

Elís Miller Larsen

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Dissertation Abstract *The Ethics of Ignorance*
Most of us think that being unwittingly ignorant—as we are when we forget a friend’s birthday or remain blind to glaring social injustices—is a bad thing. But if ignorance is really so bad, why aren’t we required not to be ignorant? On the standard view that ignorance is the lack of knowledge, ignorance can be no more epistemically evaluable than absences. I develop a theory of ignorance that illuminates and resolves the major paradoxes that arise for the ethics and epistemology of ignorance. What kinds of epistemic shortcomings attach to ignorance? What obligations, if any, do we have not to be ignorant?

Specializations Epistemology, Philosophy of Mind, Social/Political Philosophy

Competences Cognitive Science, Ethics/Applied Ethics (esp. Tech Ethics), History of Analytic Philosophy, American Pragmatism

Education Harvard University:
 PhD Candidate, 2017- Present
 Dissertation: *The Ethics of Ignorance*
 Committee: Ned Hall (Chair), Susanna Siegel, Selim Berker, Eric Mandelbaum

City University of New York, Graduate Center:
 Graduate Fellow, 2015-2017

King’s College London:
 M.Phil in Philosophy, 2014 - Passed with Merit
 Thesis: *Ante Rem Structuralism and Peirce’s Philosophy of Mind*

Nyack College:
 BA in Philosophy and Mathematics, 2010
 magna cum laude

Invited Talks Symposium on “Ignorance and Understanding”
 Souther Society of Philosophy and Psychology (SSPP), March 2023

- Invited Talks *continued*** “Ignorance and Inquiry”
Uppsala University, June 2022
Inquiry Network Workshop, October 2020
- “Responsibility for Ignorance”
University of Vermont, May 2022
- “Personal Choice and the American Dream” with Agnes Callard (U Chicago)
Roosevelt University, October 2021
- “Responsibility for Ignorance”
Amherst College, May 2020

- Submitted Presentations** “Why We Should Be Close-Minded”
29th SIUCC (Seminario Interuniversitario de Ciencia Cognitiva), June 2022
- “Predicting Prejudice”
University of Toronto, June 2019
Aegina Summer Institute on Bias and Cognition, July 2019
- “Is the Rational Racist Epistemically Justified?”
DePauw University, June 2018
- “What Is Suspension of Belief?”
Harvard University Talk Shop, March 2018
- “Wittgenstenian Propositions and the Ruler Metaphor”
San Diego State University, October 2014
- “Cultural Identity and Solidarity”
University of Memphis, October 2013

Conference Participation Session chair for Southern Society of Philosophy and Psychology (SSPP), April 2022

Comments on Zachariah A. Neemeh’s “Bayesian Perceptual Hijacking,” APA Eastern Division 2021

Session chair for *Skepticism* session, APA Eastern Division 2019

Comments on Vida Yao and Samuel Reis-Dennis' "I love women: An Explicit Explanation of Implicit Bias Test Results," APA Central Division 2018

Commentator-at-large for the Penn Reasons and Foundations of Epistemology Conference, University of Pennsylvania, November 2018

Session chair for Athena in Action Workshop, Princeton University, June 2018

Public Philosophy Talks outlier.org

Co-taught an online course offering in philosophy on epistemic bubbles, political polarization, and ignorance: <https://www.outlier.org/products/intro-to-philosophy>, initiated Fall 2021

"Avoiding Ignorance in the Ignorance Era"
Boston University Mind and Morality Lab, May 2022

"The Many Forms of Ignorance"
Diversity, Inclusion, Equity talk for The Trustees of Reservations, April 2022

Publications

Book Review for Johanna Luttrell's *White People and Black Lives Matter: Ignorance, Empathy, and Justice*.

Ignorance, Empathy, and Resisting Racism
Radical Philosophy Review 24(1): 105-108, 2021

IN PREPARATION:

(BOOK) *IGNORANCE*: the problem of how we think, not what we know
(solicited proposal invitation by Brockman Inc.)

Teaching

Undergraduate courses:
(PHIL 10200) Introduction to Philosophy: City College, Fall 2016 and Spring 2017

Embedded EthiCS lecturer for Computer Science:

Teaching continued

(For more information on the Embedded EthiCS program visit <https://embeddedethics.seas.harvard.edu/people/e1%C3%ADs-miller-larsen>)

“Sustainable AI” for (CS 146) Computer Architecture

“Ignorance & Algorithms” for (CS 279r) Research Topics in Human-Computer Interaction

“The Ethics of Hacking Back” for (CS 263) Systems Security

“Injustice Ex(tra) Machina” for (CS 109A) Intro to Data Science

“Gamification” for (CS 179) Useful and Interactive Systems

“Ethical Tradeoffs in System Design” for (CS 161) Operating Systems

Teaching fellowships:

(PSY 15) Social Psychology (course head: Fiery Cushman), Harvard University, Spring 2020

(PHIL 120) The Rationalists (course head: Jeffrey McDonough), Harvard University, Fall 2019

High school Trigonometry teacher for “second chance” school in Washington, DC, Fall and Spring 2011-2012

Awards and Fellowships Embedded EthiCS graduate fellowship, Harvard University, Fall 2020- Spring 2021

GSAS Summer Pre-dissertation Fellowship, Harvard University, 2019

\$3,000 awarded to outstanding doctoral students in the humanities and social sciences

Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) Analytic Prize, New York University, 2018

\$1,000 prize for honorable mention paper

Graduate Fellowship, Harvard University, 2017-present

Graduate Fellowship, CUNY Graduate Center, Fall 2015 - Spring 2017

Provost Enhancement Award, CUNY Graduate Center, Fall 2015

\$2,000 top-up awarded to underrepresented groups pursuing graduate coursework

Service

Referee for *Episteme* and *Ergo*

20+ hrs/ week for Harvard University Department of Philosophy Climate Working Group volunteer, Spring & Summer 2020, and Fall 2021

(For additional information on the values and initiatives of the Climate Working Group visit <https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/climate-and-diversity>)

Philosophy and Psychology workshop facilitator, Harvard University Fall 2017 and Spring 2018

Philosophy Department Graduate Representative, Mind Brain and Behavior (MBB) Program, Harvard University 2017-2018

Admissions Committee graduate volunteer, CUNY Graduate Center, 2016-2017

Inclusive Pedagogy Workshop facilitator, Minorities and Philosophy (MAP), CUNY Graduate Center, Spring 2017

Student Staff Liaison Committee Graduate Representative, King's College London, 2013-2014

Graduate Coursework

(* = audited)

Philosophy of Mind/Cognitive Science

Perception (Siegel, Harvard), Spring 2018

Memory (Siegel, Harvard), Fall 2017

Ancient Perception (Vasiliou, CUNY GC), Spring 2017

Cognitive Architecture (Block & Mandelbaum, NYU), Fall 2016

Philosophy of Mind (Brewer, KCL), Fall 2012

Ethics & Social/Political philosophy (broadly construed)

Punishment and Imprisonment (Shelby, Harvard), Fall 2018

Critical Social Theory (Haslanger, MIT), Spring 2018

Works by Nagel and Scanlon (Berker, Harvard), Spring 2018

Blame and Forgiveness (Fricker, CUNY GC), Fall 2016

Social Construction (Prinz, CUNY GC), Fall 2015

Metaphysics, Epistemology, & Logic

Epistemology* (Berker, Harvard), Fall 2018

Norms of Belief (Berker & Rinard, Harvard), Fall 2017

Intention and Acts of Meaning (Neale & Harris, CUNY GC), Spring 2017

Mathematical Logic (Hamkins, CUNY GC), Spring 2017

Reference and Experimental Philosophy (Devitt, CUNY GC), Fall 2015

Logic (Warenski, CUNY GC), Fall 2015

History

History of Modern Moral Philosophy (Schapiro, MIT), Spring 2019

Pragmatism and Neo-Pragmatism (Godfrey-Smith, CUNY GC), Fall 2016

Intentionality and Perception in Phenomenology and Ancient Philosophy (Textor & McCabe, KCL), Spring 2013

Kant's Critique of Pure Reason (Callanan, KCL), Fall 2012

19th Century Continental Philosophy (Golob, KCL), Fall 2012

Foundations in Analytic Philosophy (Textor, KCL), Fall 2012

The Ethics of Ignorance

Most of us think that being unwittingly ignorant— as we are when we forget a friend’s birthday or remain blind to glaring social injustices—is a bad thing. But if ignorance is really so bad, why aren’t we required not to be ignorant? On the standard view that ignorance is the lack of knowledge, ignorance can be no more epistemically evaluable than absences. I develop a theory of ignorance that illuminates and resolves the major paradoxes that arise for the ethics and epistemology of ignorance. What kinds of epistemic shortcomings attach to ignorance? What obligations, if any, do we have not to be ignorant? This dissertation offers answers to those questions.

Chapter 1 addresses the paradox of the evaluability of absences: absences are neither good nor bad, rational nor irrational. I first show that there exists an array of counterexamples to the common view that ignorance is the absence of knowledge, with sources in psychology, scientific theory, and everyday life where someone is ignorant because they fail to consider obvious and relevant possibilities. I then use these examples to argue for a substantive form of ignorance that is an attitude similar to belief. Many take it as evident that ignorant just is the state of not knowing. But, I argue that this is incorrect: not knowing is neither necessary nor sufficient for some cases of ignorance. If epistemic evaluability is going to have any bearing, ignorance must be more than mere not knowing.

Chapter 2 is the test case for ignorance’s epistemic evaluability. I start by addressing a second paradox about ignorance and responsibility. If we follow the standard line that ignorance is the absence of knowledge, then ignorance isn’t something that we can be responsible for. Some have confronted this paradox by suggesting that a theory of responsibility for ignorance (esp. ignorance of racial injustices) rests on our social obligations. On such a view, we are responsible for our ignorance just in case it harms others or further perpetuates social inequities. But such a theory suggests that we are only responsible because we have let down our communities since we owe it those around us not to be ignorant. I argue for a kind of substantive ignorance that takes an attitude form where agents are just as responsible for ignorance as they would be for belief. In the dissertation, I call this attitude ignoring to distinguish it from the common, passive form of ignorance. Ignoring, on my view, structures an inquiry so that we are responsible when we fail to consider obvious and relevant answers to an open inquiry. Importantly, the responsibility is agent-centered; it is not based on others, but on the idea that we owe it to ourselves to be as rational as possible.

Chapter 3 addresses a final paradox about the compatibility between inquiry and my theory of ignorance. I've argued that we are responsible for a certain type of attitude ignorance—ignoring—when we are unaware of relevant and obvious possibilities. We can generalize this thought as a norm that says, if you ignore some relevant possible answer, then you ought to consider that possible answer. But is this a norm that agents can meet? In his paper, "Ignorance of Ignorance," Kit Fine argues that second-order ignorance is impossible to revolve, which suggests that inquiring into propositions that you don't know that you don't know supplies a normative excuse. My solution to the tension between inquiry and second-order ignorance is as follows: We may not be able to inquire directly into the things we don't know that we don't know, but it is possible to conduct sub-inquires that can remove our second-order ignorance. Unlike Fine, I think even under second-order ignorance, we remain subject to normative pressure to consider obvious and relevant possible answers to the questions that shape our inquiry.

Chapter 4 applies my theory of ignorance to a problem in perception. Hallucinations, illusions, and attentional blindness are all forms of ignorance where perceivers 'miss out' on information in their environment. In this chapter I identify another kind of misperception, which I call perceptual ignorance. Perceptual Ignorance is the perceptual analogue to the cognitive state of ignoring. When someone is perceptually ignorant they have literal blind spots that result in errors in early perception, which lead to judgments that are unwarranted. I use Bayesian perceptual processing to model the problem as one of missing hypotheses within a set of priors. Perceptual ignorance not only explains how ignorance manifests as a type of prejudice, but also presents a surprising critique for Bayesian theories of perception in general. Omissions are evidence of malfunctions in updating, which undermines Bayesian models as paragons of proper functioning.

So, it is up to us to resolve our ignorance, but this task is one that we can all meet. That is part of the larger narrative of an agent-centered ethics of ignorance. Taken together, the chapters are distinct, yet imbricated arguments for a theory of ignorance. This dissertation makes the case that ignorance is the kind of thing that is epistemically evaluable—it can be epistemically better or worse; and that as better or worse it places demands on us to be our best rational selves.