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Is Ignorance About "Being Ignorant"? A Study Across Varieties of Ignorance

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Abstract

In the epistemology of ignorance, it is often assumed that ignorance is best investigated by examining how the expression "to be ignorant" is used. This contrasts with many non-English languages, which lack a direct equivalent and instead express ignorance as the absence of knowledge. But even in English, is "to be ignorant" a privileged way of expressing ignorance? In two preregistered experiments, we asked English speakers to assess the naturalness of different ignorance-related expressions in brief vignettes sampling four varieties of ignorance introduced by Peels (2023). In Experiment 1, expressions involving simple negation of knowledge (i.e., "not to know") were judged more natural than "to be ignorant", both overall and across all varieties. Experiment 2 tested whether "to be ignorant" is especially appropriate when the agent is expected to know the relevant fact. This proposal was not supported. These findings suggest that, even in English, ignorance is primarily represented as the absence of epistemic good (e.g., knowledge) rather than as a distinct epistemic predicate.

Keywords: ignorance; epistemology; expectations; folk concept; experimental philosophy

Introduction

English offers a rich vocabulary for ignorance: a person can be *unaware*, *oblivious*, *uninformed*, or simply not *know* – or, more distinctively, *be ignorant*. These expressions are not synonymous; they plausibly track different epistemic states and carry different connotations. Yet in the new field of epistemology of ignorance, one of them has quietly assumed a privileged role.

Like work on knowledge – where the concept is probed via judgments about "to know" – epistemology of ignorance has made "to be ignorant" the primary access to the concept. When the two expressions come apart, philosophers treat the former as decisive for the content of the concept. Consider Rik Peels: "Imagine that Sam [...] looks at the clock. [...] unbeknownst to him, the clock stopped working twenty-four hours ago. Is Sam ignorant that it is 7:00 p.m.? [...] Sam does not seem to be ignorant of the truth of the proposition that it is 7:00 *itself*, even though he lacks knowledge of it" (Peels, 2023, p. 57). Or Duncan Pritchard: "What, for example, did Caesar have for breakfast on the day that he crossed the Rubicon? [...] 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?" (Pritchard, 2021a, p. 114). Similar examples abound (see, e.g., Peels, 2023,

p. 61; Pritchard, 2021b, p. 228; Meylan, 2024, pp. 214–216; van Woudenberg, 2009, pp. 373–374). English-speaking epistemology of ignorance thus implicitly assumes what we call the *philosopher's picture* (see Table 1).

Epistemological theories of ignorance aim to characterize the concept wherever it is found, yet the philosopher's picture rests on a feature of English that does not generalize: in many languages there is no direct equivalent of "to be ignorant," and ignorance is expressed via a simple negation of knowledge.¹ Take Polish as an example (Table 2).

Table 1: Concepts of knowledge and ignorance in the philosopher's picture.

	Knowledge		Ignorance	
Expression for when the concept applies	"to know"		"to be ignorant"	
Expression for when the concept does not apply	"not to know"	to	"not to be ignorant"	

Table 2: Concepts of knowledge and ignorance in Polish, illustrating the Complement Thesis.

	Knowledge		Ignorance	
Expression for when the concept applies	"wiedzieć" ("to know")		"nie wiedzieć" ("not to know")	
Expression for when the concept does not apply	"nie wiedzieć" ("not to know")	even under normatively loaded conditions")	"wiedzieć" ("to know")	

Such languages explicitly comply with what Le Morvan (2011) called *Complement Thesis* – one is ignorant that p if and only if it is not true that one knows that p. Now, the

¹This holds for French, German, Hindi, Marathi, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Serbian – languages the authors have verified – though a systematic typological survey is lacking.

philosopher's picture presupposes that the pattern (2) does not hold in English. Whenever expressions "to be ignorant" and "not to know" point in different directions, "to be ignorant" is taken as decisive for the content of the concept. But whether competent speakers of English in fact treat it as decisive is an empirical question – one we address by asking English speakers to rate the naturalness of different ignorance expressions across multiple varieties of ignorance.

Within English, empirical researchers have just started probing lay intuitions regarding the ignorance vocabulary. Meylan and Reuter (2025) report three empirical studies suggesting that English speakers' use of "to be ignorant" and "not to know" is systematically context-sensitive. On the basis of their findings, they argue for a dual-character account of ignorance: in some contexts, ignorance is treated as a purely descriptive state – roughly, the absence of knowledge – whereas in others it carries a normative component, marking a failure to know what one is expected to know. In their Study 3, Meylan and Reuter (2025) varied the degree to which the agent could be expected to know a fact. Fittingness ratings for "to be ignorant" rose with epistemic expectations, while ratings for "not to know" fell. However, even in the high expectation condition, participants rated "not to know" as more fitting than "to be ignorant", although the difference was not significant at $p = .17$.² Still, their design did not resolve whether 'to be ignorant' is genuinely distinctive or merely one of several expressions speakers reach for, which motivates a more systematic comparison.

Both traditional conceptual epistemology and recent experimental work on ignorance typically proceed by focusing on a small set of intuitively compelling cases. Philosophers rely on thought experiments designed to elicit judgments about whether a target counts as ignorant, while Meylan and Reuter (2025) operationalize these intuitions through carefully constructed vignettes and fittingness ratings. But it remains unclear to what extent the resulting generalizations track ignorance as a broader, psychologically heterogeneous phenomenon, rather than a narrow slice of it.

A useful corrective comes from Peels (2023), who argues that ignorance is not a unitary category and distinguishes multiple varieties of ignorance that differ in their underlying cognitive and normative profiles. In this paper, we therefore adopt a more systematic approach: we compare several distinct varieties of ignorance side by side, with the aim of mapping how English speakers deploy ignorance-related expressions across these cases. This design allows us to test not only whether "to be ignorant" is treated as decisive, but also whether "not to know", "to be ignorant", or other expressions function as more diagnostic markers of particular varieties of ignorance. Thus, our main research question:

RQ1: Is "to be ignorant" the privileged linguistic cue to the folk concept of ignorance?

²As the authors do not report this specific comparison, it is based on our reanalysis of their publicly available dataset.

We are also interested in whether epistemic expectations moderate the relative naturalness of Meylan and Reuter (2025) compared to "not to know," and whether any such effect holds across varieties of ignorance.

RQ2: Does the naturalness of "to be ignorant" relative to "not to know" increase when the agent is expected to know the relevant fact?

Present study

A common strategy for theorizing about concepts is to examine how the expressions that encode them are used and evaluated by competent speakers. In cognitive science and experimental linguistics, speaker judgments about the naturalness or acceptability of utterances are a standard source of evidence about the representations and inferences that support language use (Sprouse & Almeida, 2017). Building on this approach, we empirically probe English speakers' intuitions about different ways of ascribing ignorance across varieties of ignorance.

We address both of our research questions through experiments in which participants are confronted with a series of very brief vignettes. They are asked to assess the naturalness of different sentences describing the situation in the vignette. We drafted vignettes to represent four (of six) varieties introduced by Peels (2023): *disbelieving* ignorance, *unconsidered* ignorance, *deep* ignorance, *complete* ignorance (see Table 3).

Each vignette is accompanied by a few expressions, corresponding to different ways of ascribing ignorance and drawn from a larger set. For each expression, participants are expected to assess its naturalness as a description of the vignette on a 6-point Likert scale.

Both experiments were implemented in jsPsych (de Leeuw et al., 2023). jsPsych code, data, scripts used for data analyses, and preregistrations for both experiments are available at <https://osf.io/g3njs/>.

Experiment 1

In Experiment 1, we focus on how the relative preference between "to be ignorant," "not to know," and other ignorance expressions vary across varieties — leaving open which, if any, would prove most fitting. The hypothesis, study materials, samples size, and analysis plan were preregistered at <https://osf.io/w7xnm/>.

Hypothesis. Phrases including "to be ignorant" will be rated as less natural than phrases including "not to know" – overall, but also across at least some varieties of ignorance.

Methods

Participants. Our target sample size of 200 participants was determined to assure about 24 responses for each vignette/phrase combination. We recruited 199 participants from among U.K. residents on Prolific ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.5$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 12.2$ years, 99 women, one other/preferred not to say).

Table 3: Varieties of ignorance: definitions and illustrative vignettes.

Variety	Definition	Exemplary vignette
<i>Disbelieving</i> ignorance	One disbelieves that p and p is true.	<i>The battle of Cajamarca took place in 1532. Robert thinks that the battle of Cajamarca was in 1560.</i>
<i>Unconsidered</i> ignorance	S has not considered p , but would immediately believe it upon consideration.	<i>Necessity implies possibility. Mark has never thought about it. But if somebody asked him whether necessity implies possibility, he would immediately realize it is the case.</i>
<i>Deep</i> ignorance	S has not considered p , but would not immediately believe it upon consideration, nor immediately disbelieve it.	<i>Hummingbirds can fly backwards. Jenny has never thought about it. If somebody asked her whether hummingbirds can fly backwards, she would not immediately realize what the answer is.</i>
<i>Complete</i> ignorance	S has not considered p and is not able to consider it.	<i>Radu Jude's films have a postmodern aesthetic. Adam has never thought about it. If somebody asked what kind of aesthetic Radu Jude's films have, he would understand neither the question nor the answer.</i>

Materials and procedure. We drafted five vignettes for each of the four varieties of ignorance (20 vignettes in total)³. For each vignette, we drafted 13 expressions, corresponding to different ways of expressing ignorance, which we further grouped into eight *verbs* (see Table 4). Participants saw two randomly selected vignettes for each variety, in a randomized order. For each vignette, four of the 13 expressions were randomly drawn to be evaluated by the participant.

³However, due to a coding error, one of the *deep* ignorance vignettes was not displayed, so that participants could see only 19 vignettes.

Table 4: Verbs and phrases in Experiment 1.

Verb	Frame (key)	Example sentence
ignore	ignorThat	<i>Mark is ignorant that necessity implies possibility.</i>
	ignorAsTo	<i>Mark is ignorant as to whether necessity implies possibility.</i>
	ignorOf	<i>Mark is ignorant of the fact that necessity implies possibility.</i>
know	knowWh ⁴	<i>Mark doesn't know whether necessity implies possibility.</i>
	knowThat	<i>Mark doesn't know that necessity implies possibility.</i>
unaware	unawareThat	<i>Mark is unaware that necessity implies possibility.</i>
	unawareOf	<i>Mark is unaware of the fact that necessity implies possibility.</i>
uninformed	unInfor	<i>Mark is uninformed about the fact that necessity implies possibility.</i>
mistake	mistakeAbout	<i>Mark is mistaken about the fact that necessity implies possibility.</i>
	mistakeAsTo	<i>Mark is mistaken as to whether necessity implies possibility.</i>
fail_notice	failNotice	<i>Mark failed to notice that necessity implies possibility.</i>
oblivious	obliviousTo	<i>Mark is oblivious to the fact that necessity implies possibility.</i>
beyond_grasp	beyondGrasp	<i>It is beyond Mark's grasp that necessity implies possibility.</i>

Participants were then asked to "Rate how natural the following sentences describing the situation above sound". They rated the naturalness on a 6-point Likert scale (1-*completely unnatural*; 6-*completely natural*). After evaluating phrases for eight vignettes, participants provided basic demographic information and were compensated for their time.

⁴"Wh-" corresponds to "whether," "who," "where," "when," and "what" in different sentences.

Results and discussion

As preregistered, we fitted a mixed-effects model with naturalness ratings as the dependent variable, verb, variety, and their interaction as fixed effects, and random intercepts for participants and vignettes. We assessed the fixed effects using Type II Wald chi-square tests. The analysis revealed a significant main effect of variety ($\chi^2(3) = 52.10, p < .001$), a significant main effect of verb ($\chi^2(7) = 1188.02, p < .001$), and a significant verb-by-variety interaction ($\chi^2(21) = 350.46, p < .001$). Estimated marginal means with Tukey-adjusted pairwise comparisons showed a significant contrast between *know* and *ignore* in the predicted direction, both overall ($b = 1.99, SE = 0.58, p < .001$) and within each of the four varieties of ignorance (all b s > 0.61 , all p s $< .001$), providing strong support for our hypothesis.

Further exploratory analysis of estimated marginal means revealed that, overall, *know* is deemed more natural than any other verb (p s $< .001$), save for *unaware* ($\Delta = 0.156, SE = 0.06, p = .11$). Within varieties, *know* is consistently rated as most natural, although it is not significantly better than *unaware* and, in unconsidered ignorance, than some other verbs (see Figure 1). As to the effect of specific expressions with the two crucial verbs, we observed no such effect for *know* ($p = .13$), but we saw such an effect for *ignore* ($p < .001$), where *ignoreThat* was rated as even less natural than the other two expressions within the verb.

The findings of Experiment 1 challenge the philosopher's picture. Our probe into laypeople's linguistic intuitions suggests that, even in English, ignorance is primarily represented as the absence of epistemic good (e.g., knowledge or true belief) rather than as a distinct epistemic predicate. Additionally, some expressions are suitable only for certain types of ignorance. For example, "to be mistaken" appears uniquely suitable for disbelieving ignorance. It suggests that the language of ignorance is more varied than commonly supposed. Finally, and quite surprisingly, "to be ignorant" was rated as less natural than "not to know" across every type of ignorance. However, vignettes included facts that knowledge of which would not be assumed. It might be the case, as Meylan and Reuter (2025) suggest, that "to be ignorant" is the most natural expression for when epistemic good is actually expected. This brings us to the second experiment.

Experiment 2

With Experiment 1 suggesting that "to be ignorant" is considered less natural than "not to know" to express four varieties of ignorance, we turned to another theoretically relevant dimension. Building on the empirical results reported by Meylan and Reuter (2025), one might expect "to be ignorant" to be judged more natural in contexts in which the agent fails to know a fact that they were expected to know. In what can be seen as a conceptual replication of Study 3 in Meylan and Reuter (2025), we therefore examine the effect of a continuous measure of epistemic expectations on naturalness ratings, while retaining the four varieties of ignorance from Experiment 1.

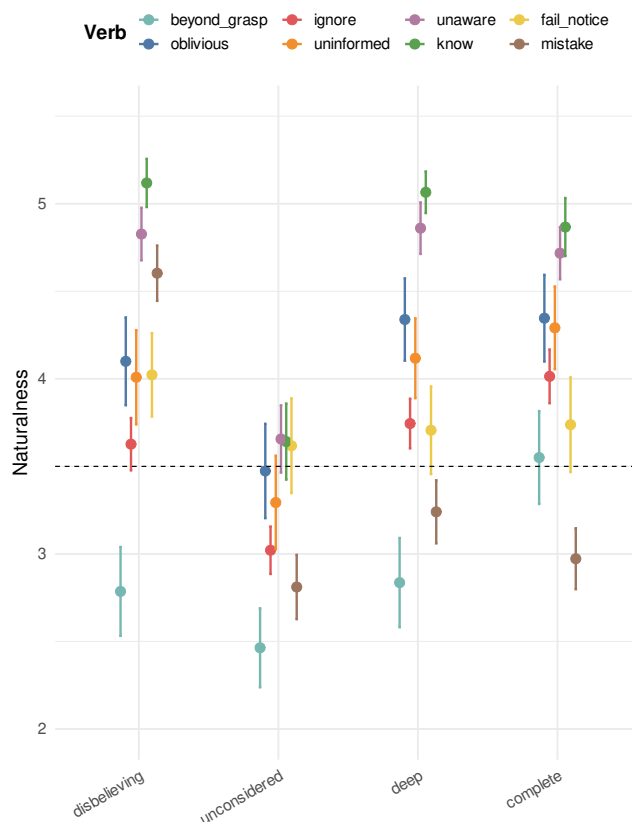


Figure 1: Estimated marginal means from naturalness ratings in Study 1. Errorbars represent 95% confidence intervals.

Unlike Meylan and Reuter (2025), we distinguish between predictive expectations and normative expectations (Rudy-Hiller, 2020). Their vignettes featured facts expected to be known because they are widely known (e.g., the fact that bees produce honey) rather than because one is obligated to know them. However, to make our replication faithful, we likewise focused on predictive expectations, leaving the normative dimension for future research. We also elicited expectation ratings from a separate participant sample rather than relying on researchers' judgments.

The hypotheses, study materials, sample size, and analysis plan were preregistered at <https://osf.io/wjr59/>.

Hypotheses. Following Meylan and Reuter (2025), we expected that higher predictive expectations would lead to higher naturalness ratings for "to be ignorant" (**H1**); yet (following a non-significant contrast present in Meylan and Reuter's data), we expected that even with high predictive expectations "not to know" will be rated as more natural than "to be ignorant" (**H2**).

Methods

Participants. To elicit predictive expectations for all 40 vignettes, we recruited 99 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 36.9$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.6$ years, 48 women, one other/preferred not to say), following the target sample size of 100, aimed at ensuring about 50 ratings per vignette. To provide naturalness ratings for the 20 new vignettes, we recruited 204 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 40.9$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 14.7$ years, 101 women, one other/preferred not to say) – the target sample size of 200 was meant to match the sample size for Experiment 1. Both samples were recruited on Prolific from among U.K. residents speaking English as their first language.

Materials and procedure. We drafted 20 new vignettes (again, five per each of the four analyzed varieties of ignorance), aiming to describe situations involving high expectations the agent would know the fact in question. We used all 40 vignettes (20 from Experiment 1 and 20 new ones) in the expectation elicitation task. For each vignette, the relevant fact was provided and participants were asked "How likely is [agent's name] to know [fact]?", with responses on a 6-point Likert scale (1 - *very unlikely*, 6 - *very likely*). Sometimes, some additional details about the agent were provided, otherwise participants were asked to imagine an average British adult. Each participant evaluated 20 randomly drawn items.

The elicited expectations, on the item level, showed a fair degree of variation ($SD = 1.43$, $IQR = 2.48$), ranging from 1.44 (*The battle of Cajamarca took place in 1532*) to 5.88 (*Amanda is under 8 feet tall*, where the agent is Amanda herself). The new vignettes resulted in expectations higher, on average, by over 2 points than the Experiment 1 items ($t(1799) = 30.6$, $p < .001$).

To test our hypotheses we reused the naturalness ratings from Experiment 1 and collected naturalness ratings from a new sample for the 20 new vignettes. The procedure followed by the new sample was identical to that employed in Experiment 1.

Results and discussion

As preregistered, we first tested H1 by fitting a mixed-effects model predicting naturalness ratings for expressions involving "to be ignorant", with item-level epistemic expectations as a fixed effect and random intercepts for participants and vignettes. Contrary to H1, predictive expectations had a significant effect in the opposite direction: higher expectations were associated with lower naturalness ratings for "to be ignorant" ($b = -0.06$, $SE = 0.03$, $p = .027$). Thus, increasing expectations that an agent should know a fact did not make "to be ignorant" sound more natural; if anything, it made it sound less so. A parallel, and even stronger, effect was observed for the *know* verb ($b = -0.12$, $SE = 0.04$, $p = .003$).

To test H2, we fitted a mixed-effects model with verb, epistemic expectations, their interaction, and variety as fixed effects, and random intercepts for participants and vignettes. We then computed a planned contrast between "not to know"

and "to be ignorant" at high predictive expectations (defined as $M + 1SD$). The contrast was significant in the predicted direction ($\Delta = 0.88$, $SE = 0.06$, $p < .001$).

Otherwise, the pattern of results closely replicated Experiment 1 across all four varieties of ignorance; Supplementary Figure 1 (available at <https://osf.io/hpgdy/>) displays the results for the new Experiment 2 vignettes.

Together, these findings suggest that even in contexts where an agent is strongly expected to know, English speakers do not treat "to be ignorant" as the default or most natural way of describing the agent's epistemic state. Instead, "not to know" remains the preferred expression, reinforcing the conclusion from Experiment 1 that "to be ignorant" is not decisive for ascribing ignorance even under high predictive epistemic expectations. Importantly, this pattern cannot be explained by a lack of sensitivity to epistemic expectations: both expressions became slightly less natural as expectations increased, but the predicted interaction, in which rising expectations would boost "to be ignorant" relative to "not to know," did not emerge.

Robustness check: Corpus frequency

Evidence from linguistics suggests that corpus frequency predicts acceptability ratings for a given expression (Lu et al., 2024; Schütze, 2016). The observed preference for "not to know" over "to be ignorant" could thus be explained by the former's greater frequency in English (98,444 vs. 2,107 occurrences in the Corpus of Contemporary American English, COCA, Davies, 2008).⁵

To check the robustness of our main result against this objection, we conducted a preregistered secondary analysis (<https://osf.io/89zx2/>). We extracted the log of relative frequency of each of our 13 expressions in COCA and included it as a simple covariate in a mixed-effects model predicting the naturalness rating with an interaction between verb and variety (which is the model used in Experiment 1, but we fitted it on the full data set from Experiment 2). Adding the log frequency significantly improved the model's fit ($\chi^2(1) = 6.54$, $p = .011$), but did not change the main pattern of results. Controlling for frequency, we still observed the predicted contrast between "not to know" and "to be ignorant", both overall ($b = 0.88$, $SE = 0.07$, $p < .001$) and within each of the four varieties of ignorance (all $bs > 0.81$, all $ps < .001$).

Furthermore, the frequency effect could not explain why "to be unaware" is rated on par with "not to know", despite being less frequent (6,499 vs. 98,444 in COCA). And, indeed, "to be unaware" was a clear positive outlier in the regression of mean naturalness on log corpus frequency: It fell on average 0.34 scale points above what frequency alone would predict.

General Discussion

Our probe into laypeople's linguistic intuitions suggests that, even in English, ignorance is primarily represented as the ab-

⁵We thank Kevin Reuter and Brandon Waldon for pressing us on this issue.

sence of epistemic good rather than as a distinct epistemic predicate. Across two preregistered experiments, expressions built around simple negation of knowledge ("not to know") were consistently judged more natural than expressions involving "to be ignorant," both across multiple varieties of ignorance and under conditions of high predictive epistemic expectations. These findings indicate that, for competent speakers of English, "to be ignorant" is not treated as a privileged or decisive linguistic cue to the concept of ignorance. Instead, speakers appear to rely on a more general representation of ignorance as lack of epistemic good, with alternative predicates contributing additional, context-sensitive nuances rather than defining the core category.

An important feature of the present study is its methodological approach to probing the concept of ignorance. Rather than constructing vignettes around a small set of intuitively compelling cases, we systematically sampled cases using an independently motivated typology of ignorance proposed by Peels (2023). This allowed us to test whether patterns of linguistic evaluation generalize across distinct varieties of ignorance, rather than reflecting idiosyncrasies of particular cases. In addition, we operationalized epistemic expectations using a continuous measure independently elicited from participants, avoiding reliance on researchers' own judgments about what an agent is expected to know. These design choices point to a broader methodological lesson: intuitions about epistemic states such as ignorance are sensitive to how cases are sampled and how expectations are operationalized. As a result, judgments elicited from isolated or prototypical cases may not reflect how speakers represent and describe ignorance across its full range of forms. At the same time, this does not diminish the role of theoretical desiderata operating at a different explanatory level – for instance, proposals that characterize ignorance in terms of reason-responsiveness rather than linguistic intuitions (Silva & Siscoe, 2024). Taken together, our results suggest that progress in theorizing about ignorance is best achieved by combining theory-guided typologies with broad empirical sampling, an approach that is also better suited for cross-linguistic and cross-cultural generalization.

A second implication concerns how philosophical theorizing has operationalized the concept of ignorance. Much philosophical discussion takes "to be ignorant" to be a central or diagnostic expression, but the present results indicate that this emphasis does not reflect how the concept is deployed in ordinary language. Even within the English-speaking community, speakers do not treat "to be ignorant" as decisive relative to alternatives such as "not to know". In this respect, the pattern observed here parallels earlier findings in the epistemology of knowledge, where philosophical usage has been shown to diverge from folk judgments (Starmans & Friedman, 2020). Moreover, contrary to proposals that link "to be ignorant" primarily to normatively loaded contexts (Meylan & Reuter, 2025), we find that speakers' preferences remain stable even under high epistemic expectations. Taken together, these results suggest that philosophical theorizing may overestimate

the diagnostic role of "to be ignorant" in capturing the folk concept of ignorance. In this sense, our results do not favor any side in the debate on the concept of ignorance, but they show that the main type of argument used in this debate – appeals to the conditions of use of "to be ignorant" – rests on a questionable empirical assumption.

Limitations and further study

The present study focused on a subset of varieties of ignorance drawn from Peels (2023). Although this typology is theory-guided, the varieties included here can be characterized independently of any specific account of ignorance, as they differ in agents' epistemic and doxastic situations rather than in theory-specific commitments.

We did not examine two varieties distinguished by Peels – *undecided* ignorance and *suspending* ignorance – which involve suspension of judgment rather than straightforward absence of belief. These cases were excluded because we found them less intuitive or less informative for the present purposes. Whether laypeople find these distinctions plausible, and whether they track them in linguistic judgments, remains an open empirical question.

Finally, the present experiments were limited to cases of propositional ignorance. Future work could extend this approach to other forms of ignorance (e.g., non-propositional or practical ignorance; Nottelmann, 2016), as well as to normative expectations surrounding ignorance, which we set aside in Experiment 2 in order to more closely replicate the design of Meylan and Reuter (2025).

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