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A Critical Catalogue of Ignorance

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Thanks to Patrick Bondy for these inspiring comments that allows me to further explain the arguments and rationale of the integrated conception of ignorance.

Weak and Strong Ignorance

Bondy's suggestion that there is weak ignorance and strong ignorance just as there is strong and weak knowledge is very interesting and perceptive (Bondy 2018, 11-12). But I take it that this distinction is more relevant for defenders of the propositional conception of ignorance, in particular supporters of the Standard View and New View.

In my reply to Peels (2019), I suggest that we should not see knowledge and ignorance as simple opposites, nor that their accounts should be mirrored. And in the original article I have argued that the Standard View and the New View are not adequate for capturing ignorance. Therefore, Bondy's suggestion and the related criticism of the debate between the Standard View and New View is not as pertinent for my integrated conception of ignorance, but I think it should be taken seriously as an alternative approach to distinguishing forms of ignorance.

“Agential Ignorance” and “Agential Conception of Ignorance”

I need to point to a terminological issue in Bondy's reply that may be central for distinguishing conceptions of ignorance and particular instances of ignorance, and thus also for motivating and defending the integrated conception of ignorance: Bondy swiftly changes between “agential conception of ignorance” and “agential ignorance” and seems to use these terms interchangeably. Similarly, for “structural conception of ignorance” and “structural ignorance”.

But these terms are importantly distinct: the former refers to a conception or an approach, the latter to a form of ignorance, or also particular instances of ignorance. In my article I only discuss agential conceptions and structural conceptions and I do not use the terms “agential ignorance” or “structural ignorance” because I am specifically interested in conceptions of ignorance

Practical Ignorance

Bondy, like Peels, points out that I do not address lack of practical knowledge or lack of know-how. Again, I fully agree that this is an open question in my article and for the integrated conception and I look forward to addressing this question in more detail. In his reply, Bondy suggests that my integrated conception can be extended to apply to such “practical ignorance” in the following way:

Theoretical ignorance: this would remain as El Kassar formulates her integrated conception of ignorance, as “a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself

in her beliefs – either she has no belief about p or a false belief – and her epistemic attitudes (doxastic attitudes, epistemic virtues, epistemic vices)”

Practical ignorance: a disposition of an agent that manifests itself in her actions – where S fails to φ , or S does not φ well or properly – and her practical attitudes (ethical and pragmatic attitudes, ethical or practical virtues and vices). (Bondy 2018, 13)

Yet, I have to reject this charitable extension. Bondy, as well as Peels, is right that there is work to do in this field, but simply imposing the integrated conception on “practical ignorance” would not be appropriate, nor is it an approach that I would wish to take.

First, I doubt that we can simply replace epistemic attitudes, virtues and vices with practical attitudes, practical virtues and vices to cover the practical case. Second, I think we need to respect the highly-evolved debate about know-how and include their concerns and arguments in any account that wants to address the lack of know-how or lack of practical knowledge. Any further conclusions require starting communication between the different fields and debates – a genuinely exciting prospect for philosophy of ignorance!

A first step might be to examine the terminology that we are using: Bondy discusses “practical ignorance” but maybe the term “incompetence” is more apt for these practical cases? Interestingly enough, psychologists who work on ignorance and meta-ignorance sometimes frame ignorance in terms of incompetence, see, for example Dunning in describing the Dunning-Kruger-Effect (Dunning 2011, 260).

Finally, and more fundamentally, I do not see why one should go for a unified account of theoretical and practical ignorance that uses the same components for both forms of ignorance. As I explain in my reply to Peels, I think that one should not aim for a unified account of ignorance and knowledge but instead take the phenomena seriously as they are. For now I take the same considerations to hold for theoretical ignorance and practical ignorance.

“We Can Say Everything That We Want to Say About Ignorance”

Bondy claims that “we can say everything we want to say about ignorance” (Bondy 2018, 9) with the propositional conception. But his claim is based on the assumption that what I call constituents of ignorance really are just causes of ignorance and I hope that my clarificatory remarks in this reply and my reply to Peels’ contribution explain why the assumption is not warranted and why the propositional conception does not say enough about ignorance. Let me briefly return to some arguments to motivate my position:

One problem is that Bondy’s (and Peels’) interpretation of closed-mindedness and other virtues or vices as causes of ignorance makes it seem as if these virtues and vices are naturally efficient causes; i.e. they turn the original claim that epistemic virtues and vices are co-constituents of ignorance into the claim that they are efficient causes.

But I would like to hear more about why we should draw this conclusion or why it is warranted. Again, a parallel in philosophy of know-how may be helpful in that context: know-how as a disposition does not explain *why* a performance occurred, it explains “why a certain *kind* of act ... is possible in the first place” (Löwenstein 2017, 85, emphasis in original). And, similarly, a disposition, like open-mindedness or closed-mindedness, does not explain why someone does not know that *p* or why someone is ignorant of that particular fact. We need events in the world, decisions, beliefs, and motivations and the like to explain why someone is ignorant.

Second, as I say in the article, ignorance is more than a doxastic issue, it also has an attitudinal component, *how* one is ignorant – not how one has become ignorant, but the particular character of one’s ignorance. That also involves more than saying what kind of ignorance (e.g. propositional ignorance or practical ignorance) the particular instance belongs to. There is another facet of ignorance that is constitutive of ignorance and it cannot be captured by the propositional conception since it is restricted to the doxastic component.

That is why I want to say more about ignorance than just refer to the doxastic component. And even more, I suggest that everyone who wants to capture actual instances of ignorance should want to say more about ignorance than the propositional conception does.¹

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