

WHY LISTEN TO PHILOSOPHERS?  
A CONSTRUCTIVE CRITIQUE OF DISCIPLINARY  
PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract:** This article articulates a fundamental crisis of disciplinary philosophy—its lack of disciplinary self-consciousness and the skeptical problems this generates—and, through that articulation, exemplifies a means of mitigating its force. Disciplinary philosophy organizes itself as a producer of specialized knowledge, with the apparatus of journals, publication requirements, and other professional standards, but it cannot agree on what constitutes knowledge, progress, or value, and evinces ignorance of its history and alternatives. This situation engenders a skepticism that threatens the legitimacy of disciplinary philosophy. The article proposes a response to this skepticism, rooted in the conditions that philosophers evince a specific kind of awareness of their own activity and its professional and cultural location, demonstrate this awareness by articulating it in the practice of philosophy itself, and recognize that precisely such articulation lies at the core of the Socratic idea of philosophy as a form of self-knowledge.

**Keywords:** agnotology, disciplines, disciplinarity, epistemology, ignorance, justification, legitimacy, metaphilosophy, philosophy of philosophy, skepticism, sociology of philosophy.

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Why should anyone listen to a philosopher? This article explores that question by treating the neglected topic of ignorance and its relation to the legitimacy of claims to knowledge or expertise. If we ask first why people in fact do listen to philosophers, the answer is that philosophy's location as a discipline in the university grants philosophers what I will call epistemic legitimacy.

As much in everyday life as in academic discourse, individuals and groups rely on the power of perceived epistemic legitimacy. In its most common and ubiquitous form, epistemic legitimacy is what we are implicitly granting someone when we do not systematically wonder about the truthfulness or reliability of everything she says, or even more basically, when we bother to listen to her at all, rather than ignore her, dismiss her as a crank, and so on.

We assume that most people are not infallible but credible. In the details and complexities that arise within any specific domain of life, we easily and typically without conscious effort distinguish between subjects in which our source may be more or less reliable, but rarely do we voluntarily encounter, or have sustained interactions with, an individual whom we regard as generally disreputable when it comes to matters of knowledge. We may come to count as highly dubitable certain groups' or individuals' beliefs in particular areas—as, for example, most of the intellectual culture of the West regards certain religious groups' statements about biology. But then most of the people who regard such groups as dubitable do not have frequent interaction with them. For normal social interaction, with groups as well as individuals, is based on a tacit grant of legitimacy. When we speak of relating to people “on their own terms,” this is what we mean. The typical interaction between individuals or groups relies on each party not comporting itself in such a way as to call into question, much less deny, the distinctive self-understanding of the other party. More pertinent to our purposes, however, is the fact that effective participation within any social group, and especially formal institutions like the academy, demands acceptance of its self-understanding, at least insofar as this acceptance can be determined by the ability and willingness of the agent to inhabit the group or institution successfully and thus to be recognized by those within the group as a part of it.

The granting and receiving of epistemic legitimacy is thus clearly at once social, involving relationships of persons and power, and also of profound philosophical import. For philosophy itself, as an academic discipline, claims to have epistemic legitimacy, that is, its practitioners think that, as with other academic disciplines, people would be somehow mistaken, perhaps seriously so, to dismiss them and their work as they might dismiss homeopathy or astrology. The presence of a discipline in the university sets the content of that discipline immediately apart, giving it a privileged epistemic status in its culture. But philosophers, of all practitioners within the academy, might well ask: Is this status justified? What is the *philosophical significance* of academic disciplines and philosophy's inclusion within disciplinary structures? To put the question more concretely, we might ask, first, what gives some works but not others a claim to our attention? In the context of the university, the answer is simple: knowledge. The university is justified, as is any individual discipline, by its claim to produce, and transmit, knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

But it is not clear that philosophy does produce knowledge; indeed, to claim it does is rather awkward for the philosopher, for he then has to account for the massive and fundamental disagreements that characterize philosophy, even if one attends only to contemporary philosophy.

<sup>1</sup> This is a standard formulation of the purpose of the modern research university, as seen, for example, in Shils 1997, 8. A discipline that disavowed knowledge as its goal and norm has the burden of proof for justifying its existence in the university, which was from its inception founded as the home for *scientia*, disciplined and organized knowledge.

Beyond disagreement, however, philosophers practice philosophy very differently, sometimes in ways that are clearly incompatible with other forms of philosophy, such that one practice is going to be dubious or a clear waste of time when viewed from the perspective of another.<sup>2</sup> Philosophy lacks shared results, unlike the natural sciences; it lacks consensus about basic issues, including what philosophy itself is and what it requires, and whatever results it may have do not seem to accumulate, producing an ever-growing body of knowledge or insight. These are all striking disparities between philosophy and the natural sciences. Yet one thing contemporary philosophy does share with the natural sciences is specialization. Specialization, however, entails a great deal of ignorance and exclusion. Is such ignorance and exclusion justified in the case of philosophy, and, if so, on what grounds, given the dissimilarity between the natural sciences and philosophy? What is at stake in these questions are two concepts, those of justified ignorance and justified exclusion, which are the focus of this article. For the question of what justifies the ignorance and the exclusion of a body of knowledge raises basic questions: On what grounds do we grant or withhold epistemic legitimacy? And does the *de facto* granting of epistemic legitimacy to philosophers make sense, or should philosophy itself be characterized by a kind of self-consciousness that is inconsistent with a kind of ignorance prevalent in contemporary philosophy?<sup>3</sup> I will argue that both ignorance and exclusion raise serious skeptical problems; that these problems combined can be understood as the plurality problem, a set of skeptical considerations that could undermine the epistemic legitimacy of much contemporary philosophy; and that thinking through a response to this problem illuminates the centrality of self-consciousness in the philosophical life.

## 2

Philosophers, particularly in the modern world, have expended much effort on the topic of knowledge, so much so that epistemology symbolizes for many the characteristic preoccupation of modern

<sup>2</sup> Consider Hobbes's contemptuous attitude toward Scholasticism, typical of many early modern philosophers, as detailed especially in book 4 of *Leviathan*. Scholasticism, whether Protestant or Catholic, was still the dominant form of philosophy taught and practiced in universities in Hobbes's time. Thus his whole project, like that of Bacon or Descartes, involves dismissing philosophy as it was practiced in the universities.

<sup>3</sup> To deny epistemic legitimacy to contemporary philosophy would, of course, mean that philosophy was in a period of (apparently unacknowledged) crisis. Philosophy would not be alone, presumably, in this legitimation crisis, as the features I enumerated that call into question its legitimacy apply to many other disciplines. Even if this is the case, and much of the academy is in a kind of crisis, my current focus is on the distinctively philosophical significance of the situation for academic philosophy.

philosophy. Ignorance, however, is also a crucially important, though almost entirely neglected, topic. The focus of this section is justified ignorance and its implications. Before explaining the principle of justified ignorance, we need first to make a distinction. There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of ignorance. The first kind of ignorance, which we could call partial ignorance, is characterized by a general framework or concept about which one lacks specific knowledge. This is the ignorance expressed in the phrase “I don’t know math.” The speaker knows what mathematics is, broadly speaking, and she can thus invoke a general concept, mathematics, to delineate her relationship to its particulars or details, which is one of ignorance; so partial ignorance is ignorance that depends on knowledge and can be the object of the ignorant person’s awareness; she can know *that she is ignorant about mathematics*. Thus, partial ignorance can be first-person ignorance, for one can express it by saying, “*I don’t know that.*” The second kind of ignorance, however, total ignorance, is the lack of the general framework, background, or concept that enables partial ignorance. As a consequence, it is ignorance that can be ascribed only in the second or third person. That is, one can say, “You don’t know that . . .” or “He didn’t know that . . .” but one cannot, about something of which one is totally ignorant, say, “*I don’t know that. . .*” An illustration may make this clearer. Imagine a person’s mind as a map. The map is filled with some dark spots where detailed surveys have not been made. A person can look at the map and know about those areas, even though she knows very little. She might not even know the name of the area, or whether it has one, but she can say, “I don’t know a lot about that area between those two rivers.” That would be partial ignorance. But now imagine places that are not on the map. These are places about which a person has no idea; for if she did, the border of the map would have extended, and she would have replaced total ignorance with partial ignorance. It will be helpful to keep this distinction in mind in the following discussion.

The principle of justified ignorance simply articulates an assumption implicit in the purported rationality of any discipline or domain of knowledge, viz., that at least some ignorance is rationally justified. The principle is also a demand which rational disciplines or activities are tacitly committed to have met. The positive epistemic status we assign to some people and disciplines and not to others is related to our belief that there are no important things that should be known by such persons or disciplines, but are not. To make this demand clearer, it will be easiest to take obvious cases where the demand for justified ignorance is met and then move into philosophy, where it is far from clear whether, or under what conditions, the demand of justified ignorance could be met. But first an illustration of the demand may be helpful. A private deployed in southern France in the Second World War is

ignorant of a substantial variety of militarily relevant knowledge, such as, for example, why he and his fellow soldiers are located in the precise village to which they have been sent. For obvious reasons, we would not regard this private's ignorance of the purpose of his location as something blameworthy in an epistemic sense. As a low-ranking, enlisted soldier, he has no responsibility to know the answer to such questions. Someone, however, does: presumably the relevant officer under whose command the private serves. If the general in charge of military operations in southern France, for example, had no idea why a group of his soldiers were at that specific village, he would be ignorant of the same thing of which the private was ignorant, but we would regard his ignorance as unjustified—indeed, potentially worthy of very serious consequences.

We could think of this as justified ignorance on a vertical scale, in this case represented by the chain of command. But there are also horizontal, or mixed, scales of justified ignorance, seen particularly in the natural sciences. Given how specialized scientific knowledge is, and how production of it in most scientific disciplines involves the practical skills and tacit knowledge required in and developed for experimental research, most scientists are justifiably ignorant of massive amounts of scientific knowledge, including knowledge within their own fields. Even a passing acquaintance with working scientists suffices to inform a person that a highly competent biologist may know nothing whatever about what her colleague an office over does. Science as a profession thus relies on the legitimacy of intense specialization, and on the correlatively great ignorance it demands, for scientific progress. The justified ignorance of scientists, however, does not require a vertical or chain of command model. The biologist ignorant of her fellow biologist's work is justified in her ignorance not because her position and the knowledge it requires is necessarily lower than her colleague's but because it is simply different, and the justification of that difference, and the non-overlapping sets of knowledge it implies, is rooted in the justification of scientific specialization.

Most people, including myself, would regard the ignorance entailed by scientific specialization to be justified; indeed, I know of no domain in which specialization and the peculiar narrowness of knowledge it cultivates has better support from its results than the natural sciences. Philosophy, however, is a very different matter. Philosophy, which for my present purposes denotes primarily the profession and its activities that pass under that name in the leading universities in Britain and America (that is, analytic philosophy), shares with other disciplines in the human sciences (or *Geisteswissenschaften*) a nonlinear and noncumulative shape to whatever knowledge it may claim to possess. Indeed, such fields, but particularly philosophy, have been notorious for their fundamental disagreement about basic questions. Even where

knowledge could be said to accumulate and progress it tends to do so in small areas *within* any given discipline, and such growth does not characterize the discipline as a whole. To state the problem of justified ignorance for philosophy in one of its weakest forms, we could take only the set of texts, topics, approaches, and so forth, extant in analytic philosophy at present and ask of any given approach, topic, or text why it should be regarded as justified in being ignorant of all the other approaches, texts, and topics available (this use of the term “ignorant” is obviously metaphorical but should be clear).<sup>4</sup> This form, as I said, is a very weak one. It can be strengthened in two directions yet remain within the discipline of philosophy by adding, across time, the history of philosophy and, across space, other approaches to philosophy, say, as it is practiced by members of philosophy departments typically regarded as nonanalytic.

Put concretely, one could ask why any philosopher writing about the mind is justified in being ignorant of, say, most of the history of philosophy that deals with the mind, and knowing and attending only to articles and books that for the most part have been written in his lifetime, in his language, and by philosophers within a certain mutually recognized community that is smaller than the set of philosophers alive and writing in English. There are, I think, two broad tacks one can take to such a question. The first, and perhaps most effective, is to deny its legitimacy, that is, to refuse to recognize the ignorance one has as being in need of justification; presumably it is just somehow justified, and its justification is of a kind that requires no defense or argument. I am not interested in mounting arguments against this approach, in part because my concerns lie elsewhere, and in part because the person likely to respond in this way in reality would rarely have reason to do so, for he is the sort of philosopher unlikely even to raise the question whether he ought to have read Aristotle, Leibnitz, Hegel, and other relevant philosophers on the mind. Thus a probable surmise is that the philosopher who *would* take this approach is likely to be the kind of philosopher who has not even countenanced the question. Based on the unselfconscious nature of a great deal of topical or issues-driven contemporary philosophy with respect to such a question, the first approach may be the preferred one of many in the discipline, were the issue explicitly considered. The question regarding the justification of ignorance, that is, the ignorance of philosophers who

<sup>4</sup> The use of “ignorant” here may be regarded suspiciously as substituting for something more accurate, *ignoring*, an activity that necessarily excludes at least total ignorance. I am sympathetic to this concern but reserve treatment of ignoring to justified exclusion, as *ignoring* turns out to be a key way philosophers exclude other work or approaches from consideration. This is merely one of several links between ignorance and exclusion, the relation of which I consider below.

take the first tack, is thus likely going to be a third-person question, one as to whether such philosophers are justified in their ignorance, not whether *I* am so justified.

I will, perhaps unfairly, since I am speaking for them, though perhaps not, since this is necessary, refer to the position of these philosophers as justificatory fideism with respect to the problem of justified ignorance. For their ignorance to be justified, it must simply be believed, without any argument from them, that it is so justified. This is justification by faith, as it were. Even to raise the question of justification is to introduce a kind of externality that threatens the self-understanding of such philosophers, insofar as this self-understanding can be gleaned from their work.<sup>5</sup> It is, in short, not to engage them on their own terms.

The second tack is to acknowledge the need for justification and then seek to respond to this need. Although I confess great ignorance on this matter, so far as my knowledge extends I am not aware of many contemporary philosophers *explicitly* seeking to do this. One could, however, plausibly read some philosophers as responding to such a need to justify their ignorance or the ignorance of their colleagues or even the profession as they see it perhaps ideally constituted. Moreover, one could also formulate a tentative typology of broad ways one might seek to respond to the need to justify one's ignorance. I will distinguish three types of possible response, which I will label the irrelevance response, the impossibility response, and the acquiescence response. A number of representatives for these responses (except, perhaps, for the impossibility response) could be used to illustrate each of them, but I will restrict myself to one or two figures, movements, or trends for each response, and I stress the typological nature of the exercise.

- (1) The irrelevance response (IR) is nicely summed up in a quip often attributed to Willard van Orman Quine, to the effect that there are two sorts of people interested in philosophy: philosophers and those interested in the history of philosophy. Whether this is apocryphal or not, it is consistent with the kind of work Quine did and representative in general of much analytic philosophy of the twentieth century (Quine 1985, 194). On this view,

<sup>5</sup> Note, too, that justificatory fideism is the *de facto* position of most philosophers, since it is no part of philosophy, as currently conceived and typically practiced, to have to consider, much less explain, why it is acceptable to be ignorant of so much philosophy. Likewise, most philosophy departments provide no philosophical justification for their course requirements, or why their requirements are so narrow. They therefore imply that the absence of such justification is legitimate. Alternatively, one could assume they regard the omission as needing justification and would accept the indictment of not having supplied it, but this hypothesis seems rather improbable.

the history of philosophy is irrelevant to its contemporary practice; those who maintain this view, like Quine, thus offer the irrelevance response. Now notice that this position explicitly addresses only the history of philosophy, as do the others below; but the problem of justified ignorance is far broader than ignorance of the history of philosophy. Thus, I am extrapolating from a view about history to a view about ignorance in general, and the reason for this is that I am not aware of an explicit philosophical treatment of the problem of justified ignorance as I have posed it.

The IR might be seen as a form of justificatory fideism, but I regard it as distinct, first, because it relies on having some, at least to a certain extent, consciously held view of philosophy in terms of which one regards the history of philosophy as irrelevant. Now one might worry that this view, even if true about history, might not extend to justifying ignorance about other, current philosophical work. Logical positivism, for example, if it may be regarded as a form of the IR, was prominent while a number of other philosophical movements were active and influential in Europe, even though positivism is not characterized by an attempt to respond extensively in any direct way to these movements. Still, one could say for our typological purposes that a proponent of the IR would easily be able to show, at least on her terms, how her substantive philosophical commitments justify her ignorance of contemporary and not just historical philosophy (parts of contemporary philosophy might be thought of as largely meaningless, for example, if those parts can reasonably be associated with traditions already regarded as containing many meaningless statements).

- (2) The impossibility response (IMR), of which I am not aware of direct philosophical representatives, seems nonetheless a plausible response to the demand of justified ignorance. According to the IMR, one is justified in one's ignorance of other work because it is impossible to take into account all the work that might be deemed relevant, and since this feat is impossible, we have good reason to deny we are obligated to perform it, or waste our lives in its pursuit.
- (3) The acquiescence response (AR), like the other two responses, accepts the demand to justify its ignorance without recourse to justificatory fideism, but it seeks to do so by doing philosophy so as to mitigate its ignorance as much as possible and to pursue a mode of philosophizing that has as part of its function the justification of its ignorance. The broadness of this description is intentional and not, I think, inaccurate as a result. Indeed, a



large number of philosophers could be viewed as representative of the AR. One notable group that exhibits the AR is Hegelians, broadly conceived, which might include contemporary Anglophone philosophers like Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre as well as European philosophers like Vittorio Hösle.<sup>6</sup>

How plausible one might find any of these responses would depend crucially on how seriously one took the problem of justified ignorance and what one thought it might mean. Thus, it will be valuable now to reflect on the preceding material in light of a much starker statement of the problem than that with which I could plausibly begin.

The principle of justified ignorance, as I indicated above, can be viewed as a demand that our ignorance be justified. As we saw, this is hardly an unimportant demand, as all fields rely on people knowing specific things and regard them as culpable for certain forms of ignorance but not for others. This demand becomes much more threatening, however, when it is applied to any field in which there are not *prima facie* reasons to think ignorance of work in areas that are or could be related to one's own is justified. To return to our example of work on the mind, one might wonder how our philosopher, ignorant of all but a certain kind of literature on the topic from a relatively narrow time frame, could be justified in believing, much less know, that there is not some much better approach to the topic than the one he is using, or that some other person or group has not developed a truer understanding in light of which his work is either simply wrong or highly misleading. Put simply: Why, given that philosophy is so *unlike* the natural sciences with their justified specialization, should one be obliged to take seriously such a philosopher's work? Why grant him the minimum epistemic legitimacy in terms of which we do not dismiss and ignore him, as we dismiss astrologers in spite of the fact that they may have a substantive body of information and skills internalized?

Now one might respond that there is no reason to do this, that is, to take such work on the mind seriously, but that would seem to undercut the rationality and value of academic philosophy. If one maintained that our philosopher's work on the mind was valid in some sense yet also that it could be justifiably ignored (or excluded, more on which below) by anyone interested in the mind, it is difficult to determine what kind of positive epistemic status it really has. Indeed, this claim seems as though it would inevitably result in a kind of reduction of philosophy to sociology, in which the explanation for why one does

<sup>6</sup> See Taylor 1984, MacIntyre 1984, and also Hösle 1984; Hösle's book is the most serious and extended engagement with the problem that the history of philosophy poses to philosophy that I am aware of, and it deserves interaction I cannot give it here. Ironically, it has been basically ignored by the philosophical community.

one's work in this particular way, and why one ignores all other kinds of work on the topic, is just some story about how academic disciplines socialize their members, grant distinction for relevant kinds of accomplished conformity (for example, publishing in the "right" journals, discussing the "right" authors), and so on. It is difficult to imagine a philosopher subjecting her work to such an explanation and then offering this to her colleagues as a philosophical argument.<sup>7</sup>

Thus I am assuming that our philosopher of the mind regards his work as making some kind of claim for rationality and value, that it says something justified and true about the mind and therefore should be studied by those interested in the mind, just as, say, Einstein should be studied by those interested in physics or Sanskrit by those interested in Indian literature.

The question, given this claim, is: Why should one regard the ignorance of our philosopher as justified? And if his ignorance is not justified, as, say, the ignorance of calculus in an advanced physics student would not be justified, this gives us grounds for thinking that his own work is not justified and that if it is somehow a contribution to knowledge, it is one by accident. Why not think that, like intelligent and learned people who still believe in alchemy, he is a very clever, perhaps well-intentioned, crank? Harmless enough to be sure, but hardly credible when it comes to his claims to be a source of knowledge. Of course some people, *even other philosophers*, do believe this. We simply ignore them.

We can summarize this kind of query as being that of the justified ignorance skeptic, or the JI skeptic. This skeptic accepts the principle of justified ignorance, and thus recognizes that ignorance can be justified, but regards some particular person or text or even field as failing to meet the demand for justified ignorance, and therefore regards the claims originating from such a source as dubious, at best. The JI skeptic's preferred question is thus something like: Why should I regard your view of  $x$  as true when you are not even aware of the existing alternatives, much less able to provide reasons for why your approach is better? Here a kind of Rortyan pragmatism is rather tempting, for one could then simply respond that one's colleagues let one get away with one's claim about  $x$  and that therefore it is true. But assuming one finds this view implausible, however attractive it may be, the JI skeptic seems to be perfectly sensible in ignoring the claims of our

<sup>7</sup> This is not to say such explanation is false; as a matter of fact, it is very likely true in many instances, and the philosophical implications of the location of philosophy in certain professional and institutional contexts should be taken seriously. Some sociology, for example, if true, entails that much philosophy is false, or at least seriously wrong-headed in its self-understanding and sense of its own value. The problems of self-selection in professions and of their territorial nature, however, make it difficult to stage such confrontations in terms that each discipline would recognize as relevant to itself.

philosopher of mind, just as he would ignore a physics student who did not know the requisite mathematics or an architect who could not read, much less draw, blueprints.

We can now pose JI skepticism against our three responses to the JI demand. It seems pretty clear that the IR representative will likely be unpersuasive to the JI skeptic, for the IR representative will not actually be in a position to show how it is that he is justifiably ignorant. His response will have necessarily to be a kind of “irrelevance by extrapolation,” where some substantive philosophical position is asserted (say, a form of the verification principle), and, based on this, other philosophical positions and perspectives must necessarily be false. But unless the substantive position is self-evident, it is hard to see why one could not be skeptical as to whether it actually justifies the ignorance exhibited by our IR representative. Thus, while the IR is not the same as justificatory fideism, it is, for the JI skeptic, uncomfortably close to its neighborhood, for it ends up simply regarding as irrelevant any material with which it exhibits no familiarity, and its only defense of this will simply be some substantive position that is developed on the assumption that it can ignore all the other potentially relevant philosophical approaches.

The IMR will also not impress the JI skeptic, for the JI skeptic could simply ask: Do you really accept the demand for JI? If the IMR turns out simply to be a denial of the demand, it will be either a form of justificatory fideism or a kind of irrationalism which denies that we need JI and will thus have no grounds for regarding some kinds of ignorance as justified and others as unjustified. The practical consequences of such a view are severe, implying as it does, for example, that a surgeon who kills a patient because she was ignorant of some standard medical knowledge is not epistemically blameworthy for her ignorance, since none of her ignorance stands under a justificatory demand in terms of which it can be judged legitimate or illegitimate. If the IMR representative were to concede the JI demand in contexts like this, then the question would simply shift to: On what grounds does it fail to apply in philosophy? In the end, it seems the IMR may actually be a form of despair, which could explain why sincere representatives of it would be difficult to find; chances are they would not end up as professional philosophers. For even if full realization of the JI demand were impossible, this would not mean we were free to ignore it. It could simply mean that all of our work may be very bad or have a very weak epistemic status, or that some people are more justified in their ignorance than others, but it is all a matter of degree because everyone falls short.

What about the AR? The AR is difficult to summarize, and its plausibility as a response is largely contingent on its concrete presentation. Schematically, however, an AR representative will try to respond to JI

skepticism by developing knowledge of philosophy that would presumably allow it to claim either that it is not ignorant in the way other philosophers may be or that where it is ignorant, it has internal resources to acknowledge this ignorance but not regard it as reason for dismissal. The AR representative may, for example, simply try to do work that mitigates as much as possible the force of the JI skeptic's question. The AR representative would thus ideally be in a position to say, "But I am not ignorant of the relevant alternatives, and where it appears I am, I can give an argument as to why some alternatives that may be construed as relevant are not in fact so, thus justifying my ignorance of positions based on them." I will say more about this kind of response below, but for now it is worth noting that if such a response could be offered, the JI skeptic would be forced, if he wished to continue his questioning, to become specific in his questions (asking, for example, why one does not know about *this particular* philosopher, or topic, or argument), which would change the force of his skepticism significantly, limiting it to his own knowledge, for his knowledge constrains his ability to offer specific questions. In contrast, the kind of general JI skepticism I articulated above relies on its recipient actually being defenseless against the question's highly general character: "Why should I regard your view of  $x$  as true when you are not even aware of the existing alternatives, much less able to provide reasons for why your approach is better?"

### 3

Since the problem of justified exclusion is in many respects analogous to that of justified ignorance, my discussion of it will be much briefer. The principle of justified exclusion is similar to that of justified ignorance, except here the accent falls on *ignoring* or leaving out of consideration. Exclusion in one sense, when it is an act, not only does not demand but actually forbids ignorance. I will call this conscious exclusion, whereas exclusion more generally could describe something simply left out of consideration, whether this was conscious or not. This I will call implicit exclusion. Acts of conscious exclusion, like my not citing many works of which I am aware, could be conceivably done for any variety of consciously known or knowable reasons. Acts of implicit exclusion are more general and less determinate. Any exclusion can be tentatively classed as implicit until further knowledge leads one to believe that the exclusion can reasonably be seen as conscious and not simply, say, an omission based on total ignorance. Practically every feature and problem that is raised by JI skepticism is translatable into a form of JE skepticism, but here I simply assume those problems and focus on some distinctive elements of exclusion.

Conscious exclusion is based on some knowledge of the thing excluded. One could not consciously exclude, in my sense, something of which one was totally ignorant. One could exclude things of which one was partially ignorant on precisely the grounds of one's partial ignorance: for example, I may exclude serious reference to quantum mechanics in conversations because I do not really understand quantum mechanics. Justified exclusion, unlike JI, could thus be based on knowledge, assuming it is conscious exclusion. If we consider our philosopher of mind, for example, his work implicitly excludes most of the history of philosophy and in all likelihood consciously excludes a number of other writers whose work he finds irrelevant to his task. Relevance is a crucial concept here, for many acts of this sort of exclusion will be framed in terms of a distinction between relevance and irrelevance. If the justification of exclusion is at issue, then, some attention needs to be given to relevance construal.

Relevance is a fundamental concept, for a little reflection reveals that it is basic to many of our assessments and reasoning processes. A simple example, one in which we are likely to regard the relevance construal as justified, may help get at what occurs in a relevance construal. If we return to our soldier in southern France, we can consider that he will most likely exclude from consideration during a battle the contents of his tent. This example is trivial, but it makes an important point: relevance seems to be a kind of, if not simply synonymous with, *mattering*. If one asked the soldier why, while being shot at, he did not consider what was in his tent, he might respond (angrily and with incredulity) that his tent did not matter while he was in a battle. No doubt, assuming no unusual circumstances, we would agree with the soldier, that is, we would judge his exclusion justified, just as we would judge his implicit exclusion of many other things justified in such circumstances.

If relevance construals are a kind of *mattering* assessment, we need to look more closely at the structure of such construals to see whether that structure can give us a clue to how things *matter* and how some assessments of *mattering* are justified while others clearly are not.

Saying something matters, in the sense of its being relevant, always has an implicit structure, composed minimally of a *mattering* object (what matters), which will typically be in the grammatical subject position, and an indirect object, usually preceded by either the preposition "for" or "to," and sometimes an adverbial clause. So our soldier might say, "The contents of my tent don't matter *while* I'm in battle." Implicitly he is saying they do not matter *to him*. This indicates a further feature of relevance construals: they are based on what I will call situational assessments, which are themselves located in a broader but not necessarily defined or determinate space.

The situation of the soldier is battle, which he assesses as having a certain import. That import then functions to render determinate, and therefore narrow, the valid frame of concerns for him. This frame of concerns would presumably consist in things like avoiding being shot, returning fire, attending to the shouts of his sergeant, and so forth. Outside this valid frame of concerns is everything else, including the contents of his tent. To summarize what we have discussed so far in terms of the structure of the relevance or mattering, the object of such a construal is related to the indirect object (the soldier in battle) as either part of the situation or not. This situational localization is at least partly what we then express in the verb “to matter” when we connect the mattering object and the indirect object to which it is related. Notice that this is an intrinsically evaluative process, for it assumes that whoever is making the statement has assessed the situation of the indirect object as being of a certain sort.

This analysis helps us see more precisely what is occurring in a relevance construal. An implicit situational assessment occurs that, among other things, defines the situation and the valid frame of concerns within that situation, and then based on that evaluation includes or excludes from that situation the object whose relevance is in question. Recall, however, that I said such situational assessments occur in a broader but undetermined space. That space is what allows one to consider an object and determine whether it should or should not be included in the situation as one has assessed it. Precisely because of this background function, this space is not determined in the relevance construal itself but forms that background in which such a construal can take place. If this background space were not present, it would mean situational assessments were invariant and given in advance, such that a question as to whether some object belonged in the situation could not arise. It is valuable to see that part of all situational assessments is precisely an assessment of them so that things internal to the situation have precisely this invariant and given character. Certain parts of a situation are constitutive of it such that one would not, for example, both assess a situation as being, say, a battle and then wonder whether combat is part of that situation. Relevance construals thus have at issue, among other things, how one is to characterize the situation, and if one is genuinely wondering whether an object belongs to a situation, the answer could lead to minor or substantive revisions of one’s original situational assessment.

We can now understand better what might justify many forms of exclusion, such as those of our philosopher of mind. In regarding, say, the history of philosophy as irrelevant to his work and therefore excluding it from his work, he is expressing his implicit commitment to a particular situational assessment. The situation in question here might be thought of as his work, how he thinks of it, and thus which

concerns he regards as valid with respect to it. Now there is a good chance, based on how he practices philosophy, that our philosopher of mind is not aware of his situational assessment, that he has, as a consequence, certainly not articulated it. But something like his situational assessment would have to be what is articulated in order for him to attempt to justify his exclusion *and* his ignorance, for it should be clear how relevance construals would affect one's sense of what should be learned and known. Notice that the absence of such an awareness and hence articulation would mean that even if our philosopher were consciously excluding something, and thus knew what it was, he would not be in a position to justify the ground of his exclusion, viz., the situational assessment upon which the relevance construal is based.

A JE skeptic would thus ask why she should regard the philosopher's exclusions as justified, and if the philosopher's answer were based on a relevance construal, the follow-up question would be why that relevance construal itself is justified, or rational, and not simply something like a preference expression, or an expression of professional necessity.<sup>8</sup> With both JI skepticism and JE skepticism now articulated, and seen in light of the principles of JI and JE, respectively, we can turn finally to a statement of the problem that arises from conjoining the JI and the JE.

#### 4

Early in this article I spoke of the *plurality problem*, which I have left unclarified until now. The reason for this is that the plurality problem can only be properly stated and understood in the context of the considerations discussed in relation to JI and JE skepticism. The plurality problem consists in the reality that there are many approaches, figures, ideas, arguments, and so on, about which any given philosopher is totally ignorant but which are related to his own work, and related in a series of complex ways, including negative relations like mutual exclusion and value diminution.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the justificatory status of this

<sup>8</sup> Professional necessity is a fine answer in many contexts. "My boss told me to" or "this is what I have to do to get a promotion or tenure" are perfectly acceptable when the only rational concern is Max Weber's instrumental rationality (*Zweckrationalität*), but where one is claiming to be offering knowledge, such responses could only be helpful if one assumed some kind of deep rationality that was embedded in such professional necessity; that is, the conditions of professional success wonderfully map onto the conditions of genuine knowledge production.

<sup>9</sup> Value diminution might occur where much of the value ascribed to some philosopher's work arises from its apparent originality, but it is then realized that the apparent originality of the work derived from ignorance of other work that perhaps not only made the same points but made them better. Frederick Beiser appears to think this about

total ignorance is necessarily a question that can be only assessed from a second- or third-person perspective, though it can, crucially, be raised as a general problem in the first person. For a philosopher might sensibly ask, “Why, given how much I don’t know, should I think my work is ...” (one may fill in the blank: “right, as valuable as I and others regard it, not totally mistaken,” and so forth). Added to this total ignorance, there is partial ignorance, which lets the justificatory question be put acutely in the first person. Our philosopher of mind, perhaps in a period of crisis, might ask, “Why, given that I know that Hegel, Aristotle, Leibnitz, Merleau-Ponty, et al. wrote about the mind, should I assume my work is not fundamentally wrong-headed, how can I know one of them is not right in such a way that all of my work ends up being a waste?” Even if our philosopher had no such qualms, the JI skeptic could pose the same question. Moreover, the problem of justified exclusion complicates things even further, for now what comes into question is not only the rationally defensible status of one’s ignorance but also the particular shape that one’s work takes in reference to why it excludes some topics, figures, approaches, and so forth, but includes others. This exclusion, as we saw, raises the even deeper question of the justificatory status of our situational assessments; and when the situation in question is as consequential as an entire field, or one’s contribution to it, it becomes clear that most philosophers’ work, like that of our philosopher of mind, does not include as part of itself its situational assessments, giving the JE skeptic no reason to think such situational assessments have even been incorporated into the self-consciousness of the philosopher in question.

For it is crucial to see how, once the reality of situational assessments and their role in relevance construal is recognized, it makes sense to ask, “Why are you justified in excluding your situational assessment?” Notice that a philosopher could not even answer this

certain current work on German Idealism and normativity, for example (see Beiser 2009, 9–27). One need not agree with Beiser to see how, if true, his claims would diminish significantly the perceived value of some contemporary philosophy. I think there are many forms of value diminution, but this particular form might be thought of as deriving from ignorance-based value inflation. Worth pondering alongside Beiser’s point is that of W. J. Mander, who argues that British Idealism was never really refuted by analytic philosophy (see Mander 2011). Thus besides the German philosophy Beiser mentions, one might wonder why contemporary Anglophone philosophers are justified in ignoring the work of the British Idealists, particularly as it is written in English and is their direct antecedent, and whether part of Mander’s point, if valid, would not also lead to a diminished assessment of the value of some contemporary philosophy. Mander’s work, in particular, raises the worry that what the novelist and literary critic John Gardner once said about philosophy is true: “Despite the aha’s of some modern philosophers, metaphysical systems do not, generally speaking, break down, shattered by later, keener insight; they are simply abandoned—sometimes after endless tinkering and clumsy renovation—like drafty old castles” (Gardner 1978, 10).



question this until she (1) became aware of what her situational assessment was and (2) articulated it. And given that that kind of self-consciousness is downstream of being aware of one's relevance construals, a philosopher whose entire work was based on inarticulate relevance construals would come under a particularly severe form of JE skepticism. All of these considerations, taken together as the plurality problem, constitute a serious challenge to the epistemic legitimacy of a great deal of contemporary philosophy. They also, however, give us insight into a fundamental aspect of our situation as human beings, and through a consideration of this, I will suggest how the plurality problem could be approached.

## 5

Both ignorance and exclusion arise from the recognition of the inevitability and necessity of externality. Ignorance, as a concept, locates knowledge against an actually empty but conceivably (though never fully) fillable backdrop, what I will call the space of ignorance. Exclusion enacts the price we pay for determinacy, which only occurs against a backdrop of indeterminacy. This description should be augmented by seeing both knowledge and determinacy as existing *within* spaces of ignorance and exclusion, respectively.

JI and JE and the problems they collectively pose as the plurality problem can thus be seen as the question of an individual's justificatory relation to these spaces. Justified ignorance, for example, means being justified with respect to some part of the space of ignorance. What *part* of the space of ignorance, it should now be clear, can only be answered through reference to a relevance construal. Thus relevance, or mattering, is fundamental not only to JE but also to JI. For judgments that some ignorance is justified or not, like all such judgments, rely on a stable situational assessment to which the issue or area in question is being at least implicitly related. Thus it is through reference to our typically inarticulate assessment of what being a certain rank means with respect to soldierly responsibility that we regard one instance of militarily relevant ignorance as justified and another as unjustified. The same goes for many other common evaluations of this sort.

A situational assessment thus functions as a guide to what constitutes *local internality*, viz., *that in relation to which other things will be regarded as external*. One reason bringing up sociological considerations, about, say, the structure of analytic philosophy as part of the university system, and using them as a philosophical argument (for example, perhaps as an argument against some position) would not likely bring acclamation from one's fellow philosophers (regardless of

how sophisticated or rigorous such considerations may be) is precisely because of the way such considerations violate what is implicitly constitutive of the local internality of the philosophical situation. Now this helps us see not only why situational assessments are often inarticulate but also why, even if they were articulate, their articulation sometimes must be excluded from the very things they articulate. I will call this feature of certain situational assessments self-exclusive articulacy.

Situational assessments are often inarticulate because they are learned through various forms of interaction; indeed, they could simply be viewed as part of what it means to understand how to navigate and thus participate in certain contexts. They are not the sort of things that require articulation and then explicit, discursive communication through some form of overt pedagogy. Self-exclusive articulacy is a feature of situations whose articulations cannot be expressed within the situation itself. Consider a ritual that had as one of its features absolute silence during its enactment. Here an articulate situational assessment is impossible *during* the situation that is the object of the articulation. Such an articulation would violate the ritual; the absence of at least the expression of the articulation is partially constitutive of the ritual. Or imagine an esoteric teaching that is impermissible to explain, for the initiated will demonstrate their understanding partly by not requiring an explanation.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, but in a far more complex way, there are ways of doing philosophy such that an articulation of the assessments embedded in the activity would seem to lie external to the activity itself. Hence, for example, acknowledging the way or the reason one is excluding things from consideration need be no part of the activity and can even, in some circumstances, be viewed as simply ceasing the activity and taking up something else, like armchair sociology, or a nonphilosophical preface to properly philosophical arguments. Similarly, practicing philosophy in a way that acknowledges the problem of justified ignorance can be viewed not only as unnecessary but as, again, a kind of cessation of proper philosophy. It is in fact precisely such a view that seems implied in Quine's quip about philosophy and the history of philosophy, for practicing a kind of philosophy that attempted to mitigate its ignorance through study of the history of philosophy simply ceases to be philosophy on Quine's view.

Self-exclusive articulacy could be viewed as a peculiar form of another problem, what I will call reflexive recalcitrance. A position or claim is reflexively recalcitrant when it seems to resist, or be unable to

<sup>10</sup> This situation is found, for example, in Judaism, where the teaching concerning the divine chariot (in Ezekiel 1) is famously forbidden as follows: "Ma'aseh Bereshit must not be explained before two, nor Ma'aseh Merkabah before one, unless he be wise and understands it by himself."

survive, application to itself. In the strictest and most simple form, this could simply be what has been called self-referential incoherence, such as characterizes claims like “A proposition is meaningful if and only if it is analytic or empirically verifiable.” But I say “recalcitrance” because often it is difficult simply to adduce such manifestly problematic propositions. Quine’s quip, for example, if summarized into a proposition about the history of philosophy seems subject to a similar problem, but in a less straightforward way than simply violating some explicit criteria it enunciates. Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, responds to Quine’s quip as follows: “On the view that I have just sketched [of the importance of the history of philosophy for philosophy], the counter-joke is: the people interested in philosophy now are doomed to become those whom only those interested in the history of philosophy are going to be interested in in a hundred years’ time. So the philosophical nullifying of the past by this conception of the relationship of past and presents turns out to be a way of nullifying ourselves in advance” (1984, 40). What MacIntyre here describes as “nullifying ourselves” in Quine’s case is obviously not a claim for some strict logical inconsistency or incoherence in Quine’s view but rather is based on the fact that since each philosopher’s present becomes a future philosopher’s past, Quine’s position would imply something like this: eventually anyone who studies Quine will be, on Quine’s criteria, no longer a philosopher, which in turn would seem to have the consequence, very unfortunate for Quine, of making him a valid object of philosophical study only insofar as he was wrong about what philosophy is. Thus I think Quine’s view of philosophy is a fair instance of reflexive recalcitrance, even though I would not claim it is incoherent in the way the verifiability principle has commonly been regarded as incoherent.

Reflexive recalcitrance can thus be seen as characteristic of positions which exhibit a peculiar rational instability, viz., that of tending to cancel themselves just insofar as they do not except themselves from their own claims.

If a position is reflexively recalcitrant or characterized by self-exclusive articulacy, then it cannot even articulate the plurality problem on its own terms, much less attempt to justify itself with respect to it; for statements of the plurality problem *in philosophy*, that is, as a *philosophical problem*, assume that the local internality of disciplinary philosophy will not be violated by recognizing explicitly the spaces of ignorance and exclusion in which it moves and orients itself. It assumes, moreover, the ability to articulate one’s own situational assessment and to subject that assessment to criticism. Concretely, for example, this would involve the opportunity, internal to the discipline itself, to articulate features of the discipline that seem to threaten its self-

understanding, such as its nonexceptional status with respect to broader trends in the structure of the academy or culture.<sup>11</sup>

## 6

The plurality problem, and the challenge it poses to philosophy, points the way toward the determinate shape any philosophy must take if it will be able to offer a plausible response to this problem. At the core of our patterns of ignorance and exclusion are situational assessments. The adjective “situational” can now be seen to have a provisional, stand-in character, for contexts could easily permit us to replace or supplement it with something more specific, if this were desirable, such as “relevance as construed by disciplinary assessment.” What situational assessments reveal, however, is a general feature of life, which can now be stated: essential to how we navigate the spaces of ignorance and exclusion are evaluations of (1) what the world, or reality, is like and (2) how that reality provides a normative framework in terms of which we can make tacit and articulate decisions about what *matters* to us, what is relevant with respect to any given thing. And professional academics, in this case philosophers, are committed de facto by disciplinary participation to institutionalized assessments with metaphysical and normative force whose recognized nature is excluded from the discipline’s self-understanding.

Both the determinacy and the normative force of these evaluations, it must be remembered, do not entail that we are typically aware of, much less able effectively to articulate, them. The realized potential to do so, however, would mean a greater degree of access to, and control over, the normative descriptions of reality that guide our activities and disciplines, allowing certain things to show up as proper objects of attention and letting others be excluded from consideration, or perhaps left entirely outside our knowledge. It would also render these articulations more easily the object of criticism and revision. I say more easily for I think attentiveness to many instances of parties “talking past”

<sup>11</sup> Sociologist Andrew Abbott, for example, has done some of the most insightful work on the evolution and nature of the modern scholarly system, particularly its social scientific and humanistic sides. But much of his analysis (see especially Abbott 1988, 2001, and 2014) raises serious questions about the epistemic legitimacy of many fields, including philosophy. Philosophy as an institutionalized practice is subject to a number of broader trends, well documented by Abbott, that have nothing intrinsically to do with philosophy itself yet profoundly shape the discipline. Some account of how this subjection to powerful but nonphilosophical influence does not undermine the self-perceived rational power and legitimacy of philosophy either is or is not a valid and important philosophical issue. Regardless of one’s view on this, much of contemporary philosophy ignores the problem, taking no explicit position, either a defense in light of the problem or an explanation of why it does not constitute a genuine problem, in spite of its seeming to.

each other reveals that their actual disagreements often reside in their disparate but unacknowledged situational assessments. To take an obvious political example, profound disagreement on what exactly constitutes the “Arab-Israeli conflict” precludes any fruitful discussion about how to resolve it. Likewise, in domestic policy, verbal agreement that “poverty is a problem” is meaningless as a basis for resolving disputes about poverty policy, precisely because different groups understand what precisely “poverty” in American society means in radically different ways, but these understandings are not typically themselves the object of articulation and debate.

In academia, disciplinary conflict is rooted largely in conflicting disciplinary assessments of method, value, and thus relevance: this is why economists and anthropologists, or historians and scientists, for example, have trouble speaking at a disciplinary level. Moreover, these disciplinary assessments are typically embedded in disciplinary narratives that link history, value, and method (for example, “Long ago, before the scientific method, myth and religion . . .”). Since such assessments and narratives are rarely articulate, however, and are not the explicit focus of the disagreements, they often function as the silent suppliers of criteria and concerns in terms of which the opposed party’s position simply lacks the plausibility or rationality that it possesses when one inhabits it from within.

Any given philosophy, then, already embodies substantive philosophical commitments simply in virtue of choosing some topics, styles, figures, and methods rather than others; and these commitments take on social reality and force when they are embedded in the discipline. Should not part of any philosophy then be at least the articulation, if not the defense, of those substantive commitments? If a philosopher seems unaware of these commitments in terms of which he would have to try to meet the plurality problem, and thus justify his ignorance and exclusions, this could be viewed as, at best, a kind of immaturity—or “self-imposed tutelage,” one that raises the question as to whether his philosophy could maintain its identity while undergoing the process of articulation or whether it does not, perhaps, suffer from self-exclusive articulacy, and thus a form of reflexive recalcitrance. Such philosophy lives only when it sleeps but risks death when it awakens to itself.

Sleep may be tempting, however, for the substantive commitments that underlie our most fundamental and complex assessments of what matters are commitments ultimately to some vision of reality, the depiction of which would be nothing less than the unfurling of the metaphysics that justify our more quotidian philosophical pursuits. Articulating our substantive commitments would thus involve stepping onto a path that many philosophers think they have left behind, and gladly, to focus on some more “proper” or “relevant” sets of concerns, concerns whose propriety and relevance are, by happy coincidence, concordant

with those of the professional community on whose approbation a philosophical career depends. Yet barring hubris or fideism, how could a discipline so noted for its lack of progress justify such ignorance and exclusion without recourse simply to an alternate, if inchoate, depiction of the world and of what matters in light of that depiction?

It seems in the end that only a philosophy that is self-conscious of itself as an activity and attempts to articulate forthrightly its substantive commitments could meet the plurality problem and potentially survive the encounter, could remain itself after the chastening that comes with exposure to the externality of the unknown and the ignored. Such a philosophy understands itself inescapably as a form of self-knowledge. This has been an essay toward such a philosophy.

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