

IGNORANCE AND AWARENESS

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Abstract

Knowledge implies the presence of a positive relation between a person and a fact. Factual ignorance, on the other hand, implies the *absence* of some positive relation between a person and a fact. The two most influential views of ignorance hold that what is lacking in cases of factual ignorance is knowledge or true belief, but these accounts fail to explain a number of basic facts about ignorance. In their place, we propose a novel and systematic defense of the view that factual ignorance is *the absence of awareness*, an account that both comes apart from the dominant views and overcomes their deficiencies. Given the important role that ignorance plays in moral and legal theory and our understanding of various epistemic injustices, a precise and theoretically unproblematic account of the nature of ignorance is important not only for normative epistemology, but also for law, ethics, and applied epistemology.

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1. Introduction

Ignorance matters. Suppose your neighbor’s home is burning down but you’re ignorant of that fact. Your ignorance will, in many typical situations, ensure that you’re not to be *held accountable* for not doing anything to assist your neighbor. Alternatively, suppose that, despite your ignorance, you were to call emergency services as a joke, claiming that your neighbor’s home is burning down. It would be a happy accident that you brought emergency services to the scene when they were desperately needed. But you wouldn’t *deserve credit* for bringing about this crucial outcome; your ignorance ensures that you are not owed praise for your helpful act.

With such examples, it’s easy to see the significance of ignorance. And it is thus unsurprising that we find many philosophers – those writing in moral and legal theory, and also those working on racial and epistemic injustice – regularly relying on the concept of ignorance in expressing when agents are and are not to be held accountable for their actions and attitudes. When it comes to moral responsibility, for example, Gideon Rosen (2003) argues that “when a person acts from ignorance, he is culpable for his action only if he is culpable for the ignorance from which he acts.” On legal responsibility, Douglas Husak (2016) holds that “ignorance of law should usually be a complete excuse from criminal liability.”¹ When it comes to epistemic injustice, Miranda Fricker (2016) and Adam Piovarchy (2021) argue that many agents who commit testimonial or hermeneutical injustice are excused due to their ignorance of their wrongdoing.² *But what is ignorance?*

In what follows, we will provide a partial answer to this question. Our answer can only be partial because there are, arguably, different objects of which one can be ignorant: one can be ignorant of *particulars and their properties* (“Socrates is ignorant of *the ball’s color*”), one can be ignorant of *propositions* (“Plato was ignorant of *the proposition that hadrons cannot exist without quarks*”), one can be ignorant of *facts* (“Aristotle is ignorant of *the fact that the ball is blue*”), and one can be ignorant of *skills* (“Alexander is ignorant of *how to solve quadratic equations*”).³ We will concentrate on what can be called **factual ignorance**, i.e. the ignorance relation we refer to with expressions of the form ‘She is ignorant of *the fact that p*.’⁴ Thus, our concern is with the best way to fill-in the following schema:

¹For others who have defended the view that ignorance can serve as a legitimate excuse, either eliminating or greatly reducing a person’s blameworthiness for moral and legal transgressions, see Baron (2016), Fischer and Ravizza (1998), Kelly (2012), and Peels (2014).

²For further discussions of the potential connections between ignorance and racial and epistemic injustice, see Martin (2021), Medina (2013, 2016), and Pohlhaus (2012).

³For more on these other ignorance relations, see Kyle (2021), Le Morvan and Peels (2016), and Nottelmann (2016).

⁴There are two ways of understanding ‘facts’ that are important to distinguish. Sometimes, facts are taken to be particulars exemplifying properties. For example, *the computer’s being large* and *this sentence occupying space on a page* are facts in this exemplification sense of ‘fact’. To be ignorant of such facts is to be ignorant of *particulars having properties*. Expressions of ignorance of ‘facts’ in this exemplification sense involve a syntactically distinct use of the phrase ‘is ignorant’, one that is *not* employed in the I-Schema. The kind of ignorance relation the I-Schema directs our attention towards is associated with a sense of ‘fact’ that essentially involves *that-clauses*, e.g. being ignorant of *the fact that* the computer is large. That-clause facts are a more expansive category of fact as they can involve facts about generalities involving modal operators, quantifiers, negatives, disjunctions, and the like. That-clause facts are sometimes identified with true propositions, but we will remain silent on that issue. See Hyman (2017) and Mulligan and Correia (2021) for more on fact-talk.

I-Schema: Necessarily, S is ignorant of the fact that p iff p and S fails to ϕ that p .

Existing proposals for how to complete this schema all involve reference to some factive condition. On the classical view, ignorance is to be identified with the absence of knowledge:

Standard View: Necessarily, S is ignorant of the fact that p iff p and S fails to know that p .⁵

In contrast, a novel view has emerged that takes ignorance to be the absence of true belief:

New View: Necessarily, S is ignorant of the fact that p iff p and S fails to believe that p .⁶

In what follows, we will argue that the Standard View and the New View are unable to explain a number of important facts about ignorance. In their place, we will provide a defense of the idea that ignorance is *the absence of awareness*:

Awareness View: Necessarily, S is ignorant of the fact that p iff p and S fails to be aware that p .⁷

Our defense of the Awareness View will be novel, systematic, and informative, explaining how the Awareness View can accommodate a number of compelling desiderata in a natural and straightforward way, something that neither the Standard View nor the New View can do. We will also explore two distinct ways of analyzing the concept of awareness such that all the benefits of the Awareness View are preserved.

A quick note before we begin. Duncan Pritchard (2021a, 2021b) and Anne Meylan (2020, 2022) reject the idea that the I-Schema is all there is to factual ignorance. Rather, they argue that ignorance also has a normative dimension, meaning that factual ignorance involves satisfying the following schema:

Normative I-Schema: Necessarily, S is ignorant of the fact that p iff p and (Psychological Base Condition) S fails to ϕ that p , and (Normative Condition) S fails to satisfy some salient normative standard by failing to ϕ that p .

⁵See Blome-Tillman (2016: 96); Fields (1994: 403); Fine (2018: 4032); Haack (2001: 25); Le Morvan (2011a), (2011b), (2012), (2013), and (2019); Lynch (2016: 509); Unger (1975: 93); and Zimmerman (1988: 75) and (2008: ix).

⁶See Goldman (1986: 26) and (1999: 5); Goldman and Olsson (2009: 19–21); Guerrero (2007: 62–63); Peels (2010), (2011), (2012), and (2014); and Van Woudenberg (2009: 375).

⁷Pritchard (2021b) also suggests that ignorance should be understood in terms of awareness. He then makes it clear, though, that his use of ‘awareness’ is just a placeholder for whatever psychological condition fails to obtain in cases of ignorance, going on to give an account of ignorance in terms of *epistemic access*. In Section 4, we will discuss the limitations of Pritchard’s epistemic access account.

In what follows, we will remain neutral on the question of whether ignorance has a normative dimension. Readers who are convinced that ignorance has a normative dimension should treat this paper as providing a novel, systematic, and informative answer to the question, “What psychological condition, ϕ , in the Normative I-Schema, gives us the correct account of factual ignorance?” While advocates of the Normative I-Schema hold that ignorance constitutively involves a normative failing, they also acknowledge that this view must be supplemented with an account of the psychological relation that is lacking in cases of ignorance (e.g. Pritchard 2021b: 237-238). Nothing we say in this paper will rule out the idea that one is ignorant of the fact that p only if one suffers from some normative failing. We are principally concerned with the psychological condition that factors in both the I-Schema and the Normative I-Schema.

2. Desiderata of Ignorance

A theory of factual ignorance ought to explain, or at least be compatible with, a number of general principles. The principles we will focus on are the following:

D1. Extensional Adequacy: A theory of ignorance should not be susceptible to clear counterexamples.

D2. Ignorance Excludes Reasons-Responsiveness: If S is ignorant of the fact that p at t , then S is not able to respond to the fact that p as a reason to ϕ at t .

D3. Absence of Ignorance Requires Responsibility: If S is not ignorant of the fact that p at t and S is in circumstances where the fact that p provides S with a decisive reason to ϕ at t , then S is responsible for responding to p by ϕ -ing at t .

The first desideratum captures the fact that we want a counterexample-free theory of ignorance. If a theory says that S is not ignorant when they clearly are, or says that S is ignorant when they are clearly not, then so much the worse for that theory. The fact that one theory of ignorance suffers from clear counterexamples while another does not provides a significant reason to favor the latter. In the next section, we will see that there are a number of cases that call into question whether the Standard View and the New View are extensionally adequate accounts of ignorance.

Let’s approach D2 indirectly. A central idea in both practical and moral theory, and a growing view in epistemology, is that rationality is a matter of *reasons-responsiveness*, where reasons are token-identical to *facts*.⁸ My action or belief, for example, counts as rational only if the target belief or action was *responsive* to some relevant fact(s) that provided me with sufficient reason for that action or belief. In order for a belief or action to be responsive to some fact p , one must satisfy some suitably robust epistemic condition that helps enable one to respond to p . I cannot believe that someone is now typing *in response* to the fact that *Bobby is now typing* if I don’t stand in a suitable epistemic relation to that fact.

⁸Broad factualism is a prominent position in the literature on the normativity of action (Alvarez 2010, Dancy 2000, Kiesewetter 2017, Parfit 2011, Raz 1999, Scanlon 1998, Schroeder 2007, Skorupski 2011, Thomson 2008, and Whiting 2014) and the normativity of belief (Kiesewetter 2017; Littlejohn 2017; Lord 2018; Schroeder 2015; Sylvan 2015, 2016, 2018; and Whiting 2014).

D2 builds on this widely shared insight by connecting factual ignorance with our inability to respond to facts as reasons because we fail to stand in a suitable epistemic relation to the target facts. If I am ignorant of the fact *that your childhood home was painted red* at a time t , then I'm not, for example, in a position to *respond* to that fact at t by forming the belief at t that your childhood home was not painted green. Of course, I can believe that fact at later times. But if I am ignorant of the fact that your childhood home was painted red at t then I cannot *respond to that fact as a reason* for a response at that very time, t . Ignorance simply excludes the epistemic relation needed for reasons-responsiveness.

There are two background principles driving D3. One is the observation that ignorance sometimes ensures that one is not responsible for ϕ -ing. When this is the case, one is not to be held accountable should they fail to ϕ . The flipside of this thought is that *not being ignorant* of a fact p *sometimes* puts one in a position where they are responsible for ϕ -ing, and thus accountable should they fail to ϕ . In particular, this can occur when the fact that p provides one with *decisive reason* to ϕ , where what it is to have a decisive reason to ϕ is for one's reasons to require one to ϕ (Lord & Maguire 2016: 9).

The second background principle driving D3 is the thesis that, in order for a fact p to provide one with (some, sufficient, decisive) reason to ϕ , one must have *the ability* to ϕ (Sylvan 2015, 2018) or *know how to* ϕ (Lord 2018: Ch.4). To deny this is to affirm the idea that one can have (some, sufficient, decisive) reason to ϕ even though one is unable to (/doesn't know how to) ϕ . This is deeply counterintuitive. So, D3 comes off as a rather compelling principle of ignorance.

3. Problems for Existing Views

In this section, we draw attention to a range of problems with the Standard View and the New View, arguing that neither can accommodate all of D1-D3.

3.1. The Problem of Extensional Adequacy

The Standard View and the New View are vulnerable to a number of clear counterexamples, thus failing to satisfy D1. Epistemologists are nearly unanimous in holding that knowledge requires true belief.⁹ If this is right, then the right-to-left direction of both the New View and the Standard View entail the following:

-TB→I: Necessarily, if S fails to believe that p when p is true, then S is ignorant of the fact that p .

In what follows, we will provide cases that are inconsistent with **-TB→I**. Since this is an entailment of both leading theories of ignorance, the failure of **-TB→I** ensures that these views are not extensionally adequate.

⁹For a systematic defense of the belief requirement on knowledge see Silva (2023: Chapter 2). For other endorsements and defenses see Armstrong (1973: Chapter 10), Audi (2011), Bonjour (2002: 28-31), Chisholm (1989: 97-8), Gettier (1963), Lehrer (1968), Moore (1953: 103), Pritchard (2006: 5), Russell (1948: 170), and Williamson (2000: 42, 254). While some experimental studies have suggested the orthodox view is false, the results of further studies have undermined this. See, for example, Buckwalter, Rose, and Turri (2015), and Rose and Schaffer (2013).

Let's start with omissive cases of epistemic akrasia. Here is the kind of case in outline. Suppose S knows a range of facts that provide strong evidence, e , for some truth p . On this basis, S comes to know *that she ought to believe p* given her evidence e , but nevertheless S fails to believe p for some non-epistemic reason. Even though she *does not believe p* , she nevertheless is *not ignorant* of the fact that p . That's inconsistent with $\neg\text{TB}\rightarrow\text{I}$. Here's a case that fills-in that outline:

Wary Traveler

For her upcoming business trip, Felice has to take a cross-country flight. However, she has always had an intense fear of flying. Whenever she boards a plane, she can't help but think that she is in grave danger — that the plane will malfunction and crash with everyone on board. In order to quell her fears about flying, Felice looks into the evidence surrounding airline crashes in the United States and finds a wealth of evidence reporting that flights in the United States very, very rarely crash or cause harm to passengers. On the basis of this evidence, she comes to know:

E \rightarrow MiniRisk: The best evidence strongly supports that her flight does not pose a significant risk to its passengers.

On this basis she competently deduces and comes to know that she ought to believe the following:

MiniRisk: Her flight does not pose a significant risk to its passengers.

Nevertheless, Felice cannot bring herself to believe MiniRisk.

Felice is in an epistemically akratic state.¹⁰ Even though Felice knows that she ought to believe that her flight does not pose a significant risk to its passengers, her anxiety about flying prevents her from believing it. Is Felice ignorant of the fact that her flight poses her no significant risk? We think not. After surveying the relevant evidence, Felice realizes that all her evidence supports that her flight does not pose a significant risk. Even though she can't bring herself to believe as she knows she ought, this does not make her ignorant of MiniRisk, i.e. the fact that her flight does not pose a significant risk. The Standard View and the New View are both inconsistent with this verdict. For while Felice is not ignorant of that fact, she neither knows it nor truly believes it.

Rik Peels, the foremost defender of the New View of ignorance, has acknowledged that such cases of epistemic akrasia may undermine the New View in exactly the ways that we have argued:

We should note that a fully spelled-out version of the New View will have to add several caveats to a rough analysis of ignorance [...] For one thing, it seems possible that one disbelieve the true proposition p , but know that, epistemically speaking, one really ought to have the attitude of belief toward p , but that, quite

¹⁰ For further discussions of the possibility of epistemic akrasia, see Coates (2012), Feldman (2005), Horowitz (2014), Lasonen-Aarnio (2020), and Williamson (2011).

irrationally, one is unable to do so for psychological reasons. It is not at all clear that such a case will count as a case of ignorance that p , even though that is what the rough and ready version of the New View as presented above implies. However, since the aim of this paper is to sketch some important arguments for the Standard and New Views, we will leave such details for another occasion (Le Morvan and Peels 2016: 26).

Even though Peels predicts that cases like Wary Traveler will be problematic for the New View, he postpones addressing such cases, saying that they are fairly complex and relatively rare (2020: 609). As far as we know, Peels has yet to offer a revised account of the New View to deal with such cases.

Perhaps Peels is right that situations like Felice's are relatively rare. Should we really overhaul our understanding of ignorance based on cases that happen so infrequently? Unfortunately for the existing views, cases of epistemic akrasia are not the only kinds of situations that are inconsistent with $\neg TB \rightarrow I$. Take, for example, the very ordinary practice of forming *new* inferential beliefs:

Population Statistics

Joyce has just come to know

Report: Mexico has reported that it has 128,932,753 residents and Myanmar has reported that it has 54,409,800 residents.

Joyce then deduces

Size: If Mexico and Myanmar have provided accurate reports, then Mexico has more residents than Myanmar.

After and because of this deduction of Size from Report, Joyce then comes to believe Size.

Deduction itself is not a belief-entailing activity. One can deduce q from p without immediately, or ever, coming to believe q . In introductory logic courses, students are often required to perform deductive exercises involving clearly false premises. When the premises are clearly false, students do not come to believe their conclusions despite deducing them from their respective premises.

Now consider the fact that we sometimes update our beliefs in response to (and therefore after) recognizing entailments from what we already believe and know. For example, we can first come to know (i) that p and (ii) that p entails q , and after, and in response, later come to believe q . This is an entirely ordinary way in which we update our beliefs (Silva 2021, 2023; Wedgwood 2014).

Now, what should we say about Joyce when she has deduced Size from Report but has not yet come to believe Size? Is she ignorant of the fact Size after deducing it from Report, i.e. that if Mexico and Myanmar have provided accurate reports, then Mexico has more residents than Myanmar? We think not. She just competently and consciously deduced Size from her knowledge of Report, and even though she does not yet believe Size, it is implausible to say that she is ignorant of that fact. We think it is more

plausible to describe agents like her as forming a new belief in Size *because she first ceased to be ignorant of it. But then we have another case where a person lacks ignorance even though they do not truly believe, showing that $\neg TB \rightarrow I$ is false.*¹¹

Against this, one might argue that Joyce really does believe Size immediately upon deducing it. But this overlooks an important point. First, if Joyce did not already believe Size prior to her deduction, then she would have had to *update her beliefs*, i.e. enact a process of forming a new belief in Size and perhaps remove an existing belief that Size is false. Recall, the belief-update process—the process of forming new beliefs and removing existing beliefs—is a causal process initiated by her deduction. From which it follows that Joyce could not have come to believe Size immediately upon deducing it. Rather, at best she will have come to believe it some amount of time after, and in response to, the deduction which initiated the update process (Wedgwood 2014).

Advocates of the New View could attempt to respond to this issue by adopting a true belief version of the Normative I-Schema, holding that a person is ignorant that p if and only if they lack a true belief that p and in doing so they manifest some normative failure. But this response will be met with limited success. First, adopting some instance of the Normative I-Schema obviously involves rejecting the New View, which explicitly excludes any normative requirement. This, then, prevents the proposed solution from being a way of preserving the New View. Second, even if this solution is effective for responding to this case, it will not be able to address Felice’s situation in Wary Traveler. Felice both lacks a true belief that her flight does not pose a significant risk to its passengers and this does manifest a failure of inquiry, as her evidence decisively indicates that her flight is safe. But she is not ignorant, contrary to the predictions of a version of the Normative I-Schema that connects ignorance to failing to have a true belief.

3.2. The Problem of Reasons-Responsiveness Without True Belief

One of the cases we’ve just considered, Wary Traveler, suggests a further problem with the Standard View and the New View. Recall desideratum D2:

D2. Ignorance Excludes Reasons-Responsiveness: If S is ignorant of the fact that p at t , then S is not able to respond to the fact that p as a reason to ϕ at t .

Recall that the basic idea with D2 is that being ignorant of some fact prevents someone from responding to that fact as a reason. To see the significance of D2, consider a case from Littlejohn where D2’s antecedent is clearly satisfied:

¹¹It is open to proponents of the Standard View and the New View to hold that Joyce is not as ignorant as she could be. If they agree with Peels’ (2020) breakdown of the different species of ignorance, they might think that Joyce is in a state of *undecided ignorance* rather than *deep or complete ignorance* since she has not yet adopted an attitude towards Size. Nevertheless, such a view still implies that Joyce is *ignorant of that fact*, as ignorance is the genus that unites these two species. Our contention is that Joyce is in neither state of ignorance because she is aware of the fact that Size is true. Indeed, it is to our ears deeply problematic to claim that she is ignorant of the fact that p , but that she is also aware of the fact that p .

Consider Nozick's (1981) experience machine. Agnes undergoes a series of experiences that dispose her to form false beliefs about her surroundings. It seems to her that she and everyone she cares about are flourishing. In the standard telling, her beliefs are all mistaken. This is not essential to the story. Agnes can be *cut off from reality* even if some of her beliefs happen to be true. Let us suppose that it seems to her that her brother has just crossed the stage at graduation and a smile stretches across Agnes' face because she believes he just graduated. What the lab technicians do not realize is that precisely as Agnes undergoes this experience her brother crosses the stage and accepts his diploma. While she believes correctly that her brother is graduating and is happy because she believes this, *her reason for being happy is not that her brother is graduating. She cannot be rationally guided by such a fact, not when she's cut off from reality.* (Littlejohn 2017: 26-27)

Littlejohn's use of the colloquial expression 'cut off from reality' is clearly being used to express the idea that Agnes is ignorant of relevant facts. And D2 is the principle guiding Littlejohn's judgment that Agnes cannot be happy *in response to* the fact that her brother is graduating. All of this seems right to us.

But contrast Agnes with Felice from Wary Traveler. Not only does Felice seem not to be ignorant of the fact that her flight does not pose a significant risk to its passengers, it seems that she *can respond to that fact in various ways even though she fails to believe it*. For example, there is nothing about the case as constructed above that prevents her from responding to that fact by *buying a plane ticket* or *asserting it* to another wary traveler for encouragement.¹² Indeed, she can even respond to that fact by *deducing* from it the following:

SafePeople: There are many people whose lives are not significantly threatened by this flight.

While one cannot ordinarily come to know propositions on the basis of deduction from unknown premises, the deduction of SafePeople from MiniRisk is special. For Felice knows other facts that she knows to strongly support MiniRisk, and she is also not ignorant of MiniRisk (as argued in the previous section). In such a case, it seems like a competent deduction to SafePeople from MiniRisk puts her in a position to know SafePeople (or at least avoid ignorance of it) by deductively *responding to* MiniRisk. But according to D2, if she's responded to that fact, she is not ignorant of it. And notice how this differs from Littlejohn's case with Anger. While Anger is "cut off" from the fact that her brother is graduating, Felice is not similarly "cut off" from the fact that her flight does not pose a significant risk to its passengers, i.e. MiniRisk.

To state the problem of this section in general terms: we have a possible case, Wary Traveler, where an agent intuitively *can* respond to the fact that *p* as a reason at *t* (e.g. by buying a plane ticket or by forming a new belief from that fact via deduction). Running a modus tollens with D2 tells us that she's not ignorant of the fact that *p* at *t*. But neither the Standard View nor the New View can allow for this because Wary Traveler

¹² Whether or not this assertion would be *proper*, of course, depends on the norm of assertion. We take no stance on this here. But it is worth pointing out that the literature on assertion has not yet engaged with the view that the norm of assertion is connected not to knowledge, but to awareness (=the absence of ignorance).

is a case of non-belief in p . Though Peels (2020) has acknowledged the difficulties raised by cases of epistemic akrasia, it is not clear how either the Standard View or the New View can account for such cases without abandoning their central commitment that belief is required for avoiding ignorance. So we face a dilemma: either give up on D2 or find a new theory of ignorance that does not require belief. We prefer the latter.

3.3 The Problem of Ignorance and Responsibility

There is a further problem associated with akrasia and the New View, an issue that Peels did not observe. The New View seems incapable of accommodating D3:

D3. Absence of Ignorance Requires Responsibility: If S is not ignorant of the fact that p at t and S is in circumstances where the fact that p provides S with a decisive reason to ϕ at t , then S is responsible for responding to p by ϕ -ing at t .

In *Wary Traveler*, we considered Felice who *failed to believe* what she knew she *ought to believe*. This is an omissive instance of akrasia. Consider, now, a commissive version in which one *believes* what she knows she *ought not believe*.

Fearful

Flo is irrationally fearful that a fire will burn down her neighborhood. She is so fearful that anytime she smells smoke she reflexively comes to believe that:

Fire: A life-and-home threatening fire has started in her neighborhood.

She knows this about herself, and so knows that she ought not to form or hold such beliefs. Unfortunately, the only way for her to give up her belief in Fire after smelling a smoke is to walk through the neighborhood checking for fires.

Notice that, were Fire true and were Flo not ignorant of it, then she would typically have a decisive reason to do *something*. She would, for example, have a decisive reason to inform the neighbors of the fire, call emergency services, or leave her own home to limit her own risk of injury. Now suppose one day Flo smells smoke from a candle burning harmlessly in her own home and by coincidence Fire turns out to also be true, e.g. a neighbor's home is dangerously on fire. According to the New View, Flo would not be ignorant of Fire and would, according to D3, be responsible for doing whatever Fire gives her a decisive reason to do. But because Flo knows that she's irrationally inclined to believe Fire at even the slightest whiff of smoke, she is *not responsible* for calling emergency services, for leaving her home, etc. Thus, if she fails to do these things, she should not be held accountable for it. But that conflicts with D3.

Consider how her neighbors would see things. If all of them knew that Flo had this irrational tendency, they would expect her *not* to call emergency services unless she had acquired more evidence in favor of Fire. So none of her neighbors *would hold her responsible* if, by happenstance, on this particular occasion her irrational fears were realized. Of course, in general *being responsible* and people being such that they *would hold one responsible* can come apart. But the latter is often a guide to the former, especially if we fix our attention, as is intended, on cases where Flo's neighbors are themselves cool, calm,

and collected rational agents in good circumstances. Thus, it seems to us that D3 combined with the New View predict responsibilities where none seem to exist. So either we must reject D3 or the New View. In our opinion, it is preferable to keep D3 and to seek an alternative to the New View.

4. Ignorance and the Absence of Awareness

The expression ‘is ignorant of the fact that’ and its contraction ‘is ignorant that’ are what we might call *negative factive adjectival expressions*. That is, they are adjectival expressions that imply the *absence* of some relation to a fact. In contrast, the expressions ‘knows that’ and ‘truly believes that’ are *positive factive verbal expressions*: they are verbal expressions that imply the *presence* of some relation to a fact. But positive factive expressions are not limited to verbal expressions. Natural language contains positive factive *adjectival* expressions as well, and we will argue that the expression ‘is aware of the fact that’ and its contraction ‘is aware that’ can open the door to a compelling and novel account of the nature of ignorance.¹³

Specifically, we will make the case that the following view is distinct from, and superior to, existing views of ignorance:

Awareness View: Necessarily, S is ignorant of the fact that p iff p and S fails to be aware that p .

We will discuss substantive theories of awareness momentarily. But before we do, it is helpful to highlight a range of semantic similarities between ‘is aware of the fact that’, ‘is ignorant of the fact that’, and their contractions. These semantic similarities will provide some initial motivation for the idea that we should prefer an awareness-based account of ignorance. In subsequent sections, we will then show how an awareness-based account of ignorance accommodates all of D1-D3.

4.1. Semantic Similarities Between ‘Ignorant’ and ‘Aware’

To begin with, ‘is ignorant of P ’ and ‘is aware of P ’ allow for similar constructions whether or not their objects are facts. To see this, consider the following::

- A. S is ignorant of the G that is F . (Ex: She is ignorant of the child that is sitting near her.)
- B. S is ignorant of the F -ness of the G . (Ex: She is ignorant of the heat of the stove.)¹⁴
- C. S is ignorant of the fact that p . (Ex: She is ignorant of the fact that I’ve arrived.)

¹³ While ‘is aware that p ’ and ‘is aware of the fact that p ’ differ syntactically it is very hard to detect semantic differences. ‘She is aware that he arrived’ and ‘She is aware of the fact that he arrived’ seem to express the same thought (Littlejohn 2015; cf. Dretske 1993). The same seems true of the relation between ‘is ignorant that’ and ‘is ignorant of the fact that’.

¹⁴ For more on the sorts of ignorance relations at play in A and B, see Kyle (2021), Le Morvan and Peels (2016), and Nottelmann (2016).

D. *S* is ignorant that *p*. (Ex: She is ignorant that I've arrived.)

Notice that each occurrence of 'ignorant' can be replaced with 'aware' without loss of a syntactically and semantically sound expressions:

E. *S* is aware of the *G* that is *F*. (Ex: She is aware of the child that is sitting near her.)

F. *S* is aware of the *F-ness* of the *G*. (Ex: She is aware of the heat of the stove.)

G. *S* is aware of the fact that *p*. (Ex: She is aware of the fact that I've arrived.)

H. *S* is aware that *p*. (Ex: She is aware that I've arrived.)

Further, we do not detect any semantic change when 'ignorant' in A-D is replaced with 'not aware'. That is, A-D seem semantically equivalent to the following:

I. *S* is not aware of the *G* that is *F*. (Ex: She is not aware of the child that is sitting near her.)

J. *S* is not aware of the *F-ness* of the *G*. (Ex: She is not aware of the heat of the stove.)

K. *S* is not aware of the fact that *p*. (Ex: She is not aware of the fact that I've arrived.)

L. *S* is not aware that *p*. (Ex: She is not aware that I've arrived.)

These observations support the idea that 'aware' is a natural antonym of 'ignorant'. Thus, when we look at how 'ignorant' and 'aware' function in natural language, we find strong motivation for thinking that the concept of awareness promises to provide us with a suitable foundation for building an account of ignorance.

4.2. Two Substantive Views of Awareness

Even though there are promising semantic similarities between 'aware' and 'ignorant', there is still the question of what awareness is and how it relates to knowledge and true belief. We can find two general views of awareness in the literature. The first connects awareness to the notion of 'epistemic access', as Pritchard (2021b: 238) writes:

In particular, I propose we embrace what I take to be the core notion of awareness as having *epistemic access* to a fact, either directly, such as when one perceives that such-and-such is the case, or indirectly, such as when an informant who is directly aware of a fact reports this fact to one.

We have a few concerns with this proposal for understanding awareness. First, we don't quite see how the suggested notion of 'epistemic access' is capable of illuminating our understanding of awareness. We have no robust, pre-theoretic notion of epistemic access that we regularly employ in non-philosophical contexts. Indeed, as Sutton (2005: 361) has pointed out, we only seem to get a grip on *epistemic* notions (like *epistemic* justification) by relying on notions found in ordinary discourse, like 'knows'. But the notion of awareness is a common part of ordinary talk and thought, not resting on stipulative philosophical

terms of any kind. It is for this reason that Clayton Litteljohn (2015: 597) has argued that it is much more promising to use our ordinary notion of awareness to provide a theory of epistemic access, rather than doing the reverse as Pritchard does here.¹⁵

That said, in the quote above, Pritchard does move things forward by providing a couple examples of conditions he takes to be sufficient for epistemic access: (i) perceiving that p and (ii) being informed by one who is ‘directly aware’ of the fact that p . We find (ii) of limited help: Pritchard suggests we understand awareness in terms of epistemic access, but then seeks to illuminate the target notion of epistemic access with the notion of ‘direct awareness of facts’, running us in a short (possibly recursive) circle. More helpful was his initial sufficient condition, (i). We agree that perceiving that p is *a way* of being aware of the fact that p . But this, of course, raises the question – what is it to perceive that p ? And what might non-perceptual modes of awareness and epistemic access look like?

While we have these concerns with Pritchard’s view, we also think that connecting awareness to a technical notion of epistemic access is useful insofar as it directs our attention to concrete proposals for what relation ‘epistemic access’ may refer to. For example, Lord (2018: Chapter 3) and Sylvan (2018: 212) argue that the kind of epistemic access to facts needed for reasons-responsiveness is *being in a position to know them*. Dropping the technical term ‘epistemic access’, we can connect the Lord-Sylvan proposal directly to awareness in the following way:

Awareness = Position to Know (A=PK). S is aware of the fact that p iff p and S is in a position to know that p .

This next raises the question, what is it to be in a position to know? Answers to this question can be found in various places, most of which are quite similar. Here are two representative answers. Smithies (2012: 268) writes: “One is in a position to know a proposition just in case one satisfies all the epistemic, as opposed to psychological, conditions for knowledge, such as having ungettiered justification to believe a true proposition.” Lord (2018: 92) writes: “You’re in a position to know p when all the impersonal conditions for knowledge are met. The personal conditions are (1) believing p and (2) believing p for the right reasons. The impersonal conditions are just whatever are left over,” (cf. Williamson 2000: 95).

A second concrete proposal for awareness has been advanced by Michael Huemer (2001:51-57) and Paul Silva (2021, 2022, 2023). Both hold that being aware of the fact that p is non-accidentally representing the fact that p :

Awareness = Non-Accidental True Representation (A=NATR): S is aware of the fact that p iff p , and S represents the fact that p , and S ’s representation of that fact is suitably non-accidental.

To illustrate their idea, suppose someone handed you a red ball in perfectly normal visual conditions. Looking at the ball in such conditions would typically produce a seeming-state, namely that it *seems true that this ball is red*. On the dominant view of seeming states,

¹⁵ In Littlejohn’s (2015: 597) own words: “[Epistemic] access is a technical notion, but awareness seems like the kind of non-technical notion that we might invoke without having to first provide clear guidance about what it amounts to.”

such states are representational states that are distinct from belief states.¹⁶ Moreover, it would be no accident that this proposition seemed true: you are standing in a normal visual relation to the ball and its color, you are skilled at identifying both balls and the colors of medium-sized objects in such conditions, and this skill is what explains the fact that that proposition seems true to you.

What non-accidentality relations are “suitable”? Huemer (2001: 54-55) is non-committal about the nature of the non-accidentality relation that awareness requires. He argues only that the relevant notion must exclude a significant degree of chance or coincidence. Silva (2021, 2022, 2023) agrees, pointing out that reliabilist virtue-theoretic conditions and safety-theoretic conditions can effectively be generalized to apply to the total class of representational states, not just belief states. For one could take any non-accidentality condition applied to *belief* (a special case of representation) for the purposes of understanding knowledge, and then take that knowledge-relevant non-accidentality condition and apply it to representational states more generally (e.g. seeming states). Thus, we can talk of safe or sensitive representational states, or representational states that result from reliable abilities to truly represent, etc. Taking a stand on the nature of the relevant non-accidentality relation will not matter in what follows, as our argument does not depend on having a fully worked-out theory of awareness. It’s also important to point out that A=PK is likewise silent on this same point, as different conceptions of knowledge involve different non-accidentality relations when it comes to what it takes to turn a true belief into knowledge.

A=PK and A=NATR are not incompatible theses. One could bridge these theses quite easily by arguing that one is in a position to know p if and only if one is non-accidentally related to the fact that p . Silva (2023: Chapters 4 and 5) undermines this equivalence. But we will here remain neutral on it. What we want to do in the following sections is explain how the Awareness View of ignorance, together with either A=PK or A=NATR, yields a theory of ignorance that avoids all the problems that the Standard View and the New View face. To do this, we want to say a bit more about *inferential awareness* and what it would be according to either view of the nature of awareness.

Inferential awareness is an instance of, what Huemer (2001: 55-57) calls, *indirect awareness*: an awareness of x (e.g. an object or fact) that is based on your awareness of something else (another object or fact) (cf. Silva 2023: Chapter 2). To illustrate, recall Population Statistics from above. Joyce has just come to know Report, *that Mexico has reported that it has 128,932,753 residents and Myanmar has reported that it has 54,409,800 residents*. She then uses Report to deduce Size, *that if Mexico and Myanmar have provided accurate reports, then Mexico has more residents than Myanmar*, afterwards coming to believe Size. Joyce’s *knowledge* (and hence awareness) of the fact Report, together with her deductive competences, intuitively, made her aware of the fact Size. And it did so even before she came to believe it. According to A=PK, this is because deducing Size from her knowledge of Report put Joyce in a position to know Size. According to A=NATR, this is because her deductive activity brought about a state of non-accidental true representation of Size. This last point can seem opaque, so we’ll say a bit more about how advocates of A=NATR think of this.

¹⁶For similar views, see Bealer (2000), Bengson (2015), Bergmann (2013), Chudnoff (2011), Cullison (2010) and (2013), Huemer (2001) and (2007), Koksvik (2020), Lycan (2013), Lyons (2009), Markie (2013), McAllister (2018), McGrath (2013), Pryor (2000), Pust (2000), Tolhurst (1998), and Tucker (2010).

If we follow Huemer (2001) and Silva (2023) we will find that there are at least two possible explanations for Joyce’s awareness of the fact Size. One explanation is that the deduction of Size from her knowledge of Report brought about a new representational state: upon deduction, Size now *seems true* to Joyce. That seeming state is based on *deduction from known premises*. Since deduction is truth preserving and knowledge excludes accidental truth, it follows that Joyce’s seeming state is, on any account, true and suitably non-accidental. Thus, it would be a state of awareness on either Huemer’s or Silva’s views. A second explanation is to argue that premises in deductive arguments represent their conclusions for agents who are competent deductive reasoners (cf. Huemer 2001: 55-57; Silva 2023), and that they can do this without producing any seeming state. For example, after Joyce notices that Size is entailed by Report (because she consciously deduced Size from Report), there is some sense in which the fact Report represents the fact Size to her. And, again, since Joyce *knew* the premise Report, Size was sure to be represented in a suitably non-accidental way. There is much more to say about the nature of inferential representation, but it should be observed that our concept of representation is pre-theoretically broad and inclusive so there should be no immediate worries here.¹⁷

One last thing to explicitly note. Knowledge that p entails awareness of the fact that p on both A=PK and A=NATR. This is because knowledge entails being in a position to know (as one cannot know p if one is not in a position to know p), and knowledge also entails non-accidental true representation (as knowledge entails non-accidentally true belief, which is a form of non-accidental true representation). It’s the converse entailments that fail, as one can be in a position to know without knowing and one can stand in a non-accidental representation relation to a truth without knowing it. This is because neither relation requires belief, while knowledge does require belief.

4.3. Extensional Adequacy of the Awareness View

Both the Standard View and the New View entail $\neg TB \rightarrow I$, but we saw that $\neg TB \rightarrow I$ is false. For in both Wary Traveler and in Population Statistics the target agents, Felice and Joyce, did *not believe* some fact p and were also *not ignorant* of the fact that p . But $\neg TB \rightarrow I$ says that not believing p entails ignorance of the fact that p . For this reason, Wary Traveler and Population Statistics were counterexamples to $\neg TB \rightarrow I$.

Why were Felice and Joyce not ignorant? According to the Awareness View and A=PK, this is because they were in a position to know. This is fairly straightforward in the case of Joyce in Population Statistics, since she only needed time to update her beliefs and thus come to believe and know Size. But what of Felice in Wary Traveler? She was akratic, after all, and in some sense *unable* to believe and thus unable to know MiniRisk due to her fear of flying. The thing to observe is that being in a position to know p at t does not require that it be immediately psychologically possible for one to know p at t . Falling asleep or facing imminent death are alike in that they create a psychological

¹⁷To illustrate the inclusivity of representation, just notice that we think that *stop signs* can represent the fact that people are instructed to stop, we think that a *picture* of us at a beach can represent the fact that we were at some point at the beach, we think that *sounds* can represent the fact that something dangerous is nearby, etc. If all of these are possible cases of the representation of facts, then the inferential representation of facts should be unobjectionable.

hindrance to acquiring new knowledge because they stop us from forming new beliefs. But you can be in a position to know, for example, that *if you exist, then there is something rather than nothing* even if sleep or death were to prevent you from coming to believe this conditional. So the target notion of ‘being in a position to know’ is not limited to immediate psychological abilities. The same is true of Felice’s contingent fears that induce akrasia, another kind of psychological hindrance to believing and hence to knowing. Since being in a position to know some fact is compatible with some psychological limitations, Felice was aware of MiniRisk according to A=PK. So the Awareness View together with A=PK predicts that both Felice and Joyce are not ignorant. In any case, should one wish to argue that ‘being in a position to know’ *does* require the absence of the psychological hindrances just noted, that would be a reason to abandon, not the Awareness View, but A=PK. For A=NATR is a view of the nature of awareness that is clearly compatible with psychological hindrances.

According to A=NATR, the explanation for the non-ignorance of Felice and Joyce is different and arguably more explanatory than the explanation provided by A=PK. For Felice and Joyce are competent reasoners who *knew* some premises from which they logically inferred (by deduction) some fact *p*. This is what made it compelling to think that they were not ignorant of the relevant fact *p* despite failing to believe *p*. For according to the Awareness View of ignorance, being ignorant of the fact that *p* is a matter of not being aware of the fact that *p*. And on A=NATR, not being aware of the fact that *p* is simply a matter of not hosting a suitably non-accidental representation of the fact that *p*. Since inferences from knowledge do provide a suitably non-accidental inferential representation of the relevant facts in both Wary Traveler and Population Statistics, it follows from the Awareness View and A=NATR that Felice and Joyce are not ignorant.

Accordingly, whatever one’s preferences are in regard to A=PK and A=NATR, the Awareness View of ignorance is capable of accommodating D1 by offering an extensionally adequate theory of ignorance vis-a-vis Wary Traveler and Population Statistics.

4.4. Awareness, Reasons-Responsiveness, and Responsibility

Along with D1, we also want a view of ignorance that can account for D2 and D3. We saw that D2 could not be accommodated on either the New View or the Standard View. Recall Felice from Wary Traveler. Not only was she not ignorant of the fact MiniRisk, she was intuitively able to *respond to that fact* in various ways *even though she failed to believe it*. For example, there is nothing about the case as constructed that prevents her from responding to that fact *by buying a plane ticket*. But this would not be possible if either the New View or the Standard View were true, since they entail ignorance in every case where one fails to believe some truth.

The Awareness View has no such difficulty. The Awareness View, together with either view of the nature of awareness discussed above, allows for one to be aware that MiniRisk is true even if it’s not believed. And this obtains in Wary Traveler, for Felice knows some premises which she knows entail MiniRisk. It’s just an unfortunate effect of her akrasia that she fails to believe what she has knowingly deduced. So the Awareness View has no trouble with D2.

Now take D3. There we considered the case of Flo who is irrationally fearful that a fire will burn down her neighborhood. So fearful is she that anytime she smells smoke she reflexively comes to believe Fire: *that a life-and-home threatening fire has started in her neighborhood*. She knows this about herself, and so knows that she ought not to form or hold such beliefs. Unfortunately, the only way for her to give up her belief in Fire after smelling smoke is to walk through the neighborhood checking for fires.

Then we considered a case where one day Flo smells smoke from a candle burning harmlessly in her own home, but Fire nevertheless turned out to be true. According to the New View, Flo would not be ignorant of Fire and would, according to D3, be responsible for doing whatever Fire gives her a decisive reason to do. But because Flo knows that she's irrationally inclined to believe Fire at even the slightest whiff of smoke, she is *not responsible* for doing what Fire would give her a decisive reason to do. Notice that the Awareness View implies just that: Flo is not responsible for responding to Fire. For on both accounts of awareness we are considering, A=PK and A=NATR, being aware of the fact that *p* is incompatible with being *accidentally* related to the fact that *p*. But Flo is only accidentally related to Fire as it's just a matter of luck that her candle was burning *and* that a fire was active in the neighborhood. Indeed, there is only a magnificently unreliable relation between her candles burning and neighborhood fires. So the Awareness View entails that Flo is ignorant of the fact Fire and thus has not inherited any of the responsibilities she would have had were she not ignorant of Fire.

5. Conclusion

The Oxford English Dictionary defines ignorance as “lacking knowledge or awareness” (2022). While it is a lack of knowledge that has received the most attention in attempting to give a philosophical account of ignorance, we think that a lack of awareness is actually better suited for the task. Factual awareness is a factive relation distinct from knowledge and true belief which can motivate a view that overcomes the shortcomings of both the Standard View and the New View. The Awareness View can capture why we lack ignorance in cases of epistemic akrasia and successful deduction, as well as explain cases where we are able to respond to *p* or are not responsible for acting on *p*, making it the best available choice for an account of ignorance.

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