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Knowing Better: Motivated Ignorance and Willful Ignorance

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Abstract

Motivated ignorance is an incentivized absence of knowledge that arises in circumstances of unequal power relations, a self-protective non-knowing which frees individuals from having to reflect on the privileges they have in virtue of membership in a dominant social group. In philosophical discussions, the term “motivated ignorance” gets used interchangeably with “willful ignorance.” In the first half of this paper, using Charles Mills’ (2007) white ignorance as the defining case, I argue that this is a mistake. A significant swath of cases of motivated ignorance are non-willful, or deep, following Rik Peels (2010). But in all cases, benefits accrued to some in virtue of their social position are gained and maintained at the expense of harms to others. In the second half of this paper, I argue that these harms are what ground attributions of culpability in cases of motivated ignorance and drive the normative requirement that the subject know better, so long as the facts in question are ordinarily and easily knowable (in a sense to be specified). Willfulness is not a necessary condition for culpability, even if it is a sufficient one.

Introduction

That evidential norms of belief result in negative epistemic duties, that is, duties not to believe, holds across a broad range of otherwise divergent epistemological standpoints. Let’s suppose that there is decisive evidence *E* in favour of some proposition *p*, and that Jake is curious about *p*, and so at some specified time *t* begins inquiring about *p*. Let’s say that, through their inquiries, Jake becomes aware of *E* (at time *t*; I will assume this going forward), but, for one reason or another, Jake disbelieves that *p*. By pretty much all accounts—reliabilist, evidentialist, virtue theoretic (or what have you)—Jake is doing something wrong from an epistemic point of view. In violating the normative force of evidence, Jake is displaying some form of irrationality. We would likely say this much about Jake even if they did not disbelieve that *p*, in the face of *E*, but merely suspended judgment about *p*. Now, let’s suppose that Jake is not inquiring about *p*, and that they have no interest whatsoever in *p*, but that they happen upon *E*, nevertheless. We might

want to say that, in this case, Jake is permitted to believe that *p*; E entitles them to that. But are they so obliged? Do we have positive epistemic duties, that is, duties to believe?

The standard evidentialist answer to this question is a qualified yes: we have an epistemic duty to believe as the evidence dictates, conditional on our having the evidence in question. If we are in possession of E, and E is decisive in favour of *p*, then we should believe that *p*. If it is decisive against *p*, then we should disbelieve that *p*. And if E is not decisive, then we should neither believe nor disbelieve that *p*, but instead suspend judgment about *p*. For the evidentialist, believing as the evidence (which is in our possession) dictates is our only epistemic duty. We have no epistemic duties to inquire over *p*, in the first place, and should our evidence regarding *p* be inconclusive, we have no epistemic obligation to gather further evidence on the matter.¹

There are those who argue that even this minimal epistemic obligation is too demanding. Mark Nelson, for instance, argues that owing to the vast amount of perceptual information that we encounter daily (what he calls the “infinite justificational fecundity” of evidence; 2010, 472), there can be no positive epistemic duties. But is it possible that it is not demanding enough? Might it be that we have epistemic duties to believe that *p* even though we have never considered that *p*, are not inquiring whether *p*, and are not in possession of any evidence E in favour of *p*?

I take this to be the implicit position in philosophical discussions around motivated ignorance. Motivated ignorance, as the term is commonly used in the philosophical literature, is not just any sort of incentivized absence of knowledge, but one that arises in circumstances of unequal power relations between social groups. In this context, it is understood as a self-protective non-knowing which frees individuals from having to reflect on the various privileges they have in virtue of membership in a dominant social group, privileges which, as I argue below, are gained and maintained at the expense of harms to others.

In these discussions, it is often implied that individuals who do not know that *p* are willful in their non-knowing. Indeed, in the literature the concepts of motivated ignorance and willful ignorance are often used synonymously.² This is unfortunate. Not all cases of motivated ignorance are willful, and not all cases of willful ignorance are motivated, in the relevant sense. This conflation is particularly troubling considering the serious and ongoing harms perpetuated in cases of privileged non-knowing, as it obscures questions of culpability. If we hope to determine the circumstances according to which it is appropriate to say that someone should know better, then we had better get clear on this.

As I argue here, cases of motivated ignorance fall on a spectrum. At one end, the subject's motivated ignorance is more or less willful. In these cases, which range from epistemic akrasia to employing bad epistemic practices cultivated to maintain privilege, the subject has at minimum a hint of an unwelcome truth but, with varying degrees of self-awareness, avoids it. After looking at some parallel considerations in ethics I determine that where there is self-awareness, there is willfulness, and thus clear-cut epistemic culpability on the part of the non-knower. In these cases, it is evident that the subject should know better.

But there are other cases of motivated ignorance in which the subject cannot be said to have even the vaguest inkling of the truth that *p*, and while their ignorance remains incentivized, insofar as they benefit from not knowing that *p*, it is not willful, at least not in any meaningful sense of the term. I refer to this phenomenon as deep motivated ignorance, following Rik Peels (2010).³ Because deep motivated ignorance is not willful it highlights the problematic conflation of willful and motivated ignorance while at the

same time raising the interesting question of whether non-willful ignorance can be deemed culpable. That is, can we hold someone accountable for their ignorance regarding a matter of fact which they have never considered? I argue that the answer here is a qualified yes: if the facts in question are ordinarily and easily knowable, in a sense to be specified, then a subject in a state of privilege should know better since the benefits she gains in virtue of her social position are maintained at the expense of harms to others. Because these cases depend on the context in which they arise, the culpability is best understood as an ethical-epistemic hybrid; it is epistemic, as it concerns a motivated absence of true beliefs, but the normative imperative is propelled by the ethical harms that arise in circumstances of historical and structural inequalities between social groups.

That summarizes the argument to follow, which can be broken down into two broad theses. The first is that motivated ignorance is a distinctive kind of ignorance, and should be distinguished from willful ignorance, which I establish in the next four sections, using Charles Mills' white ignorance as the defining case. The second, which I establish in the two sections after that, is that even when motivated ignorance that *p* is deep, a subject is culpable in cases wherein *p* is ordinarily and easily knowable, since the benefits accrued to her in virtue of her social position are gained and maintained at the expense of harms to others. These harms are what ground attributions of culpability in cases of motivated ignorance and drive the normative requirement that the subject know better. Willfulness is thus not a necessary condition for culpability, even if it is a sufficient one.

Motivated ignorance: white ignorance

Motivated ignorance is an incentivized absence of knowledge which arises in circumstances of unequal power relations between social groups, a self-serving non-knowing which inoculates individuals from having to take stock of the various benefits they have in virtue of some aspect of their privileged social identity. In an early paper exploring the link between culture and moral responsibility, Michele Moody-Adams discusses a precursor to this idea, what she calls "affected ignorance," which she characterizes as "choosing not to know what one can and should know" (1994, 296). Moody-Adams uses this notion to rebut the commonsense view that we ought to judge people's moral actions by the moral standards of their day. Looking at a number of examples, including the case of slavery in Ancient Greece, she argues that, where there is moral ignorance, it is due to individual moral defects and not cultural influences.⁴ She concludes that immersion in a socio-historical context should not excuse wrongdoing, because the absence of knowledge in these contexts is willful, "a matter of choosing not to be informed of what we can and should know" (1994, 301).

This idea that we can and should know certain facts about which we are currently ignorant has gained traction in epistemological circles in recent years, in large part due to Charles Mills' concept of white ignorance (1997, 2007, 2015), which I take to be the defining case of motivated ignorance. White ignorance is a cognitive phenomenon in which race plays a causal role in epistemic practices that promote widespread patterns of error, social suppression of truth, and misinformation. Mills' analysis of the phenomenon illustrates how the truth about what it is like to be a Black person in the United States (and elsewhere; 2015) is collectively suppressed or denied by white people, either through the perpetuation of false beliefs or the absence of true beliefs.⁵ According to Mills, any ignorance in which racial domination plays a causal

role should be considered white ignorance, and because racial causality can be indirect, its occurrence can be difficult to track in borderline cases of non-knowing that appear to be unrelated to white privilege.⁶ But in the central kind of case, racial causality functions to sustain power imbalances which suppress truth and promote white supremacy.

Mills' profound insight is that these cases are motivated insofar as individuals benefit from not knowing inconvenient truths that have the potential to disrupt the status quo. As he put it, "white ignorance has been able to flourish all of these years because a white epistemology of ignorance has safeguarded it against the dangers of an illuminating blackness or redness, protecting those who for 'racial' reasons have needed not to know" (2007, 35). This non-knowing inoculates individuals from any requirement to examine the unearned privileges they have in virtue of their membership in a dominant social group.

According to Mills, white ignorance can be manifest by racist cognizers, but it is also structural, in that false but dominant narratives about Black people are embedded in institutions and norms. Mills uses the example of Black poverty to illustrate white ignorance, noting that the end of Jim Crow made it possible to represent the racial playing field as level, allowing for the view that Black poverty is due to Black peoples' laziness and unwillingness to work; if only Black people worked harder, the story here goes, they could pull themselves out of poverty (2007, 31).

This common misconception persists today, despite its lack of evidential warrant and the unambiguous data that point to an alternative explanation of the racial wealth gap, one rooted in history and grounded in empirical facts, according to which the current state of poverty among Black Americans is the consequence of the long tail of slavery, legalized racism, Jim Crow, and the New Jim Crow, which have resulted in quantifiable material disparities, educational inequities, workplace discrimination, and disproportionate rates of incarceration.⁷ As Mills aptly put it, "white normativity manifests itself in a white refusal to recognize the long history of structural discrimination that has left whites with the differential resources they have today, and all of its consequent advantages in negotiating opportunity structures" (2007, 28).

Indeed, given that the United States is the world leader in incarceration rates and imprisons Black Americans at an average rate five times more than whites, incarceration rates alone are a major contributor to Black poverty.⁸ As James Forman Jr. argues, people with criminal records are effectively locked out of participating in civil society and denied the social and material benefits that come with that, much like Black Americans faced in the days of the old Jim Crow:⁹

Given that most offenders *already* come from backgrounds of tremendous disadvantage, we heap additional disabilities upon existing disadvantage. By barring the felon from public housing, we make it more likely that he will become homeless and lose custody of his children. Once he is homeless, he is less likely to find a job. Without a job he is, in turn, less likely to find housing on the private market—his only remaining option. Without student loans, he cannot go back to school to try to create a better life for himself and his family. Like a Black person living under the Old Jim Crow, a convicted criminal today becomes a member of a stigmatized caste, condemned to a lifetime of second-class citizenship. (2012, 11; emphasis in original)¹⁰

Ignorance about historic and structural racial injustice in the US, including facts about Black poverty and the racial wealth gap, preserves the concrete material, political,

institutional, and social benefits afforded to white people via employment opportunities, heritable wealth, upward mobility, housing opportunities, freedom of movement, freedom from incarceration, and freedom from the expectation of incarceration.¹¹ These privileges give white people a reason to remain ignorant of certain social realities, and that is so even if they lack first-person access to the set of circumstances that furnish this reason (I'll return to this point below). If, for instance, we deny that the racialization of poverty in the United States is due to historical and contemporary racial injustice, then we can justifiably dismiss calls for reparations (Coates 2014). As Mills eloquently put it, "the white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation" (2007, 19). In his discussion about white ignorance, José Medina has referred to this form of ignorance as a blindness, which he likens to a conspiracy of denial that results from "an active effort not to see," as he puts it, "no matter what the evidence may be" (2013, 35).

The new view of ignorance

The profound insight behind Mills' notion of white ignorance is that some forms of ignorance are *motivated*, serving to protect non-knowers from unsettling truths. I might not know that Ankara is the capital city of Turkey or that the unicorn is the national animal of Scotland; perhaps I have never considered whether Scotland has a national animal (let alone what that animal might be), and while I have a belief about the capital city of Turkey, it is false (I am certain that it is Istanbul). In these cases, falsely believing, or not believing at all, does not appear to preserve my privileged social status. Although I am ignorant of the facts in question, the ignorance appears to be epistemically and morally neutral, without any direct racial causality, for instance.¹² The only foreseeable negative consequence of my ignorance is bombing on a trivia question, and on a positive note, given my limited brain capacity, this cognitive lacuna leaves room for more significant knowledge.¹³ While this lack of knowledge benefits me, it is not the kind of benefit that comes at the cost of harms to others, and so the ignorance is not motivated in the relevant sense under discussion here.

In cases of motivated ignorance, historical and ongoing structural inequalities furnish privileges to individuals in dominant social groups, while persistent ignorance frees them from having to reckon with these unearned privileges. I have been referring to motivated ignorance loosely as a kind of non-knowing, which it is, but it is now time to tighten up that characterization to capture the nature of the ignorance in these cases. The term "ignorance" has many uses, but its central meaning is the absence of knowledge. The etymology of the term is from the Latin verb *ignōrāre*, which commonly gets translated as "not to know." This meaning captures a variety of ordinary uses, as in my ignorance of both the capital city of Turkey and the national animal of Scotland. It also captures what we mean when we say, for example, that in the early days of smoking people were ignorant of its harmful side effects. Even its outside uses, like when we refer to individuals as ignorant when they do something stupid or thoughtless, we mean something like "they should have known better." As a starting point, then, we can say that ignorance is the absence of knowledge.¹⁴ But there are different ways to lack knowledge, and not all of them apply in cases of motivated ignorance. We might, for instance, lack knowledge because our true beliefs are not justified, or not sufficiently justified. Or we might lack knowledge because our justified true beliefs are susceptible to Gettier counterexamples, or to more general skeptical concerns. While these kinds of non-knowing are epistemologically significant, cases of motivated ignorance

move us in a different direction. In these cases, what is glaringly absent is true beliefs about matters of fact.¹⁵

This lines up well with what Peels (2010) calls the New View of ignorance, according to which ignorance is the absence of true beliefs.¹⁶ According to the New View, there are three kinds of cases in which we can say that a subject is ignorant of a fact or set of facts, and we see each type of case in motivated ignorance:¹⁷

1. S considers that *p* but rejects it as false, even though *p* is true.
2. S considers that *p* but suspends judgment about *p*, even though *p* is true.
3. S does not consider that *p*, and hence neither believes, suspends judgment, nor disbelieves that *p*, even though *p* is true.

In the first two cases, the subject considers the facts of the matter concerning *p*, but, for one reason or another, fails to believe according to the evidence, whereas in the third case, the facts are not on the subject's radar. Following Peels, we can refer to these cases, in turn, as *disbelieving ignorance*, *suspending ignorance*, and *deep ignorance*.

There is one further refinement we need to make to the New View to fit an analysis of ignorance in motivated cases. The New View is concerned with empirical propositions about which the subject is ignorant. In cases of motivated ignorance, we require not just that these propositions are true, but that they are "ordinarily and easily knowable." I use this expression to demarcate propositions that are comprised of readily accessible historical and statistical facts, and to distinguish these empirical facts from obscure claims of history and data that are truly out of reach or otherwise hermeneutically inaccessible. On my account, a proposition that is ordinarily and easily knowable is one that with an *ordinary* effort can be *easily* known.

Certainly, it is possible to be ignorant in a disbelieving, suspending, or deep way about a proposition which is true but not easily known, and not because of skeptical concerns. I might be ignorant about the number of trees in Iceland, or about how many times Churchill sneezed in 1926, or about the number of planets that existed 200 years ago. While these are empirical matters of fact, and so in some sense more easily knowable than, say, moral facts, they are not easily known by anyone, even with an extraordinary effort, and thus fall outside of the range of cases under consideration here.¹⁸

With motivated ignorance, the facts in question are of the empirical sort that, again, with an ordinary effort can be easily known. Much of the data that undermine white supremacy, for instance, are a google search away. It can take 15 minutes and an internet connection to discover run-of-the-mill statistics on the racial wealth gap, like that Black people make up nearly 13 percent of the US population but hold less than 3 percent of the nation's total wealth,¹⁹ or that the US imprisons Black Americans at an average rate of five times more than whites. Again, these are not mysterious claims of history, or otherwise hard-to-get truths,²⁰ but are readily accessible historical and empirical facts, the sort that a moderately dedicated inquiry would turn up, and it is the absence of these sorts of facts that make up large swaths of notable cases of motivated ignorance worldwide.

To be clear, to say that these empirical facts are ordinarily and easily knowable is not to say that no effort is required to know them. Indeed, as we have just seen, part of the phenomenon of white ignorance is the ongoing perpetuation of false narratives which serve to protect dominant non-knowers. Evidence *does* get whitewashed, falsehoods *do* abound, and there are non-negligible social, cultural, and institutional hurdles, as well

as individual ones, that circumvent our path to the truth. I do not want to underestimate these obstacles. And yet, many of these facts about racial injustice are not blocked by a lack of epistemic resources or hermeneutical hurdles, nor comprised of arcane facts of history. While it is important not to underestimate the pull of dominant epistemic norms, it is equally important not to overstate their influence. Ignorance can be recalcitrant and intractable, as Medina (2013) has argued, and for reasons that in some cases can count as excusing culpability (I discuss this in the section on “Excusing conditions”), however, let us be clear that individuals in positions of relative power often have access to pathways of knowledge, should they bother to look.

Culpable ignorance: the moral case

The idea that ignorance excuses dates to Aristotle, who considered whether it makes sense to punish or blame actions that are non-voluntary, where ignorance is one criterion for non-voluntary action (force being the other) (2003, book 3.5). Suppose that Anne gives Bill a fatal teaspoon of cyanide in his morning coffee, not knowing it is cyanide, but believing instead that it is sugar.²¹ The natural thought here is that Anne’s ignorance is exculpatory. Although we might rightly classify the act in question as objectively bad—after all, Bill is going to die from it—because she did not know better, the thought is that Anne should not be blamed for it. If we use Gideon Rosen’s definition of an *excuse* as “any consideration that defeats the standing presumption of blameworthiness” (2004, 294),²² then, at least as first glance, Anne’s ignorance counts as an excuse for her action. To say that Anne’s action is excused is just to say that she should not be held responsible for it, or that she is not culpable. And if she is not culpable, then she is not deserving of the reactive attitude of blame for her action, which is just to say that it is inappropriate to blame her for it (Strawson 1974).

But what if the ignorance itself is culpable? That is, what if Anne *should* have known better? What if Anne’s daughter, Marie, had needed the cyanide for a chemistry project, and Anne had purchased it for Marie, reflecting, at the time, on the surprising and potentially dangerous similarities between the packaging of the deadly cyanide and that of household sugar. Given that previously Anne had been aware of the possibility of mistaking the cyanide for sugar, it seems fair to judge her ignorance at the time of the poisoning as the result of some negligence on her part, or what Rosen refers to as “misconduct” in the management of opinion (2003, 63). And if Anne’s ignorance is culpable, then it seems reasonable to blame her for the actions that follow from it. At least, that is how it looks at first glance, but current arguments in moral philosophy offer a range of permissiveness on the question of culpable ignorance. Some argue that whether ignorance is culpable hinges on whether it is the result of bad actions for which one is culpable.²³ Rosen’s position owes something to this idea. He argues that an agent is culpable for her ignorance only if the ignorance is based on a previous culpable act, and that she is culpable for *that* act only if she acted akratically, that is, she knew what the right thing to do was but, in full awareness, did something else instead. And clear-eyed practical akrasia, Rosen argues, is seldom the case, and if the case, extremely difficult to identify (2004, 309).²⁴ His conclusion (contra Moody-Adams) is that people are rarely responsible for acts done in ignorance: we are blameworthy only if we act *knowingly*.²⁵ Others offer less restrictive accounts, according to which ignorance is culpable if the agent could reasonably have been expected to take measures which could have avoided it.²⁶ FitzPatrick, for instance, argues that practical akrasia is less rare than Rosen suspects, and that culpable ignorance falls along a spectrum, with cases ranging from

“akrasia or due to the culpable, nonakratic exercise of such vices as overconfidence, arrogance, dismissiveness, laziness, dogmatism, incuriosity, self-indulgence, contempt, and so on” (2008, 609).

The question of whether a person is culpable for failing to know what they possibly could have known, or reasonably should have known, shifts when we consider the issue in the context of motivated ignorance. In moral philosophy, the primary object of concern is an action, for example, Anne poisoning Bill, which ignorance may or may not excuse depending on whether Anne’s ignorance is culpable. In the case of motivated ignorance, the primary issue is the ignorance itself, that is, the incentivized absence of true beliefs. Of course, false beliefs about Black people (e.g., they don’t work hard enough) can and do result in morally problematic actions (e.g., employment discrimination). But even in the presence of an attendant action, it is the underlying miscognition that is the *primary* object of concern when it comes to motivated ignorance. Despite these differences, the debate in moral philosophy is illustrative for our purposes. It suggests that for ignorance to be willful, there needs to be some level of self-awareness on the part of the moral agent, or, in our case, the non-knower. As we will see, self-awareness is present in cases of suspending and disbelieving ignorance, but not in cases of deep motivated ignorance. However, as I argue below, even in the absence of willfulness, individuals are culpable for their incentivized lack of true beliefs to the degree that they unjustly benefit from their ignorance, insofar as benefits to the privileged non-knower are gained at the expense of losses to others. But first, the easy cases.

Willful ignorance: from epistemic akrasia to bad epistemic practices

In her discussion of white ignorance, Rebecca Mason refers to a gap in dominant hermeneutical resources as a reminder “of the extent to which *willfully* sustained ignorance can inhibit communicative encounters between members of dominant and non-dominant groups” (2011, 306; emphasis added); Linda Alcoff states that white ignorance is “willful ignorance” (2007, 39); and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. writes that white ignorance “is not something to which one is doomed because of social position, but rather something one *chooses* to maintain” (2012, 731; emphasis added). In the Medina quotation cited earlier, he characterizes white ignorance as an active effort not to see. In *Epistemologies of resistance* (2013), he elaborates this active effort as a self-protective defense mechanism which is cultivated by people in positions of privilege through a variety of epistemic vices. He says that while the enactment of motivated ignorance is often unconscious and involuntary, these individuals are nevertheless complicit and thus blameworthy: “Those who are epistemically arrogant, lazy, and closed-minded are *actively ignorant*. Actively ignorant subjects are those who can be blamed not just for lacking particular pieces of knowledge, but also for having epistemic attitudes and habits that contribute to create and maintain bodies of ignorance” (2013, 39; emphasis in original). In her article on white ignorance, Annette Martin (2020) slides back and forth between calling it willful and motivated,²⁷ and Jan Wieland is explicit about this connection (or conflation, as it were): “I’ll treat willful, affected, motivated, and strategic ignorance as the same (even though they might have different connotations)” (2017, 106).

Because motivated ignorance is rightly understood as self-protective, it is natural to suppose that it is willful. And there is something to be said about this characterization, which has the attraction of foregrounding the connection between motivated ignorance and culpability, but unfortunately it does so at the expense of conflating two concepts.

This is a conceptual mistake. The two phenomena—motivated ignorance and willful ignorance—are distinct, even if there is overlap. Motivated ignorance is willful only in those cases where the subject has a suspicion or inkling of an unwelcome truth and, with varying degrees of self-awareness, intentionally avoids it, which is what we find in suspending and disbelieving ignorance. As Kevin Lynch puts it, “someone who is willfully ignorant of p must not have a doxastic attitude weaker or stronger than a suspicion that p ” (2016, 509).²⁸ To the degree that the formation of our beliefs is under our control, in cases of self-aware avoidance we can attribute the ignorance to some epistemic fault on the part of the knower.²⁹ That said, the degree of willfulness in these cases varies, depending on the sort of epistemic fault at play.

Take the most extreme example first, that of the card-carrying white supremacist. One can imagine a white supremacist who is presented with the argument for racialized poverty given above, who might even acknowledge certain historical facts, but would reject their explanatory power as it clashes with her deeply entrenched racial prejudices. As I am imagining her, this individual is aware of E , has more than an inkling that it supports p , but rejects the truth of p , as it would upend her worldview. This case of disbelieving ignorance is the epistemic version of Rosen’s practical akrasia, that is, a knowing avoidance of truth: epistemic akrasia, veering, perhaps, from clear-eyed to bleary-eyed, depending on the case. Supposing that it is possible to believe against one’s better judgment, then this would be a paradigm case of it.³⁰ And while culpability in cases of motivated ignorance does not depend on self-aware fault, as I argue below, this kind of knowing ignorance is arguably the most egregious in a taxonomy of types of motivated ignorance.

In the less extreme case, the individual is still doing a bad job forming her beliefs, but the epistemic fault, while willful, is less glaringly so. Here again the subject considers E in favour of p , but while she has a hint that p might be true, her desire to insulate herself from that truth has her adopting unreliable methods of belief formation which lead her to disbelieve or suspend judgment that p . This individual is not so much believing akratically as she is relying on bad epistemic practices, that is, ones that do not have sufficient regard for truth, such as denial, wishful thinking, dogmatism, laziness, and self-serving selectiveness with respect to facts—the epistemic version of what, in the quotation above, Fitzgerald calls the non-akratic exercise of vices.³¹ Contrast this individual with an epistemically virtuous individual, one who has sufficient regard for the truth, such that when first encountering E in favour of p , she modifies her beliefs accordingly. The individual who relies on bad epistemic practices, on the other hand, is resolute in her false beliefs. While it might be a stretch to say that this individual has a knowing disregard for the truth, the self-serving epistemic fault here veers on a form of self-deception that can be reasonably construed as willful.

Willfulness vis-à-vis bad epistemic practices gets close to what Fricker (2013, 2016) has said about white ignorance, which she has characterized as a kind of epistemic dysfunction, one that typically involves what she calls “culpable motivated irrationality.” In the case of individual racist cognizers, she argues that there is an obvious motivated irrationality, which she claims is always epistemically culpable.³² I would include in her category of “racist cognizer” my akratically ignorant white supremacist as well as the person who relies on bad epistemic practices to shield herself from true beliefs.

We can nicely illustrate this case by using one of Fricker’s familiar examples, from Harper Lee’s *To kill a mockingbird* (1960). Although, as Fricker notes, it is meant to be obvious to the reader of the novel that Tom Robinson is innocent of the crime of rape for which he is standing trial, just as it is clear to Atticus Finch, Scout, and anyone

in the courtroom who is not overcome with racial prejudice, the all-white jury find him guilty, with fatal consequences. As she reminds us, the jurors are not meant to be seen as akratically embracing false beliefs (although she doesn't use that language), they are meant to be understood as being unable to see the exculpatory evidence in favour of Tom Robinson, so thick and distorting is their racial prejudice (Fricker 2007).

Fricker uses this example to illustrate a gross epistemic injustice (of the testimonial sort) that results from negative identity prejudice, but it seems to me that we could just as well analyze the scenario as a case of motivated ignorance of the disbelieving sort.³³ The lack of true beliefs on the jurors' part is incentivized: they had good reason to disbelieve the truth, which in this case was that Tom Robinson was a kind and decent man who had shown concern and sympathy for Mayella Ewell (the woman he was alleged to have raped). Had they accepted the truth, it would have caused a serious and unwelcome disruption to their racist worldview in which Black people, on whose grossly undervalued labour they relied, were seen as less than fully human. Even if they were not entirely knowing in their ignorance, that is, even if it was not fully akratic, their ignorance seems undeniably willful: the jurors were presented with clear exculpatory evidence in favour of Tom Robinson's innocence, and through some manner of self-deception, disbelieved it. Willful motivated ignorance about Tom Robinson permitted their anti-Black racist ideology, and corresponding white privilege, to stay intact.

Deep motivated ignorance

The situation is more complicated in cases of deep motivated ignorance. Here, the subject fails to believe that p , even though p is true, while never having considered that p , in the first place. Here, the subject cannot be said to have even the vaguest inkling that p is true, and thus the ignorance cannot reasonably be construed as willful.³⁴ In deep cases, there is no willing, choosing, or intending to be ignorant.

I suspect that what lies behind the conflation of willful ignorance and motivated ignorance is the widely held conviction that, even in deep cases, the non-knower is culpable for her ignorance, such that even here she should know better. I think this is right, but rather than taking this to imply that there is willfulness in deep cases, we should take it to imply that culpability does not depend on willfulness. In other words, even if willfulness is a sufficient condition for requiring that someone know better, it is not a necessary one. If this is correct, then in virtue of what, exactly, is our non-knower culpable for her ignorance? This question is important because these deep cases make up a significant class of cases of motivated ignorance. To answer it, we need to spell out what is driving the conviction that our would-be knower is doing something wrong in cases of deep motivated ignorance, despite the lack of willfulness. What, in other words, does this wrong consist in? The answer is that motivated ignorance causes *harm*. And not just any harm, but quantifiable material, social, psychological, political, and personal harms which are directly connected to the non-knower's position vis-à-vis oppressive historic and ongoing structures of inequality between social groups. These harms, which we can broadly categorize as ethical, are what ground attributions of culpability in cases of motivated ignorance and drive the normative requirement that the subject know better.

In motivated ignorance, the prevailing set of social conditions that incentivizes the subject's ignorance is one of privilege, and it is this privilege that gives the subject a reason *not* to know, and that remains so even if the subject lacks awareness of the incentivizing circumstance afforded by her social position. What matters is that the

circumstances obtain, not that the subject is aware of them. This is what allows for the possibility of a non-willful motivated ignorance. In the case of white ignorance, as we have already seen, this circumstantial privilege translates into calculable benefits to the non-knower in the form of material advantages via housing, health, educational, and employment opportunities, as well as heritable wealth, and less tangible but equally important benefits, including psychological ones, like the freedom from the expectation of incarceration, and more basic freedoms, such as the freedom to walk, jog, go bird watching, shop for groceries, and go for a drive without fearing for one's life. What might be obvious, but should be made explicit, is that these benefits are not earned, like the rewards of hard work. Rather, they are unearned, and no more deserved than the winnings of a cheating hand at cards. And just like the winnings of a cheating hand, these benefits do not come for free. This might not be precisely a zero-sum game, but, as we have already seen, benefits to some are gained at the expense of losses to others.

Consider again the Tom Robinson case. The jurors' lack of true beliefs enables them to continue to rely on the grossly undervalued labour of Black people, their racist ideology intact, and it is this set of circumstances that leads Tom to lose the trial, first, and then, tragically, his life. This is a case in point of the concrete benefits of white privilege, and the consequential deprivation for those living outside the scope of privilege.

The racial wealth gap in the US typifies this benefit-to-loss ratio. There are many ways that this wealth gap has been perpetuated historically, and one of them is through corrupt housing practices in the real estate market. At each stage in its history, as Keeanga-Yamahitta Taylor argues, the material gains for white people through banks, loans, and real estate, came at the expense of material advancement for Black people. As she demonstrates again and again, "the historic levels of wealth inequality that continues to distinguish African Americans from whites are powerful reminders of how the exclusion of Blacks from this asset has generationally impaired Black families in comparison with their white peers" (2019, 258). This is a clear example of how longstanding discriminatory practices result in tangible material advantages for one group at the expense of losses to another.³⁵ In this respect, motivated ignorance is emblematic of what Kristie Dotson (2011) has called a "pernicious ignorance," defined as a reliable ignorance that harms another person (or persons).

The harms to others that arise in circumstances of structural inequalities between social groups are both tangible and intangible, resulting from individual practices and structural ones. These harms are not themselves epistemic, but we cannot hope to address them if our privilege insulates us from knowing them. We must know better to do better, at least typically. The incentivized lack of true beliefs is what defines motivated ignorance, but it is the ethical imperative not to do harm that drives the normative requirement which enables assessments of culpability and demands that the subject know better.³⁶

Cases of deep motivated ignorance raise some interesting scenarios, as the phenomenon makes room for someone who is a virtuous moral and epistemic agent, in general, but who, in this instance, is motivated in their ignorance, and hence culpable, or blameworthy.

In learning that *p*, the deeply ignorant subject is no longer shielded from the facts of the malformed social environment in which they have won this particular lottery, and this can lead to one of two outcomes, depending on how intellectually virtuous they are. In one scenario, our ignorant subject persists in their ignorance, willfully, even akratically, as they now have more than just a hint of the truth which would disrupt their privileged social status. This knower, lacking in intellectual virtue and resolute in

maintaining their privilege, will do what they can to avoid accepting that *p*. The dint of recognition that *p* is true along with their refusal to accept that *p* means that their ignorance is no longer deep; it has evolved into a disbelieving or suspending ignorance.

In the other scenario, our deeply ignorant subject is, in general, a virtuous epistemic agent, the sort of person who would welcome a disruption to their worldview, if that were brought about by the introduction of a true belief. For this subject, learning that *p* is true does not reverse their privileged social standing, of course, nor does a shift in belief bring an end (immediate or otherwise) to the harms perpetuated in virtue thereof. But knowing better is a first step towards doing better, and if this knower is ethically virtuous as well as intellectually so, it might result in further inquiries about *p*, recognizing their role in perpetuating that *p*, making personal life changes around *p*, committing to figuring out how to not make worse that *p*, etc.³⁷

Excusing conditions

This analysis suggests that the duty to know is relative to the benefits one gains in not knowing vis-à-vis harms to others, which tells us that culpability in cases of motivated ignorance should be determined by the social context in which motivated ignorance persists. The outcomes we get by applying this basic principle seem about right. We do not want an account which is overly demanding, requiring that all individuals know about all systems of oppression worldwide. And not just because of limited cognitive resources (although that is a factor), but because we want an account that directly links ignorance to the kinds of built-in benefits accrued in virtue thereof. So, for example, white people in South Africa should know how they continue to profit from Apartheid at the expense of Black South Africans, but their ignorance about Indigenous people in (what we now call) Canada is not likewise motivated, which places a reasonable limit on their culpability qua knowers. The average Canadian, on the other hand, should know about the ways in which they benefit from settler colonialism and genocidal policies, like the Indian Act and Indian residential schools, at the expense of Indigenous people in Canada, and white people in the US, Canada, and elsewhere, should be aware of the historic and ongoing injustices which preserve their power and privilege at the expense of Black and brown citizens; and so on. Granted, these examples are relatively straightforward, and there will be gray areas and borderline cases, especially once we account for the complicating factor of intersecting and overlapping social identities. This means that there will be instances over which reasonable people disagree, but so long as we have a general rule according to which we can say that someone should know better, we will have the basis for deliberation.

This analysis gives us some insight into the sorts of factors that might mitigate against culpability in cases of motivated ignorance. I can imagine at least three general types of these.

Excusing condition #1: genuine motivation

Not all Americans who lack true beliefs about racial inequality derive these typical material benefits from their ignorance, but that is just to say that not all these cases are genuinely motivated. There are those individuals who have a sense of the truth but believe falsely or suspend judgment, as well as those who have never considered the matter, but lack any incentivization connected to privilege. In this category we would no doubt find some of the demographic under consideration in cases of white ignorance, that is, impoverished Black people in the United States. These individuals

do not benefit from their ignorance vis-à-vis an oppressed social group; they *are* the oppressed social group. Now, to be clear, this is not to say that these individuals would face no disruption from learning the truth, and thus have no incentive not to know. I can imagine the opposite to be true, for it can be very difficult to learn facts about one's material and historical subordination. In this light, it seems that there may be an incentive to ignorance here, insofar as self-deception can be an important coping mechanism, but the "benefit" gained in this case does not come at the expense of harms to others, and so should not count as genuinely motivated. That said, one can imagine that there are non-knowing wealthy Black people who *are* in a position of privilege, and whose ignorance is therefore genuinely motivated (which is consistent with Mills' claim that white ignorance can be perpetuated by Black people; 2007, 22).

Excusing condition #2: knowability

As we have seen, there can be significant structural obstacles to the truth. Because of the power and privilege at stake in cases of motivated ignorance, denial can be built into institutions and practices, with falsehoods propagated at the highest levels, filtering down through social, political, economic, and educational institutions. This, as we have seen, is part of the phenomenon of white ignorance. While I do not want to under-emphasize these obstacles, history has shown us that institutional and structural barriers to truth can be overpowered by social justice movements and rebellions against inequality and injustice. Looking at historical cases, there seems to be a standard narrative arc to the way that information about oppressed groups is disseminated. Initially, their experiences are well understood locally, by the oppressed group, who undertake serious cognitive, material, and emotional labour to make their plight more broadly known—what Medina (2013) calls "practices of resistance." Eventually, after hard work (and opposition by those in power), these data become accessible to the broader public. At this stage, with an ordinary effort, these facts can be easily known. So, for example, right now the narrative arc around white supremacy is long past the infancy stage, with facts widely known. Knowability is not a factor here. But because gross social injustices can be structurally obscured, at the early stages of broader social recognition and historical reckoning there will be gray areas in terms of how much we can expect from the general non-knowing public on any given matter, and latitude should be afforded accordingly.

Excusing condition #3: formative circumstances

Another significant factor that influences what someone should be expected to know is the formative circumstances of the non-knowing subject. Take van Woudenberg's (2009) example of 17-year-old Jane, who was raised in a Ku Klux Klan community and who has thereby acquired all the characteristic KKK beliefs about white supremacy and anti-Semitism. Imagine that Jane has false beliefs about the racial wealth gap, having been indoctrinated through her education, home environment, and her unbelievably ignorant white parents. Jane's ignorance might benefit her just as much as their ignorance benefits them, but given her indoctrination, she is arguably less culpable for it.

As Medina (2013) has argued, formative circumstances can be cognitively limiting, and communities of isolation can impact individuals well beyond childhood.³⁹ Someone who has grown up in a cult, or in an insulated religious community, might have restricted access to evidence about matters of fact about which she has some incentive

not to know, and might require serious deprogramming and exposure to alternative worldviews—i.e., “epistemic friction” (Medina, 2013)—before we could expect them to know better. While all individuals are influenced by socialization and upbringing, not all origin stories excuse, although arguably cases like Jane’s would.

Conclusion

In circumstances of historical and ongoing oppression where we find unequal power relations between social groups, subjects in a position of privilege are motivated to not know the ways in which they benefit in virtue of some aspect of their social identity. Some cases of motivated ignorance are willful and some are not, but in all cases, benefits are accrued at a tremendous cost to those who live outside of the scope of privilege, and who experience a broad range of harms as a result. These harms curtail a person’s well-being. They shorten life expectancy, reduce access to material goods, education, housing, employment, and opportunities, and can take a tremendous toll on a person’s mental and physical health. These harms are what ground attributions of culpability in cases of motivated ignorance and drive the normative requirement that the subject know better.

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Notes

- 1 See, e.g., Conee and Feldman (2004) and Feldman (2000, 2002).
- 2 Wieland is explicit about this: “I’ll treat willful, affected, motivated, and strategic ignorance as the same (even though they might have different connotations)” (2017, 106). Lynch (2016) disputes a parallel conceptual error which mistakenly equates willful ignorance with self-deception.
- 3 See also van Woudenberg (2009).
- 4 I revisit the distinction between moral ignorance (e.g., slavery is wrong) and factual ignorance (e.g., slaves comprised 30 percent of the population of Ancient Greece) in the section on “Culpable ignorance.”
- 5 Although not just white people, according to Mills (2007, 2015), who claims that white people and Black people (and, presumably, other non-Black non-white people) can be guilty in the spread of misinformation.
- 6 As Mills says, there are many facts about which white people are ignorant, where they have no opinion or a mistaken opinion, but in which “race is not directly or indirectly responsible” (2007, 20). He offers the example of the number of planets 200 years ago, although directly following this claim notes that the issue is complicated by the indirect influence of race on the growth of knowledge, for example, how white interests might lead to research in one subject area rather than another. This is what underpins his comment about a recourse to counterfactuals (“what they should and would have known if...” 2007, 21).
- 7 See Alexander (2011), Forman Jr. (2012, 2017), and Stevenson (2014). For more specific information on discrimination in employment, see Bertrand and Mullainathan (2003); on Black poverty, see Gould and Schieder (2018).
- 8 According to Kaeble and Cowhig (2018), the rate of incarceration has been declining since 2009, yet still the United States continues to incarcerate a larger share of its population than any other country in the world. Note also that this is the rate of incarceration in state prisons, but in some states the disparity is as high as 10-1 (Nellis 2016). Indeed, according to Alexander (writing in 2011), there are more African American adults under some form of correctional control (in jail or prison, on probation or parole) than were enslaved in 1850 (2011, 180). Alexander derives this comparison from the 1850 Census, according to which approximately 1.7 million adults were slaves, as compared to 2.4 million people (or 1 in 11 Black adults) under correctional supervision in 2007.
- 9 Although Forman Jr. (2012, 2017) agrees that there are important parallels between Jim Crow and the New Jim Crow, he pushes back against Alexander’s analogy, arguing that it disguises some crucial differences between Jim Crow and today’s mass incarceration of Black Americans.

- 10 This is what Bryan Stevenson refers to as the “collateral consequences of mass incarceration” (2014, 16).
- 11 For an itemized list of white privileges, Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) account sadly remains current. For a more recent compilation, see Annette Martin (2020).
- 12 That said, Mills’ view about indirect racial causality might put some pressure on this claim (see n. 6), but that is precisely why he considers these sorts of cases borderline, because the racial connection, if it is there at all, can be tenuous and hard to trace.
- 13 For this and other virtues of ignorance (both instrumental and intrinsic) see Townley (2006, 2011).
- 14 See Nottelmann (2016) for a detailed analysis of the varieties and degrees of ignorance.
- 15 This is consistent with Mills’ position in (2007), in which he states that he is using the term ignorance to cover both false belief and the absence of true belief (16), although in (2015) he states that he does not think of white ignorance as an “aggregate of individual mistaken white beliefs” but rather as a worldview (217–18).
- 16 Peels developed his view in a series of papers (some in response to Pierre Le Morvan’s Standard View); see also van Woudenberg (2009), Le Morvan (2011), Peels (2010, 2011, 2012), and Le Morvan and Peels (2016). Here, I am relying on the basic structure of the New View, but Peels’ account has greater nuance than just these central features and thus offers a more fulsome picture of ignorance.
- 17 This is in contrast with the view that sees motivated ignorance (in particular, white ignorance) as a substantive epistemic practice; see Alcott (2007) and, more recently, Kassir (2018). Medina (2016) considers the connection between motivated ignorance and the New View but rejects the analysis for motivated cases.
- 18 This addresses Nottelmann’s (2016) worry about the characterization of ignorance as “deep” with respect to empirical propositions, like these ones, which can’t be known easily, if at all.
- 19 The median family wealth for white people is \$171,000, compared with just \$17,600 for Black people (Jones 2017). In his recent article for *The 1619 Project*, Trymaine Lee (2019) calls today’s racial wealth gap “perhaps the most glaring legacy of American Slavery and the violent economic dispossession that followed.”
- 20 For this reason, I agree with Fricker (2013, 2016) that diagnosing cases of motivated ignorance as instances of hermeneutical injustice is a mistake. As Fricker has argued, for an injustice to be hermeneutical there needs to be a legitimate deficit in conceptual resources (2013, 51; 2016, 172), but in cases of white ignorance, there is typically no shortage of relevant concepts (and, I would add, no shortage of supporting facts). Those who have argued otherwise include Mason (2011), Medina (2012, 2013), Pohlhaus (2012), and Dotson (2013).
- 21 The framing of this example is Harman’s (2011), although Rosen (2004) offers a similar example involving deadly arsenic.
- 22 Elsewhere, Rosen calls “any fact that defeats the standing presumption of responsibility an *excuse*” (2003, 61; emphasis in original).
- 23 What Holly Smith, in her influential article, calls a “benighting act,” which she defines as “an initial act, in which the agent fails to improve (or positively impairs) his cognitive position” (1983, 547). On this account, the benighting act can be a mental act (e.g., making incorrect inferences, such as: the cyanide box is in the kitchen, so it must be sugar) or acts of omission (e.g., not checking the cyanide box closely enough).
- 24 That said, Rosen gives an example of poisoning in which arsenic is mistaken for sugar. In his initial presentation, he suggests that there are degrees of culpability, such that someone who fails to know she put arsenic in the tea because of negligence or recklessness is more culpable than someone who is, for example, tricked into not knowing (2003, 299–301), feeding into the intuition that someone who has no idea that the poison might be mistaken for sugar is less blameworthy than someone who knew but forgot (even if they did not act akratically).
- 25 Zimmerman (1997, 2018) argues for a similar skeptical conclusion.
- 26 Mason (2015), for instance, wonders if bleary-eyed (her excellent term) akrasia is sufficient for culpability.
- 27 This slide is evident in her *Racial Exclusion* example, where Martin says that “merely attributing Rebecca’s ignorance to motivated reasoning or individual avoidance misses a significant part of the story: faulty educational practices. Depending on how old Rebecca is, we can grant that there is a wilful component here.” (2020, 872).
- 28 Lynch, however, disagrees with the characterization of disbelieving ignorance as wilful. He claims that “to be willfully ignorant of the truth that *p* one must not disbelieve it” (2016, 514), since he sees disbelieving

as inconsistent with suspecting that p is true. (I fail to see why this must be the case, but since Lynch's article is otherwise excellent, I suspect that it might be true, though I nevertheless continue to disbelieve it.)

29 I do not address the issue of doxastic voluntarism here, but see Heil (1983), Owens (2000), Nottelmann (2007), and Steup (2017).

30 Arguments which support the possibility of epistemic akrasia can be found in Heil (1984), Mele (1986), Dunn (1992), and Ribeiro (2011). For arguments against, see Hurley (1989), Owens (2002), Adler (2002), and Freedman (2017).

31 This position is consistent with Montmarquet's analysis of culpable belief as "a belief formed with (or characterized by) an intellectually irresponsible attitude (i.e. an attitude, broadly put, of insufficient regard for truth and evidence)" (1995, 43).

32 Fricker also discusses a kind of white ignorance which she calls socio-structural, in which "the individual may not be at any epistemic fault" (2013, 51).

33 Fricker refers to motivated ignorance as that which is "created or preserved by one or another kind of epistemic injustice" (2016, 161), although it seems to me that, at least in some cases, it is the other way around, i.e., motivated ignorance creates and preserves one or another kind of epistemic injustice.

34 As Lynch remarks, "'Unintentional willful ignorance' is an oxymoron" (2016, 514).

35 Milazzo illustrates this striking disparity in the case of post-Apartheid South Africa, where whites make up less than 9 percent of the population but own over 80 percent of the land and economy, as well as 90 percent of the companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange (JSE) (2016, 559).

36 Sanford Goldberg (2017, 2018, 2020) has developed an interesting and important account of knowing better, according to which (to oversimplify) shared social practices and standards in communities underwrite expectations of what we can properly require others to know. Although on my account the normative requirement is driven by harms to others, and on his it is derived from social expectations, his idea that what others are entitled to expect from us determines what we are required to know has a nice affinity with my position, which I hope to explore in a future paper. I am grateful to one of the referees of this paper for pointing me in this direction.

37 Barbara Applebaum (2008) has long argued for the now (relatively) popular view that all whites are complicit in racial injustice by virtue of benefitting from the privileges of racism that simultaneously marginalize people of color.

39 Van Woudenberg suggests that if, through no fault of her own, Jane's ability to know was seriously compromised, then she cannot be blamed for believing what she does, as she was effectively forced to believe (2009, 382); see also Peels (2014).

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