



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2019

The Irreducibility of Ignorance. A Reply to Peels

El Kassar, Nadja

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich
ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-179172>
Journal Article
Published Version

Originally published at:
El Kassar, Nadja (2019). The Irreducibility of Ignorance. A Reply to Peels. *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective*, 8(2):31-38.



SERRC

Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>

ISSN: 2471-9560

The Irreducibility of Ignorance

Nadja El Kassar, Swiss Federal Institute of Technology

El Kassar, Nadja. "The Irreducibility of Ignorance: A Reply to Peels." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8, no. 2 (2019): 31-38.

Short url: <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-46K> (provided by WordPress)

Thanks to Rik Peels for his thought-provoking comments which give me the opportunity to say more about the arguments and rationale of my article and the integrated conception.

1. General Remarks About Two Approaches to Ignorance

Rik Peels' and Patrick Bondy's replies allow me to highlight and distinguish two approaches to ignorance, one that focuses on ignorance as a simple doxastic (propositional) phenomenon and another that regards ignorance as a complex epistemological phenomenon that is constituted by a doxastic component and by other epistemic components. The distinction can be illustrated by Peels' conception and my integrated conception of ignorance proposed in the article. Peels' conception belongs with the first approach, my conception belongs with the second approach.

As Peels' reply also evinces, the two approaches come with different assumptions and consequences. For example, the first approach presupposes that accounts of knowledge and ignorance are symmetrical and/or mirror each other and, consequently, it will expect that an account of ignorance has the same features as an account of knowledge.

In contrast, the second approach takes ignorance to be a topic in its own right and therefore it is not concerned by criticism that points out that its account of ignorance makes claims that an account of knowledge does not make or does not fit with an account of knowledge in other ways. I will return to this distinction later. A major concern of the second approach (and my conception shares this concern) is to develop an account of ignorance *sui generis*, not an account of ignorance in the light of knowledge (or accounts of knowledge).

2. Why Peels' attempt at reducing the integrated conception to his view fails

Peels argues that the integrated conception of ignorance boils down to the conception of ignorance that he endorses. However, if I understand his considerations and arguments correctly, the observations can either be accommodated by my conception or my conception can give reasons for rejecting Peels' assumptions. Let me discuss the three central steps in turn.

2.1. Doxastic Attitudes in the Second Conjoint

As a first step Peels notes that "the reference to doxastic attitudes in the second conjoint is ... redundant" (Peels 2019, 11) since holding a false belief or holding no belief, the manifestations of ignorance, just are doxastic attitudes. But the doxastic attitudes in the second conjoint are not redundant because they capture second-order (and in general higher-order) attitudes towards ignorance, e.g. I am ignorant of the rules of Japanese grammar and I (truly) believe that I do not know these rules.

Socratic ignorance also includes more doxastic attitudes than those at the first level of ignorance. Those doxastic attitudes can also constitute ignorance. Peels' observation

indicates that it might be advisable for me to talk of meta-attitudes rather than doxastic attitudes to avoid confusion about the double appearance of doxastic attitudes.

2.2. Epistemic Virtues and Vices and the Nature of Ignorance

Peels' second step concerns the other two components of the second conjunct. Epistemic virtues and vices "[do] not belong to the essence of being ignorant" (Peels 2019, 11). But I do not see what reasons Peels has for this claim. My arguments for saying that they do belong to the nature of being ignorant from the original article are still valid. One does not capture ignorance by focusing only on the doxastic component.

This is what my example of Kate and Hannah who are ignorant of the fact that cruise ships produce high emissions of carbon and sulfur dioxides but have different epistemic attitudes towards not knowing this fact and thus are ignorant in different ways is meant to show. Their being ignorant is not just determined by the doxastic component but also by their attitudes.

This does not mean that all ignorance comes with closed-mindedness or open-mindedness, it just means that all states of ignorance are constituted by a doxastic component and an attitudinal component (whichever attitudes fills that spot and whether it is implicit or explicit is an open question and depends on the relevant instance of ignorance). I am interested to hear which additional reasons Peels has for cutting epistemic virtues and vices from the second conjunct and delineating the nature of ignorance in the way that he does.

2.3. Ignorance as a Disposition?

Peels' third step consists in a number of questions about ignorance as a disposition. He writes:

"[O]n the El Kassar synthesis, ignorance is a disposition that manifests itself in a number of dispositions (beliefs, lack of belief, virtues, vices). What sort of thing is ignorance if it is a *disposition to manifest certain dispositions*? It seems if one is disposed to manifest certain dispositions, one simply has those dispositions and will, therefore, manifest them in the relevant circumstances." (Peels 2019, 12, emphasis in original).

These questions seem to indicate to Peels that the dispositional character of ignorance on the integrated conception is unclear and therefore *disposition* may be removed from the integrated conception. It does not make sense to say that ignorance is a disposition.

But Peels' questions and conclusion themselves invite a number of questions and, therefore, I do not see how anything problematic follows for my conception. It is not clear to me whether Peels is worried because my conception implies that a disposition is manifested in another disposition that may be manifested or not, or whether he is concerned because my conception implies that one disposition (in the present context: ignorance) may have different stimulus conditions and different manifestations.

In reply to the first worry I can confirm that I think that it is possible that a disposition can be manifested in other dispositions. But I do not see why this is a problem. An example may help undergird my claim. Think e.g. of the disposition to act courageously, it is constituted at minimum by the disposition to take action when necessary and to feel as is appropriate. Aristotle's description of the courageous person reveals how complicated the virtue is and that it consists in a number of dispositions:

Now the brave man is as dauntless as man may be. Therefore, while he will fear even the things that are not beyond human strength, he will fear them as he ought and as reason directs, and he will face them for the sake of what is noble; for this is the end of excellence. But it is possible to fear these more, or less, and again to fear things that are not terrible as if they were.

Of the faults that are committed one consists in fearing what one should not, another in fearing as we should not, another in fearing when we should not, and so on; and so too with respect to the things that inspire confidence. The man, then, who faces and who fears the right things and with the right aim, in the right way and at the right time, and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is brave; for the brave man feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way reason directs. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1115b 17-22)

The fact that courage consists in other dispositions also explains why there are many ways to not be virtuously courageous. For the present context all that matters is that a disposition can consist in other dispositions that can be manifested or not.

The second worry might be alleviated by introducing the notion of multi-track dispositions into my argument. A multi-track disposition, a term widely acknowledged in philosophical work on disposition, is individuated by several pairs of stimulus conditions and manifestations (Vetter 2015, 34). Thus, ignorance as a disposition may be spelled out as a multi-track disposition that has different stimulus conditions and different manifestations.

Peels also argues against the view that epistemic virtues themselves are manifestations of ignorance. But I do not hold that epistemic virtues simpliciter are manifestations of ignorance, rather I submit that epistemic virtues (or vices) necessarily appear in manifestations of ignorance, they co-constitute ignorance.

Enveloped in Peels' argument is another objection, namely, that epistemic virtues cannot appear in manifestations of ignorance, it is only epistemic vices that can be manifestations of ignorance – or as I would say: can appear in manifestations of ignorance. Peels claims that, “open-mindedness, thoroughness, and intellectual perseverance are clearly *not* manifestations of ignorance. If anything, they are the opposite: manifestations of knowledge, insight and understanding.” (Peels 2019, 12, emphasis in original)

Let me address this concern by explaining how ignorance can be related to epistemic virtues. Being open-mindedly ignorant, and being ignorant in an intellectually persevering way

become more plausible forms and instantiations of ignorance if one recognizes the significance of ignorance in scientific research. Think, e.g., of a scientist who wants to find out how Earth was formed does not know how Earth was formed and she may dedicate her whole life to answering that question and will persist in the face of challenges and setbacks.

Similarly, for a scientist who wants to improve existing therapies for cancer and sets out to develop nanotechnological devices to support clinicians. She can be open-mindedly ignorant about the details of the new device. In fact, most scientists are probably open-mindedly ignorant; they do want to know more about what it is they do not know in their field and are after more evidence and insights. That is also one reason for conducting experiments etc. Firestein (2012) and several contributions in Gross and McGoey's *Routledge Handbook of Ignorance Studies* (2015) discuss this connection in more detail.

Thus, Peels' third step also does not succeed and as it stands the integrated conception thus does not reduce to Peels' view. But I'd be interested to hear more about why such a revision of the integrated conception suggests itself.

3. Correction Concerning “How One Is Ignorant”

Let me address a cause of confusion in the integrated conception. When I call for an account of ignorance to explain “how one is ignorant”, I do not want the account to explain how one has become ignorant, i.e. provide a genetic or causal story of a particular state of ignorance. This assumption leads Peels and Bondy to their objections concerning causal components in my conception of the nature of ignorance.

Instead, what I require, is for an account of ignorance to capture what one's ignorance is like, what epistemic attitudes the subject has towards the doxastic component of her ignorance. The confusion and the fundamental objections to the integrated conception may be explained by the different approaches of ignorance that I have mentioned at the start of my reply.

4. No Mirroring Nor Symmetry Required

Peels notes that theories of knowledge do not include a causal story of how the subject became knowledgeable, nor about the quality of the subject's knowledge, and from this he concludes that the integrated conception of ignorance which he takes to provide such a causal story must be rejected. However, as it stands, his argument is not conclusive.

First, it builds on confusion about the claims of the integrated conception that I have addressed in the previous section (3): the integrated conception does not provide a causal story for how the subject became ignorant, nor does it claim that such a causal story should be part of an account of the nature of ignorance. Rather, it spells out which additional features of ignorance are also constitutive – namely, an epistemic attitude – in addition to the doxastic component accepted by everyone.

Second, it is unclear why theories of knowledge and theories of ignorance have to presuppose a current-time slice approach, as effectively endorsed by Peels. Some theories of knowledge want to distinguish lucky true belief from knowledge and therefore look at the causal history of the subject coming to their true belief and therefore reject current-time slice approaches (e.g. Goldman 2012).

Third, Peels' objection presupposes that theories of knowledge and theories of ignorance have to contain the same constituents and features or have to be symmetrical or have to mirror each other in some way, but I do not see why these presuppositions hold. Knowledge and ignorance are obviously intimately connected but I am curious to hear further arguments for why their accounts have to be unified or symmetrical or mirrored.

5. The Distinction Between Necessary and Contingent or Accidental Features of Ignorance

Peels argues that my conception confuses necessary and contingent or accidental features of ignorance but it is not clear what reasons Peels can give to support his diagnosis. My conception specifically distinguishes necessary components of ignorance and contingent/accidental instantiations of a necessary component of ignorance.

Peels' discussion of my example of Kate and Hannah who both do not know that cruise ships have bad effects for the environment seems to jumble necessary features of ignorance whose instantiation is contingent (e.g. open-mindedness instantiates the epistemic attitude-component in open-minded ignorance) and contingent features of ignorance that trace back the causal history of an instance of ignorance. Peels writes:

Hannah is deeply and willingly ignorant about the high emissions of both carbon and sulfur dioxides of cruise ships (I recently found out that a single cruise trip has roughly the same amount of emission as seven million cars in an average year combined). Kate is much more open-minded, but has simply never considered the issue in any detail. She is in a state of suspending ignorance regarding the emission of cruise ships.

I reply that they are both ignorant, at least propositionally ignorant, but that their ignorance has different, contingent features: Hannah's ignorance is deep ignorance, Kate's ignorance is suspending ignorance, Hannah's ignorance is willing or intentional, Kate's ignorance is not. These are among the contingent features of ignorance; both are ignorant and, therefore, meet the criteria that I laid out for the nature of ignorance. (Peels 2019, 16-17)

Hannah's and Kate's particular epistemic attitudes are (to some extent) contingent but the fact that ignorance consists in a doxastic component and an attitudinal component is not contingent but necessary. In other words: which epistemic attitude is instantiated is accidental, but that there is an epistemic attitude present is not accidental but necessary. That

is what the integrated conception holds. I'm interested to hear more about Peels' argument for the opposing claim in the light of these clarifications.

6. Being Constitutive and Being Causal

Peels' argumentation seems to presuppose that something that is constitutive of a state or disposition cannot also be causal, but it is not clear why that should be the case. E.g. Elzinga (2018) argues that epistemic self-confidence is constitutive of intellectual autonomy and at the same time may causally contribute to intellectual autonomy.

And note also that a constitutive relation between dispositions does not have to entail a causal relation in the sense of an efficient cause. Some authors in Action Theory argue that a disposition is not the cause of an action; rather, a decision, motivation, desire (etc.) is the cause of the action (cf. Löwenstein 2017, 85-86). I do not want to take sides on this issue, this is just to point out that Peels' approach to something being constitutive and being a cause is not straightforward. (See also Section 4 in my upcoming reply to Patrick Bondy.)

7. Other Forms of Ignorance

Peels notes that my approach does not capture objectual and procedural ignorance as spelled out by Nottelmann (e.g. Nottelmann 2016). He tries to show that the integrated conception does not work for lack of know-how: "not knowing how to ride a bike does not seem to come with certain intellectual virtues or vices" (Peels 2019, 13) nor for lack of objectual ignorance: "if I am not familiar with the smell of fresh raspberries, that does not imply any false beliefs or absence of beliefs, nor does it come with intellectual virtues or vices" (Peels 2019, 13).

I am glad that Peels picks out this gap in the article, as does Bondy. It is an important and stimulating open question how the integrated conception fits with such other forms of ignorance – I am open-mindedly ignorant with respect to its answers. But the article did not set out to give an all-encompassing account of ignorance. Nor is it clear, whether one account will work for all forms of ignorance (*viz.* propositional ignorance, objectual ignorance, technical/procedural ignorance). Peels' observation thus highlights an important open question for all theories of ignorance but not a particular objection against my integrated conception.

At the same time, I am skeptical whether Peels' proposed account, the threefold synthesis, succeeds at capturing objectual and procedural ignorance. I do not see how the threefold synthesis is informative regarding objectual and procedural ignorance since it just states that objectual ignorance is "lack of objectual knowledge" and procedural ignorance is "lack of procedural knowledge". Peels' formulates the Threefold Synthesis as follows, with an additional footnote:

Threefold Synthesis: Ignorance is an epistemic agent's lack of propositional

knowledge or lack of true belief, lack of objectual knowledge, or lack of procedural knowledge.⁹

⁹If the Standard View on Ignorance is correct, then one could simply replace this with: Ignorance is a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in lack of (propositional, objectual, or procedural) knowledge. (Peels 2019, 13)

I do not see how these statements go toward capturing lack of competence, e.g. *not possessing the competence to ski*, or lack of objectual knowledge, e.g. *not knowing Paris*. I guess that philosophers interested in ignorance and in this issue will have to carefully study the phenomena that they want to capture and their interrelations – as Bondy starts to do in his Reply (Bondy 2018, 12-14) – in order to set out to adequately capture what Peels calls lack of objectual knowledge or lack of procedural knowledge.

8. What Does One Want From an Account of Ignorance?

Peels' reply evinces that anyone who wants to develop an account of ignorance needs to answer a number of fundamental questions, including: What is it that we want from an account of ignorance? Do we want it a unified account for knowledge and ignorance? Do we want a simple account? Or do we want to adequately capture the phenomenon and be able to explain its significance in epistemic practices of epistemic agents? I want the account to be able to do the latter and have therefore put forward the integrated conception.

9. Two Clarificatory Remarks

In closing, I would like to add two clarificatory remarks. Peels suggests that the structural conception and agnotology are identical conceptions or approaches (Peels 2019, 15-16). But even though there are significant connections between the structural conception and agnotology, they are distinct.

The examples for the structural conception in my article are from feminist epistemology of ignorance, not from agnotology. I do not want to engage in labelling and including or excluding authors and their works from fields and disciplines, but there are differences between works in epistemology of ignorance and agnotology since agnotology is often taken to belong with history of science. I would not want to simply identify them.

I do not see how Peels' observations that the examples for agential conceptions of ignorance include causal language and that the conception of ignorance that he finds in critical race theory does not fit with someone being ignorant "of the fact that Antarctica is the largest desert on earth" (Peels 2019, 14) present objections to the integrated conception.

If there are claims about the causes of ignorance in these theories, that does not mean that my conception, which is distinct from these conceptions, makes the same claims. I

specifically develop a new conception because of the advantages and disadvantages of the different conceptions that I discuss in the article.¹

Contact details: nadja.elkassar@gess.ethz.ch

References

- Aristoteles. 1995. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation. Volume Two*. Edited by Jonathan Barnes. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Bondy, Patrick. 2018. “Knowledge and Ignorance, Theoretical and Practical.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 7 (12): 9–14.
- Elzinga, Benjamin. 2019. “A Relational Account of Intellectual Autonomy.” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49 (1): 22–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00455091.2018.1533369>.
- Firestein, Stuart. 2012. *Ignorance: How It Drives Science*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goldman, Alvin I. 2012. *Reliabilism and Contemporary Epistemology: Essays*. New York, NY.: Oxford Univ. Press.
- Gross, Matthias, and Linsey McGoe, eds. 2015. *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*. Routledge International Handbooks. London ; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Löwenstein, David. 2017. *Know-How as Competence: A Rylean Responsibilist Account*. Studies in Theoretical Philosophy, vol. 4. Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann.
- Nottelmann, Nikolaj. 2016. “The Varieties of Ignorance.” In *The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance*, edited by Rik Peels and Martijn Blaauw, 33–56. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511820076.003>.
- Peels, Rik. 2019. “Exploring the Boundaries of Ignorance: Its Nature and Accidental Features.” *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8 (1): 10–18.
- Vetter, Barbara. 2015. *Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹ Thanks to David Löwenstein and Lutz Wingert for helpful discussions.