of the fact that he is ignorant (let us call him Robert). It seems intuitively right to say Joseph is at least in some sense less ignorant than Robert.

To assess whether this intuition is correct, we should ask this preliminary question: Exactly what is Robert supposed to be more ignorant of? It is not the proposition that p, for they are both ignorant that p—we could stipulate they both suspend judgment on p. Nor is it q, the proposition that they are ignorant of p. After all, Robert is simply fully ignorant of q, whereas Joseph is not at all ignorant of q. Is it the conjunctive proposition p & q? Well, both are ignorant of the conjunction because they are both ignorant of at least one conjunct. Another suggestion is that Robert is more ignorant simpliciter than Joseph—in other words, Robert is more ignorant without being more ignorant with regard to something specific. It is not clear what that would mean, though. We could stipulate that, apart from that single second-order proposition and what is entailed by it, Joseph and Robert know exactly the same things. It is then not meaningful to say that *in general* (with regard to true propositions), Robert is more ignorant than Joseph. That would leave us with p, q, or their conjunction—and we already saw that these options do not work.

I propose we construe the way ignorance comes in degrees here as *topical* ignorance. To be ignorant about a topic is to be ignorant

about *a set of propositions* rather than a *conjunction of propositions* or a *conjunctive proposition*. If we treat the example in question as a case of topical ignorance, we could say the topic consists of a set of propositions that includes p and q. Robert is more ignorant than Joseph because Robert is ignorant of both p and q, whereas Joseph is ignorant only of p. The type–token distinction applies here as well: the type is *proposition that is relevant to topic* X, and p and q are tokens of this type. Because we find more tokens of this type in Robert's case than in Joseph's case, Robert is more ignorant than Joseph.

Degrees of Objectual Ignorance

Objectual ignorance consists in lack of knowledge by acquaintance of various objects, such as material entities and topics. One may be ignorant of Hungarian cuisine, ignorant of gravitation theory, ignorant of the smell of fresh litchis, ignorant of military tactics, ignorant of Roman history, ignorant of psychotherapy. Now, some philosophers have suggested such ignorance comes in degrees. According to Nikolaj Nottelmann (2016, 52), for instance, "at least sometimes ignorance of various entities, like objects, persons, or events may be graded according to the ignorant subject's perceived remoteness from meeting the (perhaps contextually determined) standards for acquiring the relevant kind of knowledge."

Berit Brogaard has suggested something similar and has even provided threefold linguistic evidence for it. Sentences that seem to attribute objectual ignorance (i) are moderately, relatively gradable expressions, (ii) are sometimes borderline cases, and (iii) give rise to sorites paradoxes (see Brogaard 2016, 72–74). Thus, we can say that Chris is quite ignorant about Ebola for a leading politician, or that he is more ignorant about Ebola than Mary. There are boundary cases, because someone who has studied Ebola for thousands of hours is clearly not ignorant about Ebola, and it

seems that studying Ebola for, say, ten more or ten fewer seconds cannot make a difference to her knowledgeability. If the person who has studied Ebola for one thousand hours is not ignorant, then someone who has studied Ebola for one thousand hours minus ten seconds is not ignorant either. Or if someone who has studied Ebola for zero seconds is ignorant about Ebola, then so is the person who has studied Ebola for only ten more seconds. And so on. At some point, it is not clear whether the person is knowledgeable or ignorant about Ebola. We have borderline cases, then, and this gives rise to sorites paradoxes.

How should we understand objectual ignorance's coming in degrees? That depends on what one takes objectual ignorance to be. In chapter 2, we saw that intellectualists argue that objectual knowledge and objectual ignorance are reducible to propositional knowledge and propositional ignorance, whereas anti-intellectualists deny this. We do not need to settle the controversy here. If intellectualists are right, objectual ignorance should be treated as propositional ignorance, and we already saw that propositional ignorance comes in degrees in various ways. Moreover, these various ways all seem to apply here. Imagine that Emily is objectually ignorant of Norse mythology and that intellectualism is true. Her ignorance would then amount to ignorance of such propositions as that Ask and Embla were the first human couple and that all beings live in nine worlds around the cosmological tree Yggdrasil. In that case, Emily can be more or less ignorant due to being ignorant of more or fewer propositions regarding Nordic sagas. She can be more or less ignorant due to being ignorant of propositions regarding Nordic sagas that are more or less peripheral. She may be, say, disbelievingly or completely ignorant of these propositions. If she holds false beliefs, those beliefs may come in degrees. And she may be first-order and second-order ignorant.

What if anti-intellectualists are right and objectual ignorance cannot be reduced to propositional ignorance? Well, if one is objectually ignorant, one lacks knowledge by acquaintance of

something. I may be ignorant of Hungarian cuisine or of the smell of litchis simply because I have never had Hungarian cuisine or have never smelled litchis. Now, one might take this to suggest that objectual ignorance does not come in degrees: either one has had Hungarian cuisine or one has not; either one has smelled litchis or one has not. But things are not that straightforward. If you have had a single Hungarian dish in your entire life, are you thereby no longer ignorant of Hungarian cuisine? If you have smelled litchis once in your life but would not now recognize their smell, are you thereby no longer ignorant of the smell of litchis?

It is even plausible that, at least sometimes, these things are heavily context dependent. When I have had two Hungarian dishes and made another two myself, I may thereby be no longer ignorant of Hungarian cuisine. But if a chef of a three-star Michelin restaurant has had and made only two Hungarian dishes in her entire life, it may be right to say she is rather ignorant of Hungarian cuisine. When I have caught COVID-19, I may thereby be said to be no longer ignorant of it. But a doctor who has had COVID-19 but does not know anything about the virus except from what she has experienced herself while being ill may be considered rather ignorant of COVID-19. It seems, then, that even objectual ignorance comes in degrees. Contextual standards, such as jobs, professions, tasks, promises, and stakes, determine what counts as sufficient knowledge by acquaintance for being no longer ignorant.

How should we understand this in terms of the distinctions we set out with? We should *not* cash it out in terms of determinables and determinates or types and tokens. After all, the fact that you have had Hungarian cuisine does not *imply* that you are no longer ignorant of Hungarian cuisine. Whereas determinates imply a determinate and a token is the instantiation of a type, no particulars that we associate with not being ignorant of Hungarian cuisine guarantee you are no longer ignorant of it. A more plausible interpretation is one in terms of constitution by stereotypical properties. To not be ignorant of Hungarian cuisine is constituted by such

things as having had Hungarian dishes, having made Hungarian dishes, and knowing much about Hungarian cuisine. The more of these properties you have, the less ignorant you are of Hungarian cuisine. Of course, each of these properties may be further analyzed in terms of determinable–determinate or type–token relations. For instance, my having Hungarian beef goulash last night is a token of the type *having Hungarian dishes*. Yet, the *overall* analysis of (not) being ignorant of Hungarian cuisine is one in terms of constitution by stereotypical properties.

Degrees of Practical Ignorance

That practical ignorance comes in degrees has also been suggested by various philosophers, such as Brogaard and Nottelmann. Here is an example of what that would amount to. In 1900, the German mathematician David Hilbert published twenty-three unsolved problems in mathematics. Some of them have been solved since then, but fifteen of these problems have not been solved—either not at all or not entirely. I have no background in mathematics, and I am ignorant (in fact, completely ignorant) of how to solve them. Imagine that a mathematician has been working on these problems for four decades without being able to solve them. However, she *has* been able to make *some* progress toward solving them. She has, for instance, come up with parts of general solutions (although she does not recognize some of these as such), and she has come up with solutions to special cases. Thus, it seems that, while she is also ignorant of how to solve these problems, the mathematician is *less* ignorant than I am.

Nottelmann (2016, 53) has argued the anti-intellectualist tradition is in trouble here. On this tradition, practical ignorance is not reducible to propositional ignorance, the same way that practical knowledge is not reducible to propositional knowledge on this tradition. Nottelmann believes anti-intellectualism might be wanting

here, because we would not say of a better cello player that she is less ignorant of how to play the cello than another cello player who is not as good as she is. I agree. However, that is because the right thing to say in such a scenario is that neither one of them is ignorant because they both know how to play the cello, and one of them is better at it.

If the point is to come through, we should at least take two cases of practical ignorance and compare *those*. Here is one such example. A car mechanic who is unable to fix some problem with your Tesla is ignorant of how to solve the problem—say, because she knows only ten out of the twelve steps one needs to take to solve the problem. Contrast this with me. I do not even know the basics about cars; I would know *none* of those twelve steps, and I would be unable to take any of them. It does not seem implausible to say I am more ignorant of how to solve the problem than the mechanic: I do not even know where to start. Similarly, a professional chess player who does not know how to get out of a dire situation is ignorant of how to do so, but he is less ignorant of how to do so than someone who does not even know the rules of chess. Thus, it seems there is room for degrees of practical ignorance even on the anti-intellectualist approach.

How should we understand degrees of practical ignorance? Well, how should we understand degrees of *knowledgeability about how to φ*? One suggestion is to understand them in terms of reliability: if SpaceX is more knowledgeable than its rivals about how to put humans into space, it can do so more reliably than its rivals. The problem is that this does not work for practical ignorance: the car mechanic and I are both utterly unreliable in fixing this particular problem with your Tesla; we would fail on each attempt. Yet, arguably, the mechanic is less ignorant of how to fix the problem than I am. The math genius is (as yet) unable to solve Hilbert's remaining challenges—her degree of reliability in doing so is as low as mine. And yet, she is less ignorant of how to solve them than I am.

So, how *should* we understand degrees of practical ignorance? One way to think of this is by way of the type–token distinction. To fix the mechanical car failure, I need to take twelve steps. Someone who can take all steps knows how to fix the problem. The car mechanic knows how to take ten of them and is, therefore, close to knowing how to solve the problem. I do not know how to take any of these steps, so I am significantly more ignorant than the car mechanic. Each step is a token of the type *step to be taken to solve the mechanical problem*.

Degrees of Group Ignorance

In the previous chapter, I provided an analysis of group ignorance in terms of group dynamics.[5] Now, if my Dynamic Account of group ignorance is correct, what follows about degrees of group ignorance?

Well, it seems to leave plenty of room for degrees of group ignorance. Some of these closely follow the ways in which individual ignorance comes in degrees, which we distinguished above. Imagine, for instance, that two groups, A and B, are both ignorant of the human rights of women and girls. Group A has carefully considered the issue, and although equality for women matches well with certain moral rules its members embrace, it also conflicts with literal interpretations of certain passages in their holy scriptures. Consequently, they suspend judgment on whether women should have exactly the same rights as men. Compare this with group B. Group B is utterly convinced, say, that preaching by women is a great sin. It seems quite right to say group B is more ignorant of the rights of women than group A. Ignorance comes in degrees here because some propositional attitudes count as more ignorant than others. Or imagine that group A acknowledges rights 1, 2, and 5,

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[5] For an initial characterization, see Peels and Lagewaard (forthcoming).

but not rights 3, 4, and 6–10, whereas group C acknowledges only rights 2 and 7. It seems quite right to say that group C is more ignorant of the rights of women than group A. Ignorance comes in degrees here because group C is ignorant of more relevant propositions than group A.

Are there also ways of being ignorant that are unique to groups in comparison with individuals? I think there are. At least two such ways come to mind. First, the number of operative members accepting the proposition in question may be higher or lower. If groups A and B are both ignorant of some proposition p, but in group B there are more operative members ignorant of p than in group A, then, ceteris paribus, B as a group is more ignorant than A. Second, if groups A and B are both ignorant of some proposition p, but the group dynamic plays a more important role in explaining B's group ignorance than in explaining A's group ignorance, then group B is more ignorant as a group than group A.

Clearly, the ways in which group ignorance comes in degrees that overlap the ways in which individual ignorance comes in degrees are identical. But what about the two additional ways in which group ignorance can come in degrees? The number of operative members ignorant of p can easily be understood in terms of the type–token distinction: each operative member who is ignorant is a token of the type *ignorant member*. As to the second way, imagine that group A is more ignorant as a group than group B because, even though both groups are ignorant, the group dynamics play a more important role in bringing about and maintaining group ignorance in A than in B. In group A, for instance, there are more epistemic vices like narrow-mindedness and dogmatism: every inside or outside member who disagrees with the group is thought of as an instrument of Satan, and so is everyone within or outside the group who is willing to even consider the evidence that opponents of the group's position bring forward. Group B is also ignorant and that is equally due to group dynamics, but in B's case, the dynamics are weaker: within the group, evidence for opposite positions is not

forwarded to other group members, and those who disagree are treated with suspicion.

Constitution by stereotypical properties seems the right way to understand such group ignorance. Remember that in the previous chapter, in presenting my Dynamic Account of group ignorance, I pointed out there are many different mechanisms that can account for a group's being ignorant as a group, such as group virtues or vices, exchange of evidence or the lack thereof, and shared biases. A group is ignorant *as a group* if it has enough such properties. Such group ignorance is not to be understood in terms of the determinable–determinate relation, because determinates exclude each other: if something is exactly 8.19 meters long, it is not also exactly 4.39 meters long. However, group vices as an explanatory factor for a group's ignorance go well together with other explanatory factors, such as lack of exchange of evidence and group biases.

Conclusion

I conclude that all three major kinds of ignorance—propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance—come in degrees. They do so in partially different ways, though. Propositional ignorance comes in degrees because one can be ignorant of more or fewer propositions, because one can be ignorant of more or fewer core propositions as opposed to peripheral propositions, because one variety of ignorance renders one more ignorant than another, and, arguably, because one's degree of disbelief may vary. Objectual ignorance comes in degrees because one may be more or less acquainted with something, where such acquaintance is a matter of having certain stereotypical properties. Practical ignorance admits of degrees because abilities and skills admit degrees: one may be able or unable to take more or less of the steps required for not being ignorant, or one may be more or less reliable in doing something. Group ignorance

Table 6.1 How ignorance comes in degrees

	Individual ignorance		Group ignorance	
	Description	Metaphysics	Description	Metaphysics
Propositional	1. Range of propositions (including core/ peripheral) 2. Varieties of ignorance 3. Degrees of belief 4. First and second order	1. Type/token 2. Determinable/ determinate 3. Determinable/ determinate 4. Type/token	1–4: idem 5. Number of operative members 6. More or less group dynamics	1–4: idem 5. Type/token 6. Constitution by stereotypical properties
Objectual	Being more or less acquainted	Constitution by stereotypical properties	Being more or less acquainted	Constitution by stereotypical properties
Practical	Being more or less able	Type/token	Being more or less able	Type/token

shares all these ways, but it has further ways in which it admits of degrees. This is because more than one cognitive subject is involved in group ignorance: there may be more or fewer operative group members who are ignorant, and the group dynamics may play a more important or less important role in bringing about or maintaining the group ignorance. These results are summarized in table 6.1.

PART 2

APPLYING
THE EPISTEMOLOGY
OF IGNORANCE

7

Strategic Ignorance

Introduction

Long before ignorance became a topic of serious investigation in epistemology, it took center stage in agnotology. This field studies how various individuals, institutions, and groups of people, by way of different structures and mechanisms, can intentionally keep people ignorant or make them ignorant or create different kinds of doubt. Now, having certain doubts, as I have argued elsewhere, is compatible with true beliefs and even with knowledge, but full-blown doubting is not (see Peels 2015b). Thus, creating doubt is often a successful way of bringing about or sustaining ignorance. The term *agnotology* was introduced by Robert N. Proctor and became the standard term for this field of research, especially due to his own work and that of Londa Schiebinger (e.g., Proctor 1996, 2008; Schiebinger 2004, 2008). The term *strategic ignorance* is often used to denote the kind of ignorance discussed in agnotology because agnotology explores ignorance that is strategically induced and maintained.

Proctor's prime example is the tobacco industry (see, for instance, Proctor 2008). Various organizations, particularly the Tobacco Industry Research Council (TIRC), have created a smoke screen—pun intended—about the deleterious health effects of smoking by questioning scientific studies, providing alternative scientific studies, discrediting entire fields of study, emphasizing that experts disagree on the health effects of smoking, and so on.

The literature, however, contains many more examples of situations in which people, boards, companies, and institutions

intentionally kept others ignorant. Here are some of them. The Marshall Institute propagated building the Strategic Defense Initiative, which was a military shield meant to protect the United States from incoming nuclear missiles. After the project failed, the institute turned to fighting the idea of human-induced climate change by publishing rival theories and giving rise to doubts among the larger public, thus creating and sustaining ignorance. It did so because countering global climate change requires global planning and control rather than free enterprise and little regulation, which goes against the institute's unfettered market capitalism, sometimes referred to as market fundamentalism.[1] There are various campaigns trying to keep people ignorant about the health effects of exposure to lead, mercury, vinyl chloride, chromium, benzene, benzidine, nickel, and beryllium. Similarly, Merck's blockbuster pain reliever Vioxx had fatal cardiac effects, but Merck set up an extensive campaign to keep people ignorant about this (Michaels 2008, 92, 100–101). For various moral and religious reasons, the population in Western Europe was intentionally kept ignorant of several West Indian abortifacients (see Schiebinger 2008). Indigenous fossil knowledge was ridiculed and put aside by Western scientists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; as a result, that knowledge was lost (Mayor 2008, 163). These are all agnogenetic practices—that is, practices that intentionally bring about or maintain ignorance in others.

Let me make two preliminary comments about agnotology and strategic ignorance. First, as these examples show, agnotology is concerned with ignorance *that is brought about in others*. Thus, ignorance that one purposely creates or maintains in oneself, such as certain cases of self-deception, is beyond the purview of agnotology. Second, agnotology zooms in on bringing about in others mental

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[1] For details about the case, see Oreskes and Conway (2008, 78). According to them, "market fundamentalists hold a dogmatic, quasi-religious belief in unfettered market capitalism, and therefore oppose *anything* that restrains the business community, be it restrictions on the use of tobacco or the emission of greenhouse gases."

states *that one knows to be cases of ignorance*. Thus, what matters is creating or maintaining *de dicto* ignorance, not *de re* ignorance. If a professor teaches a theory to her students and that theory later turns out to be false so that her students were ignorant, then that professor intentionally brought about a state that was ignorance (*de re*). However, she did not intentionally make her students ignorant (*de dicto*). Agnotology is not concerned with such cases.

This chapter applies my epistemology of ignorance, as developed in chapters 2–6, to ideas and concepts in agnotology. In the field of agnotology, we often find a conception of ignorance that seems to be somewhat different from the one I have provided in chapters 2 and 3. This conception has been called the *strategic* or *structural conception of ignorance*, and some have suggested it provides a rival view to the Standard and New Views on ignorance—roughly, the views that ignorance is lack of knowledge or lack of true belief (see El Kassar 2018). Is this indeed a rival conception to these views, particularly to the New View I defended in chapter 3? I argue this is not the case because the structural conception can be seen as a conception that zooms in on various contingent properties of ignorance, whereas the New View on ignorance is an account of the nature of ignorance. This means the two are perfectly compatible. Next, I consider whether the field of agnotology better fits with the Standard View or with the New View. It is worthwhile exploring whether it favors the New View because in aiming at ignorance, various groups and companies really aim at the lack of true belief. After all, true belief that falls short of knowledge, say, about the health effects of smoking, would be as much of an obstruction to their purposes as knowledge. Subsequently, I discuss strategic ignorance on a group level: How can a group be ignorant in the sense specified in my Dynamic Account of group ignorance (see chapter 5) in stereotypical cases? This is an important issue, for whereas in standard cases of group belief and group knowledge, such belief or knowledge is brought about by key members or operative members of the group, agnotology focuses on situations

in which group ignorance is created or maintained by persons *outside the group*. After that, I turn to the different kinds of ignorance distinguished in chapter 2: Can one in agnogenetic practices aim at objectual and practical ignorance as well? I also address the question of whether agnotology's strategic ignorance is disbelieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, or complete ignorance. I argue that it is usually a combination of only *some* of these varieties of ignorance and that specifying which ones are involved can make an important difference to debates in agnotology. Finally, I explain how agnotology can gain from taking the notion of degrees of ignorance on board.

A New Conception of Ignorance in Agnotology?

One might think my analysis of ignorance—presented in chapter 2—in terms of propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance is too limited. After all, it seems that different, but equally valuable conceptions of ignorance play an important role in agnotology. Agnotologists often point out that classical epistemology is crucially deficient in a specific regard: they say epistemology has been too Cartesian, too individualistic; it has had insufficient eye for the social dimensions of cognition. It seems to me they are right about this. Fortunately, this has changed rather drastically over the last few decades with the arrival of analytic social epistemology. However, epistemology has often also zoomed in on knowledge and what is necessary for knowledge, such as justification, without paying much attention to phenomena like doubt, uncertainty, and ignorance, and it has little attention for the ways in which mental states, such as ignorance, can be intentionally brought about or maintained by people or groups of people. That is still also true for social epistemology.

Recently, Nadja El Kassar has gone a step further and argued that agnotology provides a different, complementary notion of ignorance that we need to take on board. This is what she calls a *structural* conception, on which ignorance is an epistemic practice. I consider it a virtue of El Kassar's work that she actually explores the relation between ignorance in epistemology and ignorance in agnotology and that she has construed an account that is meant to do justice to all these different conceptions of ignorance.

I also think El Kassar is right that scholars of agnotology often study aspects of ignorance that receive little or no attention in mainstream epistemology. This is clear from how agnotologists understand ignorance. According to Nancy Tuana (2004, 194), for instance, "ignorance, far from being a simple lack of knowledge that good science aims to banish, is better understood as a practice with supporting social causes as complex as those involved in knowledge practices." And Alison Wylie (2008, 183) suggests that ignorance "is not just a lack of knowledge in specific areas but also a matter of uncertainty and incompleteness, a knowledge that degrades from conventional ideals even in fields where we know a great deal." Robert Proctor (2008, 3), finally, stresses that "we need to think about the conscious, unconscious, and structural production of ignorance, its diverse causes and conformations, whether brought about by neglect, forgetfulness, myopia, extinction, secrecy, or suppression."

However, it seems to me that in her account, El Kassar confuses two crucially different things, namely, what we could call the *nature* (the necessary or essential properties) of ignorance and the various *contingent properties* or *features* that ignorance may or may not have, as I distinguished the two in chapter 2 (see table 2.1). The kind of ignorance that agnotology studies is propositional, objectual, or practical ignorance. It thus is the lack of knowledge or the lack of true belief—that is what makes it ignorance. We will see that agnotology can study each of these *with the specific feature that it is intentionally brought about by others on a substantial scale*—it is

this contingent feature of such ignorance that turns it into an object of interest for agnotology. According to Proctor and Schiebinger (2008b, vii), the goal of agnotology is "to explore how ignorance is produced or maintained in diverse settings, through mechanisms such as deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy and suppression, document destruction, unquestioned tradition, and myriad forms of inherent (or avoidable) culturopolitical selectivity." The nature of ignorance is one thing; how it is produced or maintained is another thing. Agnotologists like Nancy Tuana even quite explicitly say that ignorance is only "in many cases" or "frequently" an active production (see Tuana 2004, 195).

El Kassar suggests that if we reject the structural conception of ignorance, we lose a lot; for example, we lose the notion of ignorance as a bad practice, the role of epistemic agency, and the fact that much ignorance is strategic. I reply that, fortunately, we do *not* lose these things: they are highly important phenomena that we can study as much as we want to. Only, they are contingent features of ignorance: some cases of ignorance have them, others do not. This leaves plenty of room for philosophical reflection on such contingent features of ignorance in agnotology.[2] Closely related to this objection is El Kassar's suggestion that, say, the New View on ignorance would exclude highly important kinds of ignorance, such as ignorance deliberately constructed by companies. I reply that it does *not*: the New View merely says that its being deliberately constructed by, for instance, pharmaceutical companies is an accidental or contingent feature of ignorance and not part of its nature. This is perfectly compatible with studying those contingent features. In fact, we can rightly treat them in specific circumstances as significantly more important than the essential or necessary

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[2] As Anne Meylan has pointed out to me in correspondence, it is generally true that doxastic states like belief, disbelief, and suspension of judgment are not *as such* morally bad; whether or not they are depends on their contingent, extrinsic features.

properties of ignorance, which are pivotal to describing the nature of ignorance.

What is going on in agnotology when it comes to ignorance is similar to what goes on in other fields that have started to address ignorance, such as ethnography. As anthropologists Jonathan Mair, Ann Kelly, and Casey High have argued, anthropologists, and ethnographers in particular, have worked for too long with the assumption that the people they study have the same desire for knowledge as the researchers and the same aversion to ignorance.[3] This assumption was fueled by the idea—as such, rather justified—that we should not treat foreign peoples as ignorant, but as experts on all sorts of rituals, customs, habits, and practices that Westerners are unfamiliar with. However, as a result of this assumption, the crucial role of ignorance has often been neglected. Ignorance was just thought to be the absence of something valuable, namely, knowledge. Hence, no attention was paid to the ways in which ignorance can be produced, what practices lead to or maintain ignorance, the question whether people can intentionally develop their awareness of ignorance, and many other issues regarding ignorance. Mair, Kelly, and High have provided significant contributions to anthropology to make good on this. The point is essentially the same as in agnotology: we should not treat ignorance merely as the absence of knowledge but as an important phenomenon in its own right with many fascinating properties, even though, of course, those properties in ethnography are usually different from those in agnotology. This is not to deny there is some overlap—some cases are relevant for both ethnography and agnotology. For instance, the Baktaman in New Guinea have a certain body of secret knowledge and various initiation rites for novices. Moreover, even the initiated, at each level, are still ignorant of what goes on and what is passed on at higher levels. But Frederik

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[3] See Mair, Kelly, and High (2012), as well as all the essays in the volume their paper introduces.

Barth (1975) has argued that what matters is not what they know exactly but what the causes and effects of the ensuing experienced ignorance are among women, uninitiated boys, and men who have not yet reached the final stage. What is crucial here is not so much what one is ignorant of, but the fact that one is ignorant, and how such ignorance is maintained.

Again, though, this recent development in anthropology leaves plenty of room for what seems a natural interpretation: ignorance is indeed the lack of knowledge or the lack of true belief, but in certain contexts, such as agnotology and ethnography, it is more important to study various contingent properties of ignorance.

The Standard and New Views on Strategic Ignorance

In chapter 3, I discussed three views on the nature of propositional ignorance—that is, on what it is to be ignorant of the truth of a proposition; namely, the Standard, New, and Normative Views. On the Standard View, ignorance is lack of knowledge. On the New View, it is lack of true belief, possibly with the additional clause that the truth of the proposition is in some way significant. And on the Normative View, it is lack of knowledge or lack of true belief that issues from the violation of a duty to inquire. As I pointed out in chapter 3, the very field of agnotology—which studies how people can intentionally make or keep others ignorant—implies the falsehood of the Normative View. After all, in most such cases, people are ignorant not because *they* have violated a duty to inquire but because *others* have violated a duty to inform them. That leaves us with the Standard and New Views. Does either of these fit better with the topic and approach of agnotology?

It seems to me there is indeed an important difference between the two views here. The TIRC and organizations in the tobacco industry at some time in the 1970s aimed to keep people ignorant

about the health effects of smoking. In doing so, what did they aim at? Well, of course they wanted people to keep buying tobacco, and for that, all they needed was for people to not *believe* that tobacco is harmful. Thus, the lack of true belief would suffice; the lack of knowledge was unnecessary. Imagine that in the same decade, a series of scientific articles claimed to show that smoking increases the chances of dying from a heart attack or lung cancer with forty percent. Imagine also that these articles were rather unreliable from the perspective of research integrity: the scientists involved reached their conclusions not so much by careful weighing of the evidence but by wishful thinking, the research being funded by a wealthy opposer of smoking. As a result, those scientists suffered from confirmation bias, *p*-hacking, and a couple of other questionable research practices. Now, imagine that the tobacco industry *knew* this. What would the members of these organizations say to themselves if they aimed at ignorance? Surely, they would *not* say something like this:

> There is no problem with these articles showing that smoking has serious deleterious health effects. We do not need to comment on them—due to all these questionable research practices, this series of articles is utterly unreliable. The authors, therefore, do not *know* that smoking is dangerous, even though it is. Even more importantly, the people, basing their views on those of these experts, will not know that smoking is deleterious, even though it clearly is. They will hold a true belief about this, but they will not know. Since they will not know, they will be ignorant. Mission accomplished.

Clearly, this is not what they would say to themselves. They wanted people *not to believe something which they themselves knew to be true*, namely, that smoking damages one's health. They did not care about the basis of that belief: even an epistemically problematic basis that would prevent knowledge would spell trouble for them. As long as the public *believed* the truth that smoking is bad for one's

health, tobacco companies would be in trouble—people would consume less tobacco, and governments and other agencies would take measures against the tobacco industry. What the TIRC and the tobacco companies would, therefore, do in a scenario like this is try to show that the articles had been unreliably produced, that the reasoning underlying their conclusions was biased. They would provide rival theories and further evidence, question the researchers, and so on—anything that would prevent the public from truly believing the articles' conclusion.

Of course, the primary aim here was to maintain people's smoking habits. To keep them ignorant was important only because ignorance of the health effects of smoking, in combination with addiction, is a good way to keep people smoking. Later, as it became undeniable that smoking damages one's health, maintaining widespread ignorance became impossible, so the industry changed gear.

What matters in creating or maintaining ignorance is not the lack of knowledge but the lack of true belief. This is not just a feature of a particular case—it applies to virtually all cases studied in agnotology. The Marshall Institute doesn't merely want people not to *know* there is human-induced climate change—it wants people not to *believe* this truth; it wants them to suspend judgment on it or even disbelieve it. Various companies want people not merely not to know but to not even believe that exposure to things like lead, benzene, benzidine, nickel, and beryllium involves serious health risks. Merck wanted people not merely not to know about the fatal cardiac effects of Vioxx but to not even believe that there were such effects. And so on. In aiming at ignorance, then, agnogenetic practices aim at the lack of true belief and not merely at the lack of knowledge. This squares with the New View on ignorance, which says, after all, that ignorance is simply the lack of true belief, possibly with a significance clause. Such a significance clause is clearly met in agnogenetic cases: it is because these truths matter that the agents in question put so much effort into making or keeping people ignorant. The Standard View would imply a substantial

revision of a thesis that is widely accepted in agnotology. It would mean that agnogenetic practices aim not so much at ignorance but at *certain kinds of* ignorance, such as disbelieving and suspending ignorance rather than unwarranted ignorance (true belief that falls short of knowledge).

Strategic Ignorance as Group Ignorance

Many agnogenetic practices aim at ignorance of entire groups, where the group can be "those who smoke and their families," "Western women," "those being exposed to dangerous metals," and so on. Of course, in doing so, such practices *also* aim at the ignorance of individuals and often of the larger public as well. Yet, the group is primary here. This is because these practices take effort, so the payoff should be significant (i.e., a large group's ignorance rather than a single individual's ignorance), and because agnogenetic practices can make use of group dynamics in creating or maintaining ignorance in groups of people. To see how this can be done, let us return to the main conclusion of chapter 5. There, I defended the Dynamic Account of group ignorance:

> *The Dynamic Account of group ignorance*: a group G is ignorant of a true proposition p if and only if (i) either a significant number of G's operative members are ignorant of p or enough operative members of G know/truly believe that p but G as a group fails to know/truly believe that p, and (ii) this is the result of a group dynamic, such as group agency, collective epistemic virtues or vices, external manipulation, lack of time, interest, concepts, resources, or information, or a combination of these.

This account of group ignorance helps us to better understand agnogenetic practices in at least two ways.

First, if the account is true, it will be reasonable for agents in agnogenetic practices to target primarily *operative* members, at least, if it is their aim to keep the group ignorant rather than all the members that jointly constitute the group. There are many ways to make or keep operative group members ignorant—for example, by presenting defeaters. Defeaters can undermine the truth of what ones believes (a rebutting defeater) or the epistemic basis for believing something (an undercutting defeater).[4] Giving up a belief because one is presented with a defeater does not mean the belief one gives up is false—one can just as well give up a true belief, only it may be harder to concoct a plausible defeater. One can, for instance, cast doubt on experts by saying they are paid by wealthy donors who influence their views. Or one can ascribe evil intentions to them, as happened with Pizzagate: on social media, members of the Clinton Foundation were ridiculously accused of running an underground child-trafficking network. One can also discredit entire sources of knowledge as being unreliable and biased—millions of people no longer trust mainstream media because they are thought to provide fake news.

A specific way of providing undercutting defeaters is so-called *gaslighting* (see Spear 2018). This can be defined as a form of psychological manipulation in which an individual or a group creates doubt or ignorance in another individual or group by way of making them question their own perception, judgment, memory, or other cognitive capacities. Misdirection, trivialization, undermining, verbal abuse, contradiction, misinformation, and denial can all serve the purpose of gaslighting. This can be extremely harmful, even apart from the epistemic ramifications, because it leads to low self-esteem or even suicide. Whereas many undercutting defeaters merely provide reason to think the belief in question was formed unreliably, the practice of gaslighting often questions entire

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[4] For the distinction between rebutting and undercutting defeaters, see Pollock (1986, 39).

cognitive faculties or even a person's sanity. Such doubts create or maintain ignorance.

Another way to make or keep operative members ignorant is by providing competing and allegedly equally plausible explanations or hypotheses. This is what, according to many journalists and scholars, the Russian government has been doing on a regular basis over the last years. Let us assume it is true that the Russians hacked into Democratic headquarters. The Russian government regularly asserts this might have happened, so they provide no rebutting defeater. Rather, they suggest it might be Russians working in Ukraine, or the Chinese, or even the Americans themselves. As long as they do this, the West, or the Americans, or the Republicans, or a group along those lines may be ignorant as a group as to who hacked into Democratic headquarters. Or, to take another example: the Malaysian airliner MH17, we may assume, was shot down over Ukraine by Russian-supported rebels. The Russian government does not directly deny that this happened; rather, they suggest that the evidence is not conclusive and that crucial questions remain unanswered. It might just as well have been a Ukrainian military aircraft that shot down the plane—at this stage, they say, we just do not know. Again, by suggesting these things, they try to create or maintain group ignorance. Here, it is less clear what the group is or what the groups are, but there are various candidates, such as the Russian population, Russian media, and conservatives in the West.

Second, if the Dynamic Account of group ignorance is correct, then it is strategic to tap into both the epistemic dynamics bringing about the group's attitude and—possibly—various moral, prudential, and social factors on which those epistemic dynamics depend. Thus, one can bring it about—say, by bribing her—that an operative group member no longer expresses that p or even starts to assert that not-p, although she is fully aware that p. In that way, even though one has not made the operative member ignorant, one can make the group ignorant, because if a sufficient number of operative members fail to exchange their views, ideas, evidence, or

arguments, either the group members will not come to know at all or they will not come to know *as a group*. We saw in chapter 5 that groups can be ignorant *as groups* even if all members individually know. Such cases are rare, but cases of group ignorance in which several or even many members, including operative members, have knowledge are not that exceptional. Again, in such scenarios it will be instrumental to agnogenetic practices to tap into the group dynamics and to maintain group ignorance even though many members have knowledge.

Let me illustrate the point. First, by trying to capture, convict, and thereby silence Edward Snowden, the United States Department of Justice tried to maintain the larger public's ignorance about global surveillance programs, many of which are run by the National Security Agency in cooperation with certain telecommunication companies and various European governments. In saying this, I do not mean to take an ethical stance on this issue. The point is rather that the Department of Justice, whether rightly or wrongly, engages in an agnogenetic practice by trying to silence a highly important operative member of the larger public, both in the United States and worldwide. Second, China has detained numerous journalists from the Xinjian region to maintain the world's ignorance about the fate of China's Uyghurs in what now seem to be concentration camps. These are two examples of strategies that simply silence an operative member in a group, but there are also other ways of influencing the group dynamics; for instance, making an operative member epistemically or morally suspicious, removing communication channels among operative members or from operative members to nonoperative members, and adding misleading information to the group dynamics so that the nonoperative members take it to come from the operative members.

Kinds of Strategic Ignorance

Remarkably, agnotology normally takes it for granted that ignorance is propositional: ignorance that smoking causes lung cancer, that Vioxx causes heart attacks, that there are various natural abortifacients available to Western women, and so on. As we saw in chapter 2, however, there is also objectual and practical ignorance. This is important, for there are cases in which people, in carrying out agnogenetic practices, primarily aim at objectual or practical rather than propositional ignorance.

Here are some examples. The early church, partly for fear of misunderstanding, intentionally kept outsiders ignorant of core practices and rituals, such as Holy Supper. This was called *disciplina arcani*. Later theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer have argued it ought to be revived. The purpose of the early church was not merely to keep people propositionally ignorant but to make sure they would not be personally acquainted with the practices—unless, of course, they were to convert. The practice of *disciplina arcani* is still common in many contemporary sects. Here is a second example. The United States Army has sometimes intentionally destroyed military material to keep it from falling into the hands of the enemy or of rivals, such as China in the case of the helicopter raid on Osama bin Laden. Of course, the United States thereby wanted to avoid others using their military materials and vehicles, but their purpose was larger than that: they wanted to maintain ignorance in others about highly complex and secret military and technological equipment. In other words, their aim was not merely to keep others propositionally ignorant but to make sure they would not even get acquainted (see, touch, feel, experience) with the many facets of those new technologies—thus, to keep others objectually ignorant.

Something similar can be said about practical ignorance. Western colonizers (whether for good reasons or not) intentionally kept Europeans—women in particular—ignorant about how to make and use certain natural abortifacients from the West Indies.

Various governments intentionally keep other governments ig-
norant about how to build nuclear weapons. Nineteenth-century
missionaries could keep people—again, women in particular—
ignorant of how to enjoy sexual intercourse.

It matters that agnogenetic practices aim not only at proposi-
tional but also at objectual and practical ignorance, because ways
to create or maintain objectual or practical ignorance can differ
from the ways in which one can create or maintain propositional
ignorance. If you aim at objectual ignorance, you want people not
merely not to find any information on it but to not actually get
acquainted with the object in question. Thus, you prohibit people
from participation and hide material objects, or you simply never
speak about them. If you aim at practical ignorance, you want
people not merely not to find any information on it but to not en-
counter or get to know the people who do have the practical knowl-
edge in question.

Varieties of Strategic Ignorance

Let us return to propositional ignorance. What do agnogenetic
practices aim at when they aim at propositional ignorance: disbe-
lieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, or complete
ignorance—or perhaps a combination of these?

Two of these varieties of ignorance can be ruled out from the
very start. To aim at *undecided* ignorance would be to keep dis-
tracting people so that they cannot actually take a stance on
the issue in question. And even though people carrying out
agnogenetic practices often have much influence, they usually lack
the power to continually distract people from considering some-
thing while the evidence is available to them. It is also hard to think
of situations in which one would aim at *unconsidered* ignorance,
which obtains when people would immediately believe something
truly if they considered it, but they do not consider it. I think we

actually perform agnogenetic actions on a small scale in our daily interactions with people. For instance, your partner has asked you to bring dishwasher tablets from the grocery store upon your return home from work. You, however, were thinking about the book you are writing and completely forgot to go to the store. Now, upon your return home, you realize you have completely forgotten to buy the tablets, but you decide just not to mention it, hoping that your partner will not need them today so that you can buy them tomorrow. As soon as your partner considers the issue, she would realize you have not been to the grocery store and, therefore, failed to bring the dishwasher tablets. It is harder to imagine what the equivalent of such a scenario would look like on the much larger scale of groups, societies, governments, boards, and companies. Yet, there may well be such cases. In 1945 and subsequent years, the Dutch government and many Dutch citizens treated Dutch Jews returning from various concentration camps terribly, thereby adding to the enormous suffering the Jews had undergone (this is detailed in Citroen 2021). It seems the government's strategy in subsequent years was simply not to mention anything related to the fate of Dutch Jews and to hope that the population would be too distracted by the challenges of life to think about what had happened. And this strategy was successful: things started to change only in the sixties.

Both *disbelieving* ignorance (roughly, having a false belief) and *suspending* ignorance (suspension of judgment on a true proposition) are sometimes the aim of agnogenetic practices. In fact, the aim can switch from disbelieving ignorance to suspending ignorance. An example of this is the four different stages in the agnogenetic process to maintain ignorance about the health effects of smoking as described by Jon Christensen (2008, 268). First, the TIRC and the tobacco companies fought science with further alleged science. Then they created doubt about existing science. Subsequently, they questioned entire scientific fields. Today they suggest that the claims are not new and that they themselves carry out research about how to responsibly handle the risks of smoking.

In the first phase, their aim was disbelieving ignorance: people should believe there are no deleterious health effects of smoking. In the second and third phases, the aim was to make people suspend judgment: there is science that says smoking is bad, but there are serious doubts about such research, and sometimes, there are even substantial doubts about the entire field. In the fourth and final phase, they changed the object of ignorance. We all know now that smoking severely damages people's health. About two-thirds of the people who smoke die from the consequences of smoking, and this is widely known. So now, the purpose is merely to justify smoking by suggesting there are ways to responsibly handle the risks. In fact, there are no responsible ways of handling the risks; thus, this is just another case of maintaining ignorance.

It should be clear that *deep* and *complete* ignorance are at least as often the aim of agnogenetic practices as *disbelieving* and *suspending* ignorance. In all likelihood, there are quite a few examples of this that we—or at least I—cannot give precisely because we are—or at least I am—intentionally kept in that state of deep or complete ignorance. This is undoubtedly true for many secret military, scientific, and technological projects carried out by, say, the American, Russian, and Chinese governments. According to Peter Galison (2008, 39), the classified universe—the total amount of classified information of which, by definition, most people are ignorant—is five to ten times the size of the open literature that is available in university libraries and public libraries, and classified information is accumulating at a rate that is itself accelerating. It is particularly hard to remove complete ignorance precisely because one lacks the concepts to grasp the proposition in question, so that one is inevitably ignorant of the fact that one is ignorant.

In some cases of deep ignorance, though, we are fully aware that we are intentionally kept in a state of deep ignorance. On April 26, 2018, about nineteen thousand documents about the assassination of John F. Kennedy were released by the United States government, but Trump's administration intentionally kept certain documents

classified in order for them to be re-reviewed. They may be released later. For now, we are fully aware that we are kept in a state of deep ignorance of exactly what is in those documents.

In chapter 4, I also distinguished between first- and second-order ignorance—that is, roughly, ignorance of some proposition and ignorance of one's ignorance of some proposition. It is hard to say exactly how many agnogenetic practices aim at first-order ignorance without second-order ignorance and how many aim at both first- and second-order ignorance. This is because, for many cases falling under the second variety, we do not know that first- and second-order ignorance obtains precisely because we ourselves are both first- and second-order ignorant of the things in question. Generally, aiming at both first- and second-order ignorance is much safer than merely aiming at first-order ignorance in the sense that if it is successful, the former is much more stable than the latter. After all, if you know you are ignorant as to whether p, you can go try to find out whether p, whereas if you do not even know you are ignorant as to whether p, you are unlikely to set out to find the truth about p—this is, obviously, especially true for second-order deep and complete ignorance of first-order ignorance.

Degrees of Strategic Ignorance

Although the agnotology literature has focused on the phenomenon of making or keeping people ignorant, there is a closely related phenomenon that is equally agnogenetic: making people *more* ignorant. There are good reasons, from the perspective of the agents in agnogenetic practices, to make people more ignorant. The more ignorant they are, the more likely they are to act on that ignorance rather than on knowledge or true belief about the things in question. One could call this agnogenetic phenomenon *deepening* or *strengthening* people's ignorance.

Again, to see how it works, we need to employ the epistemology of ignorance developed in the first part of this book. Rather than laboriously going through each of the ways in which ignorance comes in degrees for individuals and groups, let me present two ways in which one can deepen others' ignorance: affecting which variety of ignorance an individual has and affecting which truths a group is ignorant of.

As I said, the tobacco industry first intentionally avoided speaking about the health effects of smoking. In that way, the industry kept people in a state of deep ignorance—they simply never considered the issue. From the perspective of the tobacco industry, this was the best variety of ignorance for people to be in: it did not lead to any difficult questions, and no money needed to be spent on it. As studies showing that smoking is harmful were published, however, this was no longer feasible; the tobacco companies had to choose a different variety of ignorance as their aim. From their perspective, disbelieving ignorance would be second-best, so they tried to come up with studies showing that smoking is *not* harmful. One could argue that people had become *less* ignorant, now that they were disbelievingly ignorant rather than deeply ignorant—after all, they had now at least considered the issue. However, from the perspective of the twofold Jamesian goal of believing the truth and not believing any falsehoods, people had become *more* ignorant: not only did they not believe the truth, but now they also believed a falsehood. As further evidence for the damaging effects of smoking was provided, though, the alternative studies became less and less credible. Yet, the tobacco industry could still aim at some variety of ignorance, albeit a variety on which people would be less ignorant, namely, suspending ignorance. They attempted to make the public suspendingly ignorant by disqualifying the researchers—saying they were biased or had been bribed—and disqualifying the studies—saying they applied to mice, not to human beings.

Another way in which degrees of ignorance matter to agnotology is that one can try to deepen people's ignorance about something

by making them ignorant about *more things* that have to do with it. Even if people come to know certain things about it, one can still aim to maintain people's ignorance of other truths regarding that thing or topic. Take Donald Trump's attempt to discredit Barack Obama and, thereby, to make people ignorant of Obama's credentials and achievements. Trump added to that ignorance by casting doubt on Obama's nationality. The claim that Obama is not a natural-born citizen of the United States became untenable, for some people at least, when Obama revealed his birth certificate in 2011. Yet, Trump continued to provide further falsehoods regarding Obama, saying that Obama wiretapped him, that the Obama administration left the military with no ammunition, that Obama left him with faulty COVID-19 tests, and so on. This is a clear case, then, in which Trump performed various agnogenetic practices to keep groups of people ignorant about a particular topic, namely, Obama's credentials and achievements. Topical ignorance, as we saw in chapter 2, consists in ignorance of a large number of propositions related to a specific topic. Thus, making people ignorant of more propositions that jointly constitute a topic is another way in which ignorance comes in degrees and in which agnogenetic practices can aim at certain degrees of ignorance.

Conclusion

The natural interpretation of the conception of ignorance that we find in agnotology is two-sided. On the one hand, people are ignorant because they lack propositional knowledge or true belief, objectual knowledge, or practical knowledge. That is what ignorance is. On the other hand, people are ignorant in some important cases *because*—and this is what agnotology focuses on—it is intentionally brought about or maintained by institutions, agencies, governments, and mechanisms. Understandably, the field is more interested in studying those accidental features of ignorance than

in studying its nature. This conception of ignorance is perfectly compatible with my suggestion in chapter 2 that all ignorance is propositional, objectual, or practical.

We also saw that the New View on ignorance better fits with agnotology than the Standard View because agnogenetic practices, in aiming at ignorance, mean to bring about the absence of true belief rather than the absence of knowledge. It is important for agnotology to pay explicit attention to group ignorance as something over and above the individual ignorance of group members. It turns out there are at least two ways of making or keeping groups ignorant: making the operative members ignorant and affecting the group dynamics. Moreover, agnotology gains in importance if it pays attention not only to propositional ignorance but also to objectual and practical ignorance. In addition, I argued that agnogenetic practices aim not at undecided or unconsidered ignorance but at disbelieving and suspending ignorance and sometimes even at deep and complete ignorance. Finally, that ignorance comes in degrees also matters for agnotology because agnogenetic practices can aim to deepen ignorance or maintain as much ignorance as possible even if lowering the degree of ignorance is unavoidable.

8

White Ignorance

Introduction

The philosophy of race, such as the work of Charles Mills and Shannon Sullivan, studies various metaphysical and epistemological issues surrounding race. For example, it explores whether race is a social construct and how certain concepts and paradigms of thinking can bring about hermeneutical injustice when whites interpret black minorities. Closely related to this are postcolonial theory and feminist philosophy, especially the work of Marilyn Frye and Nancy Tuana, which studies various metaphysical and epistemological issues surrounding gender (e.g., Frye 1983; Tuana 2004, 2008). In all these bordering fields, the concept of ignorance has received significant attention. What they have in common is that they study ways in which creating or sustaining ignorance plays a role in the injustice—whether moral or epistemic—done to marginalized groups in society, often minorities.[1]

In the philosophy of race and feminist philosophy, one frequently finds rather critical attitudes toward more traditional, mainstream epistemology; for example, when it comes to such core concepts as knowledge and ignorance. Lorraine Code, for instance, casts doubt on mainstream epistemology when she says: "The *S*-knows-that-*p* epistemology, of which I have been consistently critical, holds a straightforward ignorance/knowledge opposition in place,

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[1] According to Cynthia Townley (2011, 106), for instance, "prescriptions, manifestations, or ascriptions of ignorance are common ingredients of subordination and oppression."

together with an equally straightforward assumption that knowledge achieved can erase ignorance with one stroke" (Code 2007, 221; see also Code 2008). Charles Mills raises a similar worry when he states that "it could be argued that mainstream epistemology has itself been part of the problem rather than part of the solution, generating its own distinctive ignorances" (Mills 2008, 230). He goes on to draw attention to the focus on the individual person in traditional, Cartesian epistemology, as he calls it. It seems to me that traditional epistemology is somewhat richer than Mills and Code acknowledge, but rather than defending mainstream epistemology here, I will explore how my epistemology of ignorance can do justice to the complexities of ignorance that Code and others rightly draw attention to.

In this chapter, I zoom in on the concept of white ignorance in the philosophy of race—or critical race theory, as it is also called—and bring my epistemology of ignorance to bear on this pivotal notion. The chapter is structured as follows. First, some have suggested that the philosophy of race employs a rival notion of ignorance in comparison with the conception of ignorance in epistemology, especially the propositional one, as developed in chapters 2 and 3. Are they right, and do we need to revise the view on the nature of ignorance that I defended in the first part of this book? After that, I return to my threefold distinction—made in chapter 2—between propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance. Can we put that distinction to work when it comes to white ignorance? Next, six varieties of ignorance were distinguished in chapter 4: disbelieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance. Can white ignorance take the shape of each of these, or is it more specific? I argue that white ignorance usually is disbelieving, deep, or complete ignorance. It hardly ever takes the form of suspending, undecided, or unconsidered ignorance. Subsequently, in chapter 5 I argued that we need an account of group ignorance. How can the philosophy of race benefit from such an account, like the Dynamic Account developed and

defended in chapter 5? Finally, I return to my account of degrees of ignorance and show how it can be usefully employed in studying degrees of white ignorance.

As I said in chapter 5 when I presented white ignorance as a case study for group ignorance, I believe the woke movement provides important insights into racism, and I take it that insights into what white ignorance is and how it works are among these. I stress that I do not thereby accept just any idea advocated in the movement or just any activist policy based on it. A few rather extreme advocates of the movement have said and done things that have been harmful. I consider it a problem of our polarized times that this leads some people to wholeheartedly support the woke movement in every regard while it leads others to completely reject it. I will take the more challenging middle road. In this chapter, though, I zoom in on what we can morally and epistemically gain from applying an epistemology of ignorance to the concept of white ignorance.

A New Conception of Ignorance in the Philosophy of Race?

The conception of ignorance that we find in the philosophy of race has been called the *agential conception* (e.g., El Kassar 2018, 2019). On this conception, ignorance consists in actively upheld false outlooks. Charles Mills, whose contributions to this field have been seminal, understands such ignorance as the absence of beliefs, false belief, or a set of false beliefs that is brought about by various factors—such as people's whiteness in the case of white people—and that leads to a variety of behaviors, such as avoiding evidence (see Mills 2015, 217). José Medina, who has also contributed much to this field, defends a conception along these lines as well (see Medina 2013). Some critical race theorists even make explicit that it is the active, agential, or substantive aspect of ignorance that matters to the conception of ignorance in the philosophy of race.

Linda Martín Alcoff (2007, 39), for instance, points out that "what is new is the idea of explaining ignorance not as a feature of *neglectful* epistemic practice but as a *substantive* epistemic practice in itself." Elizabeth Spelman (2007, 120) claims that "ignorance . . . is at least sometimes an appalling achievement; managing to create and preserve it can take grotesquely prodigious effort." And Shannon Sullivan (2007, 154) emphasizes that she is "less interested . . . in ignorance as a simple lack of knowledge than . . . in ignorance as an active production of particular kinds of knowledges for various social and political purposes."

This agential conception of ignorance, which makes ignorance something active, something that is intentionally upheld, can also be found in various accounts of white ignorance; for example, in Alison Bailey's analysis:

> White ignorance is the axis around which white Americans construct our political identity. This steady parade of misrepresentations generates a racialized moral psychology in which white perception and conception, memory, experience, and testimony are shaped by a willful and habitual inversion of reality. The white eye is socialized to see lynchings and racialized torture as entertainment worthy of picnics and postcard reproductions. Whites are taught to see indigenous land as vacant, women of color as sexually available, and Indian schools as charitable. More recently, the American press has described September 11 as the worst enemy attack ever [perpetrated] on American soil while remaining willfully ignorant of the Trail of Tears or the 1886 U.S. invasion of Mexico's territories north of the Rio Grande. As a political system white supremacy requires that everyday experiences and interactions uphold racial ignorance by resisting corrective information, and that inconsistencies be explained as only momentary slips from contractual ideals. (Bailey 2007, 80)

Now, as I said, various philosophers have suggested that traditional epistemological accounts of ignorance, such as the ones of the nature of propositional ignorance that I explored in chapter 3, should be revised in light of these accounts from the philosophy of race. Ignorance is much more than merely the absence of knowledge or the absence of true belief.

As it seems to me, though, the way Mills and others in the philosophy of race phrase things suggests a natural interpretation of the relation between these allegedly rival conceptions of ignorance. It is this: ignorance is the lack of belief, false belief, or various false beliefs (all captured by the conception of propositional ignorance), in certain cases *brought about* or *caused by* factors related to race, gender, and the like. What these factors are will differ from case to case: they may be, for instance, people's whiteness, social power and status, being Western, being male, or being heterosexual. 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 in chapters 2 and 3 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.[2]

Not only does this seem a plausible interpretation to me of what is going on with the notion of ignorance in the philosophy of race, but some authors in this field have actually said something along these lines, albeit in different terms. A good example is José Medina's distinction between what he calls "plain" or "basic" ignorance and "active" ignorance. Basic ignorance, he says, is just

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[2] El Kassar in her paper mentions Anne Meylan's ideas on this point. Meylan has suggested—and she has confirmed to me in personal correspondence that this is indeed her idea—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 (which the structural and agential conceptions of ignorance refer to), such as absence of inquiry or a sloppy way of dealing with evidence. I fully agree with Meylan's distinction on this point and, as I argue in more detail in this chapter, taking this distinction into account can lead to a significantly improved account of white ignorance.

the absence of (true) belief or the presence of a false belief. He adds that basic ignorance tends to be innocuous. The important point, though, is that he distinguishes such plain ignorance from active ignorance, which comes with (i) cognitive resistances (e.g., prejudices, conceptual lacunas), (ii) affective resistances (e.g., apathy, interest in not knowing), (iii) bodily resistances (e.g., feeling anxious or agitated, being red in the face), and (iv) defense mechanisms and strategies (e.g., deflecting challenges, shifting burden of proof) (see Medina 2016, 182–183). He goes on to argue that racial insensitivity is a specific kind of active ignorance.

In fact, much of what El Kassar herself says supports my interpretation, which distinguishes between the nature of ignorance and its accidental features. That is surprising because, as we saw above, she argues that the propositional understanding of ignorance in mainstream epistemology falls short. 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" (El Kassar 2018, 302; italics 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 this field: (i) it is actively upheld, (ii) it is often, but not always, disbelieving ignorance, and (iii) it is fed by epistemic vices. All this is, of course, perfectly compatible with propositional understandings of 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 contingent criteria 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), and (iii) it is normally not in any way fed by epistemic vices.

Distinguishing between the nature and contingent properties of ignorance can also be helpful in spelling out what white ignorance is. Some authors, such as Charles Mills, have suggested that white ignorance is *caused* by whiteness. Says Mills (2007, 20): "What I want to pin down, then, is the idea of an ignorance, a non-knowing, that is not contingent, but in which race—white racism or white racial domination and their ramifications—is central to its origins." This claim would be problematic if Mills's conception was a biological one—that is, a conception on which whiteness is a matter of having a white skin. After all, it is not metaphysically impossible for people of color to conquer and colonize a world inhabited by people with a lighter skin color. And I hope that even in this world at some point—one rather distant in the future, I fear—people with a white skin color no longer have white privilege and are no longer in a state of white ignorance. In our actual world, however, with our colonial history, it is a fact that being white usually comes with certain privileges.[3] If one claims, as Mills does, that having whiteness *in and of itself* comes with ignorance, the idea is that ignorance is not a *contingent* but a *necessary* property of being white. Mills's ontology of whiteness is an ontology of social projection, on which ignorance and its perpetuation are essential to whiteness: it is a necessary property of the phenomenon in question. Note that the idea of social projection is not even necessary for that. One can even be a realist about social reality—as Sally Haslanger (2012, 2019) is, for instance—and suggest that social kinds, like whiteness, are essentially normative—in the current case, that whiteness has the necessary property of coming with white ignorance. In any case, Mills's conception is clearly not a purely biological one. The distinction between the essential and contingent properties of ignorance is helpful in noticing this.

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[3] I say "usually" because this privilege can, of course, be defeated by circumstances, such as attacks on whites in South Africa, the *plaasmoorde*.

Kinds of White Ignorance

In chapter 2, I distinguished between propositional, objectual, and practical ignorance. This distinction naturally mirrors the classical distinction in epistemology between propositional, objectual, and practical knowledge that has been made for decades. This straightaway calls for a significant qualification of Lorraine Code's bold claim that traditional epistemology is too narrow in its focus on "*S* knows that *p*" and, sometimes, "*S* is ignorant of (the fact that) *p*." To be fair, propositional knowledge and propositional ignorance have received by far the most attention, but it is not entirely accurate to say epistemology has been confined to them.

Now, the threefold distinction is important because much ignorance that is pivotal to the philosophy of race is not primarily propositional but objectual. In addition, much propositional white ignorance follows from objectual white ignorance. It is important to note this because white ignorance is usually cashed out in terms of propositional ignorance, and we thereby overlook something crucial. Many people nowadays are aware of the fact that in the United States, black people are often treated with disproportionate violence by the police. In other words, many people are not ignorant of this truth. They may even be fully informed about specific cases, such as the shooting of Trayvon Martin in February 2012 or the lethal arrest of George Floyd in May 2020. Yet, they have never experienced it themselves, and they *will*—in fact, *can*—never experience it because they are white. Therefore, they are in a state of objectual ignorance that is pretty much inevitable: they lack a certain knowledge by acquaintance. Consequently, it is hard for them to grasp and understand the anguish, the fear, and the anger the black community in the United States feels. I say this as a white person: I am well aware of some of the main facts regarding the police's disproportionately violent treatment of black people, but I have never experienced it myself and cannot pretend to know what it is like to be violently arrested merely because I am black.

I suggest that some points that have been made in the philosophy of race are best understood in these terms. Robert Bernasconi, for instance, seconds Frantz Fanon's critique of Jean-Paul Sartre when Bernasconi (2008, 232) says: "In 'Black Orpheus,' Sartre made the mistake of locating the black agents he was addressing within a narrative. In so doing, he claimed he had more knowledge than they did, even though they knew the situation, as he did not, from the inside." My point here is not that Bernasconi and Fanon are right about this or that they are not, but rather that their critique can be understood in terms of the threefold ignorance I distinguished in chapter 2. Sartre may well have had *propositional* knowledge about the situation of black people, but he lacked *objectual* knowledge—that is, he was objectually ignorant—and because of that, it may have been inappropriate for him to put black agents in a narrative. Our ignorance of pre-Columbian civilizations can be understood as objectual ignorance as well: we are hardly acquainted with their languages, buildings, artefacts, and rituals because they were largely destroyed and extinguished by conquest and disease.

Remarkably, even *practical* ignorance is relevant when it comes to white ignorance. Much practical knowledge is a skill, an ability, an art, a practice, something that one cannot learn merely by theoretical study and reflection—one can only learn it by engaging in it, by doing it, by being taught how to do it by someone else who has practical knowledge. Now, white ignorance comprises much white practical ignorance of how to do certain things, knowledge that *is* available to various nonwhite people. Here, we can think of indigenous knowledge of how to use certain plants in traditional medicine, how to make certain insecticides, how to perform certain rituals, or how to converse in one of the more than three hundred languages of the Aboriginal Australians.[4]

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[4] Of course, we are all individually inevitably ignorant of almost all languages, but, arguably, Western democratic societies would not have been as ignorant of numerous native languages as they are now if there had not been white ignorance.

It seems to me the philosophy of race could benefit from applying this threefold distinction between the different kinds of ignorance. Among other things, it makes clear that full knowledge of racial injustice cannot be obtained by subgroups like the white community all by themselves. We need *each other* across different races, social stratifications, and genders to avoid ignorance of such things as racial violence and acting on such ignorance. Traditional, mainstream epistemology has sometimes lost sight of important kinds of knowledge and ignorance due to its focus on propositional knowledge. However, there is no reason to think the traditional epistemology of knowledge and ignorance cannot be complemented and extended in such a way that it can do justice to the complexities of the issues explored in the philosophy of race.

Varieties of White Ignorance

We saw in chapter 4 that there are six varieties of propositional ignorance: disbelieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance. Does white ignorance comprise all these varieties, or only some of them?

To see which ones are involved, we first need to say a bit more about the relevant propositions. Which kinds of propositions are involved? We should note that they are propositions both about white people and about people of color; for instance, that being white comes with certain privileges in this world and that being black means that in many Western countries, one is more likely to suffer from police brutality. In addition, it is helpful to distinguish between general and specific propositions. An example of a general proposition is that people can be racist even if they are not intentionally so. A specific proposition is that, while Puerto

Ricans are United States citizens, they do not have voting rights and are not represented in the Senate or the House.[5]

Three varieties of propositional ignorance seem to be *not* or *hardly ever* involved in white ignorance. Take undecided ignorance. One is in a state of undecided ignorance if one has considered a proposition *p* but one has not yet formed an attitude toward *p*; for instance, because one was distracted or needed to do something else. That does not seem to be the variety of ignorance involved in white ignorance: most white people have had enough time to consider the issue of racism and adopt an attitude toward it. Nor does it seem to be unconsidered ignorance. One is in a state of unconsidered ignorance if one has not considered *p* but one would believe *p* as soon as one were to consider *p*. Quite a few white people *have* considered various propositions related to racism. And the very point about white ignorance is that most white people do *not* believe *p* as soon as they consider it. For instance, it seems many people stopped using the N-word not when they *considered* whether using that word is morally wrong but only when they were presented with arguments and evidence that it is morally wrong. Suspending ignorance, finally, could be involved in white ignorance, but such cases will be rare: generally, people rarely suspend judgment on morally highly sensitive issues. They tend to either believe or disbelieve them once they have considered them. Ethicists and academics in general may thus be exceptional in that they suspend judgment on so many propositions, as they are trained to adopt a position only when it is actually supported by the evidence.

White ignorance is usually a case of disbelieving, deep, or complete ignorance. Let us start with disbelieving white ignorance. Consider the following words from Paul Taylor (2007, 142): "Classical race thinking encourages us in our ignorance of this history [i.e., the history of the role of Western powers in

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[5] For the history of the relation between the United States and Puerto Rico, see Sullivan (2007).

governing Haiti]. It enables us to rely, tacitly or expressly, on the assumption that black folks cannot be expected to govern themselves properly. And this allows us to explain failed, flawed, or troubled black states without appealing to any factors outside of their native incapacities—which is to say, the incapacities of the natives." Here, the idea is clearly that white ignorance is at least sometimes disbelieving ignorance: it consists of false beliefs, such as the belief that black people, or people of color more generally, are unable to properly govern themselves.

Many cases of white ignorance seem to be deep or complete ignorance. Remember that one is deeply ignorant of a true proposition p if one has never considered p and one would not believe p if one considered it. When one is completely ignorant, one cannot even grasp the relevant proposition; for instance, because one lacks some of the concepts required for that. Many people are completely ignorant of various propositions concerning racism because they lack the concepts to grasp them, concepts such as *testimonial injustice* and *hermeneutical injustice* as developed by Miranda Fricker (2007)—in fact, it is telling that she needed to develop them in a book-length treatment before many philosophers (including me) came to see their relevance. The idea that many people are in a state of complete ignorance when it comes to racial issues squares well with what Sarah Hoagland says:

> Many whites seem enormously unself-conscious about whiteness as a cultural and political phenomenon much as the middle class seems enormously unself-conscious about middle classness as a cultural and political phenomenon. (I say "many" whites because white supremacists, for example, are not unself-conscious about whiteness either as a cultural or a political phenomenon.) (Hoagland 2007, 99)

White supremacists are in a state of disbelieving rather than deep or complete ignorance because they *have* considered the

issue—which is not to say that they might not look away from relevant evidence bearing on the issue. Many people, however, are in a state of deep or complete ignorance because they simply avoid contact with those who hold a different view—they look away, they do not want to know about the relevant issues. Elizabeth Spelman, for instance, rightly points out that frequently, white people intentionally do not consider the relevant propositions: "W's [the white American's] ignorance involves not a simple lack of knowledge of g [the grievances of black America], nor the embrace of a false belief about g (the false belief that g is false). W ignores g, avoids as much as he can thinking about g" (Spelman 2007, 121). And Frank Margonis (2007, 175) makes this point about John Dewey: "When Dewey, a founding member of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), ignored the steady reports of racial violence in the organization's premier publication, it appears to be a case of averting one's gaze."

Now that the issue of racial privilege and racist bias has been put high on the agenda over the last few years, especially since the arrival of and widespread media attention for the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, for at least *some* propositions, such as that being white comes with certain privileges on the job market, deep and complete ignorance will occur less frequently. Things are now crucially different from, say, the 1950s, when few people in Europe and Northern America even cared about racial issues. The very act of considering a proposition rules out deep and complete ignorance. Many people now believe and even *know* these propositions. Others, however, disbelieve them; they think that it is all a hoax or that the situation has changed drastically over the last few decades so that blacks now have the same social and economic opportunities as whites.

For other propositions, things seem to be different. Despite the societal debate on racism, they receive little attention and are hardly ever considered. Take the proposition that our language is permeated with racist terms and concepts. What I have in mind are

such things as that *master bedroom* has its origin in a context of slavery, as do words like *blacklist* and *whitelist* and expressions like "sell down the river." Most people are still utterly unaware of that. They could consider it, but they have never done so; they are, therefore, in a state of deep ignorance.

Another thing we should note about white ignorance is that it almost always comes with meta-ignorance—that is, ignorance of the fact that one is ignorant. I am rather ignorant of the social dynamics in Namibia in the 1860s, but I am well aware of this ignorance. White ignorance is different in that people tend not to be aware of their ignorance. This is true for virtually all disbelieving ignorance. If one disbelieves various true propositions about race and privilege, one usually does not know that one is ignorant; otherwise, one would not maintain such disbelief. Things are similar for deep and complete ignorance: if one has never considered a proposition *p* or cannot even consider it because one lacks the relevant concepts, one is unlikely to be aware of that. Such ignorance can come with deep or complete meta-ignorance—one is unaware that one is unaware—or even with disbelieving meta-ignorance: one thinks that one is fully informed, whereas one is not.

Closely related, yet slightly different, is first-order ignorance that comes with second-order knowledge (knowledge that one is ignorant) but also with second-order ignorance (usually, false belief) of the fact that it is not alright to be first-order ignorant. A well-known illustration of this kind of case is of the Scots-born psychologist, economist, philosopher, historian, and legal and political reformer James Mill, who in 1817 published *The History of British India* (see Mill [1817] 1968). Mill intentionally stayed away from learning any Indian languages. Thus, he was ignorant of Indian languages and *knew* that he was ignorant. He did so because he believed this would enable him to more objectively describe and assess cultural and religious practices and customs. He was, of course, disbelievingly ignorant—and, it seems, culpably so—of the fact that learning

a language is pivotal in the process of coming to understand another people's practices and customs.

White Ignorance as Group Ignorance

A core idea in the philosophy of race is that many white people are not merely ignorant *as individuals* but also ignorant *as a group*. However, whom does this group comprise, and whom does it *not* comprise? In virtue of what are white people ignorant as a group? To answer these questions, let us return momentarily to the Dynamic Account of group ignorance as I construed and defended it in chapter 5:

> *The Dynamic Account of group ignorance*: a group *G* is ignorant of a true proposition *p* if and only if (i) either a significant number of *G*'s operative members are ignorant of *p* or enough operative members of *G* know/truly believe that *p* but *G* as a group fails to know/truly believe that *p*, and (ii) this is the result of a group dynamic, such as group agency, collective epistemic virtues or vices, external manipulation, lack of time, interest, concepts, resources, or information, or a combination of these.

Who are the members of groups that are in a state of white ignorance?[6] Let us take white ignorance in the United States as an example, as this country has been a catalyst in debates on white ignorance (#BlackLivesMatter originated in the United States) and has itself a complicated and unique history with racism and slavery—among other things, the birth of the country is based on what some people would call a genocide on Native Americans, it came to blossom partly as a result of slavery, and it fought a civil war

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[6] Mills (1997, 18–19) defines white ignorance as a political rather than an ethnic category. Here, I focus on white ignorance as an ethnic category.

partly over slavery. There are all sorts of white groups in the United States, such as groups of white friends, white city councils, and white pastor meetings. It seems the largest group that has white ignorance is the group *of all whites* in the United States, the white majority. This includes at least non-Hispanic whites but arguably also Hispanic whites, while it excludes black, Native, Indian, Asian, and Hawaiian Americans. The first thing to note is that the boundaries of this group are vague. Thus construed, the group includes people who immigrated from the Middle East. It can be argued, though, that they too have faced racism from white groups. Also, a person can have a white father and a black mother, or a white father and a mother who had a black father and white mother, and so on. The boundaries of the group are vague because whiteness itself comes in degrees. This is ontologically interesting but not problematic; clouds have vague boundaries, and so do day and night, but that is no reason to deny the existence of these things. In the next section, I return to the issue of degrees of white ignorance.

Does the group with white ignorance comprise only white people? That might seem intuitive, but it is not that clear. In the same way as it is possible that women adopt men's sexism, it is possible for people of color to adopt white ignorance. This is not to say that just any kind of ignorance among people of color that is the result of white ignorance is also itself a case of white ignorance. As Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (2007, 2) rightly note, ignorance "can be a strategy for the survival of the victimized and oppressed, as in the case of black slaves' feigned ignorance of many details of their white masters' lives." Such ignorance among black people, although the consequence of white ignorance, is not itself a case of white ignorance because it is not about the privileges of white people in comparison with black people. In other cases, however, people of color share white people's ignorance about the privileged status of whites. White ignorance, then, is mostly had by white people, but nonwhites can also suffer from it.

Who are the operative members of the group? It seems these are the influential people—influential when it comes to people's beliefs, values, and actions—in the white community: presidents, members of the Senate, CEOs, pastors, sportsmen and sportswomen, scientists, movie stars. My account says that one way in which a group can be ignorant is by way of a *significant number* of the group's operative members being ignorant. That term, as I pointed out in chapter 5, is rather vague, but it is exactly this vagueness that makes the account accurate and useful. Undoubtedly, in the 1950s, when it was widely accepted that black children could not go to white schools, white ignorance was found in almost all operative members (with a few notable exceptions). This has changed slowly but drastically over the last few decades: now, many operative members of the white group—Hollywood stars, politicians, pastors—are outspoken on widespread racism and white privilege. Yet, there are still plenty of white operative members who believe the whole narrative to be a hoax or highly exaggerated. And given the influence those operative members have on millions of nonoperative members, it seems fair to say there is still much white ignorance in the white community.

An issue that is not often discussed and that I would like to draw our attention to here is the *chronological dimension* of the group that is in a state of white ignorance. In the literature, the focus in the debate on white ignorance is on the current white community. This is understandable, for it is the current rather than the past white community that can do something about white ignorance. Yet, in the same literature, there is also much attention for white communities in the past, especially when it comes to the role white ignorance played in these communities. For example, it was in virtue of ignorance or looking away that white communities in the West were able to create and maintain the transatlantic slave trade. Another example is the racist talk of many leading thinkers in the Western tradition: Locke, Hume, Kant, Voltaire, Jefferson, Hegel, Mill, and Tocqueville. As leading thinkers of their time, they confirmed and

maintained stereotypes about blacks in the wider white community with their racist talk.[7]

Such white ignorance in the past is then usually maintained: past white groups were ignorant, and group dynamics ensured that future generations would also be ignorant. Yet, there are also cases in which white ignorance is *brought about* in the course of time. In the introduction to this book, we saw that, at the time the painting of the black Dido Belle and the white Lady Elizabeth was made, people were fully informed about Dido Belle's social status as an independent person and Lady Elizabeth's equal. Yet, in the course of time, due to white ignorance, people came to be ignorant of who Dido Belle was and of her relationship with Lady Elizabeth. They came to believe she was Lady Elizabeth's slave, as they called an enslaved person. Group ignorance—in this case, deep group ignorance—can arise in the course of time; it can even, intentionally or unintentionally, be brought about—in this case, due to biases and prejudices. Another example is the way various Western countries, such as Australia, Norway, and the United States, have set up international campaigns to deter asylum seekers from migrating to these countries. This has been known for a while, but, as Sarah Bishop (2020) has argued, it is part and parcel of these campaigns that, within the electorate and abroad, ignorance of the rights of asylum seekers is strategically brought about and cultivated by omitting any discussion of these rights.

Now, how do these groups of whites—present and past—relate to each other? Well, it should be clear there *is* a relation, at least a causal and historical relation. For instance, much contemporary white ignorance exists and is maintained precisely because of the unjust treatment of black people by white communities in the past. One could take this a step further by saying that if we add a chronological or temporal dimension to groups, the current white community and the past white community jointly form a single group: the group of white people, say, since the birth of Western colonization.

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[7] This is rightly pointed out by Mills (2015, 221).

To think of groups as four-dimensional entities is not that exceptional: Israelites consider all children of Abraham as one group, black people often feel a strong connection with their ancestors, and various people nowadays believe white people or the governments of mostly white countries are culpable for what their ancestors did.

Yet, the metaphysics of groups over time is complicated. How, for instance, should we think of members and specifically operative members if some—in many cases, most—members are no longer alive and thus, in an important sense, do not even exist? How should we construe the group dynamic if part of that dynamic lies in the past? These are challenging questions. Although I cannot address them in any detail here, I would like to point out that work on the metaphysics and epistemology of groups may provide opportunities to add a historical dimension to accounts of white ignorance and that this may deepen our understanding of what white ignorance is and how it works.

Degrees of White Ignorance

White ignorance, I submit, comes in degrees. How should we construe such degrees of ignorance, and how can an understanding of degrees of white ignorance be useful in debates in the philosophy of race?

White ignorance comes in degrees in several ways. First, whiteness itself can contribute more or less to the ignorance in question. As I pointed out above, black people can also display white ignorance, but arguably less so than white people, whose whiteness itself contributes to their white ignorance. One can be more or less acquainted with something—say, applying for jobs as a black person—and, thus, be more or less objectually ignorant. One can be more or less practically ignorant about how to do something, such as how to make certain insecticides from plants that the indigenous people have used for centuries. Topical ignorance comes in degrees

because one can be ignorant of more or fewer true propositions relevant to the subject matter, such as the treatment of Mexican civilians by the United States in the Mexican–American War (1846–1848). In addition, there are varieties of white ignorance: some of it is disbelieving ignorance, whereas other cases should be understood as deep or even complete ignorance. Someone who falsely believes that she is not suffering from white ignorance is in a sense further removed from the truth than, say, a deeply or completely ignorant person. Not only does she fail to believe a truth, but she also believes a falsehood. Finally, on a group level, ignorance can come in degrees in two additional ways: the number of ignorant operative members can be smaller or larger, and the group dynamics accounting for the white ignorance can be stronger or weaker.

This is useful in many ways. Even if white ignorance is unavoidable for some people at some time, one can still be held responsible for the *degree to which* one is ignorant. We can measure progress, even while noticing that a group is still ignorant, by also noticing that as a group, the group members are less ignorant than they used to be.

For example, there is still much white ignorance in my own country, the Netherlands, about the racism implicit in the character of Black Pete (in Dutch: *Zwarte Piet*).[8] This folkloric figure in the Netherlands is a blackened white person with thick red lips who wears golden earrings, a colorful Moor's costume, and an Afro wig, and who sometimes even has poor Dutch grammar. Black Petes are supposed to be the Moorish servants of Saint Nicolas, a white bishop from Spain, who rides on a white horse. Saint Nicolas is wise, calm, and disciplined; the Black Petes are frivolous and often silly. If children behave well, they get presents from

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[8] For an overview of and an Afro-Surinamese Dutch perspective on the Black Pete debate, see Wekker (2016, 139–167). The debate, Wekker argues, is plagued by what she calls "white innocence," that is, "the strong Dutch attachment to a self-image that stresses being a tolerant, small, and just ethical nation, color-blind and free of racism and that foregrounds being a victim rather than a perpetrator of (inter)national violence" (Wekker 2016, 39).

Saint Nicolas, which are delivered by his Black Petes climbing on roofs and through the chimneys. If they do not behave well, so the warning goes, they may be punished by the Black Petes or even abducted to Spain. All this folklore culminates in a national feast on December 5, with lots of sweets and presents. Many people still believe that if the character of Black Pete is not played with bad racist intent, it thereby is not racist. Nevertheless, substantial progress has been made over the last few years, and the Dutch population is now at least less ignorant than it used to be.

Moreover, the ways in which groups can be more ignorant or less ignorant—entailed by the combination of my Dynamic Account of group ignorance in chapter 5 and my account of degrees of ignorance in chapter 6—provides us with tools to be more precise in describing degrees of ignorance. One remarkable implication is that groups can simultaneously be less *and* more ignorant. For example, Dutch white people are now less ignorant about Black Pete in some regards: they have considered the issue, people know more about the colonial background of Black Pete, Black Petes are increasingly being replaced by Petes in numerous colors ("Rainbow Petes"), and so on. In other regards, though, there is more ignorance: most ignorance used to be deep or complete, but nowadays, there is much more disbelieving ignorance. Many people now falsely believe that there is nothing wrong with Black Pete and that those who claim there *is* something wrong with it impose international (often American) standards on a Dutch custom that they do not understand from the inside. Understanding degrees of ignorance, then, can be helpful in seeing where progress has been made and where regress has taken place.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I applied my epistemology of ignorance to the concept of white ignorance in the philosophy of race. We saw that the

notion of ignorance that we find in critical race theory is not a rival of the one I defended in chapter 2 in terms of propositional, objectual, or practical ignorance. The latter is a conception of the nature of ignorance, whereas the former focuses on various contingent properties of ignorance. We also saw that white ignorance should not be confined to propositional ignorance: it comprises objectual and practical ignorance as well. I argued that white ignorance is usually either disbelieving or deep or complete ignorance; it is hardly ever suspending, undecided, or unconsidered ignorance. The Dynamic Account of group ignorance squares well with the concept of white ignorance, although whether it can take a chronological dimension on board remains to be explored. Finally, we saw that ignorance, white ignorance included, comes in degrees in different ways and that this is true for both individual and group ignorance. This is important for fighting white ignorance and for assessing how much progress has been made.

9

Ignorance in Education

Introduction

Education has many goals, such as the political goal of producing good citizens and the economic goal of ensuring that education serves the economic interests of society. Another clear goal of education is *epistemic*. Indeed, this is arguably not simply one goal of education amongst many but rather a constitutive part of the educational enterprise. A social practice merely serving political, moral, prudential, or economic ends without also serving epistemic ends would not be eligible for counting as an *educational* practice in the first place.

It is a moot point what these epistemic ends are, however. At the very least, one would expect education to lead to useful cognitive skills and a body of true beliefs. Usually, though, educational theorists set the epistemic ends at a higher threshold. This might include, for example, the propagation of knowledge and understanding, or at least reasoned belief.[1] Or they might set the epistemic bar even higher and demand the development of intellectual virtues and related epistemic standings like understanding.[2] Yet, what all accounts of the epistemic ends of education have in common is that they focus on epistemically *positive* phenomena,

[1] See, for example, Siegel (2017) for a defense of the idea that the development of critical rationality is central to the epistemology of education.

[2] See Elgin (1999) for a defense of the centrality of the notion of understanding to education. See Pritchard (2013, 2016b, 2018, 2020) for a defense of the intellectual virtues as core epistemic goals of education, where understanding is treated as a manifestation of the intellectual virtues. See also MacAllister (2012).

such as rationality, knowledge, understanding, insight, reliable belief formation, and the manifestation of the intellectual virtues.[3]

Because the overarching epistemic goals of education are positive epistemic standings, one might well suppose that negative epistemic standings, like ignorance, have no role to play in educational practices. Of course, ignorance can be the object of attention in classrooms; for instance, when students remain willfully ignorant of another student's true motivations for wearing a hijab.[4] One can then address that ignorance to remove it. The issue under consideration in this chapter is different, though: Can one in education properly aim at ignorance? I will argue, on the basis of earlier work with Duncan Pritchard (Peels and Pritchard 2021), that even though ignorance obviously cannot be one of the core epistemic goals of education, deliberately cultivating ignorance can nonetheless sometimes be a bona fide educational practice.[5]

One reason why an educational practice might be explicitly geared toward the generation of ignorance is that the epistemic ends of education come into conflict with its nonepistemic ends. Accordingly, there might be instances where, say, the social ends of education are served by overriding the epistemic ends and thereby promoting ignorance. Recently, for example, various philosophers have defended the moral value of ignorance when it comes to ignorance of certain technological and medical possibilities, various risks, and the issue of privacy (see, e.g., Hansson 2017; Miller 2017). Accordingly, one might hold that similar considerations could apply in the educational case: sometimes, ignorance should be deliberately generated for nonepistemic reasons.

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[3] For further general discussion of the epistemology of education, see Robertson (2009). See also the papers collected in Baehr (2016).

[4] For a hermeneutical case study that explores this example, see Moyaert (2019).

[5] Jon Jensen (2008) has also defended the rightful place of ignorance in education, but his point is a slightly different one, namely, that we should become aware of how little we know, and that we should learn to take our vast ignorance into account in developing new products and technologies.

Here, my focus is on the *epistemic* basis of cultivating ignorance. Moreover, practices of cultivating ignorance are entirely compatible with the idea that the overarching epistemic goal of education is the development of positive epistemic standings. In fact, where ignorance is generated in this way, it is in service of specifically positive epistemic ends.[6]

In this chapter, I argue that intentionally inducing ignorance in one's student is an epistemically valuable practice—at least, when it is done temporarily and only for the sake of reaching specific epistemic goods. This can be done in at least four ways, namely, by presenting defeaters, scaffolding, promoting understanding, and showing that the student does not know. In what follows, I put some flesh on the bones of my claim about the epistemic value of such practices by using the epistemology of ignorance developed in part 1 of the book. Thus, I pay attention to the variety of ignorance involved (disbelieving, suspending, unconsidered ignorance, and so on), to first- and second-order ignorance, and to degrees of ignorance. I also explore whether education can try to bring about objectual and practical ignorance and whether it can aim at group ignorance.

Presenting Defeaters

Sometimes, we know something until we run into defeaters. As we saw in chapter 7, defeaters can undermine the truth of what we believe (a rebutting defeater) or the epistemic basis for believing something (an undercutting defeater). So, being told by an authority that Aristarchus of Samos was not the first person to formulate heliocentrism would be a defeater of the first kind, while being told that one's reason for believing that Aristarchus was the

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[6] See Pritchard (2016a) for a defense of the more general point that ignorance can have positive epistemic value.

first to formulate heliocentrism is problematic (e.g., being told that the website that was your source for this belief is unreliable) would be a defeater of the second kind.[7] There can clearly be an educational need to present defeaters of either type, and for purely epistemic reasons. Indeed, as I will explain, although the presentation of defeaters can temporarily lead to ignorance, it can also serve the overarching epistemic goals in education, such as promoting knowledge and understanding.

But before we have a more detailed look at this, a word on epistemic reasons is in order. Some philosophers have argued that epistemic reasons to (not) believe something are reasons that bear on the truth-value of the proposition in question (e.g., Hieronymi 2005, 2006; Kelly 2003). That is not the kind of reason I have in mind in this section. Rather, what I have in mind is a reason to perform or not perform an action to achieve certain epistemic ends. As it happens, I believe there can be epistemic reasons for actions.[8] However, the point of this section does not depend on that idea; all I want to argue is that there can be good reasons to cultivate ignorance to achieve epistemic ends.

Now, let us consider a toy example. Suppose a student has a true belief which enjoys rather weak epistemic support. Imagine that she truly believes medieval scholars were fully aware that the earth is not flat but her only reason for believing this is that she overheard a classmate stating that this is the case. Although that provides certainly *some* reason to believe this proposition, it is by itself hardly a sufficient epistemic basis for knowledge. Recognizing the inadequacy of the student's epistemic basis for this belief, the educator might adduce a rebutting or undercutting defeater to provoke doubt, and thereby further inquiry, on the part of the student.

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[7] For the distinction, see Pollock (1986, 39). For further discussion of defeaters, see Bergmann (1997) and Sudduth (2008).

[8] For argumentative support for this, see Peels (2017c, 110–111).

The most straightforward way of doing this is via appeal to undercutting defeaters. For example, the educator might point out that forming a belief purely on the basis of overhearing is not a reliable manner of belief formation. One can also employ rebutting defeaters. For example, the educator might appeal to the surprising nature of the claim, as the opposite is so widely believed. Notice that, given the truth of the target belief, this rebutting defeater is a *misleading defeater* as it is prompting the student to question something that is true. Still, there could be educational reasons to employ such a misleading defeater in the service of wider epistemic ends.

Either of these strategies could lead the student to abandon her true belief, if only temporarily. It would follow that on the New View of ignorance defended in chapter 3, on which ignorance is the lack of true belief, ignorance was thereby generated. Interestingly, notice that undercutting and rebutting defeaters tend to generate different doxastic responses in the subject and, hence, different kinds of ignorance. While the former are apt to make the student suspend judgment about the target proposition (and thus lead to suspending ignorance), the latter are more likely to make the student disbelieve that proposition (and thus lead to disbelieving ignorance, which, as I argued in chapter 4, is an epistemically worse variety of ignorance). Given the nature of the scenario, in neither case do we have unconsidered, deep, or complete ignorance. Notice, too, that in the first case, probably only first-order ignorance is generated. As the student is aware of the defeater, she will in all likelihood be aware of her ignorance and, hence, will not exhibit second-order ignorance. In any case, the first-order ignorance in play is being generated by the educator precisely because she is trying to get the student to enhance her epistemic basis for this true belief and not simply be content to accept it on such a weak epistemic basis as overhearing her classmate. The ignorance is thus being cultivated by the educator to serve overarching epistemic goals.

One might think the educational application of defeaters here is due to the specific fact that the agent's epistemic basis for belief

is suboptimal. If that were right, then this would be a point that applies only to the New View of ignorance and not also to the Standard View because it would not apply to cases where knowledge, specifically, is replaced by ignorance. Interestingly, however, defeaters can also be employed in an educational context to expressly target knowledge.

Imagine now that our student, who still truly believes that medieval scholars disbelieved that the earth is flat, has formed this belief by remembering that this information was passed on to her by someone authoritative—for instance, another teacher. In this case, her belief seems to amount to knowledge. Yet, there might be an educational purpose to offering defeaters for this belief. For example, the educator might want to make the point that it is not enough to uncritically accept information from others, even authorities, particularly when the claim in question is surprising and an independent epistemic basis is easily attained—two conditions that hold in this case. The educator would thus be making an epistemic point about the importance of getting an especially secure epistemic basis for one's beliefs when the circumstances demand it.

With this in mind, the teacher might query the student about her willingness to accept this belief solely on this basis. Could the informant have been mistaken? Could the student be misremembering or misunderstanding what the informant told her?[9] Here, undercutting defeaters are presented to make the student think more carefully about why she believes what she does. While undercutting defeaters are the most straightforward way of encouraging the student to re-evaluate her information source, one could also employ rebutting defeaters in this regard. Again, simply noting how surprising this claim is could serve this purpose.

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[9] One might argue that to simply query an epistemic basis for belief in this way is not yet to offer a defeater. It is important to remember here, however, that this is not just *anyone* raising this query, but specifically a teacher who is occupying a privileged epistemic role in this regard.

As before, the rebutting defeater is more apt to generate disbelieving ignorance, in contrast to the suspending ignorance that the undercutting defeater is likely to produce, and the ignorance in play is likely to be only first-order ignorance. Notice, too, that both defeater types are in this case misleading defeaters, given that the student in fact has not merely a true belief but a true belief with a sufficient epistemic basis for knowledge (at least, prior to the presentation of the defeater).

The goal of introducing these defeaters is to prompt the student to undertake further investigations, such as regarding the credibility of the informant, or to find independent support for the claim in play. In doing so, the student is putting her true belief on a firmer epistemic footing. These defeaters are thereby generating ignorance—by the lights of both the Standard and New Views on ignorance—but only temporarily, as a means to ultimately generating positive epistemic goods. In particular, the ignorance that is being generated is of a specific kind: it will tend to be either suspending or disbelieving ignorance (most likely the former) and will only be first-order ignorance.

One may object that if the ends here are truly epistemic, such as knowledge and understanding, there is a much quicker and more robust way of bringing them about. One could, for instance, give further and better reasons for thinking that medieval scholars knew the earth is a sphere. That would be a good way to reach the epistemic ends of knowledge and understanding *regarding the proposition that medieval scholars were aware that the earth is a sphere*. But, of course, there are further epistemic ends to be reached. Among them are realizing the strength or weakness of one's reasons, employing epistemic virtues like curiosity and thoroughness, and being more distinctive about when to accept something on someone's authority. Presenting defeaters before giving certain additional evidence may be a good way to reach these ends.

Scaffolding

A second way in which educational practices can promote ignorance for specifically epistemic reasons involves factors that prevent the student from knowing or having a true belief, although in a very different manner from that considered in the last section. The concern there was with an educator introducing defeaters and thereby cultivating ignorance in her students. In contrast, the concern here is with how it might be important to an educational practice for the educator to actively ensure that students are ignorant of certain kinds of information by not even making that information available to them.

It is often important to the practice of good teaching that one can steer the student through the learning material so as to make it manageable and thereby to enhance the student's capacity for learning. For example, a complex topic might be broken down into digestible chunks, or the educator might bracket aspects of the subject matter that she recognizes as being particularly thorny until the student has mastered the basics. The metaphor that scholars in the philosophy of education often use for this practice is *scaffolding*.[10] One can see the clear rationale for this practice and see why it is also a specifically epistemic rationale. After all, if the student is overcome by the difficulty of the topic, she will fail to learn anything. It is, therefore, important to the educational goal of promoting learning that one ensures this does not happen.

What is interesting for our purposes is that educational scaffolding can sometimes quite properly lead to the cultivation of a specific kind of temporary ignorance on the part of the student. Consider the following scenario. The student is learning a new topic—algebra, for example. The educator knows the student will

[10] See, for example, Foley (1994); Simons and Klein (2007). This idea is often traced to Vygotsky's educational theory (e.g., in Vygotsky 1978) and in particular his notion of the zone of proximal development; see, for example, Wood and Middleton (1975). For a useful recent overview of Vygotsky's educational theory, see Davydov and Kerr (1995).

struggle with this topic, and so she gives her a selection of easy questions to tackle to begin with, and she talks the student through each one. The student is growing in confidence as she gets more and more of the easy questions right. But now it is the end of the class, and the educator needs to set some homework. Inevitably, she will not be with the student while this work is being completed. With this in mind, she looks through the questions in the textbook and selects assignments that she is confident the student can easily complete, given what she has learned so far. Importantly for our purposes, the educator does not include in her selection some of the more difficult questions, which she knows would throw off her student and cause her to doubt what she has learned so far. Indeed, she may go so far as to deliberately avoid directing students to material that she believes would undermine the student's learning if she became aware of it. In doing all this, the educator ensures that the student will successfully complete the homework and that her confidence in tackling this material will grow accordingly.

The scenario I have just described is a familiar case of educational scaffolding in action. Notice how the educator is in effect creating an epistemically friendly environment for the student by excluding information that would prevent the student from prospering. In the process, however, she is ensuring that the student lacks true beliefs in certain propositions. A fortiori, she will lack knowledge of these propositions in that there will be aspects of the subject matter—or, at least, questions about it—that she is unaware of. Of course, the student did not have a true belief in these propositions previously, so the educator is not *creating* ignorance, but she is ensuring that it is *preserved*. Moreover, she is doing so for epistemic reasons because, by preserving this ignorance, she is helping the student to master the subject matter and thereby acquire knowledge.

Let us consider a second case, one in which the educator is plausibly *creating* ignorance rather than merely preserving or maintaining it. Imagine a teacher explaining the basic principles of Newtonian physics to a student. It would be natural for such an

educator to leave aside for now the fact that such principles do not apply to either very small or very large items in the universe, for such a complexity is unlikely to add anything to the discussion, but it might well confuse the student a great deal. This eliding of relevant information would thus be a case of educational scaffolding. But in not making this point explicit, the educator is at least implying that these scientific principles have universal application. Indeed, given that educators normally mention restrictions of this kind, the student would be justified in making this inference. If she does so, however, she forms a false belief for the time being. The educational strategy, geared toward an overarching epistemic goal, thus implies the generation of ignorance. Or perhaps we should say that because of this strategy, the student's former deep ignorance of Newtonian physics is replaced by disbelieving ignorance. The generation of ignorance is temporary, of course: the educator clearly plans to correct the false belief when the right time comes. Crucially, however, even if she became aware that the student has formed this false belief, she would probably not correct it at this point—at least, so long as it remains implicit.[11]

Promoting Understanding

Notice that it is crucial to what is going on in the educational-scaffolding case just described that the ignorance the educator is effectively making use of as part of the scaffolding strategy is both first-order and second-order ignorance, as I distinguished them in chapter 4. That is, the student is not just ignorant of the target proposition but also ignorant that she is ignorant of it, where it is important to preserve the latter at this stage to bracket the relevant

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[11] It is important that the student's false belief remains implicit in this way, for if she makes explicit to the educator that she holds this false belief, then it will be incumbent upon the educator to say something. Educational scaffolding is not meant to legitimatize outright lying on the part of the educator, after all.

complexities. The process of eventually removing this ignorance will naturally proceed by making clear to the student there is second-order ignorance in play. In that way, she comes to realize what it is that she is ignorant of, as a first step toward removing the first-order ignorance.

The process of removing this ignorance is obviously an educational strategy aimed at epistemic ends. Yet it might itself, at least temporarily, generate further ignorance. We can bring this point out by considering how education is often specifically focused on promoting *understanding*. Understanding, I take it, is an integrated body of knowledge, rather than just knowledge or justified true belief in a set of propositions. As we might say about the Newtonian-physics student, while she now knows some very useful facts about physics, she is also ignorant of some fairly fundamental facts about physics. This means that she has a quite basic lack of understanding of this subject matter. But consider what would happen once the student was made aware of this lack of understanding. She might temporarily lose her confidence in more propositions regarding this subject matter than just the ones she is ignorant about.

The educational goal of promoting understanding and thereby removing the student's ignorance might thus temporarily lead the student to suspend belief in true propositions she previously believed and, indeed, knew. Again, then, we have a case of an educational strategy geared toward an overarching epistemic end that temporarily generates ignorance, more specifically, suspending ignorance. What is different about this case, however, is that the generation of ignorance is a side effect of the educational strategy rather than an explicit part of it. The educator's goal is not the generation of ignorance but the promotion of the student's understanding. Indeed, the educator ultimately aims to *eliminate* the student's ignorance. It is just that attaining the latter goal sometimes involves temporarily generating ignorance. Because the student will normally not outright *disbelieve* the propositions she believed before, it will usually be a case of suspending ignorance of which she is aware.

In other words, she will have second-order knowledge of first-order suspending ignorance.

Showing That the Student Does Not Know

Imagine that a student truly believes, but does not know, some proposition. For instance, she truly believes that *Madame Bovary* by Gustave Flaubert is the best-sold French novel in history. The student may fail to have knowledge for a variety of reasons. Maybe she believes the proposition merely because her own surname is Bovary. Or maybe she believes it only because she cannot remember the names of any other French novels. Once it becomes clear to an educator that a student holds a true belief but lacks knowledge, it is only natural for the educator to want to explain to the student why knowledge is lacking even though her belief is true.

One way of doing this might involve providing the student with a sufficient epistemic basis for her belief in the target proposition and, hence, ensuring that she has knowledge. In the simplest case, for example, telling a student that something she believes is true but that her reasons for holding it are inadequate for knowledge will lead to the student having knowledge, as she will now base her true belief on the reliable testimony of the educator. Alternatively, the educator might go further and actually articulate the reasons why this true belief ought to be held. As a result, the student will have both the educator's testimony and the articulated epistemic basis as grounds for her knowledge.

However, these types of cases are not my concern here. Rather, I want to zoom in on scenarios where the educator has good educational reasons for wanting to make the student aware that she lacks knowledge without in the process supplying her with an epistemic basis that would enable her to have the target knowledge. The teacher can ask the student, for instance, whether maybe she believes *Madame Bovary* to be the best-sold French novel just

because her own surname is Bovary. It might be important to the educator that the student identifies the epistemic basis for her true belief herself. Such cases are interesting for our purposes because if the student is given good reasons for thinking she lacks knowledge without at the same time being given a new epistemic basis for her true belief, this will ordinarily lead to the student losing her belief, at least until she identifies a new epistemic basis for believing it. After all, if one is convinced that one lacks an adequate epistemic basis for believing a proposition, one will lose one's confidence that this proposition is true and, thus, stop believing it.

What is interesting about such cases is that they involve the employment of an educational practice that leads to the student losing her true belief. At least on the New View on ignorance, it follows that this educational practice is generating ignorance. Normally, this will be suspending ignorance, as the subject is likely to now suspend judgment on the true target proposition. Moreover, the educational practice is clearly geared toward specifically epistemic ends, as the educator's goal is to encourage the student to identify an adequate epistemic basis for the belief herself.

However, on the Standard View on ignorance, this would *not* be a case of an educational practice generating ignorance. This is because on the Standard View, the student was already ignorant of the target proposition, as the student lacked knowledge before the educational intervention. On Duncan Pritchard's Normative View, ignorance necessarily issues from a duty violation. Many cases of true belief that falls short of knowledge are cases in which one holds a true belief that one should not have had because one violated a duty to investigate. Therefore, many such cases would be situations in which the student was *already* ignorant. Hence, the educational practice would not count as generating ignorance.

Still, such cases are significant even for exponents of the Standard and Normative Views. This is because they concern an educational intervention where ignorance is *maintained* rather than removed, even though it would have been fairly straightforward for the

educator to have removed the ignorance in question. Moreover, notice that the educator's intervention, although geared toward specifically epistemic ends, actually results in the student's epistemic position becoming further removed from being knowledge than before. After all, the student previously had at least a true belief in the target proposition, whereas after the intervention, she does not even have that. The educator is thus still in an important sense cultivating ignorance via her intervention, even by the lights of the Standard and Normative Views.

One may wonder how this variety of ignorance generation or maintenance serves positive epistemic goods. After all, in the scenario at hand, the student abandons a true belief. It seems that various epistemic goods are served even in this kind of scenario. First, in the new situation, although the student no longer believes the truth, her doxastic attitude at least matches her evidential situation. That is an epistemically good thing.[12] A doxastic attitude—in this case, suspension of judgment—that matches one's evidential situation is, at least in one of the many senses of *rationality*, an epistemically rational attitude. Belief where one's evidence warrants only suspension of judgment clearly is not. Second, it is true that the new situation will not come with a true belief in the object proposition. Yet, it may come with *other* true beliefs and even knowledge. Clearly, these are other epistemic goods. For instance, the first-order ignorance in a situation like this will often come with second-order knowledge. If a teacher shows a student that her belief is based on wishful thinking, and if the student, upon seeing that this is right, abandons the belief and ends up with suspension of judgment, she will often come to know a wide variety of things. Here are some of them: her previous belief was irrational, her previous belief did not fit the evidence, she has abandoned that belief, her current

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[12] That this is a good thing has been championed in detail by Conee and Feldman (2004). Feldman (2002, 378–379) has even argued that rationality or reasonableness is the goal or aim of belief.

attitude—that of suspension of judgment—matches her evidence, and her current attitude toward the proposition is rational.

Objectual Ignorance

So far, I have focused on propositional ignorance. Where does objectual ignorance fit in? Remember that, as I explained in chapter 2, objectual ignorance is lack of objectual knowledge. Thus, one can be ignorant of the taste of kumquats, ignorant of Polynesian culture, ignorant of Victorian fashion for men, and ignorant of Islamic rituals for newborns. In an educational context, students may be ignorant of each of these things as well. However, for many students, what will stand out more—at least at the outset of their education—is ignorance of such things as quantum mechanics, modal logic, British law, statistics, and research integrity.

Now, three of the four educational practices I distinguished above do not apply to objectual ignorance. Because objectual ignorance is not propositional, as we saw in chapter 2, one cannot present defeaters for it (practice 1), one's increase in understanding does not lead to a loss of objectual knowledge (practice 3), and showing that one has a true belief that falls short of knowledge does not apply either because objectual knowledge is largely not a matter of having true beliefs (practice 4). The second educational practice—that of scaffolding—is directly relevant here, though. To make sure that students are not lost in a multitude of facts, theories, and models, the educator may withhold not only information but a full body of knowledge on a topic, or an entire field, or even specific material objects. She thereby intentionally maintains objectual ignorance in her students. She may choose not to present general relativity to her students yet, she may keep them in ignorance about the fossil record, she may withhold recent discoveries about black holes, she may not yet present them with coronaviruses, and so on.

Objectual ignorance, we saw in chapter 2, is a matter of constitution by stereotypical properties. Being physically acquainted with a material object or being familiar with a research field are among those properties. A teacher, then, may maintain objectual ignorance in her students by aiming at the continued exemplification of such stereotypical properties in her students. She may also at some point intentionally lower the degree of objectual ignorance, without removing ignorance entirely, by introducing a particular subject matter step by step.

Practical Ignorance

Students are practically ignorant about many things, even many things that matter to their own discipline. This is true at the outset of their education and even at the time of graduation. After all, it is also true for academics working within that discipline. Students can be ignorant of how to prepare a Petri dish, how to apply deontic logic, how to study a medieval Gothic manuscript, how to separate carbon molecules by weight, how to carry out a liver resection, or how to peremptorily challenge a judge.

Sometimes, it is wise to temporarily maintain such ignorance. Again, this is a case of scaffolding: one hides or holds back a bit of knowledge—in this case, practical knowledge—to make sure the acquisition of other knowledge is at this stage not stymied. One may withhold from a theology student knowledge of how to read an Aramaic text so that the student, in learning ancient Hebrew, does not confuse the semantics of ancient Hebrew with that of Aramaic, which is rather close to it. Or one may withhold knowledge of how to construe an argument in modal logic so as to first fully focus on what modal logic is based on, namely, propositional logic.

Can one also *induce* practical ignorance in teaching circumstances? It seems this is hardly possible. Of course, one can for various reasons *defeat* a student's knowledge that she can φ, so

that she becomes ignorant of the fact that she can φ. But that actually guarantees that she can φ. Otherwise she could not be ignorant of it: as we saw in chapters 2 and 3, ignorance implies truth. Maybe there are a few exceptional scenarios, though, in which one can bring it about that someone who knew how to φ becomes ignorant of how to φ. Imagine, for instance, that a student knows how to construe a plausible argument for a metaphysical position that is widely considered to be common sense in the technical sense of the word.[13] The educator then decides to present the student with rival views that the student was utterly unaware of, such as Humean, skeptical philosophical positions and scientist approaches like those of James Ladyman (2011) and Alex Rosenberg (2011). The positions take the student by surprise; she no longer knows how to construe a plausible argument for the common-sense metaphysical position. Again, this ignorance-inducing process can serve various epistemic purposes, such as better coming to know and understand the possibilities in the argumentative metaphysical landscape.

Group Ignorance

So far, I have focused on individuals. But it seems that in educational contexts, one can also make or keep entire groups ignorant. In chapter 5, I distinguished between ignorance as *aggregate* ignorance—that is, as the combination of the ignorance of the group members—and ignorance as *group* ignorance—that is, as something over and above the ignorance of the group's individual members. What I would like to suggest now is that in teaching contexts, some groups are mere aggregates, whereas others are more than that. Imagine that I teach logic to a group of two hundred freshmen right in the first semester. They hardly know each

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[13] For more on what the common-sense tradition in philosophy amounts to, see Peels and Van Woudenberg (2020).

other, their bases for their knowledge about logic are not in any way dependent on one another, they have not shared the justification for their beliefs about several logical theorems, and they have not yet developed any group vices or virtues. In this situation, the group is merely an aggregate of individuals. To the extent that each of the four above-discussed strategies for inducing or maintaining ignorance applies to some individual in this group, it may apply to the group, for there may be many more such individuals in the group. In fact, in such a situation, one may well adopt the exact same strategy toward the group as a whole as one would adopt toward any individual in the group.

Sometimes, however, groups are much more than mere aggregates, and group ignorance is much more than the collective ignorance of the group's individuals. In medicine, for instance, small working groups may convene regularly for years, and they may have a wide variety of attitudes regarding propositions—knowledge, belief, ignorance, doubt—that differ from those of other groups, and similarly for objectual knowledge and ignorance, as well as practical knowledge and ignorance. After a while, such groups may develop cognitive virtues or vices, certain members in the group may become the operative members, and some people within the group may even become authoritative members in the group. The group's attitudes may be influenced or even formed entirely by the (lack of) exchange of evidence, patterns of jointly questioning, division of labor, and so on. Educators can, at some point, be rather familiar with the characteristics of specific groups, and in teaching such groups, they may employ a number of strategies that aim at temporary ignorance.

It seems to me that all four strategies distinguished above also apply to such groups. However, the ways to bring about group ignorance will include factors that are unique to groups. Take the first way, that of presenting defeaters. If an educator aims to defeat a group's knowledge that p for educational purposes, she may choose, for instance, to (i) present the defeater only or primarily to operative

group members; (ii) present the defeater only to those members of the group who know that p; (iii) show that some members believe that q and some members believe that r and that these propositions jointly imply s, which is a defeater for the group's belief that p; or (iv) question the skills in doing propositional logic of a few operative members whose reasoning provides a crucial building block for the group's justification for p. Group dynamics, as we saw in chapter 5, are complex, and this provides unique opportunities for educators to present groups with defeaters or aim at ignorance in one of the other three ways that I distinguished.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on the instrumental role that ignorance cultivation can play in educational practices aiming at various epistemic ends, such as knowledge and understanding. I have argued there are at least four ways in which teachers can properly aim at ignorance in their students: (i) sometimes, one should present students with defeaters for their knowledge; (ii) scaffolding in education can come with ensuring that the students are ignorant; (iii) bringing about understanding often leads to the students' suspending judgment on at least some true propositions they previously truly believed; and (iv) sometimes, teachers should show the students that they lack knowledge regarding a particular issue. In each of these cases, the teacher aims at temporary and first-order ignorance in her students. In the first, third, and fourth practices, this comes with second-order knowledge of such first-order ignorance. In the case of scaffolding, a teacher may even maintain second-order (say, deep) ignorance in her students of their first-order ignorance. Scaffolding applies not only to propositional ignorance but also to objectual and practical ignorance. Each of the four practices also apply to groups. In aiming to maintain or bring about group ignorance, though, one can tap into the complex epistemic

dynamics of groups, and that is how such cases can differ from bringing about or maintaining individual ignorance.

The results of this chapter are summarized in table 9.1.

I have assumed that the teacher has not only the will but also the ability to lead the student out of the ignorance in question. If the student sticks with the ignorance, or if there is good reason to think the teacher will not be able to lead the student away from her temporary ignorance, then the ignorance-inducing strategy will not have the epistemic value we pursue in educational practices. We are, thus, talking about cases in which things go well—in such cases, temporarily inducing ignorance has epistemic value.

What I have argued is an instantiation of a more general phenomenon: love of truth can and sometimes should manifest itself in a wide variety of strategies that promote ignorance. Scientific

Table 9.1 Ignorance-inducing educational practices and their effects

Educational practice	Original state	New state	Level
Presenting defeaters	Knowledge	Suspending ignorance or disbelieving ignorance	First-order ignorance and second-order knowledge
Scaffolding	Deep ignorance Objectual ignorance	Deep ignorance Disbelieving ignorance Objectual ignorance	First-order ignorance and second-order ignorance
Promoting understanding	True belief and knowledge	Suspending ignorance	First-order ignorance and second-order knowledge
Showing lack of knowledge	True belief that falls short of knowledge	Suspending ignorance	First-order ignorance and second-order knowledge

research, judicial inquiry, and journalistic investigation some-times aim at maintaining ignorance to pursue epistemic ends; for instance, by neglecting or leaving aside what are considered to be details or irrelevancies in order to focus on what is primary. Political campaigns and media projects can aim at maintaining ig-norance; for instance, by avoiding or ignoring what is considered to be misleading evidence. Here, I have unearthed several educa-tional strategies that aim at generating or maintaining ignorance to ultimately reach certain positive epistemic ends, such as knowledge and understanding. I leave it for another time to explore whether these specific strategies are unique to the realm of education or whether they can also be found elsewhere.

10

Ignorance That Excuses

Introduction

Ever since Aristotle, it has been acknowledged that ignorance sometimes excuses.[1] For instance, I am blameless for offering a friend poisoned chocolate pudding if I am utterly ignorant as to its being poisoned—unless, perhaps, I *should not* have been ignorant. But precisely when does ignorance excuse? It turns out that this question can be divided into at least five further questions:

(1) Ignorance *of what* excuses?

(2) Given my earlier distinctions between different kinds and varieties of ignorance in chapter 4, *which kinds and varieties* of ignorance excuse?

(3) Does only *factive* ignorance excuse, or can one also be excused by *normative* ignorance?

(4) Is one excused only if one acts *from* ignorance, or does it suffice to act *in* ignorance?[2]

(5) Can *culpable* ignorance excuse as well?

The third, fourth, and fifth questions have received significant attention in the literature; the first and second have hardly received

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[1] See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.1.13–27, 3.5.7–12, 5.8.3–12. See also Brandt (1969, 349); Fischer and Ravizza (1998, 12–13); Goldman (1970, 208); Rosen (2003, 61–62); Sartorio (2017); Smith (1983); Zimmerman (2008, 169–205).

[2] For the former view, see Donagan (1977, 128–130); Guerrero (2007, 63–64); Rivera-López (2006, 135); Zimmerman (1997, 424; 2017, 80). For the latter view, see Houlgate (1968, 112–113); Rosen (2008, 598n).

any attention at all. They will, therefore, be the focus of this chapter. In answering them, I will employ several epistemological ideas and distinctions that I developed in part 1 of the book, such as those between the varieties of ignorance and that between propositional and practical ignorance. We shall see that an answer to the first question sheds light on the third question as well. The fifth question will be addressed in the next chapter, which zooms in on responsibility for ignorance. I will leave the fourth question for another occasion.

Excuses have to do with blame and responsibility. Let me be explicit that when I talk about these phenomena, I focus on such things as moral, prudential, and epistemic rather than legal blame and responsibility. Here, I will not attempt to spell out how we should understand moral, epistemic, and prudential responsibility and blame. For our purposes, it suffices that there is a clear difference between these kinds of responsibility and blame, on the one hand, and legal responsibility and blame, on the other. I do not delve into legal responsibility here because, at least on orthodox criminal-law doctrine, ignorance of the law does not excuse. Also, the law knows strict liability: one can be legally blameworthy even if one should not have known better. In certain countries, for instance, it is prohibited to sell intoxicating liquors to minors, and one will be liable to legal punishment for doing so even if one is blamelessly ignorant that the buyer is a minor—say, because one is presented with convincing but misleading evidence.

The chapter is structured as follows. I first spell out what it is to be excused for something. I argue that one is excused if and only if one did something wrong by violating an obligation and one is blameless for that. Next, I argue that an excuse can be provided by ignorance of four kinds of propositions: ignorance of one's having the obligation in question, ignorance of one's having the ability to meet that obligation, ignorance of how to meet that obligation, and lack of foresight regarding that obligation. I also argue that it follows from this that normative ignorance can excuse as well

as factive ignorance, and I reply to several objections one might level against this line of reasoning. In addition, I defend the claim that there are important differences between the extents to which varieties of ignorance excuse. Upon closer inspection, it turns out that disbelieving, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance normally fully excuse, whereas suspending and undecided ignorance provide at most a partial excuse. Along the way, we will see that practical and objectual ignorance can excuse as well. Finally, I consider when ignorance counts as an excuse for a group. What I say in this chapter is based on earlier work of mine on ignorance that excuses (particularly Peels 2014; 2017c, chapter 5). However, we will see that the epistemology I developed in part 1 is able to take us several important steps further.

Excuses

Let us first get a firmer grip on what it is to be excused. Let me stress that I do not mean to ask when someone is *verbally* excused by someone else. People can be excused for something even if no one verbally excuses them. Also, a person may be verbally excused by someone while being utterly guilty. Thus, I understand excuses not as speech acts performed by a person in defense of someone's φ-ing,[3] but as those states of affairs the actualization of which renders one blameless (thus also Baron 2017, 60).

As the etymology of *excuse* suggests,[4] a person is excused for something only if she is *blameless* for it. And she is blameless for something if she is not the proper object of the reactive attitude of blame.[5] I take it that someone is not the proper object of blame if

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[3] The speech act interpretation is advocated by Austin (1979, 176); Brandt (1969, 337); Zimmerman (1988, 64–69).

[4] The Latin expression *ex causa* means "out of" or "away from" an "accusation."

[5] For more on the reactive attitude of blame, see Peter Strawson's (1974) landmark essay.

she does not *deserve* to be blamed. It is clear, however, that being blameless cannot be the whole story about excuses. I am blameless for drinking two cups of coffee a day, but I am not excused for that. Blamelessness seems necessary for being excused, but not sufficient. What, in conjunction with blamelessness, *is* sufficient for being excused?[6] One suggestion is that the thing for which one is excused should be objectively bad or undesirable. For instance, it may have harmful consequences.[7] Thus, a doctor is excused for giving her patient a deadly medicine if she falsely believed it would cure her patient—that is, if she is blameless for that false belief. Here, the excuse for her objectively bad action is her blameless ignorance of the consequences of her giving that medicine.

However, the idea that one is excused for something only if the act or omission in question is objectively bad seems to fall short. First, I am blameless for not solving the Middle East problem and for not curing all cancer patients in my country. These states of affairs are objectively bad. Clearly, though, I am not *excused* for these states of affairs. That is because I have no obligation to prevent them from obtaining. Thus, the fact that one blamelessly does something that is objectively bad is not sufficient for being excused for that.

Second, most philosophers agree that we can be excused for violating *subjective* obligations, even if there is nothing objectively bad about (not) performing the act in question. It is controversial precisely how subjective obligations are to be spelled out—in terms of what one believes about one's *obligation* or in terms of what one believes about *badness*; in terms of what one *believes* or in terms of what one *should believe*. However, that debate need not concern us here.[8] All that I would like to draw attention to at this point is

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[6] Austin (1979, 175–177) and Brandt (1969, 337) are quite ambiguous on what it is that one is excused for. The view that I defend here is similar to that of Fields (1991, 11).

[7] Cf. Rosen (2008, 592), according to whom an excuse is "any consideration that blocks the normal inference from bad act to culpable agent."

[8] Elsewhere, I have defended an account of subjective obligations. See Peels (2017c, 97–98).

the intuitive idea that we have subjective obligations—that is, obligations that arise because of the subject's perspective on things. Thus, if a doctor is physically forced to give her patient a medicine that she falsely believes will harm her patient, it seems that she is excused, even though there is nothing objectively bad about giving her patient that medicine. So, objective badness of the relevant state of affairs is not necessary for being excused for its actualization, nor is it in conjunction with blamelessness sufficient for it.

Why, then, is the view that one is excused for a bad state of affairs initially plausible? A good explanation seems to be that this is because we can be excused only if we have violated an obligation. And stereotypical obligations, such as an obligation not to kill, are obligations to avoid some kind of objective badness. The necessary conditions for being excused are easily confused with what usually accompanies them.

That one is excused only if one has violated an obligation squares well with an idea that is widely accepted in ethics, namely, that we should distinguish between *justifications* and *excuses*. Justifications are states of affairs that imply that one did nothing wrong because one did not violate any obligation. Excuses, however, are states of affairs that imply that, even though one *did* do something wrong because one violated an obligation, one is not to be blamed for it.[9]

One can be excused, then, only if one has violated an obligation—more precisely, an *all-things-considered* rather than a mere *pro tanto* obligation. For example, if I violate a pro tanto obligation to prepare for my biology exam by meeting my moral obligation to attend the funeral of a friend who died in a car accident, then it seems that I am *justified* in not preparing for my exam rather than *excused* for it. Ordinary language may be a little vague on this point, but most philosophers prefer to describe such a case in terms of *being justified in* rather than *being excused for* violating an obligation.

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[9] For a distinction along these lines, see, for instance, Austin (1979, 176); Baron (2017, 53).

The details are tricky here. What if I violate, say, *both* my pro tanto obligation to prepare for my biology exam *and* my all-things-considered obligation to attend the funeral of my friend? It would seem strange to say that in that case, I need no excuse for not preparing for my biology exam just because that duty is trumped by another, more important duty. If, somehow, I choose not to attend the funeral of my friend but do not prepare for my biology exam either, one may wonder why, given that I did not attend the funeral, I did not at least prepare for my exam. It looks like in this situation I both need and miss an excuse for not preparing for my exam. Or imagine that I violate my all-things-considered duty to attend the funeral and plan on preparing for my exam, but my jealous housemate prevents me physically from accessing my biology books. Would we not say in that case that I am excused for not preparing for my exam by my housemate's interference? That seems right to me. But what should we conclude from such cases? For what, exactly, is one excused here? Is one excused for not preparing for one's biology exam? Or is one, perhaps, excused for not preparing for the biology exam once one has decided not to meet one's all-things-considered duty to go to the funeral? In what follows, I focus on being excused for violating one's all-things-considered duty, as that seems to be the most common and less controversial case.

I take particular excuses to be *sufficient* for blamelessness, not *necessary*. For it seems that different excuses can obtain simultaneously. Imagine that Oscar gives a piece of chocolate to his six-year-old daughter. Unbeknownst to him, it is poisoned. Moreover, someone is pointing a gun at her and threatens to kill her if he does not give her that chocolate. His acting under duress excuses him for giving it to her. But it is not necessary for his blamelessness. After all, even if he had not acted under duress, he would have been excused for giving the chocolate to his daughter, for he was ignorant that it was poisoned. Hence, Oscar is excused both by his acting under duress and by his ignorance. This is because both are

sufficient conditions for being blameless for giving his daughter that piece of chocolate. One is excused, then, if one blamelessly violates a subjective or objective obligation.

I said that if one is excused, one is blameless. This needs qualification, though. Some excuses are *full* excuses, whereas others are only *partial* excuses. When someone is fully excused, she is not blameworthy at all.[10] If Oscar gives his daughter a piece of chocolate that, unbeknownst to him, was poisoned by a maniac who happened to choose his house for his malicious action, and Oscar had no indication whatsoever to think that the chocolate is poisoned, then he is not blameworthy at all for giving it to her. Slightly more formally:

> *Full excuse*: some person S's ignorance fully excuses her for the actualization of some state of affairs Σ[11] iff (i) S fails to meet an all-things-considered obligation to prevent the actualization of Σ or to (not) do something which would have prevented the actualization of Σ, and (ii) due to S's ignorance, S is blameless for the actualization of Σ.

But not all excuses are *full* excuses. Imagine that Oscar heard on the news that some maniac is poisoning people's chocolate bars in his neighborhood. He notices that his chocolate bar is opened. But then, he knows, he often leaves opened chocolate bars in the desk and finishes them later. He decides to give it to his daughter. Imagine that it is poisoned. It seems that in that case he is blameworthy for giving it to her; he acts recklessly and violates an objective obligation not to give it to her. Still, it seems, he is not as blameworthy as he would have been if he had *known* or *truly believed* that it was

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[10] This distinction should not be confused with that between *excuses* and *exemptions*. Excuses, such as certain kinds of ignorance of particular facts, remove blameworthiness, whereas exemptions, such as insanity and infancy, remove all responsibility (thus also Baron 2017, 62; Mason 2017).

[11] I say "state of affairs" rather than "action," for it seems that people can also be excused for omissions, beliefs, intentions, affections, vices, and other things.

poisoned. Thus, his ignorance that it is poisoned makes him less blameworthy than he would have been if he had *not* been ignorant, but he is still blameworthy to some degree. The following analysis of partial excuses captures this idea:

> *Partial excuse*: S's ignorance partially excuses her for the actualization of some state of affairs Σ iff (i) S fails to meet an all-things-considered obligation to prevent the actualization of Σ or to (not) do something which would have prevented the actualization of Σ, and (ii) S is blameworthy for the actualization of Σ, but (iii) due to S's ignorance, S is less blameworthy for the actualization of Σ than she would have been if she had *not* been ignorant.

It is, of course, also possible that one has no excuse or that *one's ignorance* does not excuse. If Oscar knows that the chocolate bar has been poisoned and he is ignorant that the president was brushing his teeth at the moment at which the chocolate bar was poisoned, then *that* ignorance provides no excuse whatsoever for giving the chocolate bar to his daughter. Thus, one's ignorance provides no excuse in cases in which one would have been equally blameworthy had one *not* been ignorant, or if one is excused by something else, such as acting under duress.

Ignorance of What Excuses?

Remarkably, the third question that I mentioned, namely, whether normative ignorance can excuse as well as factive ignorance, has received much more attention than the first, more general question about ignorance *of what* excuses. We will see that my answer to the latter also sheds light on the former.

The literature on excusing ignorance just takes it for granted that such ignorance is *propositional* ignorance. In chapter 2, though, we saw there is also objectual and practical ignorance. We should,

then, examine whether these other kinds of ignorance can excuse as well.

In this section, I argue that there are four different kinds of things ignorance of which excuses. In arguing this, I aim to lay out the general categories of things ignorance of which excuses. Thus, if Oscar is ignorant that the chocolate bar is poisoned, that excuses him, but ignorance of chocolate bar poisoning is not a general category of things ignorance of which excuses. Rather, Oscar is ignorant that he should not give the chocolate to his daughter (because it is poisoned). Below, we will see that in such a case, one is ignorant of one's objective obligation.

Ignorance of One's Obligation

Imagine that Jenny enrolls in the History Department at a university and that, as a student, it is her obligation to read the entire two-hundred-page student manual. However, her tutor told her she need not read it because all important information is shared in some other way. Consequently, Jenny is disbelievingly ignorant of her obligation: she falsely believes it is *not* her obligation.[12] Because it is perfectly responsible to trust one's tutor, she is fully excused by her ignorance for violating her obligation.[13] Thus, we have found a first phenomenon ignorance of which partially or even fully excuses:

> *Ignorance of one's obligation*: S is ignorant that she has an all-things-considered obligation O (not) to actualize Σ or (not) to do something which would have prevented the actualization of Σ.

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[12] For the notion of disbelieving ignorance, see chapter 4.

[13] For the same intuition, see Plantinga (1990, 52). According to Fields (1994), having acted from a false moral belief is not an excuse. In his defense of this thesis, however, Fields conflates blame and disapproval. Also, he provides a pragmatic justification of the practice of blaming without considering the issue of whether someone *deserves* blame.

This is cast in terms of one's all-things-considered obligation. After all, one can know that one has an obligation to φ and yet be ignorant that one has an all-things-considered obligation to φ. I may realize that I have an obligation to send someone my comments by today because I promised to do so, but falsely believe that that obligation is trumped by an obligation to help a friend who has fallen seriously ill (it turns out that my presence is entirely superfluous), so that I am ignorant that sending in my comments is my all-things-considered obligation. In such a scenario, my ignorance may excuse me for violating my all-things-considered obligation to send in my comments, despite my knowing that I have an obligation to do so.

The second disjunct is included because sometimes, the thing for which one is excused is not something that is under one's control. Imagine that there is a bomb in the room and that there is an action—say, pressing a specific button—I can perform that has a forty percent chance of preventing the bomb from exploding. Imagine further that if I were in fact to perform that action, the bomb would not explode. Due to no fault of my own, I am *ignorant* of what that action is. Now, take the event of the bomb's exploding. That is not something I do or do not intentionally actualize. What I do or do not actualize is the action of pressing the button. However, pressing the button is relevantly related to the bomb's not exploding. Therefore, I can be excused for the bomb's explosion by my ignorance of the fact that I should press that particular button.

One might worry that the idea that disbelieving ignorance can excuse is too strong in that it contradicts the principle, advocated by a number of philosophers, that one should act from p—treat p as a reason to act—only if one *knows* that p.[14] Such a principle might

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[14] For a defense of this principle, see, for instance, Hawthorne and Stanley (2008, 577–578). It is important to note that this principle is meant not merely as an evaluative principle but as a principle that has to do with responsibility, as is evidenced by Hawthorne and Stanley's use of the terms *blame* (pp. 572 and 587) and *excuse* (pp. 573 and 582). Hawthorne and Stanley explicitly allow, though, that one can be excused for violating the principle that one should act only from knowledge.

be taken to imply or suggest that one is blameless for acting on the basis of one's disbelief that *p* only if one *knows* that not-*p*, not if one merely blamelessly disbelieves that *p*. I do not find this objection convincing. On the one hand, if the principle does not allow for excusing circumstances, it is clearly false. Someone who believes on the basis of good evidence that *p* and who has no reason to mistrust her belief that *p* clearly blamelessly acts on *p*, even if it turns out that *p* is false. On the other hand, if the principle allows for excusing circumstances, then blameless disbelieving ignorance appears to be one of the best candidates. If one believes something is (not) the case and one has no reason to mistrust that belief, then it seems one is off the hook for acting on that belief even if it is false or otherwise fails to be an instance of knowledge.[15]

Ignorance of One's Ability to Meet an Obligation

Imagine that during class, a professor assigns to two of her students, Stephanie and Rachel, the task of giving a class presentation on Operation Valkyrie, a well-known attempt to assassinate Hitler. Stephanie knows that if she is to give that presentation, she needs to borrow certain books from the university library that are not available online. Reading those books is the only way to acquire the relevant information. Imagine, however, that right after class, the city is flooded because of heavy rainfall, so that she cannot reach the library. By accident, Rachel (not Stephanie) finds out that another professor of theirs has a large World War II collection that includes all the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie.

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[15] Elizabeth Harman (2011) has argued that disbelieving ignorance of one's obligation does not always excuse. However, I find the description of her cases insufficiently detailed to see whether they are convincing counterexamples. In any case, I have argued elsewhere that if we take people's dormant and tacit beliefs into account, we can explain why people are blameworthy in many if not all of the kinds of scenarios she describes; see Peels (2011b).

That professor's house is easily accessible, and she is happy to lend her books to any of her students. Because Stephanie is completely unaware that the professor has these books, her ignorance that she is able to meet her obligation seems to provide a full excuse for not preparing a good presentation on Operation Valkyrie. Thus, we have found a second phenomenon ignorance of which excuses:

> *Ignorance of one's ability to meet one's obligation*: *S* is ignorant that she is able to meet her all-things-considered obligation *O* (not) to actualize *Σ* or (not) to do something which would have prevented the actualization of *Σ*.

By the "ability to actualize *Σ*" I mean something rather simple here, namely, the physical or mental feasibility of actualizing *Σ*. It does not require that one knows or has true beliefs about how to actualize *Σ*. It is because of this rather restricted meaning of the phrase "ability to actualize *Σ*" that we can distinguish the kind of ignorance discussed here from that discussed in the following section.

What about *deep* ignorance that one is able to meet one's obligation? Remember that if a person is deeply ignorant that *p*, then she neither believes that *p* nor disbelieves that *p* nor suspends belief on *p*. She has never considered whether *p* is true. It is much harder to imagine that such ignorance excuses, but that is only because it is much harder to imagine that one is blameless for not even *considering* whether *p* is true. It is clear, for instance, that if Stephanie never considers going to the library, she is blameworthy for that. For if Stephanie has to give a presentation, she *should consider* going to the library. However, it seems that *if,* somehow, an agent's deep ignorance that she is able to meet her obligation is blameless, we cannot blame the agent for violating her obligation.

Ignorance of How to Meet an Obligation

The third kind of phenomenon ignorance of which excuses is ignorance of how to meet one's obligation:[16]

> *Ignorance of how to meet one's obligation*: S is ignorant of how to meet her all-things-considered obligation O (not) to actualize Σ or (not) to do something which would have prevented the actualization of Σ.

This kind of ignorance closely resembles the kind of ignorance distinguished in the previous section—that is, ignorance of the fact that one can meet one's obligation. It is crucially different, though. Imagine that, as mentioned previously, Rachel has accidentally found out about the books on Operation Valkyrie in the other professor's World War II collection. Now, imagine that Rachel tells Stephanie that *she* (Stephanie) can prepare her presentation, despite the fact that the library cannot be reached because of the recent floods. Imagine also that, while Stephanie knows that Rachel is highly reliable, they are so intellectually competitive that Rachel refuses to share with Stephanie how she can get access to the relevant books. Then Stephanie will know *that* she can meet her obligation, but she will be ignorant as to *how* to do it. Of course, if one knows *how* to meet one's obligation, then one knows *that* one can meet one's obligation. But, as this example shows, the reverse does not hold. This means that in some cases, one is excused by practical rather than merely propositional ignorance—namely, those cases in which one's ignorance of how to do something is not reducible to propositional ignorance.

To the extent that ignorance of how to meet one's obligation is *propositional*, ignorance of this kind fully excuses both when it

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[16] Many philosophers, such as Rosen (2008), overlook this third kind of exculpatory ignorance.

is *disbelieving* ignorance and when it is *deep* ignorance. When Stephanie believes on the basis of strong evidence that the professor has no books on Operation Valkyrie, or when she has not even considered it and is blameless for that, it seems that her ignorance of how to meet her obligation fully excuses her for not preparing a good presentation on Operation Valkyrie.

Lack of Foresight

The final category of ignorance that excuses is rare and rather hard to spell out precisely. One can be excused by lack of foresight. A person can know or truly believe that she has an obligation to φ, that she is able to φ, and how to φ, and yet be ignorant that not φ-ing will result in the actualization of Σ. For instance, imagine that I have an obligation to prepare for my biology exam and that I know I am able to meet that obligation by reading Miller and Levine's *Biology*. Imagine also that I culpably fail to meet this obligation. However, I am inculpably ignorant that the knowledge I would have acquired by reading the book would have enabled me to save someone's life in an utterly unforeseeable situation taking place a week after the exam. It seems that in such a case, I am *blameless* for not saving that person's life. Because by not saving that person's life I, presumably, violate an obligation, this means that I am *excused* for not saving her life.

But in virtue of what am I excused in such a situation? One might think it is my *ignorance of how* to save that person's life—that is, practical ignorance. This suggestion, however, is unconvincing. If I do not know how to save that person's life, and if that ignorance is blameworthy, it is not yet clear whether I am to be blamed for not saving that person's life. For whether or not I am to be blamed for that depends on whether, at the time I violated my obligation to prepare for my biology exam, I could *foresee* that not doing so would result in my ignorance of propositions that I would have to

know in order to save someone's life on that future occasion. Hence, a second, more convincing proposal is that what excuses me is my blameless lack of foresight regarding my future obligation to save that person's life and my inability to meet that obligation in virtue of not preparing for my biology exam.

This is not to say that I am excused by lack of foresight in *every* case in which I violate my obligation to prepare for my biology exam and in which I later need the relevant biological knowledge to save someone's life. Imagine that after my biology exam, but before encountering the victim, I learn that the biology book contains life-saving information that I will be needing at some point in the nearby future, but that I can no longer acquire that information. In that case, it is not my lack of foresight that excuses me for violating my obligation to save the victim's life, for when I encounter the victim, I no longer lack such foresight. Rather, it is the inability to gather the relevant information after my biology exam. All I claim here is that in at least *some* cases, lack of foresight provides a full excuse for violating an obligation.

It is a complex issue precisely how *lack of foresight* should be spelled out. Rather than trying to provide a precise definition, I point to two characteristics of such foresight. First, it seems that foresight does not require *conscious* or *occurrent* beliefs about one's future obligations, future inabilities, or future ignorance. If foresight required such occurrent beliefs, we would hardly ever be excused by lack of foresight, for it is impossible to occurrently foresee many of the consequences of the violation of one's obligations. It seems that dormant or tacit beliefs suffice. By *dormant beliefs* or *tacit beliefs* I mean, roughly, that one would consciously or occurrently believe the proposition in question if one were to consider it.[17] Second, one need not believe that one will actually have the relevant obligation,

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[17] For a more detailed articulation of what I mean by *dormant beliefs* and *tacit beliefs*, see Nottelmann and Peels (2013, 238, 248–249). I return to such beliefs in the next chapter.

or that one will actually be unable to meet that obligation, or that one will actually be ignorant of how to meet that obligation. It suffices if one believes it is *sufficiently likely* that one will have that obligation at some time in the future and that, by violating one's present obligation, one *sufficiently raises the chances* of being unable to meet that future obligation or of being ignorant regarding that obligation.

Here, again, both disbelieving and deep lack of foresight provide a full excuse. If I have deep lack of foresight because I have not even considered whether my biology exam might be relevant to saving someone's life in the future, and if I am blameless for that, it seems that I am not blameworthy for not saving that person's life. Similarly, if I have every reason to believe that whether or not I prepare for my biology exam will make no difference to whether or not I can save someone's life on future occasions and, therefore, I disbelieve that, it seems that I am not blameworthy at all if I fail to save someone's life on some future occasion when I could have saved that person's life with the knowledge I would have acquired if I had prepared for my biology exam.

What this short discussion shows, then, is at least two things. First, ignorance of rather different sorts of things—obligations, abilities, future events—can excuse. It is important to study whether the four categories discussed here are exhaustive and whether each of my characterizations is correct. If not, we may miss out on other important cases of ignorance that excuses. Or we may misconstrue whether or to what degree someone is excused by ignorance. These things matter to moral evaluations but possibly also to legal assessments. Second, this discussion shows that propositional ignorance is not the only kind of ignorance that excuses; certain kinds of practical ignorance can excuse as well. Of course, objectual ignorance can also excuse, such as one's lack of acquaintance with a certain subject matter. However, it seems that in each situation in which objectual ignorance excuses, it will be because one of the above-mentioned four categories obtains. And that means that

even in those situations, it is, in the end, propositional or practical ignorance that excuses.

Does Normative Ignorance Excuse as Well?

As I pointed out above, various philosophers have argued that factive ignorance excuses, whereas moral or normative ignorance does not excuse.[18] In answering the question whether they are right, I first point out that we should not treat the words *moral* and *normative* univocally here. Holly Smith (2017, 98) gives an example that illustrates the difference. Sophie fails to pay attention during a class on life-saving techniques because she is texting with her boyfriend. Consequently, she is culpably ignorant of the fact that the Heimlich maneuver should not be applied to babies. Later in her life, because of her culpable ignorance, she applies the Heimlich maneuver to a choking baby, with disastrous consequences. Now, this is clearly a case of *normative ignorance*: it is ignorance of how things should or should not be, not ignorance of how things actually are. Sophie is blameworthy because the ignorance from which she acts is blameworthy. But it is easy to revise the scenario in such a way that her ignorance is blameless. For instance, she pays good attention in class, but the teacher deceives the class on various medical maneuvers. In that case, it should be clear that Sophie is blameless for applying the Heimlich maneuver to a choking baby because she reasonably acts from what she blamelessly believes about the situation—this is a case of blameless ignorance. But here is the point: the norm that one should not apply the Heimlich maneuver to babies is a *prudential* rather than a *moral* one. The case involves *normative* ignorance, albeit only prudential ignorance. What this

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[18] See, for instance, Harman (2011). For a similar view, see Arpaly (2003); FitzPatrick (2008); Guerrero (2007).

case shows at least, then, is that normative ignorance can excuse as well as factive ignorance.

Does *moral* ignorance excuse as well? It is hard to see how it could not. Imagine that Luca is abducted by a neuroscientist who hates him. The neuroscientist implants a device that makes Luca believe it is fine to cheat on his wife, and after that makes sure he does not remember anything of the event. Subsequently, he cheats on his wife because he thinks it is perfectly morally permissible to do so. Apart from this bizarre deviation, everything is fairly normal with him. He is in this case blamelessly disbelievingly ignorant of the fact that one should not cheat on one's spouse. Because he is not to be blamed for his ignorance and he acts from that ignorance, it seems undeniable that he is *excused* for cheating on his wife. Depending on the details of the case, Luca may even be *exempted*, that is, bear no responsibility at all for doing so.

Moreover, we previously saw that ignorance of one's obligation excuses one in a wide variety of circumstances. I may be ignorant of my moral obligation not to give this pudding to my friend because it is poisoned. If I am blamelessly ignorant of the fact that it is poisoned and, thus, of my obligation that I should not give it to him, it is hard to see how I could be blameworthy for giving him the pudding. Of course, in this case I am also *factively* ignorant, namely, of the fact that the pudding is poisoned. Maybe the idea is that one cannot be excused by ignorance if one is *only* normatively ignorant. But that seems equally untenable. This is because it all depends on *why* one is normatively ignorant: Should one have known better? Or is one's normative ignorance due to, say, a neurological defect, indoctrination, the implantation of a malicious device, the manipulative education one received, or the fact that the moral truth was just particularly hard or maybe even impossible to see in these challenging circumstances? Remember that I stipulated at the outset of this chapter that we are concerned with *blameless* ignorance. Now, if one's normative ignorance is blameless for one or more of

the reasons I just gave, it is hard to see how it could possibly fail to excuse.

Perhaps what the philosophers who oppose the idea that moral ignorance can excuse have in mind is that *moral ignorance across the board* does not apply. That is, someone who is thoroughly antisocial and radically mistaken about morality is not thereby off the hook. One might say that such a person—a psychopath, for instance—is not ignorant but just utterly incapacitated. This is questionable, however. Elinor Mason (2017), for example, has argued that the exemption we take to hold in the case of psychopaths should not be understood in terms of an incapacity (the lack of motivation of some kind) but in terms of large-scale or deep normative ignorance. But if this is somehow not true, I think it is worthwhile to stress that my point is conditional. What I want to say is that *if* someone is morally ignorant and she is blameless for that, then such moral ignorance excuses.

The only remaining option, then, is to argue that moral ignorance is *always* blameworthy. But that move seems problematic. If one is morally ignorant—whether or not across the board—due to a brain tumor, indoctrination, or manipulation, it seems undeniable that in most such cases, one's moral ignorance is utterly blameless. And if someone acts on that blameless ignorance, it seems hard to deny that it fully excuses.

Of course, there is also much moral ignorance—perhaps even moral ignorance across the board—that does not excuse at all. The German Schutzstaffel officer and physician Josef Mengele was fully responsible for what he did to concentration camp prisoners, even if he was ignorant of many profound moral truths about human beings. This, however, is perfectly compatible with my account: I merely make the conditional claim that *if* someone is blamelessly morally ignorant, then such moral ignorance excuses as well as factive ignorance.

Which Varieties of Ignorance Excuse?

We saw that, under certain conditions, *disbelieving* and *deep* ignorance provide a full excuse for an action or a consequence of an action. The same applies to blameless *unconsidered* and *complete* ignorance.[19] Here is why: if one is ignorant merely because one has never so much as considered the true proposition in question, and one is blameless for not considering it, it is hard to see how one could be blameworthy for such ignorance. And if one lacks the conceptual resources to consider some true proposition (a case of complete ignorance), and one is blameless for that lack, it seems that one is equally blameless for such ignorance.

Let us now turn to *suspending* and *undecided* ignorance. In this section, I argue that we have good reason to think that suspending and undecided ignorance by themselves never provide a *full* excuse. I consider each of the four categories of potentially excusing ignorance in turn.

First, imagine that Jenny suspends judgment on whether it is her obligation, as a history graduate student, to read the student manual. I think it is clear that such suspending ignorance all by itself, even if it is blameless, does not provide a full excuse. If Jenny suspends belief on whether she should read the manual because she only vaguely remembers someone saying something to that effect, then it seems she should either err on the side of caution by reading the manual or find out whether or not she should read the manual. What I mean is that in such a case, suspending ignorance does not provide a *full* excuse. Yet, it may well provide a *partial* excuse. At least in certain cases, someone who fails to read a manual because she suspends belief on whether she should, should not be blamed as much as someone who is aware that she should read it but who chooses not to do it—say, out of laziness.

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[19] For detailed accounts of these varieties of ignorance, see chapter 4.

Second, imagine that Stephanie suspends judgment on whether she can go to the library. It seems that she should then try to find out whether she can reach the library or—if it is not too dangerous— simply try to reach it. If she neither tries to reach the library nor investigates the matter further, it seems that her suspending ignorance does not provide a full excuse. (It might even provide no excuse whatsoever, but I will not discuss that here.) If she investigates the issue but finds no answer, she can simply go and have a look, if it is not too dangerous. If it then turns out that the library cannot be reached, then *that* or her blameless belief that that is the case counts as her excuse. If it turns out to be too dangerous, then she is excused by *that* or by her blameless belief that that is the case.

Third, one might think that, mutatis mutandis, the same applies when Stephanie knows that she is able to meet her obligation but suspends judgment on how she can meet her obligation. If she knows she can collect the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie but suspends judgment on whether her professor has those books and is willing to lend them, she can send her an email or try to call her. But here is the problem: virtually any professor might happen to have a World War II collection that includes the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie. True, this is unlikely, but Stephanie has no reason to completely rule out this possibility for those professors she does not know well. But then, if she considers all those professors and suspends judgment in each case, it follows that she is *not* fully excused by her ignorance of how to meet her obligation—and that seems clearly false. I think there are two ways to meet this worry, though. First, one might think that, given the low probabilities involved, it is rational for Stephanie to disbelieve that—rather than suspend judgment on whether—a particular professor whom she does not know has the relevant books on Operation Valkyrie. If the probabilities were much higher, one might suggest, she would have an obligation to investigate, and suspending ignorance would not fully excuse. Second, and more importantly, even if it is rational to suspend judgment for each professor as to whether she possesses

the relevant books and whether she is willing to lend them, that suspending ignorance (on a large series of propositions) *all by itself* does not provide a full excuse. It is only when we add that it is too hard—or just improper, or some such thing—to find out whether one of the professors has the relevant books that Stephanie is fully excused.

Fourth, when it comes to lack of foresight, it also seems that only disbelieving and deep ignorance provide a *full* excuse. Imagine that I suspend belief on the true proposition that by violating a particular obligation, I sufficiently raise the chances of violating certain future obligations. Imagine also that I nonetheless violate that obligation. It seems that that will not get me off the hook. True, in at least some cases, I will not be as blameworthy as I would have been had I known this true proposition. But it seems that I am not completely blameless either. Hence, suspending lack of foresight provides at most a partial excuse.

One might think there are exceptional circumstances in which suspending ignorance *does* fully excuse. Imagine that I should φ, but that I suspend belief about whether I should φ because someone puts a gun to my friend's head and says that he will pull the trigger if I believe or disbelieve that I should φ (for the sake of the argument, I assume that I somehow bring about suspension of belief). Does my blameless suspending ignorance by itself fully excuse me for failing to φ in a situation like this? No, it does not. Remember that, as I said earlier, excuses are *sufficient* conditions for being blameless. But my suspending ignorance in this scenario is by itself *not* sufficient for my blamelessness. Something about acting under duress—someone's putting a gun to my friend's head—should be added to explain why I am blameless.

One may wonder precisely why, in opposition to disbelieving and deep ignorance, suspending ignorance provides at most a partial excuse. Here, I have focused on arguing *that* there is this difference rather than explaining *why* there is this difference. What I said provides a suggestion, though. It seems that suspending ignorance,

in opposition to disbelieving and deep ignorance, gives rise to further obligations, namely, an obligation to investigate or find something out if the stakes are sufficiently high.

Note that all this equally applies to *undecided* ignorance. Imagine that I realize I have not heard from my disabled sister in two weeks, whereas she normally calls me every week. However, I am then distracted by a stranger asking for directions, so that I have not yet formed an attitude toward the issue of whether I should give her a call. Then such undecided ignorance does not fully excuse me for not trying to get in touch with her. I should return to the issue and then take action.

Group Ignorance as an Excuse

So far, we have focused on the conditions under which *individual* ignorance excuses. Yet, it is undeniable that people sometimes appeal to *group ignorance* to excuse themselves. After the Second World War, numerous Germans claimed that they had been ignorant of the existence of concentration camps and that that excused them for not opposing the Nazi regime. American officials claimed that they were ignorant of the upcoming attack on the Capitol on January 6, 2021, and that that excused them for its being completely overrun. And numerous governments worldwide appealed to ignorance of COVID-19 and lack of acquaintance with pandemics to excuse their slowness in responding to the spread of the coronavirus. Groups can appeal to group ignorance to excuse the group, individuals can appeal to group ignorance to excuse the group, and individuals can appeal to group ignorance to excuse themselves as members of the group. Here, let us zoom in on what appears to be the core case: group ignorance that potentially excuses the group.

The literature on group excuses is still small.[20] My epistemology of ignorance allows us to make a couple of new points.

To make these points, I will use one particular example: the Srebrenica genocide. In July 1995, during the Bosnian War, 370 lightly armed Dutchbat soldiers were assigned the task of protecting the town of Srebrenica, an area that the United Nations had declared a "safe area." The Dutch, outnumbered by better-armed opponents, surrendered to the Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska (VSR) under the command of Ratko Mladić. Mladić's forces subsequently massacred more than eight thousand Bosniak Muslim men and boys and transferred and abused more than twenty-five thousand Bosniak Muslim women. Dutch army generals and government officials initially appealed to both inability—being only lightly armed—and ignorance, in particular ignorance of the genocidal intentions of Mladić's men. In subsequent years, the Dutch supreme court found the Dutch state liable for not doing more to prevent at least some of the deaths. Here, my purpose is not to assess that verdict or evaluate the actions of the Dutch army, but to see what light an epistemology of ignorance could shed on whether and how group ignorance excuses.

I think two important points about potentially excusing group ignorance can be made and illustrated by reference to this disturbing example. First, group ignorance seems to structurally work the same way as individual ignorance when it comes to the issue of when it counts as an excuse. Of course, ignorance excuses only if it truly is ignorance: if the Dutch army generals, for instance, knew full well that a genocide was likely, they cannot be excused by ignorance. Moreover, ignorance—with a few exceptions— excuses only when it is *blameless*. If the Dutch army generals and officials were ignorant of the VSR's intention to murder thousands of Muslim men and boys because they simply looked away from the crimes already committed (rape, murder), their ignorance was

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[20] For one important recent piece, see Tanguay-Renaud (2013).

not blameless. Finally, disbelieving, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance, as long as they are blameless, *fully* excuse, whereas suspending ignorance and undecided ignorance at most *partially* excuse. Imagine, for instance, that the Dutch army officials were sincerely convinced, *and blamelessly so*, that the VSR would treat the Muslim civilians well. In that case, it seems, they may well be fully excused. Compare this with a situation in which they suspended judgment on whether the VSR would kill thousands of civilians (suspending ignorance) or in which they had not yet taken a stance on the issue (undecided ignorance). Given what was at stake, handing over thousands of civilians to the VSR in the face of such ignorance would clearly have been deeply morally culpable.

Second, what is unique about potentially excusing group ignorance in comparison with individual ignorance is the factors that need to be considered to establish whether that ignorance is blameless. Remember that in chapter 5, I defended the following account of group ignorance:

> *The Dynamic Account of group ignorance*: a group *G* is ignorant of a true proposition *p* if and only if (i) either a significant number of *G*'s operative members are ignorant of *p* or enough operative members of *G* know/truly believe that *p* but *G* as a group fails to know/truly believe that *p*, and (ii) this is the result of a group dynamic, such as group agency, collective epistemic virtues or vices, external manipulation, lack of time, interest, concepts, resources, or information, or a combination of these.

This suggests that we should consider at least two things in assessing whether the group's ignorance is blameworthy: (i) Should the ignorant operative members have known better? In other words, did those operative members as operative members of the group (rather than as individuals) have a duty to perform certain belief-influencing actions that would have removed their ignorance? Take Colonel Thomas Karremans, commander of the Dutchbat troops

in Srebrenica. If he was ignorant, did he do enough to gather all the relevant information? (ii) Did the group meet its duties regarding the epistemic group dynamics of evidence sharing, questioning, gathering data, giving testimony, and so on? Were the rumors and stories about rape and murder taken seriously, and was the evidence taken into consideration and exchanged?

In assessing ignorance as an excuse for groups, then, we should consider, on the one hand, factors that hold for both individual and group ignorance, such as which variety of ignorance is involved, and, on the other hand, factors that are unique to group ignorance, such as whether particular operative members should not have been ignorant and various epistemic duties pertaining to the group dynamics.

Conclusion

Let me draw the threads of this chapter together. I have confined myself to ignorance for which one is blameless and which plays a motivational role in one's act or omission. I have distinguished four categories that are relevant when it comes to ignorance that excuses: (1) ignorance of one's obligation, (2) ignorance of one's ability to meet an obligation, (3) ignorance of how to meet an obligation, and (4) lack of foresight. We have seen, then, that propositional and practical ignorance can excuse. Moreover, we saw that disbelieving, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance often provide a full excuse as long as the ignorance is blameless. Suspending and undecided ignorance usually provide at most a partial excuse. In other words, they lower the degree of one's blameworthiness. The scheme presented in table 10.1 puts the results together.

Finally, we saw that the excuse of group ignorance works structurally similar to the excuse of individual ignorance. Yet, two unique things are important in assessing whether a group's

Table 10.1 The extent to which different varieties of ignorance excuse

		Ignorance of what?			
		Ignorance of one's obligation	**Ignorance of one's ability to meet one's obligation**	**Ignorance of how to meet one's obligation**	**Ignorance regarding one's future obligation**
Variety of ignorance	**Disbelieving**	Full	Full	Full	Full
	Suspending	Partial/No	Partial/No	Partial/No	Partial/No
	Undecided	Partial/No	Partial/No	Partial/No	Partial/No
	Unconsidered	Full	Full	Full	Full
	Deep	Full	Full	Full	Full
	Complete	Full	Full	Full	Full

ignorance is blameworthy, namely, whether certain operative members of the group should not have been ignorant, and whether the group dynamics should have been different in such a way that the group would not have been ignorant. In the next chapter, which concerns responsibility for ignorance, I return to the fifth question that I distinguished at the outset of this chapter: Can culpable ignorance excuse as well?

11

The Roots of Culpable Ignorance

Introduction

In the previous chapter, we explored when ignorance counts as an excuse. I assumed for the sake of argument that the ignorance that potentially excuses is *blameless*. In this chapter, I answer the question of when ignorance is *culpable*. In other words, I respond to the question of which conditions should obtain for someone's ignorance to count as culpable. In doing so, I will use *culpable ignorance* as shorthand for "ignorance for which the subject is culpable." As we shall see, when ignorance is culpable and when it is not matters for such issues as moral responsibility, legal responsibility and legal excuses, epistemic responsibility and epistemic excuses, the ethics of belief, and the epistemic condition of moral responsibility. In providing an answer to this challenging question, I will use the resources of the epistemology of ignorance that I developed in part 1.

I focus on *propositional* ignorance; that is, ignorance of the truth-value of certain propositions. This is not to deny that one can also be blameworthy or blameless for objectual and practical ignorance. I am blameless for my ignorance of how the newest Talisker whiskey tastes because I have no obligation to be familiar with that. A plumbing student who fails to pay attention during class may be blameworthy for being ignorant as to how to fix the hole in the sewer. We shall see toward the end of this chapter that what I say about propositional ignorance can, mutatis mutandis, also be applied to objectual and practical ignorance.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, I spell out what I understand culpability to be. After that, I sketch a particular

way of thinking about responsibility for belief and for ignorance, namely, the Influence View. Subsequently, I contrast the Influence View with its two main rival views: doxastic compatibilism and attributionism. I explain why the Influence View seems more plausible to me. I next spell out the Origination Thesis, a particular view on the roots of culpable ignorance. After that, I qualify the Origination Thesis by arguing that culpable ignorance has in fact three distinct roots, or origins. Subsequently, I discuss various objections to the view on culpable ignorance that I defend. Moreover, I elaborate on the ramifications of this particular view for various debates in philosophy, including the fifth question that we asked at the outset of the previous chapter, namely, whether culpable ignorance can excuse.

Culpability

I take it that one is culpable if one is the proper object of reactive attitudes like blame compunction, indignation, and resentment by someone who is fully informed about one's situation (and the reactive attitude of remorse if that person is identical to oneself). I do not say this is the *essence* of blameworthiness. Maybe the essence of blameworthiness is for someone to be responsible *and* to be in a normative state that negatively reflects on one as a moral, epistemic, or prudential being. Because that may not be that informative, though, and because we have a fairly firm grip on the notion of blame, I explain culpability in terms of blameworthiness.

Some philosophers, such as Holly Smith (2017, 98), add that one is culpable for φ-ing only if one *freely φ-s*. I am not convinced that this is right. This is because there are at least two ways in which one can be culpable for φ-ing: originally and derivatively. One is originally culpable for φ-ing if one φ-s freely and one is blameworthy for φ-ing. Thus, if Babette drinks too much alcohol, which is bad for her health, she does so freely and is blameworthy for it. One is

derivatively culpable for φ-ing if φ-ing is relevantly related to one's earlier χ-ing (for instance, when it is a consequence of it), which was done freely and for which one is originally culpable. Thus, if Babette drinks too much alcohol and then runs over a pedestrian, she is blameworthy not only for drinking too much alcohol but also for running over the pedestrian, even if the latter is not in any way done freely—Babette is not evil, just drunk.

Smith argues that in cases of what I called derivative culpability, one is only blameworthy for the earlier, benighting act, as Smith calls it, but not for the later, unwitting act. Thus, Babette is blameworthy for getting drunk but not for killing the pedestrian. That seems misguided to me, also when it comes to derivative responsibility for ignorance. Imagine that Charity is a student in medicine and that she chooses not to pay attention during a class in oncology. Years later, as a doctor, she fails to recognize a tumor that she would have recognized if she had paid attention in class. This is because she is now deeply ignorant of certain things regarding cancer. It seems she is culpable not merely for not paying attention in class but also for failing to notice the tumor. Of course, one might think it is just a matter of bad luck that she happens to treat a patient with a tumor while her colleague, who did not pay attention in class either, does *not* happen to treat a patient with a tumor. Perhaps such moral luck should not make a difference to one's blameworthiness. That is a distinct challenge, though, one that I have addressed elsewhere (see Peels 2015c; Peels 2017c, chapter 6). Here, my point is merely that in this case, Charity is also blameworthy for failing to recognize a tumor. In fact, the very challenge provided by the problem of moral luck confirms that there is not only original but also derivative responsibility.

The question before us in this chapter, then, is the following: If someone is blameworthy for propositional ignorance, *in virtue of what* is she blameworthy? Can we target the root or, possibly, the multiple roots of culpable ignorance? Are they the same for all varieties of ignorance distinguished in chapter 4? Are they the same

for first-order and second-order ignorance? Again, we will see that my epistemology of ignorance sheds fresh light on a problem beyond epistemology, namely, the problem of when ignorance is culpable.

The Influence View

The idea that there is original responsibility for an act or omission (what Smith calls the benighting act) and derivative responsibility for the belief or instance of ignorance to which the violation of that obligation leads (the unwitting wrong) squares well with what I call the *Influence View* on responsibility for our doxastic attitudes. This view says that responsibility for our doxastic attitudes—including all varieties of ignorance—is to be explained in terms of doxastic *influence on* rather than doxastic *control over* which specific proposition is believed. After all, we usually do not control our beliefs, but we often do have some kind of influence on them. This is because, although we cannot choose our beliefs or intentionally bring them about, we *can* do such things as gather further evidence, and doing so will often make a difference to our beliefs. Similarly, we can intentionally maintain our ignorance by not collecting the relevant evidence, by not talking with someone who disagrees, by looking away. Such intentional ignorance has sometimes been called "nescience" (DeNicola 2017, 79).

Let us focus on indirect rather than direct control because if we lack indirect control over our beliefs, then surely we cannot directly bring them about. For instance, I have indirect control over whether I lose four pounds of weight: I can eat healthily and exercise twice a day until I have lost four pounds. I can intentionally bring about that state of affairs in the course of time by performing a series of actions. Mutatis mutandis, the same is true for learning how to sail, writing a book on racism, and building a cottage in the mountains.

Such indirect control is to be contrasted with influence. When I merely have influence on something, I cannot intentionally bring it about. For instance, imagine that I want to find out when the St.-Bavokerk was built. This is a medieval church in my hometown Haarlem in the Netherlands. I look it up in a history book and find out that things are pretty complicated. A wooden church was built in 1307, but it burned down. It was rebuilt and promoted to chapter church in 1497. It became a cathedral in 1559. It was confiscated by Protestants nineteen years later, who removed all statuary from the exterior. In the nineteenth century, the church was given a more Gothic look by adding fake ramparts to the roof edge. Moreover, in the course of time, various smaller buildings were built up against the original church, some of which have become part of the church, such as the library, the sacristy, and the consistory.

The answer to my original question of when the church was built, then, is complicated, and I have come to believe each of the elements of the answer. Now, I had control over looking this up, but I had no control over my doxastic attitudes toward the various propositions that compose the answer. I never intentionally set out to acquire those attitudes toward those propositions, and it even seems that if I am a healthy and normally rational being, I could not have done so.[1] Mutatis mutandis, the same applies to all sorts of discoveries that we make, things we look up, and experiences we have when we, say, set out for a walk or try to find a new job: we have influence on them, not indirect control over them. And we are responsible for them in virtue of that influence.

Now that we have seen several examples of indirect voluntary control and voluntary influence, we can define the exact difference between them as follows:

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[1] At least, in *almost* all cases I lack intentional control over which beliefs I acquire. Elsewhere, I have argued that in exceptional circumstances, I can intentionally control acquiring a particular belief; see Peels (2015a).

Indirect voluntary control: S has indirect control over φ-ing if and only if (i) S can intentionally φ by performing a series of different actions over a considerable period of time, and (ii) S can not-φ.

Voluntary influence: S has influence on φ-ing if and only if there is some action or series of actions χ such that (i) S has control over χ-ing, (ii) if S χ-s, S will φ, and if S does not-χ, S will not-φ, and (iii) S cannot φ intentionally.[2]

We have influence on our beliefs by a wide variety of *belief-influencing factors*, that is, things that make a difference to what we believe. Here is one way to categorize them:

(A) *Doxastic mechanisms*: belief-forming faculties, such as visual perception, the use of modal logic, memory, and even limited echolocation.

(A_1) The functioning of doxastic mechanisms: we can make specific faculties more or less reliable (i.e., the extent to which they deliver true beliefs) by training or neglecting them.

(A_2) The creation or elimination of doxastic mechanisms: if I blind myself, I lose the belief-forming faculty of visual perception, and if I study deontic logic, I find a new way of forming beliefs about what ought to be the case, what is permissible, and what is prohibited.

(B) *Cognitive situatedness*: the evidence one has.

(B_1) Being in a situation in which one acquires evidence of a certain kind: one can decide to gather various kinds of evidence, for instance, by studying fingerprints, going through the record, and checking the weather forecast.

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[2] For an elucidation and defense of this distinction, see Peels (2017c, 67). There, I also address the question of why indirect control over φ-ing requires that S can intentionally φ but not that S can intentionally not-φ.

(B$_2$) Being in a situation in which one loses evidence of a certain kind: one can decide to destroy the evidence that is available to one, say, by burning various files.

(C) *Intellectual virtues and vices*: mental character traits like dogmatism, open-mindedness, perseverance, and thoroughness.

(C$_1$) The quality of intellectual virtues and vices: virtues come in degrees, so one can become *more* open-minded or *less* perseverant.

(C$_2$) The creation or elimination of intellectual virtues or vices: virtues can arise—for example, one could gradually replace dogmatism with open-mindedness.

(C$_3$) Intellectually virtuous or vicious behavior in particular processes of belief formation or belief maintenance: one can be open-minded, but whether or not one is open-minded on a particular occasion is another matter; being open-minded is compatible with being dogmatic on some occasions, and being dogmatic is compatible with being open-minded in rare circumstances (for further examples, see Peels 2017c, 91–96).

So, the idea is that we usually do *not* control our beliefs but that we *do* control belief-influencing factors. Because we have influence on our beliefs by way of our control over these factors, we are derivatively responsible for our beliefs.

Others have embraced a view along these lines as well, although they sometimes used slightly different terminology. Among them are Anthony Booth (2009a, 2009b, 2014), Anne Meylan (2013), and Nikolaj Nottelmann (2007). Just to be clear: I do not deny that we sometimes intentionally form a belief. I am even happy to concede that there are exceptional circumstances in which we might have that ability and *ought to use it*, given that something epistemically or morally important may depend on it. Yet, that is not the normal situation. Normally, we form, revise, change, and abandon beliefs by exercising influence on them.

Note that this is also true for ignorance. As we saw when we explored the varieties of ignorance in chapter 4, ignorance is often just disbelief or suspension of judgment (namely, regarding a true proposition). Accounts of doxastic responsibility in terms of influence are accounts of responsibility for the three doxastic attitudes: belief, disbelief, and suspension. This means that several varieties of ignorance—namely, disbelieving and suspending ignorance—automatically fall under the purview of such existing accounts of doxastic responsibility. They are just special instances of it. However, it seems existing accounts of responsibility in terms of doxastic influence can easily and plausibly be extended so as to include responsibility for the other varieties of ignorance; that is, for undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance. For instance, by concentrating harder instead of being distracted, I can avoid undecided ignorance; if I do not do so, I may be blameworthy for my undecided ignorance. By taking the time as a policeman to consider even remote scenarios, I can avoid unconsidered ignorance. By thoroughly preparing for the interview, the journalist can avoid deep ignorance of the author's oeuvre. And by choosing to take a course on SPSS, the student can avoid complete ignorance of certain statistical methods.

Let us call various obligations to perform or not perform belief-influencing actions *intellectual obligations*. The police have an intellectual obligation to study the crime scene, professors have an intellectual obligation to prepare for class, parents have an intellectual obligation to inform themselves about rules and regulations regarding school attendance, and I have an intellectual obligation not to spy on my neighbor. We can, thus, say that sometimes one's ignorance is culpable because one has violated certain intellectual obligations relevantly related to one's ignorance. If one had not done so, one would not have become ignorant. Or one would not have remained ignorant. And, of course, subtle variations are possible. In chapter 6, we saw that ignorance comes in degrees. Thus, it may well be that because one failed to meet one's intellectual obligation,

one is blameworthy for being ignorant *to that degree*, even though one could not have avoided ignorance altogether.

Now, intellectual obligations come in various sorts. Some are professional, such as the police's obligation to study the crime scene and the professor's obligation to prepare for class. Other obligations are categorical: we have them simply in virtue of being human beings. Some of these are moral, such as my obligation not to spy on my neighbor, whereas others are epistemic, such as my obligation to think the issue through if I find myself with contradictory beliefs on some topic. How these epistemic intellectual obligations are to be spelled out is a complicated matter that we need not take a stance on here. What matters is that *some* cases of culpable belief and *some* cases of culpable ignorance are to be explained in terms of epistemic obligations. Candidates are, for instance, cases in which someone (i) holds an irrational and false belief that *p* (i.e., disbelieving ignorance) and (ii) is fully aware of that but does not endeavor to change anything about her beliefs. What is epistemically bad about this scenario is that one holds a belief that is likely to be false, given one's evidence base. Other candidates are cases in which one (i) thinks that one holds contradictory beliefs, and yet (ii) one does not bother to do anything about it. What is epistemically bad about such cases is that it is *guaranteed* that one holds at least one false belief—either one of the allegedly contradictory beliefs is false or the belief that they are contradictory is false. In these kinds of cases in which one can exercise influence on one's belief—and thus come to hold a different belief, say, by careful inquiry—it does not seem implausible to say that one's belief is epistemically culpable.

The Influence View provides a model not merely for responsibility for belief, but also for responsibility for other propositional attitude, for ignorance as an excuse, and even for other excuses than ignorance, as Holly Smith (2017, 97) rightly notes. If a mother knows that her child has a severe allergy to bee stings, but she does not bring an epinephrine injector along when they attend a picnic, she is culpable when she is unable to inject her child with

epinephrine when the child is stung. Cases of impairing abilities, maltreatment of material, and so on, all have the same structure: the subject has no control over φ-ing, but she does have influence on φ-ing and is derivatively responsible in virtue of that.

Two Rival Views: Compatibilism and Attributionism

Of course, the Influence View is not the only one out there—this is philosophy. A relatively large number of philosophers have argued that we can explain culpability for ignorance without appeal to tracing, that is, without explaining it in terms of doxastic influence.[3] Here, I cannot assess all the strategies that have been proposed. Instead, I focus on the two most influential ones.

The first rival view is *doxastic compatibilism*. It has been defended by many, including Pamela Hieronymi (2006, 2008), Conor McHugh (2014), Sharon Ryan (2003), and Matthias Steup (2000, 2008). Doxastic compatibilism says that people are responsible for their beliefs to the extent that those beliefs are reason responsive: they change as one's evidence changes. Even though people do indeed lack intentional control—they cannot choose to believe certain things—they do have some other kind of control, which suffices for doxastic responsibility. They have *compatibilist* control.

I agree that compatibilist control is necessary for doxastic responsibility: if one's beliefs in no way respond to the evidence, then it seems one cannot be responsible for those beliefs—unless, of course, one is responsible for the fact that one's beliefs are not reason responsive. However, is compatibilist control also sufficient? It seems to me it is not. Imagine that my beliefs are reason responsive but that I lack control over various belief-influencing

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[3] For example, Adams (1985); FitzPatrick (2008); Frankfurt (1988); Hieronymi (2008); Robichaud (2014); Sher (2009); Smith (2008); Williams (1973).

factors. I cannot decide to study a file, look something up online, work on my intellectual vice of narrow-mindedness, or any such thing. It seems that in that case my beliefs are just spontaneously and automatically formed, depending on what input my doxastic mechanisms receive, such as other beliefs and sense data. It is hard to see how I could ever be responsible for my beliefs or ignorance in a situation like that. It seems that we are responsible only if our beliefs are reason responsive and we also exercise influence on them.

Another rival view to the Influence View is *attributionism*. It has been championed by Nomy Arpaly (2003), Thomas Scanlon (1998), George Sher (2009), and Angela Smith (2008). Here, the idea is that responsibility for a state of affairs does not require that one has freely brought that state of affairs about, not even that one has freely done something that led to the actualization of that state of affairs. Rather, all that responsibility requires is that the actualization of the state of affairs reflects badly on one. The main worry with respect to attributionism is that if, for instance, someone acts from culpable ignorance, saying that she is culpable for that ignorance because it reflects badly on her seems to beg the question. *In virtue of what* does ignorance reflect badly on someone? Imagine that Xavier has various racist and sexist biases and that he is deeply—but not completely—ignorant of them. Moreover, he has not had the opportunity to work on such biases. Then, of course, it is bad to have those biases, and it may even be wrong in some sense, but it is hard to see how he could be *culpable* for having and displaying those biases. The Influence View can do justice to this fact because it can explain responsibility for racist biases in terms of our ability to prevent them: once Xavier has somehow become aware of them and has had the opportunity to work on them but fails to do so, he is culpable for them. Attributionism may also rule that Xavier is culpable, but it owes us an account of *in virtue of what* Xavier is culpable for his racist and sexist biases.

In response, attributionists may appeal to the notion of quality of will: blameworthy agents display a bad quality of will. Yet, this faces by now well-known and serious worries. First, agents that we think of as not bearing responsibility, such as children and psychopaths, can also have bad quality of will.[4] Bad quality of will, then, is not sufficient for being blameworthy. Moreover, it is not even necessary. Negligence can be blameworthy but does not manifest any bad quality of will. Most importantly, though, the very challenge before us is that most propositional attitudes are precisely *not* formed by an act of will. The Influence View explains how agents can still be responsible for their ignorance despite the absence of voluntary control over false beliefs and other kinds of ignorance. Attributionism, even with a focus on bad quality of will, does not provide an explanation for that.

The Origination Thesis

Now that we have a firmer grip on what responsibility for belief and responsibility for ignorance look like, let us get back to the main question of this chapter: When is ignorance culpable?

In reply, let us first consider the Origination Thesis, as defended by Michael Zimmerman (1997; 2008, 173ff.; 2017) and others (Levy 2011; Rosen 2003). This thesis captures a view as to when someone is blameworthy for violating an obligation. This is important, for among such obligations is the intellectual obligation to perform a belief-influencing action such that if one fails to perform it, one becomes or remains culpably ignorant.

Origination Thesis: every chain of culpability is such that at its origin lies an item of behavior for which the agent is directly culpable and which the agent believed, at the time at which the

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[4] This point has been made by others; e.g., Mason (2017, 30).

behavior occurred, to be overall morally wrong.[5] (Zimmerman 1988, 1996, 1997, 2008, 2009, 2017)

There are a few minor problems here. For instance, why is the definition only concerned with moral wrongness and not also with, say, epistemic and prudential wrongness? Such deficiencies can be easily overcome, though:

> *Origination Thesis**: every chain of culpability is such that at its origin lies an item of behavior for which the agent is directly culpable and which the agent believed, at the time at which the behavior occurred, to be overall morally, prudentially, epistemically, or otherwise wrong.

Important for us is the core idea behind the Origination Thesis. What underlies the thesis is a principle of *fairness*: How could someone be culpable for doing something if doing that thing squares with what she believes about the world, both about what it is and how it ought to be? We can hardly expect people to act contrary to their beliefs. Thus, what explains the plausibility of the Origination Thesis is the central value of fairness: it seems fair to blame people for doing what they believe or even know to be wrong. It seems unfair to blame people for doing something that they sincerely and blamelessly believe to be right. That seems unfair because they simply would not be blameworthy. As we will see, however, this core idea needs further refinement as well.

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[5] Some versions of Zimmerman's Origination Thesis are cast in terms of ignorance (e.g., Zimmerman 2017, 83), but it is clear that it should be taken to apply more broadly to anything for which one is culpable.

Influence and Culpable Ignorance

Now, when is ignorance culpable? If the Influence View that I defended is right, one is culpable for one's ignorance only if one culpably violated one or more relevant intellectual obligations in coming to be ignorant or in maintaining that ignorance. But when is one culpable for violating an intellectual obligation? It seems to me there are at least three ways in which this can happen.[6]

First, one can be blameworthy because one acts *from clear-eyed akrasia*. To act from *akrasia* is to act against one's occurrent beliefs in the sense that on one's occurrent beliefs, one should not, all things considered, perform that action.[7] What counts here is the all-things-considered ought rather than any prima facie or pro tanto ought. If one believes that *some things* considered, one ought not to φ, but one also believes that that pro tanto obligation is trumped by another obligation, namely, one to φ, then it may be perfectly legitimate to φ. It seems that if one occurrently believes that one should not φ—say, not steal the jacket, or not make an insulting remark—and yet one does so, one is blameworthy for doing so—of course, if no further excuse, such as blameless compulsion, holds. Note also that it is not required that it is *objectively* wrong to φ—subjective wrongness will do. Thus, if I believe that this cake is poisoned and that I should not give it to you, and yet I do so, I am blameworthy for that, even if the cake later turns out not to be poisoned at all.

Before we move one, I would like to stress that violating intellectual obligations, sometimes leading to ignorance, is in a sense *easier* than violating other kinds of obligations, especially the big, general moral obligations. If I kill you or do not attempt to save you when you are drowning, I normally experience straightaway the moral

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[6] Some of the ideas in this section are based on Peels (2011b).

[7] I distinguish, then, between *akrasia*, which is a matter of not acting in accordance with one's beliefs, and weakness of will, which is a matter of not doing what one intends to do (thus also Holton 1999; Mason 2017, 47; McIntyre 1990).

badness of the situation. It is thus hard to violate an obligation not to kill you or an obligation to help you from clear-eyed *akrasia*: its wrongness is in my face, so to say. Not paying attention in a class on cancer treatment is much easier, and so is not reading an important dossier on a recent murder. The consequences of these obligation violations are much further down the road of time. Moreover, the consequences of these violations may never obtain. Thus, even though acting from *akrasia* may be quite rare when it comes to regular moral obligations,[8] it is not at all rare when it comes to *intellectual obligations*. And, of course, once one is ignorant, such culpable ignorance may lead to the violation of a wide variety of other obligations. I say this because the easier it is to violate an obligation, the more often it will occur, and the more often it occurs, the more important an explanans it is for people's violation of intellectual obligations, which leads to ignorance.

Second, one can be blameworthy for acting as one does if one acts *against one's dormant and tacit beliefs*. By dormant and tacit beliefs, I mean different kinds of nonoccurrent beliefs. Yesterday, you dormantly believed that in 2019, Trump gave the order to withdraw American troops from Kurdish Syria; you were not thinking about it yesterday but had done so earlier on (with avowal). Also, you tacitly believed that you are not a killer whale; you knew it and therefore believed it without having ever considered it. If you tacitly believe you should pay attention, but you let yourself be distracted, you are blameworthy. If you believe you should not forget your spouse's birthday, and yet you do so, you are blameworthy. Again, you are only blameworthy if no further excuse holds, such as extreme tiredness, compulsion, or severe illness.

The literature provides plenty of examples along these lines: looking away while on the road, forgetting someone's birthday, unsubscribing from a journal one ought to read as a professional doctor, not listening to a training which explains how to

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[8] This is claimed by Zimmerman (2017, 84).

apply the Heimlich maneuver.[9] These are all cases in which you act against dormant and tacit beliefs and are thereby culpable for violating an obligation. In some cases, such as that of unsubscribing from a journal you ought to read, the case involves the violation of an *intellectual* obligation, which leads to culpable ignorance.

One may wonder exactly why or in virtue of what one is blameworthy in such a case. Marcia Baron (2017, 67) suggests that someone's forgetting or not noticing is blameworthy if a reasonable person would not have forgotten or would have noticed. Similarly, Daniel DeNicola (2017, 108) suggests that ignorance can be reprehensible if "one could reasonably be expected to have known." However, reasonableness or rationality is only a weakly deontological term: one may be blameless for not being reasonable. If I have been involved in a traumatic subway accident, I may unreasonably believe that subways are dangerous. That belief is unreasonable, for there is plenty of evidence to think that subways are generally extremely safe. Yet, due to my traumatic experience, I can hardly be blamed for this irrational belief (cf. Rosen 2008 and Smith 2011).

This second way of being blameworthy is often overlooked. Randolph Clarke, for instance, asks us to imagine that a workman who is mending a roof in a busy town starts to throw down slates into the street below without first checking whether anybody is passing by. This is what Clarke says about this scenario:

> He failed to advert, adverting would have prevented the harm that resulted, he could have adverted, and he ought to have done so. His omission to do so was wrong. But it was also unwittingly so. He didn't realize that he was wrongly omitting to look to see if anyone was in the street. In fact, given that . . . it simply didn't occur to him to look, he wasn't even aware that this was something he was omitting to do. (Clarke 2014, 164)

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[9] For such examples, see, e.g., Smith (2017).

Is the workman indeed unaware or ignorant that he is doing wrong? I submit that he is not: if he is a normal individual, he will hold all sorts of beliefs to the effect that one should not throw building material down into a busy street without first looking. That he is not paying attention does not mean he does not hold any such beliefs *dormantly* or *tacitly*. He is not unaware or ignorant; he just does not pay attention.

Third, one can be blameworthy for violating an intellectual obligation if one acts *from suspending ignorance*. As we saw in chapter 4, one can be in a state of suspending ignorance, and that suspension can be blameless or blameworthy. Very often, if one suspends judgment on certain morally or epistemically relevant features of the situation at hand, one should not act in a particular way. If one is not sure whether there is still someone in the building, one should not start the demolition process. If you suspend judgment on whether the cake has been poisoned, you should not give it to your friend. Now, there may be exceptional situations in which such suspending ignorance does *not* render one blameworthy. For instance, one may *also* sincerely believe that, even in the face of such suspending ignorance, it is fine to act as one does. If *that* disbelieving ignorance is blameless, one may well be excused by it—whether one is in fact excused depends on the details and is up for debate. It seems that that will be rare, though. Usually, one does not hold—not even tacitly—any further beliefs about whether, given one's suspension of judgment, it is fine to act as one does. Rather, one is normally in a state of unconsidered or deep ignorance about such things. Here, as in the two previous cases of acting from *akrasia* and acting against one's dormant and tacit beliefs, there is a tension between one's doxastic attitudes and one's action. Even if the action does not go contrary to what one believes, one's doxastic attitudes do not warrant performing the action.

Once one is culpably ignorant, one can violate various further obligations, whether intellectual or other, from that blameworthy ignorance. Such ignorance may be disbelieving, but it may also be

suspending, unconsidered, deep, and even complete. My account implies that in many such cases, one will be derivatively culpable. Because that ignorance is culpable, it must have come about by way of the violation of an intellectual obligation that led to that ignorance. It follows from what I have argued that in that case, one of the three ways in which one can be blameworthy applies.

Thus, one's ignorance is culpable if (i) it issued from the violation of one or more intellectual obligations that are relevantly related to it and (ii) in violating these intellectual obligations one acted (a) from clear-eyed *akrasia* or (b) against one's dormant and tacit beliefs or (c) from suspending ignorance. This suggestion is based on the Influence View and what I consider to be an improved version of the Origination Thesis.

Objections and Replies

At least six objections might be leveled against my account of culpable ignorance.

First objection. Are there not two further roots of culpability: recklessness and negligence? One acts recklessly, roughly, if one fails to sufficiently regard the danger of the consequences of one's actions. One acts negligently, roughly, if one takes insufficient care in considering the potential harm that one might foreseeably do.

If one acts recklessly, one is fully aware of the risks but fails to proportion one's actions to the risks. Doing so is, of course, wrong, and there may be various reasons to hold people judicially accountable for it. Yet, doing wrong as such does not imply culpability. One may be excused for a reckless act by compulsion, psychosis, or some such thing. May one also be excused by ignorance? Well, not by ignorance *of the risks*, for acting recklessly implies that one is fully aware of the risks. To be excused by ignorance, the ignorance should be ignorance of such a thing as that one should not perform

the act given that the risk is so high. For example, leaving a baby un-attended on the changing table, say, to take a shower, is *reckless*: the risk that she will fall off is simply too high. What if one is ignorant that the risk is too high—that is, if one is aware of the risk but does not realize its normative weight? Well, it depends. It seems that if the ignorance is suspending ignorance, one is not excused at all. If it is disbelieving ignorance, one may be excused if it is *blameless* disbelieving ignorance. I, thus, suggest that my account can make sense of recklessness.

What about negligence? An analysis of negligence does not rule out ignorance. Negligence is compatible with ignorance of the fact that one should take care. Depending on the nature of that igno-rance and on whether or not it is blameless, it can excuse. Thus, negligence is a wrong as well, and my account of culpable ignorance can explain when one is excused for it and when one is not.

Second objection. One may wonder whether we cannot simply say that someone is culpable for her ignorance if her attitude of ignorance does not match her evidence. That would be quick and easy, but I am afraid it would not work. Whether one's ignorance matches one's evidence is an issue of *synchronic rationality*, which is a matter of whether one's doxastic attitude matches one's evidence base at a particular time. It is not a matter of *diachronic rationality*, which asks not merely what evidence one has but also what evi-dence one should have had, let alone of full-blown *responsibility*. Synchronic and diachronic rationality are rather different from re-sponsibility. One may be blameless for being synchronically and diachronically irrational, as we saw in the subway accident ex-ample above.

Third objection. Why should we focus on one's mental states in determining whether the violation of an intellectual obligation and the ensuing ignorance is culpable or not? Is this not overly ra-tionalistic? Should we not also pay attention to people's intentions, desires, aversions, emotions, and so on, as, for instance, Holly Smith does? She replaces an epistemic condition in her account

of blameworthiness with the following condition: "*S* has a morally objectionable configuration of desires and aversions" (Smith 2017, 98). She gives three reasons for this. First, it is difficult to provide a condition that does not take sides in the debate. Although I think Smith is right, this is hardly a reason to reject giving an epistemic condition. Unless, of course, we can do without an epistemic condition entirely. But we will see that we cannot.

Second, she suggests that one's epistemic state is simply not relevant to the issue of blameworthiness. Rather, it is the defective motivations that count. Here is what she says: "It is the agent's defective motivations that ground her morally flawed state in performing the action. Her epistemic state is not part of the ground for her morally flawed state. An agent's belief that her chosen action is wrong, or that it has certain non-moral features (which make it wrong), plays the role of *connecting* her motivations to the action: the belief channels her desires and aversions towards performance of the action" (Smith 2017, 100–101). Marcia Baron also suggests that one's motivations for maintaining ignorance matter. The shipowner in W. K. Clifford's famous example, for instance, was culpable for his false belief that his ship was seaworthy and, therefore, culpable for his ignorance that it was *not* seaworthy. This was because he suppressed his doubts *and did so for the wrong reasons*—namely, making money (see Baron 2017, 64). The problem with this line of thinking is that it concerns *wrongs* and as such does not imply blameworthiness. Imagine that the shipowner *also* believes that it is perfectly fine for him to suppress his doubts, whereas it is of course *not* fine for him to do so—it is wrong. Thus, the shipowner is ignorant of the normative truth that he should not suppress his doubts. The natural question to ask is whether he is culpable for such ignorance. Imagine that he is entirely blameless for falsely believing it is fine for him to suppress his doubts. In that case, it is hard to see how the shipowner can properly be blamed. We should not expect people to act against their beliefs. Most likely, though, his false belief that it is fine for him to suppress his doubts

is itself blameworthy. He could and should have known better; for instance, because he could and should have worked on his vice of narrow-mindedness but acted from *akrasia* in not doing so.

Third, in many cases, according to Smith, the subject's epistemic state does not matter. She asks us to imagine that a nurse fails to sterilize his equipment and consequently is unable to properly treat a patient later. I agree that he may be blameworthy for this, but it is not clear that we can give this verdict without considering his beliefs. Imagine, for instance, that he falsely believes his colleague will sterilize the equipment. Imagine also that his disbelieving ignorance is itself blameless. It seems that he then may well be excused by it. What if he believed that but did not act from that false belief, but rather from laziness? That would lead us into the debate on whether one is excused by acting *from* ignorance or whether acting *in* ignorance suffices. As said in the previous chapter, I will not delve into that debate here. All I want to say is that one cannot overlook a person's epistemic states: they *do* matter in assessing whether someone is culpable or not for an action or its consequences.

I do not think that my account is overly rationalistic. Beliefs trump emotions when it comes to what one should do. Someone who believes that we ought to take care of the sick, the poor, and the wounded really ought to do that, even if she is repelled by their smell and looks. We really ought to go to work, even if we dislike working. If it would make you really glad to see your friend but you deem it unwise to visit her (for instance, because of reasons related to COVID-19), then you should act on that belief. And so on. Of course, there are situations in which, say, a person's intuition tells her to do a particular thing. She may believe on the basis of good evidence that she should trust such intuitions. But then again, her belief also normally tells her to act on her intuition. If she believes that she should not act on that intuition and the belief is blameless, then it seems it would not be proper to act contrary to that belief. Again, the belief should be guiding here, not one's intuition.

Fourth objection. One may worry that my account is not that helpful, as it is cashed out in terms of people's doxastic attitudes, and we often have little idea what exactly people's doxastic attitudes are. We cannot look inside people's heads. I think this can indeed be a challenging problem at times. Yet, we are not clueless. People leave many traces that give us insight into their beliefs and other doxastic attitudes: the things they say, how they behave, what they write down, and so on. Empirical research, such as ethnography, has developed various tools to triangulate research on people's beliefs. Moreover, there is often public evidence that gives us a pretty good grasp of what a normal individual (one not suffering from psychiatric disorders or other excusing circumstances) would believe in various circumstances. Of course, this is not to deny that on my account, we sometimes do not know or are uncertain as to what a person's beliefs are. It would follow that we sometimes do not know whether a person is really culpable for what she did. However, I think this is exactly the result we need: in some cases, we must suspend judgment on whether a person is culpable, or we have to go with what is probable, given the evidence that we have.

Fifth objection. Is there not a further way in which one might be blameworthy for violating an obligation, namely, by acting from *blameless ignorance*? Obviously, this sounds a little counterintuitive: How could one be blameworthy for violating an obligation if one acts from blameless ignorance? Randolph Clarke, however, has argued that there are actually cases that show this. Here is one of them:

> Imagine that Bob arrives at his daughter's school at a quarter to three to pick her up. As he routinely does, he parks in a spot where parking is prohibited from 3:00 to 4:00; a car parked there during this hour would block the school buses. Bob's pickup has never taken longer than a couple of minutes. But today it does—it takes half an hour, due to (what turns out to be) an administrator's mistaken insistence that Bob's daughter has misbehaved badly. By

the time Bob has sorted the problem out and returned with his daughter to his car, the bus drivers are furious about the delay. They blame Bob for holding them up. (Clarke 2014, 171)

Clarke interprets this case as follows: Bob is blameworthy, even though he is not aware of the wrongdoing. Bob, then, acts from nonculpable ignorance and is nonetheless blameworthy. If Clarke is right about this, there is indeed a fourth way of culpably violating an obligation and, thus, a fourth root of culpable ignorance.

I submit, though, that there is a more plausible way to interpret this scenario. One could, for instance, say that Bob is well aware and, thus, not ignorant of the fact that he should not park his car there for half an hour. Only, his true beliefs about this are tacit and dormant: due to the situation, they do not come to mind. They are beliefs, nonetheless. Because, as we saw in chapter 3, propositional ignorance is the lack of true belief, Bob is not ignorant that he should not park there for more than a few minutes. Clarke may retort that Bob *is* ignorant of another proposition, namely, that he is *now* blocking school buses. I think this is right: Bob has never considered that proposition. He would immediately believe this proposition as soon as he were to consider it, though. That makes it a case of unconsidered ignorance.

Is Bob blameworthy for blocking the school buses? It depends on whether or not he is excused by the demanding circumstances. If he is, then he is not blameworthy. His blameless unconsidered ignorance is an excuse for blocking the busses. If he is not, then the circumstances do not render his ignorance blameless: he should have considered whether he is blocking buses. Note, though, that this case does not call for a fourth way of being blameworthy: Bob's dormant and tacit beliefs about the situation are sufficient for holding him responsible. He knew that he was parking there and that he should not park longer than a few minutes. Moreover, he was not under any kind of duress that would render him blameless for not considering whether he could be blocking buses.

Sixth objection. Some have objected to an account of responsibility in terms of a person's beliefs because it conflicts with our considered verdicts in a specific kind of case. Take Huckleberry Finn in Mark Twain's 1884 novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Jonathan Bennett (1974) asks us whether Huckleberry, who fails to turn in the runaway slave Jim despite his conscience telling him that he should do so, is blameworthy for acting as he does. Bennett suggests Huckleberry is not only blameless but in fact praiseworthy for not turning Jim in. In response, let me stress that Huck is, of course, doing the right and in some sense praiseworthy thing. Yet, we should distinguish such rightness and praiseworthiness from responsibility and culpability. We know very little about Huck's exact beliefs and motivations. Maybe Elinor Mason is right that we sometimes simply do not know enough about what goes on mentally in people to normatively assess them.[10] Maybe Huck had all sorts of doubts regarding the reliability of his conscience in this specific regard. But if all the mental facts of Huck were on the table, so to say, and it turned out that in letting the slave go he acted against his all-things-considered judgments, it seems he would indeed be culpable for acting as he did—we should not let ourselves be blinded by the fact that what he did was objectively right.

Ramifications

Let me close by laying out four ramifications of what I have argued. First, my account of culpability for ignorance can easily be extended to an account of culpability in general. One is originally culpable if one acts (i) from *akrasia*, (ii) against one's dormant or tacit beliefs, or (iii) from suspension of judgment where one should not.

Second, we saw in the previous chapter that normative ignorance of normative truths can excuse as well as factive ignorance of such

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[10] This is one of Mason's points about Huck Finn (Mason 2017, 43).

truths. This chapter gives us additional reason to think that this is true. After all, there is structural similarity between factive and normative ignorance in that both can result from the violation of intellectual obligations. In both cases, one is culpable if one is originally responsible for the violation of an intellectual obligation in one of the three ways that I distinguished. It would follow that normative ignorance in general—and even moral ignorance in particular—can well excuse if it is blameless.

Third, although I have focused on propositional ignorance, there is no reason to think that things work substantially differently for objectual and practical ignorance. It would be misleading to talk about belief-influencing factors and intellectual obligations when it comes to these two other kinds of ignorance. After all, objectual ignorance and practical ignorance are not beliefs. They are not even doxastic attitudes. Rather, they are, respectively, the lack of acquaintance with something and the lack of a skill or ability. Yet, something structurally similar applies there: we can maintain or remove objectual and practical ignorance by performing or not performing certain actions, such as tasting wine, learning how to make an oil painting, inspecting a crime scene, and studying how to preside over the meeting of a political party. Thus, my account sheds light on culpable or blameless objectual and practical ignorance as well.

Fourth, the final question mentioned at the outset of the previous chapter and postponed until this chapter is this: Does culpable ignorance excuse? In the literature, we find three answers to this question, sometimes called the Conservative, Moderate, and Liberal Views.[11] Some philosophers, such as W. D. Ross (1939, 163–164), think that blameworthy ignorance provides a full excuse. Others, such as E. L. Beardsley (1979, 578), D. E. Burrington (1999, 516–517), and G. H. Joyce (1914, 404), claim that it provides only a partial excuse. Still others, such as Aristotle (*Nicomachean Ethics*

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[11] For the distinction between these three views, see Smith (1983, 548–551).

3.5.7–9), Hilary Kornblith (1983, 35–36), Clark Murray (1914, 104), Nicholas Wolterstorff (2010, 106), and Michael Zimmerman (2008, 175), defend the view that it provides no excuse at all. I suggest that none of these views is fully wrong, but that none of them is fully right either. Let me explain.

Sometimes, culpable ignorance provides a full excuse. This is when the intellectual obligation that one violated and that led to the ignorance in question has nothing whatsoever to do with the obligation that one consequently violates from that ignorance. Imagine that Klaus's father pressures him to become a submarine engineer. Klaus takes many classes that explain the mechanics of submarines in detail, but he does not pay any attention because he does not care about submarines. His father is an influential figure in the navy and makes sure Klaus graduates despite his being deeply ignorant of core facts about the mechanics of submarines. Klaus is fully aware that it would be utterly irresponsible, given his ignorance, to take part in a submarine mission and, therefore, pursues what he really loves: maritime painting. In fact, he is so good at it that his works are sold internationally for millions of euros each. One day, while he is working on a painting, he is overpowered and abducted by some criminal ex-marines who aim to force him to make a couple of paintings for them. To make sure they go undetected, they use an old submarine. A few hours into their escape from the scene by submarine, though, the engine breaks down and they slowly start sinking toward the bottom of the sea, where the submarine will implode. His abductors free Klaus's hands and wait for him to start working on the engine. Klaus now has an objective duty to get the engine going again. He cannot do so, though, because of his ignorance. Moreover, his ignorance is culpable: if he had met his obligations earlier in life, he would have known how to repair the engine. Yet, it seems that in this rather unexpected scenario, his culpable ignorance excuses him for not repairing the engine. Admittedly, this dire scenario is a little far-fetched, but it illustrates an important point: when the violation of an intellectual

obligation leads to culpable ignorance, but that intellectual obligation is unforeseeably related to a future situation, culpable ignorance may well excuse in that situation.

Sometimes, culpable ignorance provides a partial excuse. It follows from what I argued in the previous chapter that this is at least sometimes the case when one acts from suspending ignorance on one's obligation. Thus, if I, as a demolition worker, suspend judgment on the true proposition that there is still someone in the building and yet I give the order to blow it up, I am blameworthy for doing so. However, if I had known or truly believed that there was someone in the building, I would be even more blameworthy. My suspending ignorance, then, at least somewhat reduces the degree of my blameworthiness and therefore counts as a partial excuse.

Sometimes, and perhaps even usually, culpable ignorance provides no excuse at all. Imagine that it is Steve's job as a lawyer to read the file about his client carefully. Steve, however, is racist and does not mind his client, a black man, going to jail. As a result of not reading the file, he is ignorant of basic facts about his client's situation. If he had known these facts, he would have been able to prevent the lifelong incarceration of his client. Steve's ignorance is culpable and clearly provides no excuse whatsoever for not defending his client with the knowledge that a proper defense requires.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the roots of culpable ignorance. I have argued that responsibility for such ignorance is best understood in terms of influence rather than indirect control, compatibilist control, or bad will. I have also defended the view that there are three ways in which one can be responsible for violating an intellectual obligation that led to the culpable ignorance in

question: acting from *akrasia*, acting against one's dormant and tacit beliefs, and acting from suspension of judgment where one should not have done so. At various junctures, we have seen that an epistemology of ignorance is crucial for answering the question of when ignorance is culpable.

12

Asserting Ignorance

Introduction

This chapter is about assertion and ignorance. This is an important topic because there are far more things that we are ignorant of than things we know. And, at least sometimes, we want to be able to make clear to someone that we are ignorant of something.

There are many issues regarding assertion and ignorance that one could explore. Here are a few examples:

- Is it ever permissible to assert that p if one is ignorant as to whether p, and if so, in what sense?
- Does asserting vagueness imply some kind of ignorance?[1]
- Does the illocutionary act of asserting that p require that one is not ignorant of all the conversational implicatures of asserting that p?[2]
- As we saw in chapter 3, one can be propositionally ignorant only of truth. Is the truth of p a presupposition of the assertion that someone is ignorant of p,[3] an implication of it, an indirect speech act, or yet something else?[4]

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[1] For this issue, see Dorr (2003) and Williamson (1992, 2000).

[2] The issue of conversational implicatures was, of course, famously introduced and explored by Paul Grice (1975, 1989).

[3] For the concept of a presupposition, see Frege (1892, 31) and Levinson (1983, 178–181). An example would be the proposition that John tried to stop in time when we ask whether John did or did not manage to stop in time.

[4] For the notion of an indirect speech act, see Searle (1975, 59–60).

Here, I focus on a different issue, namely, asserting ignorance, which, for the purposes of this chapter, I take to be asserting the proposition that somebody is in a state of ignorance. I will use this to illustrate that the philosophy of assertion and the philosophy of language more generally can profit from the epistemology of ignorance that I developed in part 1.

There are many kinds of assertions regarding ignorance, such as that one is oneself ignorant, the person spoken to is ignorant, another person who is not involved in the conversation is ignorant, a group of people is ignorant, or an institution or a board or some such thing is ignorant. Here, I focus on asserting one's own ignorance—that is, ascribing ignorance to oneself as an individual or as a group. Even this focus allows for a variety of options, though. There is asserting ignorance:

- of or that p;
- as to whether p;
- about a number of propositions, such as "I am ignorant as to what the correct answers to these questions are";
- about a topic—for example, "I am ignorant about string theory" or "I am ignorant in biology";[5]
- of some thing or entity (objectual ignorance);
- of how to do something (practical ignorance).

I take it that to assert ignorance with respect to some proposition p is to make a statement or an avowal or a report, to express a judgment, to give a testimony, or some such thing, that one is ignorant with respect to p. To avoid unnecessary complexity, I will be concerned with statements in the simple present or present progressive tense.

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[5] In fact, this may be the most frequently used phrase when it comes to asserting ignorance: one is ignorant about X, with respect to X, in X, or of X, where X is some topic, issue, or field. Vogt (2017) rightly points this out.

Now, it seems that many of the questions that can be asked about assertion in general can be asked about ignorance assertion as well: Does asserting ignorance aim to bring about or imply aiming to bring about true belief in the hearer? Is knowledge of the proposition q that one is ignorant with respect to p the norm of asserting that q,[6] or, rather, truth or belief or justified belief or epistemic certainty? Here, I focus on a different question, one that, as we shall see, has to do with conceptual issues that are unique to ignorance: To what extent can one assert one's own ignorance—that is, assert that one is, as an individual or as a group, in a particular state of ignorance? Or, more specifically, which varieties of ignorance can one assert, and which varieties of ignorance can one not express? When we explore this issue, it is helpful to focus on the issue of which kinds of ignorance one can epistemically properly assert. Epistemically proper assertions, I take it, are assertions that match one's total evidence base. Maybe one can improperly assert all sorts of ignorance, but because we value, among other things, being rational and should aim at assertions that match our evidence, I focus on the question of what kinds of ignorance one can properly assert.

To answer this question, I discuss whether one can express objectual and practical ignorance and whether each of the six varieties of ignorance—disbelieving, suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete ignorance—can be expressed. I also briefly consider unwarranted ignorance, which adherents of the Standard View take to be an additional variety of ignorance, and ignorance that issues from the violation of an obligation to inquire, as adherents of the Normative View could call it. I argue that only two out of these six or eight varieties of ignorance are assertable and that the remaining varieties are unassertable for rather different reasons. Subsequently, I explore whether this conclusion also holds for asserting *group* ignorance. Finally, I discuss two ramifications of my thesis that some varieties of ignorance can be asserted whereas

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[6] Thus, for instance, Williamson (2000, 243).

others cannot for the debate about inexpressible ignorance and the Transparency View on self-knowledge.[7]

Asserting Objectual and Practical Ignorance

It is generally quite unproblematic to assert that one is in a state of objectual or practical ignorance. I am ignorant of Kazakh cuisine, of Mandarin, of seventeenth-century Maltese history, and of what it is like to be a black suspect being violently arrested by the police.[8] Similarly, one can quite properly assert that one is ignorant of how to launch a Falcon 9 into space, how to treat a patient with COVID-19, how to write a sermon for a Mormon audience, or how to win a game of ice hockey.

Yet not all cases of objectual and practical ignorance can be rationally asserted. It seems, for instance, one can properly assert that one is objectually ignorant of X or practically ignorant of how to φ only if one actually *believes* there is such a thing as X or such a thing as φ-ing. Thomas Aquinas, for instance, could not assert his ignorance of the First and Second World Wars, because he lacked the relevant concepts. And I cannot express my lack of practical knowledge—that is, my practical ignorance—with respect to many steps taken in the construction of Elon Musk's Starship.

Asserting the Varieties of Ignorance

Asserting Disbelieving Ignorance

It is entirely unproblematic to assert that one disbelieves a certain proposition. And, clearly, it is in many ways unproblematic to make

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[7] Parts of this chapter are based on Peels (2020).
[8] For more on the latter example, see chapter 8 on white ignorance.

such a claim about a proposition that is in fact true. As I pointed out in the introduction to this chapter, though, we are here concerned with assertions *about ignorance*. Thus, the claim should imply not only that one disbelieves the relevant proposition p but also that p. After all, a claim about disbelief, such as the claim that I disbelieve Canada is south of the equator, is as such not a claim about ignorance. Claims about disbelief become claims about ignorance only if one adds that the relevant proposition is true, so that one is ignorant of it. But it is pretty much immediately clear that such assertions are highly problematic. Consider the following sentences:

> (a) I am ignorant of the fact that $2 + 2 = 4$ because I disbelieve that.
> (b) I believe that hippos are not the deadliest animals in Africa, but that is just a case of ignorance because they may very well be the deadliest animals in Africa.

These are not flat contradictions. Rather, they are epistemically problematic in pretty much the same way as Moorean paradoxes are. These say something like this (see Moore 1966, 63):

> (c) p, but I do not believe that p.

Declarative sentences about ignorance like (a) are even more problematic than the Moorean paradox (c), because they say something like this:

> (d) p, but I believe that not-p.

Now, it may be possible to say:

> (e) I realize that elevators are not dangerous, but because of my recent accident, I find myself with the irrational belief that elevators are dangerous.

Here, one makes the following claim: *p*, but I disbelieve that *p*. However, something is added in (e), namely, the claim that the belief in question is irrational—a case of epistemic *akrasia* (see Owens 2002), as we saw in chapter 4. And as I pointed out there, if one holds such a metabelief, expressed in (e) in the additional claim, it seems questionable that one is truly ignorant of *p* or ignorant as to whether *p*. If one holds the belief that elevators are dangerous but one realizes that that belief is irrational because it is merely the consequence of a recent accident, it seems questionable to say one is ignorant of the fact that elevators are not dangerous.

Disbelieving ignorance, then, cannot be properly asserted: one cannot, or only at the cost of facing a Moorean paradox, assert that one displays this kind of ignorance with respect to a particular proposition.

Asserting Suspending Ignorance

Things are quite different when it comes to suspension of judgment on a true proposition. There is nothing problematic about the following sentence:

(f) I am ignorant as to whether *p*: because I do not have sufficient reason to think that it is true or false, I suspend judgment on it.

Of course, it *would* be problematic to say:

(g) I am ignorant of the fact that *p*: because I do not have reason to think that it is true or false, I suspend judgment on this truth.

For that would imply something like this:

(c′) *p*, but I do not believe that *p* (even though I do not disbelieve it either).

Clearly, (c′) would just be another Moorean paradox. However, by claiming that one is ignorant *as to whether p*, one does not say that *p* is true nor that it is not—one simply says that it is either true or false but that one is ignorant as to whether it is true or false. Normally, if one suspends judgment on *p*, one neither believes nor disbelieves that *p*; many accounts of suspension of judgment, such as that of Friedman (2013), imply this. This is confirmed by the paradoxical nature of the following assertion:

(h) I suspend judgment on *p*, but I am not ignorant as to whether or not *p* is true.

This is highly problematic. It would be perfectly fine, though, to say something like this:

(h′) I suspend judgment on *p*, but I am not ignorant of the fact that *p* is either true or false.

I conclude that one can properly assert that one is in a state of suspending ignorance.

Asserting Undecided Ignorance

As we saw in chapter 4, the work of philosophers on suspension of judgment strongly suggests that there is also what I call undecided ignorance. It is possible that you have considered *p* and that upon considering it, you neither believed that *p* nor disbelieved that *p* nor suspended judgment on *p* because you were undecided or because you were distracted by some other event. It seems that in such a case, you simply have not yet formed a doxastic attitude. However, *p* is still true, and you neither know nor believe truly that *p*; you are, therefore, ignorant of the fact that *p* is true. Now, can you assert that

you are in this state of ignorance with respect to a particular proposition? Yes, you can:

> (i) I was pondering whether going by train is the quickest way to get to London, but then I had to take care of my daughter who had fallen over. So, I have not had time to really consider it yet, and I am, therefore, ignorant as to whether going by train is the quickest way to get to London.
>
> (j) I have tried to decide on whether the experiment is the right one, but because I have been so tired lately, I have not yet been able to really think it through. I, therefore, remain undecided, and I am ignorant as to whether we should set up this particular experiment.

Of course, undecided ignorance is relatively close to suspending ignorance, so it might be hard to explicitly assert that one is in a state of undecided rather than suspending ignorance. However, as (i) and (j) show, it seems that one can do so and that there is nothing ungrammatical or irrational about it.

Asserting Unconsidered Ignorance

Unconsidered ignorance has two properties that jointly distinguish it from other varieties of ignorance. First, one has never considered the relevant proposition. Second, as soon as one were to consider or entertain the relevant proposition, one would truly believe and, normally, even know it. In chapter 4, I gave the example of the proposition that being non-self-membered is a counterexample to Frege's Basic Law V (proposition p). Before Russell drew Frege's attention to p, Frege had never even considered p. However, as soon as he considered p, he realized it was a counterexample. This is not to deny that he first tried in several ways to maintain his theory in the face of the counterexample. The point is merely that he

immediately realized that it was an example that seemed to count against his Basic Law V. If we apply this to the issue under consideration, it seems that before he read Russell's letter, Frege could *not* have properly asserted the following statement:

> (k) I am ignorant as to whether being non-self-membered is an example that seems to count against my Basic Law V.

After all, as soon as he had considered the proposition that being non-self-membered seems to count against his Basic Law V, he would have believed and known that *p*. Thus, he could never properly have uttered a sentence like (k). Of course, people who know much less about logic and mathematics could properly utter something like (k). But their ignorance would probably be a case of complete ignorance rather than unconsidered ignorance. They simply lack certain crucial concepts and insights in logic and mathematics. They would still not come to know that being non-self-membered is a good counterexample to Frege's Basic Law V even if they were to consider that proposition.

Let us now consider some garden-variety instances of ignorance, rather than the exotic one that held for Frege. In these cases, too, we simply fail to pay attention to a relevant aspect or event or option, but our ignorance would be removed as soon as we were to consider the relevant proposition. It seems one cannot properly assert one's ignorance when one would no longer be ignorant if one were to consider the relevant proposition:

> (l) I am ignorant as to whether the butler (in the movie) killed the butcher with the butcher's own knife.
> (m) I am ignorant as to whether I left my gloves on the roof of my car.[9]

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[9] What if I have some recollection that I left my gloves there, but not enough to warrant belief, and I would realize this upon considering whether I left my gloves on the roof of my car? On my taxonomy of the varieties of ignorance, provided in chapter 4, that

This is, of course, not to say that one cannot properly assert (l) and (m) in some circumstances. However, one cannot properly assert them *when one is in a state of unconsidered ignorance*. Of course, this is plausible a fortiori if one makes explicit that one is in a state of *unconsidered* ignorance rather than ignorance more generally:

(k′) I am ignorant of the fact that being non-self-membered is a counterexample to—or at least an example that seems to count against—my Basic Law V, but I have never considered the issue.

In fact, it seems that this will be true for *any* case of unconsidered ignorance, for to properly assert that you are in a state of unconsidered ignorance with respect to *p*, you inevitably think about *p* or consider *p*, and that will normally be enough for one's ignorance to disappear immediately. After all, if you were to claim that you are ignorant as to whether you left your gloves on the roof of your car, you would immediately realize that you did and, thus, no longer be in a state of unconsidered ignorance. Therefore, you can never assert truly and properly that you are in a state of unconsidered ignorance: as soon as you do so, it is false, and you will have sufficient evidence to think that it is false. Of course, you may still be ignorant because you have a false belief that your gloves are on the car, but then your ignorance will be a case of disbelieving rather than unconsidered ignorance.

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would be a case of *deep* rather than *unconsidered* ignorance. Now, one might object that it seems quite different from our ignorance of whether Taiwan has more than twenty-three million inhabitants. I agree that there is an important difference between the two cases: in the gloves example, I have some evidence, whereas in the Taiwan example, we have no evidence either way. There is, thus, a difference in how much evidence one has, but as they meet the same conditions, they both count as cases of deep ignorance.

Asserting Deep Ignorance

Like unconsidered ignorance, deep ignorance implies that you have not considered the relevant proposition. The crucial difference with unconsidered ignorance, however, is that even if you were to consider the relevant proposition, you would remain ignorant because you would disbelieve a truth, suspend judgment on a truth, or remain undecided about a truth. An example is most people's attitude toward the proposition that the population of Taiwan is larger than twenty-three million. It is in fact slightly larger than twenty-three million, but most people have never considered this proposition. If they were to consider the proposition and if they are sufficiently rational, they would probably end up in a state of suspending or undecided ignorance with respect to it until they would have gathered or stumbled upon more information about this. Of course, one could assert something like the following claim:

>   (n) I am ignorant as to whether the population of Taiwan is larger than twenty-three million.

However, it is rather clear that one can properly assert this *only if one has considered* the proposition that Taiwan's population is larger than twenty-three million. Thus, one could not properly assert (n′):

>   (n′) I am ignorant as to whether the population of Taiwan is larger than twenty-three million, but I have never thought about the issue.

It follows that deep ignorance is unassertable. An important qualification is in order here, though. Although it seems impossible to properly assert *de dicto* that one is in a state of deep ignorance with respect to *p*, it does seem possible to properly assert this *de re*. Here is an example:

(o) Professor Keira told me he spent yesterday afternoon thinking about a new theorem *T*, but he did not have time to explain *T* to me. I have never considered *T*, and if even he does not know whether it is true, I am sure I am also ignorant as to whether it is true.

Does this also provide a way out for the other two varieties of ignorance that I argued are unassertable, namely, disbelieving and unconsidered ignorance? I do not think it does. Let me explain.

To be in a state of disbelieving ignorance with respect to *p* is to think that *p* is false, while it is in fact true. To assert *de re* that one is in a state of disbelieving ignorance with respect to *p*, one would have to assert that there is some proposition—say, the proposition Professor Keira spent yesterday afternoon thinking about—that is in fact true or the truth-value of which one does not know but that one believes to be false:

(o′) Professor Keira told me he spent yesterday afternoon thinking about a new theorem *T*, but he did not have time to explain *T* to me. I am ignorant as to whether *T* is true, but I believe it is false.

It seems one can assert something along the lines of (o′) only at the cost of irrationality. One should not disbelieve *p* if one does not know what it says, and it is paradoxical to assert both that one is ignorant with respect to *p* and that one believes that it is false. Thus, one cannot properly assert that one is in a state of *de re* disbelieving ignorance with respect to a proposition *p*. Of course, it is possible that I know Professor Keira has a bad track record when it comes to his alleged theorems and that I, therefore, disbelieve *T*, whatever it may amount to. In that case, however, it would be highly paradoxical to claim that one is ignorant as to whether *T* is true. For it seems that if one believes it is false and one believes that on good grounds,

such as Professor Keira's bad track record, one is not ignorant of whether T is true or false.

One cannot assert *de re* that one is in a state of *unconsidered* ignorance with respect to p either. Remember that if one is in a state of unconsidered ignorance, one would more or less immediately believe p if one were to consider p. But one cannot properly assert something like this:

> (o″) Professor Keira told me he spent yesterday afternoon thinking about a new theorem T, but he did not have time to explain T to me. I have never considered T and I am ignorant as to whether it is true, but as soon as I were to consider it, I would believe it.

If one thinks that one would immediately believe p—for good epistemic reasons, that is—if one were to consider p, one should already believe that p—unless p is a highly exceptional kind of proposition, like the proposition that one is currently considering a proposition. That is a proposition one would immediately believe as soon as one were to consider it, and even for good epistemic reasons, but it is not a proposition one should believe *right now* merely because one has that disposition. And that is because the very act of considering that proposition renders belief in it rational. Thus, turning to *de re* ignorance rather than *de dicto* ignorance saves only the proper assertion of *deep* ignorance, not that of *disbelieving* or *unconsidered* ignorance.

Asserting Complete Ignorance

Let us now turn to the sixth and final variety of propositional ignorance. If one is completely ignorant with respect to p, one cannot even grasp p. For example, I have no background in physics and I am, therefore, completely ignorant of certain truths of general

relativity. It seems such ignorance is unassertable. After all, as soon as one asserts that one is ignorant with respect to the relevant proposition, one has at least considered the relevant proposition and one is, therefore, not completely ignorant of it.

Again, the move to *de re* ignorance may provide a way out. Imagine that I am not terribly good at mathematics—a euphemism, I hasten to add. It seems I can then truly assert (o′′′):

> (o′′′) Professor Keira told me he spent yesterday afternoon thinking about a new theorem *T*. It is a complicated theorem, and I am sure I could not even grasp what it amounts to. I am, therefore, completely ignorant as to whether it is true.

Asserting *de re* ignorance with respect to some proposition will thus sometimes be possible. Often, however, it will not. Imagine that in the year 2148, an event takes place that drastically alters the course of history. It has to do with cyborgs and means of communication that we cannot even imagine now. I cannot assert complete ignorance with respect to various propositions that explain the event. In response to this, one might propose to formulate the relevant declarative sentences conditionally. Thus, one could say something like this:

> (p) If there is going to be an event in 2148 that drastically alters the course of history and there are certain facts that explain it, I am completely ignorant with respect to those truths.

One of the problems with (p), though, is that in cases like this, one does not actually assert that one is ignorant with respect to the relevant propositions, only that one is ignorant if they are true. One does not assert *q* when one asserts that if *p*, then *q*. For example, in asserting that if Amsterdam is south of Madrid and Oslo is south of Amsterdam, then Oslo is south of Madrid, I do not thereby assert that Oslo is south of Madrid. In fact, I know very well that that is

false. I merely claim that if the antecedent (a conjunction) holds, then the consequent is true. Thus, in asserting things like (p), one does not truly assert that one is ignorant.

Asserting Unwarranted Ignorance

As we chapter in chapter 3, on the Standard View of ignorance, there is also what I call *unwarranted* ignorance. This is true belief that falls short of knowledge. By contrast, on the New View of ignorance, which I defended, on which ignorance is lack of true belief, there is no such thing as unwarranted ignorance. What if the Standard rather than the New View is correct? Can one properly assert that one is in a state of unwarranted ignorance with respect to some proposition p?

One may be in a state of unwarranted ignorance for a variety of reasons: one truly believes that p without having any evidence for p, one truly believes that p but one's belief is unreliably formed, one truly believes that p but one's belief that p is Gettierized, and so on. Common to all these kinds of ignorance is that one truly believes that p but one lacks knowledge. To realize that one is in a state of unwarranted ignorance, one should thus be aware that one of the conditions necessary for knowledge is not met. Thus, in asserting such ignorance, one should say something like this:

> (q) I believe that p, and p is true, but I am ignorant as to whether p because my belief that p is unreliably formed and I have no independent evidence for it.

Or:

> (q′) I believe that p, and p is true, but I am ignorant as to whether p because I have no reason to think that p is true.

Or:

> (q'') I believe that p, and p is true, but I am ignorant as to whether p because the fact that my belief that p is true is a matter of sheer luck.

Clearly, these are all highly problematic. One should not believe that p if one also believes that one's belief that p is unreliably formed, as in (q), or that one has no or insufficient evidence for it, as in (q'). For in such cases, one clearly has a defeater for one's belief—either a rebutting defeater (good reason to think that p is false) or an undercutting defeater (good reason to think that one's belief that p was formed by a process that was insufficiently truth conducive). Sentence (q'') is problematic for another reason: it seems a necessary condition for being in a Gettier scenario that one does not realize that one is in such a scenario. If one *is* aware of that, one will realize that there are other, good grounds for one's belief, one will, thus, know the relevant proposition, and one's belief will thereby no longer be Gettierized.

The strategy of moving to *de re* assertions will not work here, for the same reasons why it did not work for disbelieving ignorance. After all, one would have to say something like this:

> (o'''') Professor Keira told me he spent yesterday afternoon thinking about a new theorem T. I believe T to be true, because all new theorems Professor Keira comes up with turn out to be true, but I am ignorant as to whether it is true.

This is clearly highly paradoxical: if you think you are ignorant as to whether a particular theorem T is true, you should not believe it.

Thus, if the Standard rather than the New View on ignorance is correct, there is such a thing as unwarranted ignorance, and it will sometimes be true to say of someone that she is in a state of unwarranted ignorance. However, one cannot say of oneself—not without

facing a Moorean paradox—that one is in a state of unwarranted ignorance with respect to a particular proposition. This is not to deny that one may perfectly well say in general that, given the enormous amounts of beliefs any person holds, one is probably in a state of unwarranted ignorance with respect to at least one proposition. But that is clearly different from saying about a specific proposition p that one is in a state of unwarranted ignorance with respect to p.

Asserting Ignorance That Issues from Duty Violation

As we saw in chapter 3, on the Normative View on ignorance, one is ignorant if one lacks a true belief or one lacks knowledge and one had a duty to inquire such that if one had inquired, one would not have lacked that true belier or that knowledge. In other words, ignorance is the lack of true belief or the lack of knowledge where that lack issues from duty violation. This means that on this view, there can be an additional variety of ignorance: true belief that falls short of knowledge because one should have inquired. Thus, someone who believes everything she overhears and thereby ends up with a true belief that Brad Pitt is about to buy a ten-million-dollar mansion in Portugal—the rumor just happens to be right—does truly believe it, but she does not know it and is therefore ignorant of it.

Can one assert such ignorance, if there is indeed such ignorance? No, one cannot, at least not without facing a Moorean paradox. The reason for this is similar to the one discussed in the previous section. This is unsurprising because true belief that falls short of knowledge because one should have inquired is a specific variety of unwarranted ignorance. To assert that one is ignorant whereas one should not have been, one must assert that one truly believes that p but that in doing so one violated an epistemic obligation: one violated a duty to inquire. And if, on the one hand, the violation of that duty renders one's belief-forming process unreliable, one

should not believe that *p*. If, on the other hand, the violation of that duty does not render one's belief-forming process unreliable, there is no reason to think that one lacks knowledge. And if there is no reason to think that one lacks knowledge, there is no reason to think that one is ignorant.

Asserting Group Ignorance

There are at least two issues when it comes to whether one can assert group ignorance. First, can *an individual*, say, a member of the group, properly assert the group's ignorance? Second, can *the group* properly assert its own ignorance? Note that the latter is a perfectly legitimate question because group assertions are made all the time. Governments, boards, institutions, universities, and companies make a whole gamut of claims, allegations, announcements, and denials, so we may legitimately ask whether they could also claim ignorance.

The answer to the first question is clearly positive. Whereas individual ignorance entails the ignorance of all the relevant persons (only the individual in question), group ignorance does *not* require that all relevant persons (all group members or all operative members) are ignorant. Remember that in chapter 5, I championed the following account of group ignorance:

> *The Dynamic Account of group ignorance*: a group *G* is ignorant of a true proposition *p* if and only if (i) either a significant number of *G*'s operative members are ignorant of *p* or enough operative members of *G* know/truly believe that *p* but *G* as a group fails to know/truly believe that *p*, and (ii) this is the result of a group dynamic, such as group agency, collective epistemic virtues or vices, external manipulation, lack of time, interest, concepts, resources, or information, or a combination of these.

Thus, the group's being ignorant is compatible with individual members having knowledge, operative members having knowledge, and even *all* members having knowledge. Someone who is aware of the group ignorance can, then, perfectly properly assert that the group is ignorant. In fact, this happens quite frequently. A Swedish Egyptologist, for instance, can perfectly well say:

> (r) We in the West are deeply ignorant of the rich cultural heritage, history, and customs of Egypt.

She can properly say so even if she herself is an *expert* in Egypt's rich cultural heritage, history, and customs. After all, she makes a claim about the group, not about herself, even though she is a member of the group.

The *group* can also make an assertion. As Jennifer Lackey has argued, groups can do so by way of coordinated group actions, like jointly writing and publishing a research paper, or by way of an authorized spokesperson, as, for instance, governments and political parties tend to do.[10] There are important differences between these two kinds of group assertion, but none of them seems to concern asserting ignorance: the propriety of group assertion of group ignorance, both for coordinated group actions and for authorized spokespersons, is structurally similar to an individual asserting her own ignorance. In both kinds of cases distinguished by Lackey, the assertion is made *by the group* (if a spokesperson makes an assertion as a spokesperson, she normally does so on behalf of the group). For example, civilians can jointly make a piece of street art that expresses that they are kept (say, suspendingly) ignorant of exactly what is going on in Area 51 in Nevada. And a spokesperson for a group of white anti-racists can properly claim that the group is objectually ignorant of what it is like to be violently arrested by the

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[10] For this helpful distinction, see Lackey (2021, 139); for her definitions of each of these, see Lackey (2021, 149–150).

police and maltreated because of one's skin color. Some varieties of ignorance, however, cannot properly be asserted by a group. A group cannot properly assert, for instance, that it is in a state of unconsidered ignorance. If a group is ignorant of a proposition's truth merely because its members have never considered it, then a group cannot properly assert that, because the group members would then consider the proposition and believe it. Of course, it is possible that a spokesperson with the relevant authority spontaneously decides to assert unconsidered ignorance on behalf of the group; in that way, the group can assert such ignorance. But the point here is whether a group can *properly* do so, and there the answer must be negative. A group's asserting group ignorance, then, seems to work structurally similar to an individual's asserting her individual ignorance.

Inexpressible Ignorance and
the Transparency View

I have argued that whether or not one can properly assert one's ignorance depends on the variety of ignorance involved. I think this claim has at least two important applications.

First, take the debate on whether there is such a thing as *inexpressible ignorance*. Shamik Dasgupta (2015, 441–451) has argued that there are several kinds of inexpressible ignorance. For example, we cannot express our own ignorance of our absolute position in Newtonian space-time; if quidditism is true, we cannot express our own ignorance of which properties play which causal roles; and, if individuals are independent of their qualities, we cannot express our own ignorance of which individual underlies which constellation of qualities. Others, such as Tim Maudlin (1993), have argued that all ignorance is expressible. What I have argued in this chapter is that a careful look at the various states of ignorance reveals that several varieties of ignorance cannot be expressed. Thus, even if the

examples concerning specific propositions or facts—such as our absolute position in Newtonian space-time—are expressible, what I have argued shows that there is inexpressible ignorance and that it is much closer to home. For what makes such ignorance inexpressible is the specific kind of attitude that it consists in, not a complexity in the world outside of us.

Second, an influential view in epistemology has it that we have self-knowledge, including knowledge about our mental states, not by way of introspection but by way of considering how things are in the world. This is called the Transparency View. Thus, according to Gareth Evans:

> In making a self-ascription of belief, one's eyes are, so to speak, or occasionally literally, directed outward—upon the world. If someone asks me "Do you think there is going to be a third world war?," I must attend, in answering him, to precisely the same outward phenomena as I would attend to if I were answering the question "Will there be a third world war?"[11] (Evans 1982, 225)

Here, I will leave belief aside and focus on ignorance. The Transparency View, on a wide understanding, is taken to apply to all mental states, such as knowledge, belief, intending, and desiring. Imagine that the Transparency View is correct. Should it also apply to ignorance, as ignorance is also a mental state? How do we self-ascribe ignorance? Well, for some varieties of ignorance, it may work the way the Transparency View has it (I do not think it does, but I will leave arguing so for another occasion). For now, the important thing to see is that for at least some varieties of ignorance that are properly assertable, the Transparency View seems false: we do not determine whether we are in that state of ignorance by attending to the way the world is. Rather, we do so by introspecting. Here are two examples.

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[11] For a highly similar view, see Moran (2001, 2003).

First, imagine that someone asks me whether I am in a state of undecided ignorance with respect to *p*. I could, of course, consider whether *p* is true, but doing so may well lead to, say, my forming the belief that *p* is true. After all, it may well be the case that I am now less distracted or better rested or in some other way in a better position to assess *p* in comparison with the last time I considered *p*. It seems that the right way to go would be to visit my memory or to consider where I left things the last time I considered whether *p*, but not to consider *p* itself. A natural response could then very well be: "Yes, I am now in a state of undecided ignorance with respect to *p*. But give me some time to make up my mind and I will then tell you whether I believe that *p*, disbelieve that *p*, or suspend judgment on *p*." The Transparency View, then, does not seem to hold for cases of expressing one's undecided ignorance: the look is inward, not outward.

Second, imagine that I have an extremely talented colleague who has been working on a complex logical theorem *T**. In fact, it is so complex, she tells me, that even if she explained it to me, I would have no clue whether it is true or false. She knows me well and has always been right on such issues, so I form the belief that I am in a state of deep ignorance with respect to *T**. But note that I come to this conclusion not by considering *T** itself. In fact, I have no idea what *T** says; my belief is merely a *de re* belief. I do not consider the relevant proposition itself because I have no idea what the proposition is. I might even be completely rather than merely deeply ignorant about it, so that I cannot even grasp the relevant proposition. Thus, the Transparency View is false for this kind of case. Now, it is not immediately clear how I do form a belief about my state of deep or complete ignorance vis-à-vis *T**. The belief seems not to be formed on the basis of introspection either. Maybe it is based on my colleague's testimony. But no matter how we should think of this case, it seems clear that the Transparency View gives the wrong verdict about this particular scenario as well.

Table 12.1 Assertible kinds and varieties of ignorance

	Individual		*Group (by an individual)*		*Group (by the group)*	
	De dicto	De re	De dicto	De re	De dicto	De re
Objectual	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Practical	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Disbelieving	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Suspending	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Undecided	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Unconsidered	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
Deep	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Complete	No	Yes/No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes/No
Unwarranted	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No
From a duty violation	No	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

Conclusion

I conclude that whether one can properly assert that one is in a particular state of ignorance with respect to a specific proposition depends on what that particulate state of ignorance is and whether it is a *de dicto* or a *de re* assertion. Table 12.1 presents an overview of the results of our discussion in this chapter.

Note, however, that there are at least three different reasons why some kind of ignorance may not be assertable:

- For disbelieving and unwarranted ignorance: asserting that one is ignorant as to whether *p* conflicts, in the sense of one's

facing a Moorean paradox, with the attitude one has toward p, namely, disbelief or belief, for ignorance is ignorance of truth.

- For unconsidered ignorance: asserting that one is ignorant as to whether p requires considering p, and as soon as one were to consider p, one would no longer be ignorant of the fact that p.
- For deep and complete ignorance: asserting that one is ignorant as to whether p requires considering p, and considering whether p or the ability to consider whether p would turn one's ignorance into a different kind of ignorance.

Finally, I have pointed out that taking this into account has several applications. Among them are the debate on whether or not there is inexpressible ignorance and the debate on the Transparency View. It turns out that it is undeniable that there is inexpressible ignorance and that the Transparency View is false for at least some mental states.

Epilogue

Looking Back

When my interest in ignorance was born, some fifteen years ago, I was struck, on the one hand, by the important role of ignorance in so many debates in and beyond philosophy and, on the other hand, by the lack of substantial analysis of ignorance. I am still not sure what best explains this lack: Is it the understandable focus on epistemically desirable states, like rationality, knowledge, and understanding? That may be, but other epistemically negative phenomena, such as epistemic vices, have increasingly received attention over the last few years. Is it the tacit assumption that ignorance is simply the lack of knowledge and that, therefore, an analysis of knowledge will do? But then we saw that various authors implicitly or explicitly question the idea that ignorance is just lack of knowledge. Whatever the reason is, I hope that this book will contribute to a change in this situation over the coming years.

We saw—at least, I argued—that an epistemology of ignorance can make a crucial difference to various debates. I have in mind at least the debates about ignorance brought about by agnogenetic practices, white ignorance, ignorance in education, responsibility for ignorance, ignorance as an excuse, and expressing ignorance. Of course, not all distinctions that I made in part 1 of the book matter equally for each debate. Often, specific distinctions and arguments are enough to elucidate a question, show that a particular position is untenable, raise new questions, or defeat a particular argument. Among them are the distinction between ignorance as lack of knowledge and ignorance as lack of true belief, the differences between propositional, objectual, and practical knowledge, distinctions between the varieties of ignorance (disbelieving,

suspending, undecided, unconsidered, deep, and complete igno-
rance), the distinction between first- and second-order ignorance,
the exploration of how group ignorance differs from individual ig-
norance, and the different ways in which ignorance can come in
degrees.

Debates about the aim of belief, the value of knowledge, the
norm of assertion, group belief and group knowledge, the rela-
tion between knowledge and understanding, epistemic virtues and
vices, and numerous other debates have benefited immensely from
various epistemological analyses of belief and knowledge. I hope
I have been able to show how debates that involve the notion of
ignorance could similarly profit from a rigorous epistemology of
ignorance.

Looking Forward

In developing an epistemology of ignorance, I had to bypass sev-
eral important questions. For instance, can there be bodies of ig-
norance, in the same way as there are bodies of knowledge (e.g.,
certain databases)? What sort of thing would that be from a meta-
physical point of view, given that ignorance is often thought to be
primarily the absence of something? Can ignorance have epistemic
value? How does ignorance relate to doubt, hesitation, and the ep-
istemic vices? Exactly what is the relation between ignorance and
skepticism? What are the sources of ignorance? The epistemolog-
ical work on knowledge and understanding will unquestionably
shed some light on these issues, but I have no doubt that asking
these questions about ignorance will come with its own challenges
and unique potential insights.

As to applying my epistemology to issues in and beyond philos-
ophy, I have also only been able to make a start by giving a couple of
examples: agnogenetic practices, ignorance in education, white ig-
norance, responsibility for ignorance, ignorance as an excuse, and

expressing one's ignorance. The list, however, is much longer. Let me mention some issues in philosophy that I have not covered in this book but in which the notion of ignorance seems to play an important role.[1] I submit that it is at least worthwhile exploring how a full-blown epistemology of ignorance would bear on them.

Ethics. How should we think of ignorance when it comes to the epistemic condition of moral responsibility? Some philosophers have suggested that one is responsible only if one is not ignorant of the moral significance of one's behavior (see Sartorio 2017). Sometimes, ignorance of diseases or certain treatments or health risks is preferable; but exactly when and how is such ignorance to be conceptualized? What is the relation between ignorance and various virtues, such as modesty, blind charity, and not holding a grudge against people: do some virtues imply ignorance?[2] Might some specifically *epistemic* virtues, such as intellectual humility, also come with ignorance? Can ignorance only ever excuse, or can it also justify? Is it morally worse to make people hold certain false beliefs (a particular variety of ignorance) than to prevent them from holding certain true beliefs (another variety 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?

Decision theory. How much ignorance is permitted or ruled out for one to rationally take certain measures to prevent global warming? What should one do if, in situations in which one is ignorant and an expert provides testimony, one has some reason to not completely trust the expert, as is often the case in medicine, science, commerce, law, and politics? How should we conceptualize ignorance in prisoner's dilemmas, as first developed by Merrill

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[1] I already gave some examples in Peels (2010, 2017a, 2018). The list here is more extensive.

[2] The idea that there are important relations between ignorance and certain virtues has been advocated by Driver (1989, 2001) and Townley (2011, 22–53).

Flood and Melvin Dresher at the RAND Corporation in 1950 (see Poundstone 1993, 8, 117)?

Philosophy of law. The notion of ministerial responsibility means that a minister can be responsible for what happens in her department even if she is ignorant of that. What kinds and varieties of ignorance does this comprise? Many laws state that people are to be punished only if they acted *mens rea*, that is, from a guilty mind. There are several mental states that count as "having a guilty mind," and culpable ignorance is one of them. When should we count ignorance as legally culpable?[3] 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. What kinds of ignorance can exculpate, excuse, or inculpate?[4]

Philosophy of science and technology. What (heuristic) role does ignorance play in scientific investigation?[5] To what extent should we aim at ignorance rather than knowledge of certain technologies?[6]

Philosophy of religion. The argument from divine hiddenness states that God's existence is improbable because many people are ignorant as to whether or not God exists and a perfectly benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent God would not allow that to happen (see McBrayer 2016). What does such ignorance amount to? Certain theologians have argued that the practice of *disciplina arcani*—that is, intentionally keeping outsiders ignorant of specific rituals or ideas—should be revived in religious communities. How should we construe such ignorance? Skeptical theism says it is not unlikely that we will be ignorant of many reasons God has for

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[3] For more on this, see Smith (2011).

[4] For this threefold distinction, see Alexander (2017).

[5] A recent important contribution to answering this question is Firestein (2012).

[6] Seumas Miller (2017), for instance, has argued that we sometimes have an obligation to be or become collectively ignorant regarding certain nuclear technologies.

permitting various kinds of evil. How should we understand such ignorance?

Philosophy of language and rhetoric. Is it ever permissible to assert that *p* if one is ignorant as to whether *p*, and if so, in what senses of *permissibility* and *ignorance*? Does the illocutionary act of asserting that *p* require one to not be ignorant of all the conversational implicatures of asserting that *p*? Does asserting vagueness imply some kind of ignorance? Is the truth of *p* a presupposition of the assertion that someone is ignorant of *p*, an implication of it, an indirect speech act, or yet something else? When and how can ignorance be used as a rhetorical resource? Does effective rhetoric require that the audience is to some extent ignorant of rhetorical devices?

Argumentation theory. The *argumentum ad ignorantiam* or argument from ignorance was for a long time considered to be a fallacy. As several philosophers have argued, however, some forms of this argument are perfectly sound (e.g., Walton 1996). What distinguishes the argument's sound forms from its unsound forms, and does it have anything to do with the nature and varieties of ignorance?

Philosophy of mind. John Locke's famous person-in-the-room experiment asks us to imagine that someone is transported to a room when sound asleep. When he awakes, he considers leaving the room, but he decides not to do so. He is ignorant that the room is locked, so that he could not have left it. Now, does the person act freely in staying in the room? Such Frankfurt-style cases *avant la lettre* invite us to explore in more detail the relation between freedom of the will and ignorance.[7] John Searle's Chinese room argument also involves the notion of ignorance (see Searle 1980). It is directed against functionalist and computationalist positions that maintain that the mind is merely an information-processing system that operates on formal symbols. Searle asks us to imagine

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[7] See Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* 2.21.10 (Locke [1690] 1975, 238).

that artificial intelligence has progressed in such a way that it is now able to construct a computer that behaves exactly as if it understands Chinese: it takes as input Chinese characters, follows a computer program, and delivers Chinese characters as output. It does this so well that it easily passes the Turing test: a Chinese speaker cannot distinguish between a live Chinese speaker and the computer. It replies convincingly to all questions. Searle then asks us to imagine that he himself is entirely ignorant of Chinese, that he is in a closed room, and that he receives questions in Chinese. Every time he receives a question, he looks it up in a collection of Chinese phrase books that contain matching answers. In other words, he manually does what the computer does electronically. Searle suggests there is no essential difference between him and the computer: the computer does not really *understand* but rather *simulates understanding* Chinese. How are we to construe ignorance in this thought experiment?

Political and social philosophy. One of the purposes of public commemoration practices is that we should not become ignorant. But what exactly do we seek to avoid?[8] Ignorance seems crucial to privacy and secrecy, but precisely how are these notions related?[9] Certain kinds of propaganda seem to aim at ignorance, such as Soviet propaganda about what happened at Chernobyl, but exactly what kind of ignorance does such propaganda aim at, and how is it induced and maintained? How does ignorance relate to ideology; does ideology necessarily come with certain kinds of ignorance? There seems to be a clear connection between ignorance and epistemic bubbles and between ignorance and echo chambers, but exactly what is the relation, and what sorts of ignorance are involved?

Maybe for some of these debates, a simple analysis of ignorance in terms of lack of propositional knowledge will do. But given the

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[8] For some further examples of issues in social and political philosophy that touch on ignorance, see the contributions to Gross and McGoey (2015).

[9] Several of the essays in a 2013 special issue of *Episteme*, edited by Martijn Blaauw, touch on ignorance (see Blaauw 2013).

results of the application of my epistemology of ignorance to the six debates in and beyond philosophy that we explored in part 2 of this book, I have no doubt that for many of the issues that I listed here, applying a thorough epistemology of ignorance will yield surprising insights.

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