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Knowledge and Ignorance, Theoretical and Practical

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In “What Ignorance Really Is: Examining the Foundations of Epistemology of Ignorance,” Nadja El Kassar brings disparate conceptions of ignorance from recent epistemology into contact with each other, and she proposes an integrated conception of ignorance which aims to capture the important aspects of each of these conceptions. This paper is both useful and stimulating for anyone interested in the subjects of knowledge and ignorance, especially those who might be ignorant of work on ignorance conducted in other branches of epistemology.

El Kassar’s View of Ignorance

El Kassar identifies three broad approaches to ignorance in the epistemology literature which lead up to her proposed integrated conception:

(1) *Propositional conception of ignorance*

This is the standard approach in epistemology. On this approach, ignorance consists of a subject’s lacking either knowledge of or belief in a true proposition.

(2) *Agential conception of ignorance*

Agential ignorance goes beyond mere propositional ignorance, in “explicitly includ[ing] the epistemic agent as contributing to and maintaining ignorance” (p.3). Epistemic vices such as arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness contribute to this sort of ignorance. On this approach, the particular way in which ignorance is brought about or maintained is viewed as partly constitutive of the ignorance itself.

(3) *Structural conception of ignorance*

Like the agential conception, this conception of ignorance views the causes of ignorance as partly constitutive of ignorance. Unlike the agential conception, however, the structural conception takes into account belief-forming practices and social structures that go beyond the individual cognizer.

(4) *Integrated conception of ignorance*

El Kassar argues that each of these other conceptions of ignorance gets at something important, and that they are not reducible to each other. So she proposes her integrated conception, which aims to bring the key features of these approaches together: “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)” (p.7).

In the remainder of this commentary, I will do two things. First, I will briefly argue in defense of the Standard View, on the ground that we can say everything we want to say about ignorance, taking the propositional conception of ignorance as fundamental. Second, I will suggest that proponents of the Standard View of ignorance do not need to choose between viewing ignorance as a lack of knowledge and ignorance as lack of true belief. Just as there are strong and weak senses of “knowledge,” there can be corresponding weak and strong senses of “ignorance.”

Third, I will propose that we should recognize another kind of ignorance, which we might call *practical* ignorance, which consists of not knowing how to do things. There is a clear way in which practical ignorance is distinct from propositional ignorance, given that knowledge-how and knowledge-that appear to be different kinds of knowledge that are irreducible to each other. But there is also a sense in which practical ignorance can be partly constitutive of propositional ignorance, which is similar to how El Kassar sees agential ignorance as partly constitutive of ignorance in general. Indeed, I will suggest, El Kassar's integrated view of ignorance might easily be extended to cover practical ignorance as well.

Propositional Ignorance as Fundamental

I want to defend the view that propositional ignorance is the most fundamental kind of ignorance. Viewing ignorance this way is intuitively plausible, and it allows us to say everything we need to say about ignorance.

The claim that propositional ignorance is most fundamental is ambiguous. On the one hand, it might mean that agential and structural ignorance are entirely *reducible* to it, in the sense that the crucial aspects of agential and structural ignorance as described above, such as the cognitive dispositions of individual subject or the knowledge-producing institutions extant in a society, are themselves all forms of propositional ignorance or that they derive from propositional ignorance.

El Kassar notes that that kind of reductivism is implausible, and it is not the view I mean to defend here. Instead, I mean to defend the proposal that "The propositional conception is most fundamental because the second and the third conceptions are not really conceptions of ignorance but rather accounts of different causes of ignorance" (p. 4).

On this view, the only condition that *constitutes* ignorance is lack of knowledge or true belief, and so all ignorance is propositional ignorance. But propositional ignorance might be brought about in various ways, and it is useful to distinguish the various ways in which it can be brought about or sustained, especially when some of those ways make a person's or a group's ignorance particularly dangerous or resilient.

This approach does not aim to denigrate the projects pursued by proponents of agential and structural conceptions of ignorance. It does not even aim to prevent us from talking about different kinds of ignorance as differentiated by their agential or structural causes.

Just as we can categorize propositional knowledge into different kinds based on the subject matter of what is known and the methods by which knowledge in different areas is acquired, all the while acknowledging that these are still all kinds of propositional knowledge, so too we can distinguish kinds of propositional ignorance based on the subject matter and the ways in which ignorance is caused or maintained, while still recognizing these as kinds of propositional ignorance.

El Kassar objects (p. 4) that this proposal misunderstands the agential and structural conceptions of ignorance, for they aim to *broaden* our view of ignorance, to incorporate more than just propositional ignorance. They view certain kinds of agential or structural causes of ignorance as part of what constitutes ignorance itself. Propositional conceptions of ignorance cannot capture these aspects of ignorance; these aspects of ignorance are not propositional in nature, after all.

But it seems that propositionalists can make two replies here. First, if virtue epistemologists such as Greco (2009) are right, then knowledge itself depends on subjects possessing and exercising certain cognitive abilities. In that case, there are agential aspects to propositional knowledge—and in some cases, to propositional ignorance. So some aspects of agential ignorance can be built into propositional ignorance.

And second, it's not clear that we need to broaden the conception of ignorance to include things beyond propositional ignorance. Granting that there are aspects of agential and structural conceptions of ignorance that are left out of the account of what ignorance is when we take propositional ignorance as fundamental, it does not follow that we cannot take those aspects of agential and structural ignorance into account at all.

Some kinds of causes of ignorance are worth dwelling on in our theories of knowledge and ignorance. We just don't need to think of the causes of ignorance as themselves forms of ignorance, or as part of what constitutes ignorance.

So it seems to me that we can still say everything we want to say about what are here called propositional, agential, and structural ignorance, even if we only ultimately count propositional ignorance as ignorance proper, and we count the features of agential and structural ignorance as important causes of ignorance proper but not themselves constitutive of ignorance.

Propositional Ignorance: Lack of Knowledge or True Belief?

El Kassar notes that if we take the propositional conception as fundamental, then we will need to decide whether to take ignorance to consist of a lack of true belief or a lack of knowledge. But perhaps we can have it both ways. As Goldman and Olsson (2010) note, ordinarily, from the fact that S lacks knowledge that *p*, one may infer that S is ignorant of *p*. Knowledge and ignorance appear to exhaust the logical space, for a given subject S and true proposition *p*.

Furthermore, in ordinary English there are strong and weak senses of “knowledge,” with the weak sense meaning simply true belief, and the strong sense meaning Gettier-proof justified true belief. In the weak sense of “knowledge,” ignorance is a lack of knowledge and a lack of true belief, because knowledge and true belief are one and the same, on this conception of knowledge.

In the strong sense of knowledge, on the other hand, a lack of knowledge results from lacking true belief, or from lacking justification, or from being Gettiered. But, Goldman and Olsson argue, lacking justification or being Gettiered do not make a person ignorant of whether p is true. As long as p is true and S believes p , it is incorrect to say that S is ignorant of p .

So Goldman and Olsson plump for the view of ignorance as lack of true belief. But another option is to take their initial point about ignorance as a lack of knowledge at face value. Given that ignorance is a lack of knowledge, and given that there are strong and weak senses of “knowledge,” one would expect that there also are strong and weak senses of “ignorance.” A lack of knowledge in the *weak* sense would be ignorance in the *strong* sense, and a lack of knowledge in the *strong* sense would be ignorance in the *weak* sense. Because knowledge in the strong sense consists of more than knowledge in the weak sense, a lack of knowledge in the strong sense takes less than does a lack of knowledge in the weak sense.

Practical Ignorance

The proposal here is that ignorance at bottom consists of a lack of knowledge. So far, in line with the Standard View, we have only been considering propositional knowledge: ignorance consists of the existence of a true proposition p , and S’s lacking knowledge that p .

But on the assumption that knowledge-how is not reducible to knowledge-that, it seems useful to have a conception of ignorance which will apply to the lack of knowledge-how.¹ For example, it seems natural enough to say that I am ignorant of how to kick a field goal, or how to speak Mandarin, or how to build a sturdy chair. And if knowledge-how is not just a species of knowledge-that, then my ignorance of these things consists of more than a simple lack of true beliefs about how these things are done: they consist at least in part of my *lacking the ability* to do them. We can call this kind of ignorance *practical* ignorance.

Importantly, practical ignorance is not reducible to the agential kind of ignorance discussed above. Although the agential conception takes cognitive abilities and dispositions to be partly constitutive of ignorance, practical ignorance would be much broader, encompassing practical inabilities as well as cognitive inabilities. Further, the agential conception of ignorance draws our attention to ignorance that can sometimes be actively maintained by very sophisticated intellectual abilities, in which case such ignorance does not manifest practical ignorance.

For example, one might have the ability to reinterpret data to support a preferred outlook. That is not a truth-conducive ability, but it is an ability to form desired beliefs, and it is an ability at which people can become quite proficient. In cases where a subject exercises such an ability, she might successfully maintain a distorted or mistaken outlook because of the exercise of practical abilities, not because of practical ignorance.

¹ Peels (2010) briefly considers the possibility of practical ignorance, only to set it aside and focus on propositional ignorance.

Like propositional ignorance, practical ignorance can be partly caused or sustained by agential and structural features of a person or a society. For example, practical ignorance can be actively maintained by an individual's interference in her own development, or by other people's interference in her development. Social structures geared toward the oppression of segments of the population, or which simply encourage members of certain social groups to participate in some activities and not to participate in others, can also contribute to sustaining people's practical inabilities.

And, like agential ignorance, practical ignorance can be responsible for maintaining propositional ignorance in individuals or in groups, about individual propositions or about whole domains of knowledge.

For example, the inability to speak local languages can keep victims of human trafficking from gaining knowledge of the kinds of resources that might be available to them. The inability to perform relatively simple arithmetical calculations can prevent an individual from knowing whether she is receiving the correct amount of change in a transaction. The inability to conceptualize certain kinds of behaviour as abusive can sustain a lack of understanding of one's situation.² And so on.

So although practical and propositional ignorance are different kinds of ignorance, on the assumption that know-how and knowledge-that are irreducible to each other, they appear to be susceptible to being intertwined in these ways.

The nature of practical ignorance and its relation to propositional ignorance bears further investigation. One potential feature of El Kassir's integrated conception of ignorance is that, although it has a doxastic component built in, and so it does not account for practical ignorance as I am conceiving of it, it might be straightforwardly extended to cover practical ignorance as well.

For example, theoretical and practical ignorance might be defined and brought together as follows:

Theoretical ignorance: this would remain as El Kassir formulates her integrated conception of ignorance, as "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)" (p.7).

Practical ignorance: a disposition of an agent that manifests itself in her actions – where S fails to φ , or S does not φ well or properly – and her practical attitudes (ethical and pragmatic attitudes, ethical or practical virtues and vices).

Ignorance in general: combines theoretical and practical ignorance. Ignorance in general would then be: a disposition of an agent that manifests itself in an agent's

² I have in mind here Fricker's (2007) treatment of hermeneutical injustice.

beliefs or actions – whereby she fails to succeed in achieving the characteristic goal of the activity in question (believing truly, knowing, or successfully carrying out some practical action) – and in her epistemic and practical attitudes (doxastic attitudes, ethical attitudes, epistemic and practical virtues and vices).

Of course, this is only a suggestion about how practical ignorance could be conceptualized. I have argued in defense of the Standard View of (theoretical) ignorance, so this sort of unified integrated conception is not available to me. Nor do I mean to suggest that El Kassar is committed to developing her view of ignorance in this direction.

Still, given a commitment to El Kassar’s integrated view of ignorance, and given that we should also want to give an account of practical ignorance, this seems like a plausible way to deliver a unified treatment of ignorance.

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