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IGNORANCE AND INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT. It is argued that the two main accounts of ignorance in the contemporary literature—in the terms of the lack of knowledge and the lack of true belief—are lacking in key respects. A new way of thinking about ignorance is offered that can accommodate the motivations for both of the standard views, but which in the process also avoids the problems that afflict these proposals. In short, this new account of ignorance incorporates the idea that ignorance essentially involves not just the absence of a certain epistemic good, but also an intellectual failing of inquiry. It is further contended that making sense of this normative dimension to ignorance requires one to situate one's account of ignorance within a wider epistemic axiology.

1. THE STANDARD ACCOUNTS OF IGNORANCE

There are two main accounts of ignorance in the current literature. The prevailing view is that ignorance is the complement of knowledge, such that being ignorant about p is simply a failure to know that p .¹ Call this the *knowledge account* of ignorance. One can see the attraction of the proposal. For not only is it elegant in its simplicity, but it also fits with the broad idea of ignorance in everyday discourse. Indeed, it accords with the standard dictionary definition of ignorance, which in turn reflects the etymology of the word. Relatedly, isn't knowledge the cure for ignorance? If so, then that strongly suggests that ignorance is simply a lack of knowledge.

The knowledge account of ignorance faces some problem cases, however. In particular, given that not every case of true belief amounts to knowledge, it entails that one can be ignorant about p while nonetheless truly believing that p . That sounds at least *prima facie* odd. Indeed, it also means that

one can be ignorant about p even while having a justified, but Gettierized, true belief that p . (More generally, any epistemically well-supported true belief that fails to amount to knowledge will amount to ignorance on this view). Such cases put some pressure on the view, especially Gettier-style cases given that the agent concerned can be epistemically blameless in believing as she does.

This leads us to the other main account of ignorance in the contemporary literature. This holds that ignorance is not a lack of knowledge, but rather a lack of true belief.² In particular, so long as one has a true belief that p , then on this view one is not ignorant about p , even if one fails to have knowledge that p (indeed, even if one fails to even have *any* good reasons for believing that p). Call this the *true belief account of ignorance*.

The true belief account of ignorance avoids the concern just noted regarding the knowledge account, whereby it is obliged to treat even someone with a true belief in the target proposition, including a justified but Gettierized true belief, as ignorant. But of course it has problems of its own, not least in entailing that an agent who happens on a true belief merely by dumb luck would not count as ignorant. Indeed, in such a scenario the subject would go from being ignorant to having her ignorance removed. Could removing one's ignorance really be so easy?³

The current debate between these two views tends to proceed, not unnaturally, by taking a side in this dispute and then mounting a defence of the favoured camp in light of a critique of the other. I propose a different tack. In particular, I will be arguing that there is a fundamental sense in which *both* proposals are problematic. Crucially, however, once we understand why these proposals are inadequate as they stand, then we will be in a position to formulate an account of ignorance that is sensitive to the motivations for both of these conceptions of ignorance. In this way we will be able to move beyond the current *impasse* between the two leading accounts of ignorance.

Before we get to the problems facing the standard accounts, however, a few clarificatory remarks are in order. First, as the foregoing makes clear, it is what we might term *propositional ignorance* that is our focus here, where this is the kind of ignorance that corresponds with propositional knowledge or true belief in a proposition. Arguably, at least, there are forms of ignorance that are not essentially propositional in nature, such as varieties of ignorance that correspond with acquaintance knowledge or know-how. But these will not be our concern here.⁴ Accordingly, henceforth the reader should take 'ignorance' to refer specifically to propositional ignorance.

Second, I will be following the contemporary literature in taking it as a methodological given that there is a single core notion of (propositional) ignorance that we are trying to capture with an account of ignorance. Note that this is of course compatible with the idea that our actual usage of this

time might sometimes be quite permissive, and hence can vary from the core usage. Still, if one found oneself struggling to offer a coherent account of ignorance, then this would be an assumption that one would be wise to revisit. But since I will be claiming that there is a plausible way of thinking about ignorance available, this methodological assumption ought to be relatively uncontentious, especially since it is tacitly accepted in the current debate anyway.

Third, I take it to be important to our understanding of the two standard accounts of ignorance that we are restricting the scope of the view to agents who have beliefs and knowledge in the first place. There are an awful lot of thoughtless things in the universe—such as trees, aeroplanes, tectonic plates, and so forth—which fail to know or truly believe anything, but which I don't think we are ever tempted to regard as ignorant as a result. Accordingly, with this restriction in play proponents of the standard accounts of ignorance are not committed to claiming that, say, rocks are ignorant of the second law of thermodynamics (even though it is clear that rocks certainly lack both a true belief and, *a fortiori*, knowledge of this proposition).

Relatedly, fourth, I think we should also stipulate that the kind of ignorance that we are interested in is only concerned with truths. There are lots of false propositions that I fail to truly believe—and which, *a fortiori*, I fail to know—but I am not thereby ignorant of them. As we might say, it is only when it comes to truths that there is anything to be ignorant of. These last two points might seem to be so obvious as to not be worth making explicit in this discussion. Indeed, in much of the contemporary treatment of ignorance they are left tacit, and I don't think this is an oversight but rather reflects the fact that they *are* obvious. Nonetheless, as we will see, there is something important to be theoretically gained by bringing them to the fore.

2. *CONTRA* THE STANDARD ACCOUNTS OF IGNORANCE

I will be offering three kinds of case that create problems for the standard accounts of ignorance. In all of them an otherwise knowing and believing subject lacks both knowledge and belief in the target true proposition, but does not thereby count as ignorant (or so I claim).

First, consider cases of pointless truths that one has, quite rightly, no interest in. To take a familiar example from the epistemological literature, consider the number of grains of sand on a beach (or the number of blades of grass on one's lawn, etc.). No sensible agent would be bothered to acquire such a pointless truth, though it is surely within the scope of their abilities to do so (provided

they have enough time, patience, and so forth). Indeed, one manifests one's rationality as an inquirer (i.e., as someone who cares about the truth) precisely by *not* seeking out these trivial truths. But in passing up knowledge, or even true belief, in this proposition, would it follow that one is thereby ignorant of this fact? In particular, is there any temptation at all to ascribe ignorance in this case, as opposed to merely noting that the target proposition is something that the agent doesn't know? Note too that the difficulty of discovering this particular pointless truth is not the issue here (though it clearly doesn't help), since the same would apply with regard to a pointless truth that was easy to discover (such as how many teaspoons there are in the canteen drawers).

Moreover, notice that if someone were to happen on a true belief in a proposition of this kind—through guesswork, say—it would be rather unnatural to treat this as *removing* their ignorance of this proposition, as the true belief account would suggest. As we noted above, groundless true belief of this sort is a general problem for the true belief account of ignorance, and hence one could reasonably claim that it is of no specific import here. Nonetheless, consider someone who elected to uncover the truth in this regard, and so took the trouble to, say, count the grains of sand in question. Now she not only has a true belief in the target proposition, but also knowledge. Are we tempted to claim that as a result she is no longer ignorant of this proposition (as both accounts of ignorance would propose)? I think not. Instead, I think we would want to say that there is a proposition that was previously unknown but which is now known—ignorance doesn't seem to enter into it at all.

Second, consider truths that may well be significant, but which we evidently have no practical means of discovering. What, for example, did Caesar have for breakfast on the day that he crossed the Rubicon? This is the kind of thing that could have been historically recorded—and which might well be historically significant (perhaps it would tell us something important about his state of mind, say)—but I think we can reasonably take it that it wasn't documented. If no such records exist, then there isn't any feasible way of determining the answer to this question now. (For clarity, let us stipulate that there is not a typical Caesar breakfast listed in the historical record either, or anything else in the vicinity that would supply us with a credible inductive basis for forming a belief about the target proposition). It thus follows that this is something that we are unable to form a rational belief about, much less know. Even so, would we say that this is something about which we are ignorant? Wouldn't we rather just say that it is something that we simply don't know? (And if one did happen to form a true belief in the target proposition, while lacking any rational basis for it, would we regard that as *removing* one's ignorance, as the true belief account would suggest? That doesn't seem very credible).

Third, consider truths that for structural reasons cannot be known or believed. Quantum physics, for example, seems to entail that there are certain inherent cognitive limitations, such as regarding the possibility of precise knowledge of both the current position and momentum of a particle. If that's right, then there are structural constraints to our knowledge of the physical world. On the lack of knowledge account of ignorance at least we are thereby ignorant of the target propositions. But that sounds like an odd result, given that this doesn't reflect any cognitive lack on our parts, but rather an epistemic boundary that we cannot cross. Moreover, as before, happening to form a true belief in this regard without any rational basis doesn't seem to thereby remove ignorance either, *contra* the true belief account.

There is another kind of example, of a more philosophical variety, in the vicinity that will also illustrate this point. Wittgenstein (1969) famously argues that it is in the nature of the structure of rational evaluation that it takes place relative to a backdrop of *hinge certainties*. These are basic commitments that we are optimally certain of and which enable rational evaluations. But since they provide the framework for rational evaluations, they cannot be rationally evaluated themselves. Our hinge commitments are thus held in an essentially arational fashion. It is not our present concern whether such an account is plausible.⁵ The point is rather that such a proposal would entail that our hinge commitments could not be known, at least insofar as we grant that knowledge requires rational support. Indeed, Wittgenstein argues that these hinge commitments involve a distinctive kind of propositional attitude, and it has been suggested that this further entails that our hinge commitments do not constitute beliefs either.⁶

Assuming that the propositions in question are true, does it therefore follow that we are ignorant of our hinge commitments? This claim seems very odd indeed, particularly since we are optimally certain of those (true) propositions that we are hinge committed to. Moreover, notice that although we do not have knowledge of our hinge commitments, there is also a sense in which we do not fail to know them either. What I mean by this is that, if Wittgenstein is right, then such commitments are simply not in the market for knowledge. It thus follows that it is not as if they constitute something that we could have known, but failed to. And yet wouldn't saying that we were ignorant of them imply just that? Relatedly, insofar as we treat hinge commitments as being a distinct propositional attitude to belief, then what goes for our lack of knowledge of these hinges also goes for our non-belief in them. Although it's correct that we don't believe the (true) propositions that we are hinge committed to, it is not as if these are truths that we could have believed but failed to. Rather, the point would be that these commitments are simply not in the market for belief in the first place.

But how then can a failure to have a true belief in a hinge commitment amount to ignorance? On either of the standard accounts of ignorance, we seem to be generating the wrong verdict of ignorance regarding our hinge commitments.

This third kind of case is the most interesting for our purposes. Do not be side-tracked by the appeal to the notion of a hinge commitment here, since all that's important for such a case is that ignorance does not seem to be applicable to truths that agents simply could not have knowledge of or believe. This kind of example is revealing precisely because such scenarios ought to be *paradigmatic* instances of ignorance on the standard accounts of this notion. After all, if ignorance is lack of knowledge or true belief, and there are truths that one could never know or believe, then our situation with regard to these truths ought to be straightforwardly a case of ignorance. That ignorance seems instead to be obviously inapplicable in such scenarios is thus highly revealing. But what does it reveal, exactly?

3. IGNORANCE AND INQUIRY

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. In particular, the sort of intellectual failing in question is one concerned with a failing of good inquiry. In all the cases we have looked at, while there is a clear absence of the target epistemic good (whether true belief or knowledge), there is no intellectual failing of the subject *qua* inquirer in play, and that's why we don't attribute ignorance to the subjects concerned.

With this general thought in mind, let's reconsider the cases that we have looked at, taking them now in reverse order. If there are truths that for structural reasons cannot be known or believed, then on this way of thinking about ignorance rather than such cases being paradigmatically cases of ignorance, they will instead be cases where ignorance is inapplicable. This is because by being unknowable/unbelievable, these commitments cannot coherently be the concern of inquiry at all, and thus our lack of knowledge/true belief in these propositions cannot indicate an intellectual failing of inquiry. Accordingly, it should be no surprise that it sounds jarring to treat agents as being ignorant of their hinge commitments, given how these commitments are described.

Next consider the cases of truths that are practically, rather than structurally, unknowable, such that there are overwhelming practical hurdles to acquiring a rational basis for belief in the target

proposition. These cases lack the clarity of scenarios where knowledge and belief are unavailable for structural reasons, but they benefit from not being tied to philosophically contentious phenomena like hinge commitments that are introduced to enable us to explain why a structural (as opposed to a merely practical) limitation is in place. We can account for our intuition that attributing ignorance would be inappropriate here by appealing to the practical unknowability of the truths in question, for clearly if these truths are practically unknowable then one cannot be subject to any intellectual fault, *qua* an inquirer, for failing to know them. Moreover, since these are truths where, practically speaking, one cannot gain any kind of rational basis for one's belief in the target proposition, one similarly can't be at intellectual fault for failing to believe these truths. In fact, the contrary is the case, in that it would be indicative of an intellectual failing on one's part, *qua* inquirer, if one believed them in the manifest absence of any rational basis for doing so.

Finally, consider our case of unknown/unbelieved pointless truths. Again, our new way of thinking about ignorance would explain why ignorance isn't applicable in such cases. This is because there clearly isn't any intellectual failing of inquiry in play when it comes to not believing or knowing pointless truths, as no good inquiry would be devoted to discovering such truths. Indeed, as we noted above, the opposite is the case, in that one would be at fault even from a purely intellectual view for pursuing such truths. It is worth stressing this point. That is, it is crucial to such cases that one doesn't pursue the trivial truths for intellectual reasons, and not for merely practical reasons (e.g., because one doesn't care about these truths, even though one ought to, from a purely intellectual point of view). In particular, if these were truths that were not pointless, but one didn't pursue them because one simply didn't care about them, then ignorance *would* be applicable to one for failing to know them/truly believe them. One doesn't get immunity from ignorance by simply failing to care about a body of truths. The case that we described was precisely not of this sort, however, since it was the very pointlessness of the truths in question that meant that someone who cares about the truth would not bother pursuing them.⁷

What goes for subjects in these cases will also apply to other scenarios where a subject fails to have knowledge/true belief but where there is clearly no intellectual failing of inquiry on display. Consider, for example, someone from the distant past who believes that the earth is flat. We would surely regard her as not exhibiting an intellectual failing of inquiry in this regard. After all, given the information available to her, there is simply no route to her discovering this fact herself. Accordingly, even despite her lack of true belief/knowledge, she wouldn't count as ignorant. In contrast, if an adult from the present day were to go back in time to such an era and formed the same false belief, then we

would think of this as manifesting an intellectual failing of inquiry, and hence we would attribute ignorance. It follows that what was once something that didn't amount to ignorance can over time become an instance of ignorance as our wider cognitive situation changes, and thereby changes our intellectual culpability for what we believe. There is thus a sense in which whether one counts as ignorant is relative to the wider cognitive circumstances that one occupies (in contrast to whether someone counts as having knowledge/true belief, at least on standard accounts of them anyway).

By the same reasoning, small children are also usually exempt from ignorance ascriptions, as they are not in a position to manifest the kind of intellectual culpability in question, even when their beliefs are false (/fail to be knowledge). The same goes for adults who have significant cognitive impairments, and for the same reasons. I think this result is entirely what we would expect, given the normative dimension to an ignorance ascription.

Inevitably, there will be trickier cases in this regard. Given my limited cognitive abilities, do I count as ignorant of advanced quantum physics, a highly complex domain that is clearly concerned with significant (rather than pointless) truths? One could argue that I am simply unable to gain knowledge and true beliefs in this regard, and if that were so then on this way of thinking about ignorance I wouldn't count as ignorant of it. I'm inclined to push back on this, however. After all, while it might be very difficult for me to do so, I surely could gain true beliefs in this regard by consulting textbooks and such like. Moreover, these true beliefs ought to amount to knowledge, given the reliability of the information source. There is thus a sense in which there are significant truths that I fail to know or truly believe because of an intellectual failing on my part as an inquirer. This is why ignorance does seem applicable here. (Of course, what does seem right about this case is that there is no feasible route to me to gain *understanding* of this domain. As we will see below, that might have implications for whether one counts as ignorant, depending on one's conception of what it is that good inquiry is aiming to achieve).

In any case, we do not need to adjudicate every scenario. The general point is that we have a test for determining whether ignorance is applicable in terms of whether, in not attaining the relevant epistemic good, the subject manifests an intellectual failing of inquiry.

4. IGNORANCE AND EPISTEMIC AXIOLOGY

All three of our problem cases for the standard accounts thus reveal our disinclination to ascribe ignorance where it is manifest that there is no intellectual failing on the part of the subject, *qua* inquirer, when it comes to her lack of knowledge or true belief in the target proposition. Thinking of ignorance in terms of the subject's intellectual failing *qua* inquirer can also explain the limitations on ignorance that we imposed on the standard accounts in §1. It is now no wonder that ignorance doesn't apply to thoughtless objects, or to our lack of knowledge/belief in falsehoods, since the idea of intellectual failings of inquiry simply doesn't get a purchase in such cases. Thoughtless objects do not make inquiries, and the intellectual goal of good inquiries is not regarded by anyone as being falsehoods.⁸ This way of understanding ignorance thus gains us an important grip on the notion, of a kind that the standard accounts can't deliver.

What we have at present, however, is not so much a new account of ignorance as rather a schematic specification of how such a new account should be understood. There is a good reason for this. The problem cases for the standard accounts that we have looked at so far are all concerned with a lack of knowledge/true belief where everyone would agree that there is no intellectual failing of inquiry. But insofar as there are philosophical disputes regarding how best to understand good inquiry from a purely intellectual point of view, then there will also inevitably be disputes over what constitutes an intellectual failing of inquiry. More generally, the moral of our discussion of ignorance is that, *contra* the standard accounts of ignorance, one cannot capture this notion independently of an account of what constitutes a good inquiry. That project in turn essentially concerns, *inter alia*, one's conception of the fundamental epistemic good, at least given the further plausible assumption that this is what a good inquiry should be directed towards. Ignorance is thus now being understood as a fundamental epistemic ill relative to a conception of the fundamental epistemic good—the two theoretical concerns go hand-in-hand.⁹

Notice that this way of thinking about the nature of ignorance builds on something that is implicit in the standard accounts. What unites both of the standard accounts of ignorance is the idea that ignorance is to be understood as the absence of a certain epistemic good. What makes that way of approaching ignorance so compelling is surely the thought that ignorance is a fundamental epistemic ill, and hence that it should be understood as the absence of a fundamental epistemic good. But if that's right, then the dispute between the standard accounts isn't just in terms of which epistemic good is absent when one is ignorant, but rather also concerns which of the target epistemic goods

(truth/knowledge) is the fundamental one. What our problem cases for the standard accounts of ignorance further bring out is the point that since ignorance is concerned with an intellectual failing of inquiry, then one's conception of the fundamental epistemic good will also have ramifications here, at least given that good inquiry aims at the fundamental epistemic good.

We can see these points in action by considering how one's conception of the fundamental epistemic good, and thus of good inquiry, will have a bearing on one's account of ignorance as an intellectual failing of inquiry. For example, if one had a conception of the overarching intellectual good as being knowledge, and thus understood good inquiry in these terms, then one would be inclined to treat this new theory of ignorance as being essentially a modification (albeit a significant one) of the knowledge account of ignorance.¹⁰ Rather than lack of knowledge *simpliciter* sufficing for ignorance, one would instead have to manifest a particular kind of lack of knowledge that revealed an intellectual failing on one's part *qua* inquirer (where inquiry is now understood as aimed at knowledge).

Notice how this new way of thinking about the knowledge account of ignorance would enable it to deal with the problem posed by Gettier-style cases where the subject's justified true belief is faultlessly formed. After all, while such cases involve an absence of knowledge, they are not also scenarios in which the subject manifests an intellectual failing *qua* inquirer. By situating the knowledge account of ignorance within such an inquiry-based conception of ignorance, it is thus able to deftly side-step the problem posed by such Gettier-style cases, as they no longer qualify as instances of ignorance (even though they remain scenarios where knowledge is lacking).

Alternatively, if one thinks of the overarching intellectual good as being the truth,¹¹ then one would be inclined to treat this new theory of ignorance as being essentially a modification (albeit, again, a significant one) of the true belief account of ignorance. Rather than ignorance now being merely the absence of true belief, it would also in addition have to involve the subject manifesting an intellectual failing *qua* inquirer (where the aim of inquiry is now understood as being the truth).

Embedding the true belief account of ignorance within an inquiry-based conception of ignorance does not have the straightforward pay-off that we just saw a parallel move having for the knowledge account. In particular, forming a true belief in an epistemically problematic way would still, on the face of it anyway, count as removing one's ignorance according to this proposal. But once one does situate one's account of ignorance within the broader conception of one's epistemic axiology, then various ways of responding to this issue present themselves.

To begin with, notice that in cases of lucky true belief of this problematic kind there will characteristically be ignorance in the vicinity, even by the lights of this proposal. For even if one is obliged not to treat the true belief in the target proposition as an instance of ignorance, a belief formed on this basis will likely be accompanied by other beliefs that are false and which also manifest an intellectual failing of inquiry on the subject's part. In particular, the idea is that we are now evaluating not just a belief but also the manner in which this belief was the result (or failed to be the result) of inquiry. As such, the focus of evaluation broadens to take in not only the target belief but also other beliefs that are the product of the same inquiry.

Imagine, for example, someone who forms a testimony-based belief through sheer gullibility, and hence has an unjustified belief, even if it turns out to be true. Let's suppose that she forms her belief by trusting the word of an unreliable informant, who just happens to give her a true belief on this occasion. While the subject is not ignorant of the target proposition on this view, there will likely be other propositions in the vicinity that she is ignorant of and which resulted from the same inquiry, such as that her informant is someone to be trusted on this score. Moreover, notice that this false belief is also such that it manifests an intellectual failing of the subject *qua* inquirer, given that it is rooted in her gullibility. That is, her gullibility led her as an inquirer not only to form a (true) belief in the target proposition but also in related (false) propositions. In this way the proponent of the true belief account of ignorance can use the manner in which the view is now embedded within a conception of good inquiry to explain why we are inclined to treat the subject as ignorant. After all, from the wider perspective of the results of inquiry more generally, rather than just the individual target result, there *is* ignorance on the part of the subject.

Once one takes this step to embed the true belief account within a conception of good inquiry, however, then one might be tempted to adopt a much more radical line regarding these cases. For the axiological impetus behind the idea of true belief as a fundamental epistemic good is surely that the truth itself is a fundamental epistemic good. We want to get things right, for our conception of the world to hook up accurately with the way the world is. But if that's the reason why we value true beliefs from an epistemic point of view, then it is hard to see why lucky true beliefs should be what we are after. This doesn't involve a hooking up of one's conception of the world and the way the world is at all, but is merely a fortuitous match between belief and fact. As we might put the point, lucky true beliefs don't offer us any cognitive contact with reality at all. Relatedly, if the truth is what we care about from an epistemic point of view, then we surely don't want individual truths that by

their nature tend to come packaged in a cluster of false beliefs, as we have noted is the case when it comes to unjustified beliefs that are only luckily true.

Indeed, situating ignorance within an account of the fundamental epistemic good and its role in inquiry makes this kind of line especially salient. As we noted above when we were discussing pointless truths, the good inquirer ignores such truths precisely *because* she cares about the truth.¹² This is why conceiving of ignorance as involving an intellectual failing of inquiry does not commit one to supposing that failing to believe any truth, including trivial ones, would represent ignorance. This point about valuing the truth doesn't in itself favour true belief over knowledge as being the fundamental epistemic good. That is, since knowledge entails truth, one could argue that one seeks the truth because one wishes to know it. But it does remind us that valuing the truth does not entail valuing all truths (i.e., true propositions) equally. With this point in mind, however, we should also be suspicious of the idea that in valuing the truth one thereby values all true beliefs, even if they don't involve any kind of cognitive contact with reality. If that's right, then it is open to the proponent of the inquiry-embedded true belief account of ignorance to contend that the subject is ignorant when it comes to lucky true belief, in that the particular kind of true belief that is the target of good inquiry (i.e., which represents a cognitive contact with reality) is lacking.¹³

So once we incorporate our standard accounts of ignorance into a conception of good inquiry, then dialectical options open up in terms of how to deal with familiar problems that are posed for these accounts. Conceiving of ignorance in this way, however, also prompts the thought that there could be further theoretical alternatives in this regard. For example, if one held that the overarching epistemic good was neither truth nor knowledge, but something else such as understanding or wisdom, then this would lead to a different conception of what good inquiry is aimed at, and thus a different conception of ignorance.¹⁴ One might argue, for example, that ignorance is a lack of understanding that manifests an intellectual failing of inquiry. Indeed, a further dialectical possibility on this score is to embrace a pluralism about fundamental epistemic goods, and then treat ignorance as a fundamental epistemic ill that manifests itself in a variety of ways depending on the kind of fundamental epistemic good that is absent.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

So what have we learned? I take the fundamental moral of the foregoing to be that we should not theorize about ignorance in terms of simply being an absence of a certain epistemic good, even if all agree that it does at least involve that. Rather, we first need to situate this notion within a wider epistemic axiology, whereby ignorance occupies a negative role in contrast to the fundamental epistemic good, whatever that might be. Only in doing so can we capture the normative dimension to ignorance, and in particular the sense in which it involves not just the absence of a certain kind of epistemic good, but also an intellectual failing of inquiry.¹⁵

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NOTES

¹ For some key defences of this position, which is sometimes called the ‘standard view’ on account of its widespread adoption, see Zimmerman (2008), Le Morvan (2011; 2012; 2013), and DeNicola (2017).

² For some key defences of (versions of) this proposal—which is sometimes called the ‘new view’ in order to contrast it to the ‘standard view’ (see endnote 1)—see Goldman & Olsson (2009), van Woudenberg (2009), and Peels (2010; cf. Peels 2011; 2012).

³ These two contemporary accounts of ignorance are usefully surveyed in Le Morvan & Peels (2016).

⁴ See Nottelman (2015) for a taxonomy of three kinds of ignorance that correspond to propositional knowledge, acquaintance knowledge, and ability knowledge. See also El Kassar (2018), who also examines some non-propositional forms of ignorance and considers how they relate to propositional ignorance.

⁵ There have been a number of defences of a Wittgensteinian hinge epistemology along these general lines. See (1989), Williams (1991), Moyal-Sharrock (2004), Wright (2004), Coliva (2010; 2015), and Schönbaumsfeld (2016). For my own proposal in this regard, see Pritchard (2015, part 2). For a recent survey of work on Wittgenstein hinge epistemology, see Pritchard (2017).

⁶ I take just such a line in Pritchard (2015, part two), at least where ‘belief’ picks out that propositional attitude which is a constituent part of rationally grounded knowledge (which I take it is also the notion of belief that is operative in this debate about ignorance).

⁷ That the failing of good inquiry is specifically intellectual ensures that incorporating this further condition into one’s account of ignorance doesn’t straightforwardly lead to a pragmatic encroachment thesis regarding ignorance (which is not to say that there aren’t other ways to motivate such a thesis regarding this negative epistemic standing). For more on pragmatic encroachment, see Fantl & McGrath (2010).

⁸ Of course, one does not need to make an inquiry in order to manifest an intellectual failing of good inquiry, as that could be ensured by *failing* to inquire. Still, in order to be the kind of subject whom it makes sense to regard as manifesting an intellectual failing of good inquiry, one must meet whatever conditions are relevant for being someone who can make inquiries.

⁹ Note that this is not to deny that ignorance can sometimes have a positive epistemic value. For a general defence of this claim, see Pritchard (2016*b*). For a defence of this idea within the specific contours of the epistemology of education, see Peels & Pritchard (2019).

¹⁰ For two recent defences of the idea that knowledge is the goal of inquiry, see Millar (2011) and Kelp (2014). I offer some critical discussion of this idea in Pritchard (2014; 2016*a*; 2016*c*).

¹¹ This is in fact the view that I defend—see Pritchard (2014; 2016*a*; *forthcominga*; *forthcomingb*).

¹² Put another way, the significance (or otherwise) of the truths in question is not an independent value over and above the value of truth, but is rather built into the very idea of valuing the truth. For more on this point, see Pritchard (2014; 2016*a*) and Treanor (2018).

¹³ Of course, those attracted to the idea that knowledge, or at least some other epistemic standing, is the fundamental epistemic good (and hence the goal of inquiry) will instead conclude that what such cases show is that it is not mere true belief at all that we seek, but rather true belief that enjoys the relevant epistemic standing.

¹⁴ For some key contemporary discussions and (diverse) defences of the special epistemic value of understanding, see Zagzebski (2001), Kvanvig (2003), Pritchard (2009), Pritchard, Millar & Haddock (2009, ch. 4), Greco (2013), Hills (2016), and Elgin (2017). For a survey of this work, see Grimm (2012). For some key contemporary discussions and defences of the special value of wisdom, see Kekes (1983), Nozick (1989, 267-78), Ryan (1999), and Tiberius (2008). For a survey of this work, see Whitcomb (2011).

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