



Ignorance, soundness, and norms of inquiry

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Abstract

The current literature on norms of inquiry features two families of norms: norms that focus on an inquirer's *ignorance* and norms that focus on the question's *soundness*. I argue that, given a factive conception of ignorance, it's possible to derive a soundness-style norm from a version of the ignorance norm. A crucial lemma in the argument is that just as one can only be ignorant of a proposition if the proposition is true, so one can only be ignorant with respect to a question if the question is sound.

Keywords Ignorance · Inquiry · Questions · Soundness

1 Soundness and question ignorance

I don't know that the earth is flat. But I'm not thereby ignorant of anything. To be ignorant with respect to p , it has to be the case that p is true: as far as propositions go, one can only be ignorant of the facts.

Factivity of Propositional Ignorance (FPI): Necessarily, if S is ignorant with respect to p , then p is true.

Being ignorant entails not knowing, but not knowing does not entail being ignorant: for I am not ignorant of any falsehoods though I know none of them.

The factivity of ignorance enjoys wide support from, *inter alia*, Rescher (2005: 28), van Woudenberg (2009: 375), Nottelmann (2016: 34–35), Zimmerman (2018: 626), Meylan (2020: 443), Kubyshkina and Petrolo (2021: 5920), Piedrahita (2021: 484–85), Pritchard (2021: 112), and Peels (2023: 27).¹ As Pritchard (2021: 112) puts things, 'it is only when it comes to truths that there is anything to be ignorant of'. One of the aims of this paper is to extend a factive-style notion of ignorance to the

¹ But for an argument against, see Le Morvan (2022).

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domain of questions; the second aim is to apply that conception to the literature on norms of inquiry.

Sometimes we say that *S* doesn't know *that* something is true. Just as often, we deny knowledge to a speaker by using a *wh*-complement to introduce a question. These locutions can imply that an agent is ignorant, and they use a question to pick out what the agent is ignorant of. For example: Sam doesn't know *who* will come to the party, or Giorgio doesn't know *whether* it will snow tonight. I will use the locution 'S knows (or doesn't know) *wh-Q*' to stand in for these kinds of expressions.

I don't know whether England or France is closer to Middle-earth. But I'm not thereby ignorant of anything. Why not? The explanation cannot be the *factivity* of ignorance (not directly, anyway), because questions aren't the sorts of things that are true or false. What then? I answer: To be ignorant with respect to *Q*, it has to be the case that *Q* is sound. Soundness for questions is like factivity for propositions.

A question is sound just in case it admits a true, direct answer. Direct answerhood is variously theorized,² but examples are easy to come by. Intuitively, the direct answers to the question (e.g.) <Is England or [rather] France closer to Middle-earth> are <England is closer to Middle-earth> and <France is closer to Middle-earth>. Neither of those (direct) answers is true: therefore the question has no true, direct answer. That's why it is unsound.

This suggests the following necessary condition for question-directed, or erotetic, ignorance³:

Erotetic Ignorance entails Soundness (EIS): Necessarily, if *S* is ignorant with respect to *Q*, then *Q* is sound.

In other words, for *S* to be ignorant with respect to *Q*, it's not sufficient that *S* not know *wh-Q*—just as it's not sufficient for being ignorant that *p* that one not know that *p*. For an instance of not knowing *wh-Q* to constitute ignorance, it must at least also be the case that *Q* is sound. Or, as Nottelmann (2016: 37) puts it, if someone is erotetically ignorant of *Q*, 'the relevant question *has at least one correct answer* in the actual world' (emphases mine). To parrot Pritchard, it is only when it comes to questions that have true direct answers—questions that are sound—that there is anything to be ignorant of.

I've briefly made the case for **EIS** by observing that, just as for propositional ignorance, the mere absence of knowledge-*wh* is insufficient grounds for ascribing erotetic ignorance. Something *like* factivity is required, and soundness plausibly plays the relevant role. But one might also try to derive the question-soundness of erotetic ignorance from the factivity of propositional ignorance. Consider the following argument:

- (1) If *S* is ignorant with respect to *Q*, then there is some proposition *p* that (directly) answers *Q* such that *S* is ignorant with respect to it.⁴

² See Whitcomb and Millson (forthcoming) for an interpretation.

³ See Rescher (2009: 28–29), Nottelmann (2016), and Peels (2023: 35–37).

⁴ Premise (1) encodes an ignorance-variant of the standard way of interpreting what it is to know *wh-Q*, going back at least to Higginbotham (1996, Sect. 5), whereby an agent knows *wh-Q* iff they know a true, direct answer to *Q*. See also Peels (2023: 35–37) and Nottelmann (2016: 39).

- (2) If S is ignorant with respect to p , then by p is true. (FPI)
- (3) So, if S is ignorant with respect to Q , then Q has some direct answer that is true. (from 1, 2)
- (4) So, if S is ignorant with respect to Q , then Q is sound. (from 3, the definition of soundness)

Thus, the factivity of ignorance for propositions directly contributes to an argument for a corresponding principle regarding soundness.⁵

I've argued that one is only ignorant with respect to Q if Q is sound. This is an independently interesting thesis. But it can also teach us something about the norms of inquiry.

2 Two families of interrogative norms

There has been an explosion of interest in norms of inquiry—or of the interrogative attitudes (IAs)⁶ like 'being curious,' which typically motivate inquiry—in the last decade. Broadly speaking, most of these norms have focused on *ignorance-side* considerations. Paradigmatically, this family of norms includes the ignorance norm. Here, for instance, is Whitcomb (2017: 152):

Inquire as to what Q 's answer is only if you don't know Q 's answer.⁷

and here is Friedman (2017: 311):

Necessarily, if one knows Q at t , then one ought not have an IA towards Q at t .

Whitcomb and Friedman independently label these *ignorance norms*, which have since been defended by a growing number of interrogative epistemologists.⁸ The gloss on such norms is: don't inquire into a question unless you're ignorant about it.

Another family of interrogative norms focuses on *soundness-side* constraints. Here, for instance, is Willard-Kyle (2023b: 620):

One ought to: inquire into (an unconditional question) Q at t only if one knows at t that Q has a true (complete, and direct) answer.

⁵ See George (2013) and Phillips & George (2017) for a challenge to (1) on the (purported) basis that knowledge wh- Q displays false-belief sensitivity. The issue of false-belief sensitivity has only been raised as an objection to the *sufficiency* of knowing Q 's direct answer for knowing wh- Q . That is: the potential counterexamples to (1) are cases in which an agent knows a direct answer to Q . But whenever an agent knows a direct answer to Q , the question is sound. So even if ignorance with respect to questions displays false-belief sensitivity (thus making (1) false), that by itself is no challenge to the thesis that we are only ignorant of sound questions.

⁶ See Friedman (2013, 2017).

⁷ Cf. Whitcomb (2010: 674).

⁸ For endorsement, see also Millson, (2020: 685), Sapir & van Elswyk (2021), Willard-Kyle (2023a), and Haziza (2023). For critique, see Archer (2018, 2021), Falbo (2021, 2023), and Woodard (2022).

More simply: only inquire into questions you know are sound. And here is Whitcomb and Millson ([forthcoming](#): Sect. 3):

It is irrational to: wonder Q when your knowledge doesn't evoke Q .

where a question is *evoked* by your knowledge only if (among other things) your knowledge secures the question's *soundness* (§2–3). Both of these latter norms entail that one should only wonder about questions that are sound.⁹

These two families of norms, *ignorance*-side norms and *soundness*-side norms, seem to be drawing from very different sets of concerns. Ignorance-side theorists worry that an agent might know *too much* to properly inquire; *soundness*-side theorists worry that an agent might know *too little*. Ignorance-side norms draw from the Platonic¹⁰ thought that inquiry into questions when you already know the answer is pointless: the end has already been reached. Soundness-side norms draw from the thought that questions, like assertions, have presuppositions that need to be appropriately resolved (e.g., by being known) before being put forward interrogatively.

3 A revision to the ignorance norm

What I want to suggest is that an independently motivated reformulation of the ignorance norm shows that these two sets of considerations are not as independent as they initially appear. In short, that's because being ignorant with respect to a question entails that the question is sound.

Although Whitcomb and Friedman refer to their norms as *ignorance* norms, both articulate principles that invoke not strictly *ignorance* but *not knowing*. But as we've seen, these concepts are not equivalent: ignorance is a contrary of knowledge not a contradictory. Let's experiment with tweaking a version of the ignorance norm so that it appeals explicitly to ignorance:

IGN: Have an IA toward Q only if you are ignorant with respect to Q .

There are several reasons to prefer the formulation in **IGN**. The first reason is merely terminological: **IGN** better matches the advertising given to such norms in the literature.

But there are theoretical reasons to take **IGN** seriously too. Ignorance is the more natural thing to play the role of licensing inquiry than the mere absence of knowledge. One motivation for ignorance norms is the Platonic thought that inquiry is directed at the goal of knowledge.¹¹ But a question, Q , that is unsound is not even a

⁹ As the reader may have noticed, the norms under consideration are sometimes framed as norms governing *inquiry*, sometimes *IAs* (or interrogative attitudes). At other points in the literature, such norms seem to target the speech act of asking questions. These concepts are, of course, connected: one's interrogative attitudes *motivate* inquiry and find *expression* in the speech act of question-asking. I won't fuss too much here about which of these things should be understood as the primary object of interrogative norms.

¹⁰ In the *Meno*, Plato says that one 'wouldn't inquire into that which he knows (for he knows it, and there's no need for such a person to inquire)' (tr. in Fine 2014: 7). Cf. Kelp (2014, 2021).

¹¹ Cf. Kelp (2014).

candidate for knowledge $wh-Q$. Not even in principle. The ‘goal’ of inquiries into such questions is defective.

Another way to put the same thought is that there’s nothing bad about not knowing when not knowing does not constitute ignorance. I don’t know that Lincoln was the first US president, and I don’t know that Hamilton was the first US president. I also don’t know whether Lincoln or (rather) Hamilton was the first US president (where that question is construed to have as its direct answers that Lincoln was the first US president and that Hamilton was). But that’s no reason for me to wonder whether Lincoln or rather Hamilton was the first US president. My not knowing whether Lincoln or (rather) Hamilton was the first president is not an epistemic state there is a reason for me to get out of. Ignorance incentivizes inquiry; merely not knowing does not.¹²

Relatedly, **IGN** can, but traditional ignorance norms cannot, explain why it is strange for me to wonder whether England or France is closer to Middle-earth. I do not know the answer to that question, and so traditional versions of the ignorance norm allow me to inquire into this. But **IGN** sensibly prohibits me from wondering whether England or France is closer to Middle-earth. After all, this is not a question I am *ignorant* of.

This final point exploits the fact that, given **EIS**—the principle that erotetic ignorance entails the relevant question’s soundness—, **IGN** has different normative consequences than traditional ignorance norms. Notably, **EIS** and **IGN** jointly entail that one should have an IA toward Q only if Q is sound:

Sound: Have an IA toward Q only if Q is sound.¹³

The motivations for ignorance- and soundness-based norms seemed distinct at the outset. But when reformulated as **IGN**, a version of the ignorance norm turns out to imply a norm on the soundness side of the divide—a surprising discovery! It is, nonetheless, plausible once we suppose that when it comes to making sense of inquiry, ignorance facts are more explanatory than not-knowing facts.

4 Centring ignorance: new connections

At this point in the paper, I have finished the positive arguments for **IGN**. But before concluding, I want to briefly draw attention to one dialectical advantage of framing the ignorance norm as genuinely requiring ignorance (as **IGN** does) and not the

¹² Meylan (2020), drawing on Chisholm & Sosa (1966), makes the related point that the mere absence of knowledge is not obviously bad—it can be neutral. See also Haas & Vogt (2015: 22) on the disvalue of ignorance.

¹³ Does **Sound** get us all the way to the most robust versions of the principles invoked by Willard-Kyle (2023b) or Whitcomb and Millson (forthcoming)? No. Their principles required not only that Q is sound, but that the soundness of Q is at least derivable from what the agent knows. So although adopting **IGN** would bring interrogative epistemology into the soundness side of the discussion, adopting **IGN** would not, by itself, settle whether any of the more ambitious soundness-side norms are true.

mere absence of knowledge. **IGN** makes transparent how different conceptions of ignorance—debated (unsurprisingly) in the literature on ignorance but rarely considered in the literature on norms of inquiry—generate different normative requirements for IAs.

There are three major camps concerning the nature of ignorance: the *standard* view (which treats ignorance as a contrary of knowledge),¹⁴ the *new* view (which treats ignorance as a contrary of true belief),¹⁵ and the *normative* view (which treats ignorance as having some special normative feature that explains its badness).¹⁶ Although simplified (and thereby occluding some nuance), the definitions below can give us a rough sense of how different views of ignorance interact with **IGN**:

- **Simple Standard View**

An agent *S* is ignorant with respect to *p* iff *p* is true and *S* does not know that *p*.

An agent *S* is ignorant with respect to *Q* iff *Q* is sound and *S* does not know wh-*Q*.

- **Simple New View**

An agent *S* is ignorant with respect to *p* iff *p* is true and *S* does not (truly) believe *p*.

An agent *S* is ignorant with respect to *Q* iff *Q* is sound and *S* does not truly believe a direct answer to *Q*.

- **Simple Normative View**

An agent *S* is ignorant with respect to *p* iff *p* is true, *S* does not know that *p*, and *S*'s not knowing that *p* is epistemically disvaluable.

An agent *S* is ignorant with respect to *Q* iff *Q* is sound, *S* does not know wh-*Q*, and *S*'s not knowing wh-*Q* is epistemically disvaluable.¹⁷

Plugging any of these definitions into **IGN** yields diverse and theoretically interesting results. Plugging in the **Simple Standard View** yields the nearest successor to the principles defended in Whitcomb (2010, 2017) and Friedman (2017). It is more demanding only in the notable (but by now familiar) respect that it obliges one to direct IAs only toward sound questions, as do any of the three substitutions. In other ways, it closely resembles the original norm.

Plugging in the **Simple New View** creates additional points of departure: in addition to requiring soundness, this substitution prohibits IAs even into those questions that one (merely) believes a true, direct answer to. It prohibits inquiry even when one's belief in a direct answer is unjustified or Gettiered, so long as it is true.

¹⁴ See, e.g., Haack (2001: 25–26), Rescher (2005: 28; 2009: 1–2), Haas & Vogt (2015), and Le Morvan (2022) (though the latter denies factivity).

¹⁵ See Goldman (1999: 5), Guerrero (2007: 62–63), van Woudenberg (2009), and Peels (2023: 56–62).

¹⁶ See Meylan (2020, 2022) and Pritchard (2021). The relevant badness is variously theorized but is often taken to involve failure to perform an inquiry or failure to do so well.

¹⁷ There could also be a 'New Normative View' that, in addition to having a disvalue clause, also replaces instances of 'knowledge' with 'true belief'.

Suppose, for instance, that I truly believe that Sam was at the party; however, my belief does not amount to knowledge because I am Gettiered.¹⁸ It's at least a *bit* weird if, under those circumstances, I nevertheless wonder whether Sam was at the party. The **Simple New View**—but not the **Simple Standard View**—predicts that it is wrong for me to wonder whether Sam was at the party.¹⁹

Now consider the **Simple Normative View**. The consequences of plugging this conception of ignorance into **IGN** will depend, among other things, on when it is that one's not knowing something is epistemically disvaluable, which gets variously theorized. But proponents of the normative view have often thought that it is *not* epistemically disvaluable when one doesn't know *trivial* truths or truths that are *beyond our intellectual reach*: One is *not* ignorant (on this conception) of how many blades of grass there are in a field, nor of the answer to questions that there is no way for us to determine an answer to (see Meylan, 2020: 441–42; Pritchard, 2021: 113–14). Thus interpreted, **IGN** prohibits inquiring into trivial or unanswerable questions. These are intriguing verdicts, worthy of fuller investigation.

I will not attempt to weigh the merits of each substitution into **IGN**: my goal in this section has been to sketch a range of views, not to declare a champion. But if there is a genuine ignorance norm on inquiry, then our judgments about what questions are permissible to inquire into should be sensitive to our judgments about the nature of ignorance, and vice versa. **IGN** wears on its sleeve how substituting different conceptions of ignorance leads to different, theoretically interesting normative requirements for inquiry.

5 Conclusions and future directions

Would Whitcomb, Friedman, and other defenders of the ignorance norm go in for the reformulation expressed by **IGN**? We'd have to ask them. **IGN** is intended as a sympathetic variant that takes seriously the possibility that there is a distinction between ignorance and the mere absence of knowledge. The goal, however, is not to force defenders of the ignorance norm to affirm a soundness-side norm, but to demonstrate that ignorance-side and soundness-side considerations bearing on IAs are not so detached as they might have appeared. And that's because, given **EIS**, ignorance for questions entails soundness.

Establishing a connection between ignorance-side and soundness-side norms does not, by itself, settle what lessons should be drawn within the emerging interrogative literature. On the one hand, the fact that a version of the ignorance norm entails a soundness-side principle might motivate those who already endorse an ignorance-side norm to (also) embrace soundness-side interrogative epistemology: after all, **IGN** already makes question-soundness a precondition for proper IAs. On the other hand, the fact that **IGN** already entails that one's IAs should be directed at sound questions might enable one to *resist* the more burdensome demands advanced

¹⁸ Gettier (1963)

¹⁹ This is also predicted by Friedman's (2019) norm, DBI. See Sapir & van Elswyk (2021) for critique.

by soundness-side theorists like Willard-Kyle (2023b) and Whitcomb & Millson (forthcoming): after all, perhaps **IGN** can, by itself, explain some of the data that soundness-side theorists claim as evidence for their own views.

This paper will leave that choice point to the reader. It has, nonetheless, defended several substantive conclusions. First, it has articulated a soundness constraint on question-ignorance: insofar as one can only be ignorant of propositions that are *true*, so one can only be ignorant about questions that are *sound*. Second, it has introduced a new version of an old norm: by being sensitive to the distinction between being ignorant and not knowing, it's possible to modify extant ignorance norms on inquiry so that they target ignorance itself rather than mere absences of knowledge. This accords better with both the advertising of such norms and some of their motivations. Third, it has defended a convergence thesis: that when one makes the relevant adjustments to the ignorance norm, the resulting principle (**IGN**) shows that ostensibly discrete considerations bearing on interrogative epistemology, *ignorance*-side and *soundness*-side considerations, are actually connected. Indeed, the reformulated ignorance norm requires agents to have IAs only toward questions that are sound. And finally, the paper has sketched some ways that genuinely centering *ignorance* (rather than *not knowing*) in the inquiry literature enables generative cross-pollination with the ignorance literature.

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