

Session 2. Kinds of Ignorance

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FIL4200: Epistemology and Philosophy of Science

26. January 2023

1 Clarifications

Let's start with a couple of questions raised in the forum:

(1.) Lexical effects of ignorance.

Labelling people as ignorant **can** be pejorative.

So in these discussions, one has to be careful about how this term is being used.

There is an interesting question here concerning political weaponisation of the **terms** "ignorance" and "ignorant".

But note that it doesn't **have** to be this way.

Ignorance can be expressed from a place of **understanding** e.g. "They can't be blamed, they were ignorant (through no fault of their own)." (see e.g. Le Morvan and Peels).

Agnotology can help us understand our **own** ignorance.

e.g. I'm interested in our ignorance (in particular **my**) ignorance of mathematical and scientific claims.

Questions?

(2.) Is conscious deep ignorance just for science?

Wilholt argues that conscious deep ignorance is especially attractive for science.

But might this provide a demarcation?

I'm not sure: It seems to me that one can be consciously but deeply ignorant of philosophical questions too.

e.g. Trolley problems seem like good candidates.

I find **demarcation** problems **hard** (see, e.g. Larry Laudan's work).

There is also the question of how **fruitful** they are (though of course, see again lexical effects!).

But I think the **default** is to say that there are cases of non-scientific conscious deep ignorance (let's keep an eye on this going forward).

Questions?

(3.) Can we be consciously ignorant of incoherent claims?

Yes! Let T be a formal theory.

I can be consciously ignorant of whether some statement ϕ in the language of T is provable in T .

This is even in the case where T **does** prove ϕ .

In this case, it is **incoherent** to suppose that ϕ doesn't follow from T , but it seems that such things can be part of conscious ignorance.

2 Sound questions and conscious ignorance

Consider the Willholt/Bromberger conditions on conscious ignorance:

1. P is able to articulate or at least understand Q and is aware of Q .
2. P does not know a correct answer to Q .
3. Q is sound (i.e. possesses a correct answer).
4. P believes that she does not know a correct answer to Q .
5. P regards Q as sound.

I have several questions here, some of which popped up in the forum:

1. Must I be able to formulate the question?

Aren't there cases where I can formulate a question, but I am **not** a competent user.

e.g. Almost any non-trivial claim about quantum mechanics for me now.

Presumably some level of **deference** is allowed?

Question. Must I be able to formulate/understand the question?

Question. How **general** is this problem (perhaps it is just a matter of degree)?

Question. Are there **simpler** examples?

2. Must Q be sound?

The authors considered this week primarily examine **trivial** unsoundness.

e.g. "What did Napoleon wear at the battle of Waterloo in 1799?" (History buffs: What's the mistake?)

For some claims, I am **unsure** whether the question is sound (and don't **regard** the question as sound).

e.g. Suppose we have a sorites test-tube in an opaque box.

"Is the tube in the box red?" **Options:**

- True
- False
- Neither

This problem is quite widespread wherever we think we can have **truth-value gaps**.

e.g. Versions of intuitionism/constructivism, the continuum hypothesis / mathematical independence, open future, lack of clarity about reference.

For some of these, my worries about soundness derives from being **well-informed**.

This issue highlights:

Question. What do we mean by a **correct** answer?

Perhaps we should think of this ignorance as a kind of higher-order ignorance about the **soundness of Q**?

Question. Should we conceive of the above cases as ones where I'm **only** ignorant about "Is Q sound?" and **not** " Q ?".

Question. What **evidence** might we get for the soundness or not of a question?

Question. Does it matter whether we regard Q as sound for **bad** reasons?

3 Predicaments

A is in a p -predicament with regard to Q if and only if, in A 's views, Q admits of a right answer, but A can think of no answer to which, in A 's views, there are no decisive objections.

Conscious deep ignorance for Wilholt. Conscious ignorance plus p -predicament.

A person is in a b -predicament with regard to a question if and only if the question is sound, but the correct answer, in Bromberger's words, "is beyond what the person [...] can conceive, can think of, can imagine, that is, is something that that person cannot remember, cannot excogitate, cannot compose."

Thoroughly opaque ignorance for Wilholt. Unconscious ignorance plus b -predicament.

Question. Our previous question from earlier highlights that maybe there are cases where we are **consciously** ignorant **but** in a b -predicament.

Question. What do we mean by a "decisive" objection in p -predicament?

I've encountered this reaction from some physicists (especially highly theoretical): An objection is only decisive when **falsified**.

But this is **very** strong!

Question. Why think that p -predicaments are so attractive for science?

Isn't a substantial part of science exploring questions for which there are *no* decisive objections?

Question. How do b -predicaments relate to the Kuhnian distinction between 'revolutionary' and 'normal' science (and incommensurability)?

Question. The Strawsonian Problem. Suppose I am investigating a question Q , for which I am in a b -predicament (if this is possible). My concepts shift as a result. Does the **content of** Q also shift?

4 Other interesting things from the forum (if we have time)

Question. Does negative epistemology help with demarcation (and responding to some scientific disparaging of philosophy)?

Question. What is the class of permissible languages for formulating questions? Are there **unknowable** questions?

Question. Are there **unknowable answers**?

Question. Does ignorance analysis vary across possible worlds?

Question. Is there an infinite amount of ignorance?

Question. Is there really a pluralism about ignorance claims (perhaps motivated by a contextualism about knowledge/ignorance)?

5 Housekeeping

Compulsory activities. Please check the announcement.

Questions/Responses: Nothing different from first version of syllabus. I have set up sections for each week.

Presentations: These are **not** mandatory but are strongly encouraged.

Draft: It is **not** mandatory to submit a draft by 15. April to take the course for credit, but I will not provide comments on work provided after.

Questions?