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PUBLIC EXPERTISE AND IGNORANCE

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ABSTRACT. One of the roles of public expertise is to spread useful knowledge throughout society. In this way, public expertise can combat ignorance. Crucially, however, it is also explained how a surprising central role of public expertise is often to manufacture the very ignorance that is being combatted. This is because there is more to ignorance than simply the absence of knowledge, as ignorance more specifically concerns lacking the knowledge that one should have. In this way, ignorance is never normatively neutral (in the manner that mere lack of knowledge can be). What expert-led public information does is thus create a reasonable expectation that one should know certain important truths, and hence ensures that those who remain unaware of them are now ignorant of them. Ignorance must thus often be manufactured by public experts before those same experts can combat it. This role of public expertise—*informative public expertise*—in responding to ignorance is contrasted with another important role of public expertise—*critical public expertise*—that often has an explicitly political bearing. The aim of critical public expertise is to show how members of the public ought to know truths of which they are unaware, and hence charge them with ignorance. Rather than manufacturing ignorance, as informative public expertise does, it thus instead reveals hidden ignorance. In this fashion it serves an explicitly critical social function. By appealing to the normative nature of ignorance we are thus able to capture two very different ways in which public expertise relates to, and ultimately combats, ignorance.

KEYWORDS: Epistemology; Expertise; Ignorance; Intellectual Culpability; Knowledge.

1. MANUFACTURING IGNORANCE

Call *public experts* those experts who offer their expertise to benefit the general public. Clearly not all experts are public experts. Some expertise is only relevant to a very narrow audience (think, for example, of the expertise of train-spotters), while some expertise is not meant to benefit the general public, even if would be of benefit to them (think, for example, of how certain kinds of economic expertise is geared only towards the profits of those who fund it). Our interest is specifically in public experts, so understood, and their relationship to ignorance.

It is natural to cast public experts as combating ignorance in the populace at large. Think, for example, about experts who raise awareness of medical issues (such as the dangers of undiagnosed type-2 diabetes) or the experts who brought the climate crisis to the fore of our attention. On this model, public experts are bringing the light of knowledge to bear on the dark corners of public life where it has not shone yet, thereby extinguishing ignorance.

I want to suggest that this way of thinking about the relationship between public expertise and ignorance is not the complete story. In particular, it misses out a crucial element of the role that public experts often play in this regard, which is not just to combat but also to *manufacture* ignorance. This might sound like a very puzzling claim to make: why would experts be concerned to manufacture ignorance? In order to understand this claim we need to think a bit more deeply about the nature of ignorance, since it is this notion that is not being fully appreciated here.

As a crude first pass, one might think that ignorance is just the absence of knowledge (or, failing that, the absence of some other epistemic standing, like true belief), but I will be suggesting that this can't be the right way to think about this notion. If ignorance just were the lack of knowledge, then it really would be the case that the relationship between expertise and ignorance is simply one of the former combatting the other. But there is a further dimension to ignorance, as it is also concerned with a normative standing. As I will be arguing, while ascribing a lack of knowledge can be normatively neutral (one can be blamelessly lacking in knowledge, for example), ascriptions of ignorance always have a negative normative valence. In short, to be ignorant is to lack knowledge that one ought to have. If that's right, then a crucial part of the role of public experts, before we even get to

the stage of combatting ignorance, is often to first elevate the public's lack of knowledge of a certain subject matter, such as climate change or the dwindling numbers of black rhinos, so that it constitutes ignorance in the first place. In this way, a certain kind of public expertise is concerned to manufacture ignorance before it combats it. We will call public expertise that plays this social role *informative public expertise*.

Once we understand this aspect of the role of public experts, however, it also enables us to bring into sharper relief a second way in which public expertise can function. This is not to manufacture and then combat ignorance as informative public expertise does but rather to reveal hitherto hidden ignorance. Call this *critical public expertise*. This is a role that public experts play that usually has an explicitly political purpose. The idea is to reveal that our lack of knowledge is not blameless at all, as might have otherwise supposed, but rather manifests our intellectual culpability. In this way, public expertise can also perform an important socially critical function of highlighting concealed ignorance. As we will see, it is only with the contrast with informative public expertise in place that we can understand the nature of critical public expertise.

2. THE NEGATIVE NORMATIVE VALENCE OF IGNORANCE

Most philosophical treatments of ignorance regard it as simply the absence of knowledge.¹ Where philosophers depart from this traditional account of ignorance, the claim is usually only that a different epistemic standing is lacking, such as true belief.² What most views of ignorance thus share is the idea that it is simply the absence of an epistemic standing. For convenience, in what follows we will stick with convention and treat the target epistemic standing that is lacking when one is ignorant as knowledge.³ Nonetheless, I think it is clear from further reflection on the matter that ignorance cannot simply be a lack of knowledge.

Consider, for example, facts that one could easily know right now but which one has no possible reason to find out, such as how many spoons one has in one's kitchen cupboard. This is something that one does not know, but it would be odd to describe this lack of knowledge as ignorance: I am not ignorant of the number of spoons in my kitchen cupboard, even though this is clearly unknown. The crux of the matter is that there is no reasonable expectation that one should know this truth. Indeed, in the usual run of events,

there is every rational expectation that one should *not* know it, as what possible reason would there be to go to the trouble of finding this out? Hence, although this truth is clearly unknown, it is not an instance of ignorance.

Once one starts to reflect on the matter one realises that the cases multiply. What about truths that one could not possibly know, for example because they are well beyond anyone's capacity to know? I don't know what coloured underpants Caesar was wearing on the day he crossed the Rubicon (I assume there is no historical record of this fact available). I guess no-one will ever know this now: this truth is simply epistemically inaccessible to us. It would be odd to describe this lack of knowledge as ignorance though. How could I be ignorant of a claim that I could never know?

Or consider cases where one actively decides, for good reasons, to not know a particular truth. For example, consider a lawyer who is aware that being cognisant of certain facts about her client might create problems for that client. In exercising her professional responsibilities to her client as a lawyer, she might therefore ensure that there are specific truths that she does not know, even though they could have easily been known, had she been so inclined. But would we really say that our lawyer is *ignorant* of these truths that she elects not to know? After all, she chooses not to know them, and does so for very good reasons; ignorance does not seem applicable here.

There are many other cases of this kind, as I've described elsewhere.⁴ What they reveal is that ignorance has a normative status associated with it. This gives an ascription of ignorance a normative valence that a mere ascription of a lack of knowledge lacks. In particular, while one can specify that someone lacks knowledge without implying any kind of intellectual fault on their part, in ascribing ignorance to an agent one is implying that it is a lack of knowledge that is due to one's intellectual fault. In short, this is because to be ignorant of something is to fail to know something that one ought to have known.⁵

We can see this point at work in the examples we have looked at. In failing to know the number of spoons in my cupboard drawer I am not thereby ignorant because this is not something that I am reasonably expected to know. It is not a truth that I ought to have known (indeed, if anything, I ought not to know it), which is why it is not in the market for ignorance. The same goes for truths that I cannot possibly know, such as what colour underpants Caesar wore on the day he crossed the Rubicon. Finally, even propositions that I could easily know and which might be worth knowing (unlike the truth about the spoons),

might nonetheless be unknown for entirely appropriate reasons, just like in our lawyer case, If so, then this is not something that one ought to know either, and hence it wouldn't count as ignorance.

The idea that ignorance has this specifically normative dimension should not be surprising. After all, to call someone ignorant is clearly to disparage them, in a way that merely noting that they lack knowledge need not do. Moreover, although we are here talking of *propositional ignorance*—i.e., ignorance as it relates to specific propositions—one would expect propositional ignorance to be related to the more general phenomena of *character ignorance*. That is, we don't just ascribe ignorance of particular propositions to people, but we also ascribe ignorance to their characters—one can be an ignorant *person*. Calling someone an ignorant person is clearly a highly disparaging thing to do. One can, of course, be ignorant of particular propositions without thereby being an ignorant person. Significantly, however, the converse does not hold: if one is an ignorant person, then one is certainly going to be disposed to be propositionally ignorant. In general, ignorant people manifest a range of intellectual vices, from arrogance to intellectual carelessness, and this leads them to fail to know propositions that they ought to know. It is no wonder then that propositional ignorance inherits the negative normative valence that is already clearly present in character ignorance.⁶

I've termed the idea that ignorance is not merely the absence of an epistemic standing but also involves this negative normative valence the *normative account of ignorance*. I've defended this view at length elsewhere, and don't propose to defend it further here.⁷ My goal is rather to show how bringing this proposal to bear on our understanding of the role of public expertise is important to properly capturing two fundamental ways in which public expertise functions.

3. INFORMATIVE PUBLIC EXPERTISE

A notable consequence of the normative account of ignorance is that whether one counts as ignorant of a particular proposition can depend on a range of social factors that might have no bearing at all on whether one has knowledge of this proposition. For example, we don't regard small children as being ignorant for failing to know key facts about contemporary

economics or politics, but we might well regard their parents for being ignorant for lacking this same knowledge. This is because there is no reasonable expectation that children should know these truths, unlike their parents. Similarly, what one can be reasonably expected to know can vary in terms of one's social roles. If one is a consultant neurologist, for example, then one is expected to be aware of the latest research relevant to one's field and would be judged ignorant for failing to know this information. In contrast, there is no corresponding expectation that a member of the public should know these arcane facts, which is why an ascription of ignorance here would not be appropriate.⁸

This social feature of the notion of ignorance is salient to the role of public experts. To begin with, I want to focus on a specific kind of public expert whose role it is to make the public aware of important information that they might otherwise be unaware. This is informative public expertise. A great variety of experts perform this public role, from geologists informing us about earthquake risks to economists informing us about the likelihood that mortgage rates will dramatically rise in the near future.⁹ It is natural to conceive of what such public experts are doing as helping us to be less ignorant by spreading the knowledge that results of their expertise. While this is generally true, it is often not the full story.

Consider one important role that public experts can play, which is to make the public cognisant of an important phenomenon that they would have been otherwise unaware. Think, for example, of the public information campaigns regarding AIDS in the 1980s or the way that scientists have raised public consciousness of the climate change crisis. In these cases we as a society are relying on the experts to provide us with knowledge about a particular subject matter (AIDS, climate change) that we would likely have otherwise lacked. As we might put it, expertise is shining the light of knowledge and thereby removing the darkness of ignorance.

The problem with this way of characterising the situation, however, is that it misses out a crucial element. Take a public health campaign like that associated with AIDS in the 1980s. It is certainly true that prior to these campaigns most of the general public lacked knowledge of what AIDS was. But were people at this point *ignorant* of this illness? It is hard to see why their lack of knowledge would be given this normatively loaded status. The issue is that unless one were a member of the specific communities that were being devastated by this illness, or one was part of the medical establishment dealing with it, then there would be

no realistic way of being aware of it. That was precisely why national ad campaigns were required to raise awareness of the illness.

I am suggesting that what such an ad campaign is thus doing is effectively making use of expert advice to *manufacture* ignorance. Prior to the ad campaign, the general public were simply unaware of AIDS. Crucially, however, this lack of knowledge doesn't amount to ignorance (for most people anyway), given that there is no reasonable expectation that an ordinary member of the public should know about this illness. By making people aware of AIDS, however, the ad campaign thereby creates the reasonable expectation that one should know about this illness, and hence ensures that anyone who doesn't know about it is therefore ignorant of it. Indeed, the tagline for the UK advertising campaign was 'AIDS: Don't Die of Ignorance'. The message is clear: we are making you aware of something that you ought to know, so make sure you know it, since if you don't (and hence are ignorant), then you are in danger.¹⁰¹¹

Indeed, cases of informative public expertise are often explicitly characterised in terms of making the general public aware of something of which they were—quite reasonably—hitherto unaware. Such public information campaigns are typically presented in terms of 'raising awareness' in just this fashion. Consider one of the most successful public information campaigns of recent times: the efforts to combat dangerous levels of ozone depletion in the atmosphere. The problem posed by ozone depletion wasn't discovered by atmospheric scientists until the mid 1980s, when expeditions to Antarctica identified a growing hole in the ozone layer. It was quickly determined that this problem was being caused by chemicals called chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) that are used, for example, in many personal hygiene products. Within a few years, many advanced countries had begun public information campaigns to make the general public aware of the problem and to convince them to make changes to their use of products that would limit CFC emissions. A secondary goal of such campaigns was also to create the political climate whereby government treaties could be established to formally limit CFC emissions. On both fronts these campaigns were incredibly successful, as within a relatively short space of time the general public became aware both of the problem and its seriousness. This in turn led to changes in personal consumption and to public support for the governmental treaties that followed. The campaign to prevent ozone depletion is these days highlighted as a model example of successful global climate coordination.¹²

Such a campaign clearly satisfies the rubric of informative public expertise that I have set out. Consider first the claim about ignorance being manufactured by the public expertise. Given the obscure and technical nature of the facts in play, one could hardly reasonably expect members of the public to be aware of this climate problem. Indeed, initially it was only scientists with quite specialised expertise who would be aware of the nature of this difficulty. The general public's widespread lack of knowledge of the depletion of the ozone layer was thus not a plausible candidate at this point to be treated as ignorance. The success of this information campaign in raising public awareness of the hole in the ozone layer changed all that, however. Now this became something that one ought to know, and hence if one did not know it one would count as ignorant of it. Ignorance is thus being manufactured by the campaign, as it is now no longer possible for members of the public to be unaware of this problem without that being due to their intellectual fault.

Recognising this aspect of the role of informative public expertise is I think crucial to properly understanding how it functions. Public information campaigns of this kind must first raise awareness, and thereby manufacture ignorance, in order to then combat the ignorance that has been manufactured.

4. CRITICAL PUBLIC EXPERTISE

I've argued that a core form of public expertise is informative public expertise, where this involves both manufacturing and combating ignorance. I now want to contrast this form of public expertise with a second variety—*critical public expertise*—that is devoted to highlighting as opposed to manufacturing ignorance. As we will see, we can bring this second form of public expertise into sharper relief by setting it alongside the more familiar informative public expertise.

Critical public expertise is often directed towards explicitly political ends. In terms of the framework provided by the normative account of ignorance, the aim of the expertise is to demonstrate that the public's lack of knowledge of a certain subject matter already amounts to ignorance, even despite the fact that this lack of knowledge is not generally considered to be ignorance. More precisely, the claim is that this lack of knowledge manifests intellectual fault, and hence should be treated as ignorance. Accordingly, rather

than manufacturing ignorance as informative public expertise does, critical public expertise instead maintains that what was hitherto not regarded as ignorance (but merely lack of knowledge) is in fact ignorance, and so should be treated as such.

Consider, for example, cases where climate change experts charge the public with complacently ignoring the seriousness of the climate change emergency, or Black Lives Matters activists complaining that police brutality against young black men doesn't get properly dealt with.¹³ These cases are different from the AIDS or ozone depletion campaigns as it is built into the presentation of the expertise that the target audience should be aware of the facts they are highlighting. The charge is that there is intellectual fault on the part of the public in not knowing the relevant facts.

The climate change movement is instructive in this regard. Whereas it began as a form of informative public expertise of the kind that we considered above, whereby part of the job of the public expert is to turn widespread lack of knowledge into ignorance, over time it has morphed into our second kind of critical public expertise aimed at highlighting ignorance. The point is that now the information about the climate change emergency has been widely disseminated this has become the kind of domain where everyone ought to have knowledge, and hence a lack of knowledge amounts to ignorance.

When it comes to an issue like climate change, where the experts have been telling us about the problem for decades, the variety of ignorance in play among those living in the present day is inevitably a motivated, or *wilful*, ignorance. The information is fully available to the general public to know about climate change, which entails that the refusal to believe it requires one to engage in intellectually culpable behaviours. This might mean simply ignoring uncomfortable truths. In the case of Black Lives Matters, for example, it seems very plausible that some people simply refuse to listen to the unpleasant truths about, for instance, the incarceration rates of young black males in US jails or their high rate of police homicide. Ignoring information in this way is clearly an intellectual vice; it certainly manifests cognitive bias.

A more serious kind of wilful ignorance is, of course, conspiracy theories. Simply ignoring widely publicised truths is difficult, and can lead to cognitive dissonance as one is regularly exposed to these truths that one refuses to believe. In order to avoid such dissonance, it is thus preferable (if still epistemically sub-optimal) to indulge in alternative explanations of the information being presented that suit one's interests. In this way, one can

be led to conspiracy theories, such as the many conspiracy theories that motivate climate change denial. (Similar conspiracy theories are, of course, available that oppose the kind of critical public expertise that promotes awareness of the police and judicial ill-treatment of young black men).¹⁴ Either way, we have a lack of knowledge that is intellectually culpable and hence amounts to ignorance. The previous rounds of informative public expertise to raise the profile of the target facts have thus done their work, as they have ensured that lack of knowledge in this regard now amounts to ignorance.

Notice that this way of thinking of the political dimension to ignorance is very different to how it is usually understood in the contemporary literature. Ignorance is usually understood in this literature along conventional lines as either lack of knowledge (e.g., Fricker 2016, 144) or lack of true belief (e.g., Mills 2007, 16), with a further pernicious subclass of ignorance delineated that involves a kind of intellectual culpability (e.g., Medina 2017). But this ignores the fact that the very notion of ignorance already includes an element of intellectual culpability. Ignorance is not simply the intellectually benign absence of knowledge. On the alternative way of thinking about political ignorance advocated here, we are able to capture the sense in which appeals to ignorance of this kind are meant to be exposing how a lack of knowledge of the target facts on the part of the folk amounts to ignorance due to the intellectual culpability involved. The role of critical public expertise is to accuse the public of a failure to knowledge what they should know.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Once we recognise the normative dimension to ignorance we are able to gain a better understanding of two of the fundamental ways that public expertise functions. In its most basic form, public expertise performs an informative role. As we have seen, this does not merely involve combating ignorance, but also has a crucial component of raising public awareness of the target facts so that their lack of knowledge now amounts to ignorance. This is the sense in which I have argued that public expertise can have a role to play in manufacturing ignorance. With informative public expertise delineated, we are then in a position to capture a very different role that public expertise plays, where the goal is less to inform than to highlight the public culpability in failing to know the salient facts. This is

critical public expertise, a form of expertise which, as we have seen, typically performs a political function. The distinction between these two forms of public expertise is, inevitably, not sharp. We have noted, for example, that what begins as an expression of informative public expertise can over time transform into an expression of critical public expertise, as the experts rail against the fact that elements of the public are resistant to the information presented to them, such as by formulating conspiracy theories to explain it or away or simply doing all they can to ignore it. Nonetheless, the distinction is important to understanding public expertise and its relationship to ignorance.¹⁵

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NOTES

¹ For some key defences of the so-called traditional account of ignorance in terms of lack of knowledge, see Zimmerman (2008), Le Morvan (2011; 2012; 2013), and DeNicola (2017).

² For some of the main defences of the so-called ‘new view’ of ignorance as the lack of true belief, see Goldman & Olsson (2009), van Woudenberg (2009), and Peels (2010; 2023; cf. Peels 2011; 2012). This account, and the traditional account of ignorance in terms of the lack of knowledge (see endnote 1), are usefully surveyed in Le Morvan & Peels (2016). Note that we are here focusing on propositional forms of ignorance—see Nottelman (2015) and El Kassar (2018) for two recent discussions of non-propositional forms of ignorance and how they relate to the propositional variety.

³ I discuss this issue in some detail in Pritchard (2021*b*) and argue that the proper object of assessment when it comes to ignorance is a kind of lack of awareness, an epistemic standing that can fall short of knowledge. It will be harmless to set this complication to one side for our purposes here, however, and just focus on the absence of knowledge.

⁴ See, for example, Pritchard (2021*a*; 2021*b*). See also Pritchard (2021*c*; 2022*a*; 2022*b*).

⁵ Strictly speaking—see endnote 3—my favored view of ignorance is that one is ignorant when one is unaware of a fact that one ought to be aware of. But lack of knowledge will suit our purposes just fine.

⁶ For more on this connection between character and propositional ignorance, see Pritchard (2021*b*; 2022*b*).

⁷ See especially Pritchard (2021*a*; 2021*b*). For some related discussions of the normative account of ignorance, see also Pritchard (2021*c*; 2022*a*; 2022*b*).

⁸ See Goldberg (e.g., 2011; 2017; 2018, *passim*) for some interesting work unpacking the kind of normative epistemic expectations that would be relevant here, such as what one should have known.

⁹ Note that in what follows I will be taking it as given that the experts we are concerned with are genuine. I will also be setting to one side what is involved in being an expert. For further discussion of the notion of an expert, including the epistemic stock we should invest in them, see Goldman (2001; 2018), Coady (2012, ch. 2), Croce (2019), Watson (2020), and Pritchard (*forthcoming*).

¹⁰ It shouldn’t be thought problematic that on this conception of public expertise the public knowing more can entail that they are in a (narrow) sense more ignorant. This is, after all, a familiar aspect of how epistemic defeaters can work, whereby being aware of a defeater can undermine the epistemic standing of a belief that was previously in good order. This general phenomenon does mean that sometimes knowing less can put one in an epistemically superior position (at least with regard to one’s beliefs in specific propositions anyway). For a classic discussion of this general phenomenon, see Elgin (1988). For more on defeaters in contemporary epistemology, see Grundmann (2011) and Moretti & Piazza (2018).

¹¹ As Dan DeNicola has pointed out to me, on the traditional conception of ignorance as lack of knowledge there is also a sense in which experts can ‘manufacture’ ignorance. This is because one role of experts can be to create new forms of specialized knowledge. Inevitably, the non-experts will lack this new knowledge and hence, on this view, just in virtue of creating this specialized knowledge, the experts are also creating ignorance in the non-experts. This scenario is clearly very different to the notion of manufacturing ignorance in play here, not least because this a case where ignorance is the result of the expertise itself rather than being the result of the public dissemination of expert *advice*, which is what we are envisaging. Moreover, I think it is also clear that this alternative notion of manufacturing ignorance is not plausible. Indeed, it reveals the deficiencies in the account of ignorance that underlies it. Why should the mere fact that I lack specialized expert knowledge that there is no reasonable expectation that I should be aware of entail that I am ignorant?

¹² See, for example, this 2019 article in *The Guardian* newspaper:

- <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/jan/20/how-to-stop-the-climate-crisis-six-lessons-from-the-campaign-that-saved-the-ozone>

¹³ Interestingly, the contemporary discussion of the decolonization of philosophy runs along similar lines, in that the charge is that there are important facts that are salient to our discipline that practitioners should be aware of but often are not. For some helpful recent discussions of the issues in play here, see Allais (2016), Gordon (2019), and Mitova (2020). I set this particular debate to one side here, given that our concerns are with public expertise (i.e., expertise of interest to the general public).

¹⁴ There is now a wealth of epistemological work on conspiracy theories. For two recent monographs on this topic, see Dentith (2014) and Cassam (2019).

¹⁵ I am grateful to Dan DeNicola for detailed comments on an earlier version of this piece. This essay was written while a Senior Research Associate of the *African Centre for Epistemology and Philosophy of Science* at the University of Johannesburg.