

A UNIFIED ACCOUNT OF MOTIVATED IGNORANCE

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ABSTRACT

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Motivated ignorance is a state of not-knowing that is cultivated or maintained by a person in order to serve their motives (i.e. their desires, interests, needs, or goals). While there has been a fair amount of work done by some feminist philosophers and critical philosophers of race on cultivated forms of ignorance in general, a detailed account of motivated ignorance in particular has not been given. In my dissertation, I offer just such an account—examining both what it means for a person to not-know in the particular way that characterizes motivated ignorance and how this particular form of not-knowing is produced. I call my account a unified one because it asks both of these questions, while current accounts of ignorance generally only address either one or the other. The accounts of the feminist and critical race theorists mentioned above (who I call epistemologists of ignorance) usually focus on the latter practical question, while those of epistemologists who are neither feminist epistemologists nor epistemologists of ignorance (who I call mainstream epistemologists) only address the former conceptual question.

In the first two chapters of my dissertation, I argue that it is not only possible to create a unified account of ignorance that combines the methodologies and insights of mainstream epistemologists and epistemologists of ignorance, but that it is beneficial for an account of motivated ignorance to be a unified one. I develop my two-part definition of motivated ignorance in the remaining chapters. In the third chapter, I argue that the state of not-knowing that characterizes motivated ignorance is best understood as one of agential insensitivity. This kind of insensitivity occurs when an agent's failure either to attend to relevant and available evidence, or

to change their beliefs in response to this evidence, results in their beliefs not tracking truth or evidence. Finally, in the fourth chapter, I argue that in cases of motivated ignorance agential insensitivity is produced by an agent's motives exerting influence on their cognitive processes, especially when these motives are affective ones. Furthermore, since our motives are socially shaped, the production of motivated ignorance is a deeply social process even though it takes place largely at the level of individual cognition.

For my grandmothers, Lynette Woomer and Caroline Brunetto,
and for the many other women on whose shoulders I stand.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1: PAVING THE WAY FOR A UNIFIED ACCOUNT OF IGNORANCE	7
1. The Mainstream View of Ignorance	7
2. The Active View of Ignorance.....	12
2.1. The Passivity Objection	14
2.2. The Complementarity Objection.....	17
2.3. The Negativity Objection.....	21
3. More Compatible Than They Seem.....	22
4. Conclusion	29
CHAPTER 2: WHY A UNIFIED ACCOUNT?	31
1. Benefits of Combining Conceptual and Practical Analysis.....	32
2. Benefits of Combining Insights from the Mainstream and Active Views.....	35
3. Benefits of Combining the Mainstream and Active Models of Epistemic Subjects.....	39
3.1. Reframing the Conceptual Analysis of the Mainstream View	40
3.2. Reframing the Practical Analysis of the Active View	43
4. Conclusion	46
CHAPTER 3: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATED IGNORANCE.....	48
1. Nozick's Concept of Insensitivity.....	49
2. Two Shifts in Focus	52
3. Agential Insensitivity	55
4. Agential Insensitivity in More Detail	60
4.1. Attention Failures.....	60
4.2. Uptake Failures	63
5. Conclusion	65
CHAPTER 4: A PRACTICAL ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATED IGNORANCE.....	67
1. What Are Motives?	69
2. How Do Motives Influence Agential Insensitivity?	74
2.1. Motivated Attention Failures	77
2.2. Motivated Uptake Failures.....	82
3. How Does Social Location Impact Our Motives?	87
3.1. Effects of Social Location on Motives.....	88
3.2. Effects of Social Location on Emotions	90
4. Conclusion	94
CONCLUSION.....	96
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	102

INTRODUCTION

The epistemology of ignorance was born as a field of inquiry when feminist philosophers and critical philosophers of race, such as Marilyn Frye, Charles Mills, and Nancy Tuana, sought to transform the usual ways of thinking about ignorance and its role in the production of knowledge. Epistemologists of ignorance (as I will call theorists in the tradition mentioned above) aimed to complicate common conceptions of ignorance as a lack of knowledge primarily by arguing that ignorance can be cultivated and maintained by knowers with the support of social-political structures.¹ I will call this form of ignorance *actively produced ignorance*. We can break this main argument into two smaller points—(1) that people can be active participants in their own ignorance, and (2) that social-political structures encourage people to cultivate ignorance about certain things. As Frye says, "Our ignorance is perpetuated for us in many ways and we have many ways of perpetuating it for ourselves" (Frye 1983, 119).

Although there are two parts of this picture, epistemologists of ignorance mostly focus on the second, theorizing mainly about the many different ways in which social-political structures can encourage people to cultivate ignorance about certain things. However, the question of how individual knowers can be active participants in their own ignorance is largely left open.

Many epistemologists of ignorance point to the fact that some ignorant subjects seem to be resistant to evidence as reason to think that these subjects are actively participating in their own ignorance. Actively ignorant subjects seem to be able to "be right there and see and hear, and yet not know" (Frye 1983, 120). It is not always the case that ignorant subjects don't have

¹ Throughout my dissertation, I use "epistemologists of ignorance" to mean feminist philosophers and critical philosophers of race who take up questions of ignorance and whose collective body of work has come to be labeled "epistemologies of ignorance." It is important to note that I do not take the epistemology of ignorance to be coextensive with feminist epistemology and thus some of the critiques I express of the former do not extend to the latter.

access to the necessary information to know—it is possible for them to have access to it and still fail to know. In a similar vein, Mills says that "The white delusion of racial superiority inoculates itself against refutation" (Mills 2007, 19). In instances of white ignorance and other actively produced forms of ignorance, even when an ignorant subject encounters evidence contrary to their false beliefs, they avoid changing them—usually by misinterpreting this evidence in order to render it compatible with their existing beliefs. This kind of ignorance "fights back" (Mills 2007, 13). Moreover, many epistemologists of ignorance posit that there is something willful and self-interested about this kind of resistance to evidence. After all, members of dominant groups reap many benefits from being ignorant.

However, few epistemologists of ignorance offer a story for *how* an agent can participate in their own ignorance. Frye suggests that the answer to this question lies in attention. For example, she thinks that those of dominant identities are too focused on impressing each other, and in the case of white women, too focused on being given the full privileges that white men possess, to notice what is really going on (Frye 1983, 121). Mills posits that the answer lies in cognition more generally.² He sees white ignorance of racial realities as involving "a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)" (Mills 1997, 18). In other words, the location of white people at the top of the racial hierarchy encourages them to misunderstand the world in order to justify and preserve their social position, and they develop ways of processing information that allow them to do this. Mills, however, does not provide many details about how such distorted cognition operates in individual agents.

² Many other epistemologists of ignorance seem to accept Mills' picture as an explanation of more willful forms of actively produced ignorance.

It is these gaps in the epistemology of ignorance literature that motivate my dissertation, which will seek to provide an account that offers more insight into both how to conceptualize a state of not-knowing that is resistant to evidence in the ways that epistemologists of ignorance have noted, and also how this state of not-knowing can be produced in individual ignorant subjects. I will not, however, be providing an account of actively produced ignorance in general, but only of one type of actively produced ignorance that I will call motivated ignorance.

Motivated ignorance is, at its most basic, a state of not-knowing that is cultivated or maintained by a person in order to serve their motives (i.e. their desires, interests, needs, or goals). In cases of motivated ignorance, the two sides of actively produced ignorance discussed above arguably come most clearly into view. First, the motivatedly ignorant subject is an active participant in their own ignorance, since it is their own motives that are driving the cultivation and maintenance of this ignorance. Second, while motivated ignorance does not have to be socially supported, it often is due to the influence our social location has on our motives. It is my hope, then, that many aspects of my account of motivated ignorance will also prove useful for future work on actively produced ignorance.

Let's examine some of the specifics of the account I am offering. In this dissertation, I develop a unified account of motivated ignorance. By my definition, motivated ignorance is characterized by a particular kind of not-knowing (resistance to evidence) that is produced in a particular kind of way (cultivated or maintained in order to serve some motive). My dissertation examines both what it means for a person to not-know in the particular way that characterizes motivated ignorance and how this particular form of not-knowing is produced.

By a *unified account*, I mean one that combines the methodologies and insights of the view of ignorance held by most contemporary mainstream epistemologists (by which I mean

epistemologists who are neither feminist epistemologists nor epistemologists of ignorance) and the view of ignorance held by most epistemologists of ignorance. I will call the former *the mainstream view of ignorance* and the latter *the active view of ignorance*. Because these two views are generally understood to be opposed to one another, my first task is to show that it is possible to develop such an account. I take up this task in my first chapter, arguing that the mainstream and active views of ignorance are actually more compatible than they seem at first glance because they are addressing two different questions about ignorance. The mainstream view is addressing the question of what it means for a person to be ignorant, while the active view is addressing the question of how ignorance is produced. I call inquiry into the former question *conceptual inquiry*, and inquiry into the latter *practical inquiry*. Since these views are actually compatible, this opens up the possibility of creating a unified account of ignorance that engages in both kinds of inquiry.

In my second chapter, I argue that it is not only *possible* to create a unified account of ignorance, but that it is *beneficial* for an account of motivated ignorance to be a unified one. There are three main kinds of benefits that come from offering a unified account of motivated ignorance—those that come from combining the *methodologies* of the mainstream and active views, those that come from combining their *substantive insights*, and those that come from combining their understandings of *epistemic subjects*. Combining the methodologies of the two views enables a unified account to explain more aspects of motivated ignorance than a non-unified account could, while combining their insights allows a unified account to avoid losing its normative force, as some active accounts arguably do, and avoid lapsing into a passive notion of ignorance, as most mainstream accounts do. Finally, combining their understandings of epistemic subjects enables a unified account to theorize about the motivated ignorance of

subjects who are socially situated, but still individuated. When I talk about epistemic agents in the future, it is this two-part conception that I have in mind. This conception of epistemic agents is necessary for an account of motivated ignorance because of the key role that an individual agent's motives play in the production of such ignorance. Understanding this role requires taking the interests, desires, needs, emotions, and so forth of an agent into account, as well as understanding how these things are affected by the social location of that agent. Neither the mainstream view's focus on generic, individuated subjects nor the active view's focus on subjects as members of social groups enables us to understand both of these things.

For the remaining chapters of my dissertation, I develop my two-part definition of motivated ignorance. In my third chapter, I engage in conceptual inquiry into the particular state of not-knowing that characterizes motivated ignorance. I argue that this state of not-knowing is best understood as one in which an agent's beliefs do not respond to truth or evidence (which I call *belief-insensitivity*) as a result of that agent's failure to either attend to relevant and available evidence or to change their beliefs in response to this evidence (which I call *agential insensitivity*). My analysis in this chapter builds on Robert Nozick's concept of sensitivity, but a shift in focus is required in order to understand agential insensitivity. This shift involves focusing on the insensitivity of believers (*believer-insensitivity*), rather than beliefs, and also focusing on believer-sensitivity which is caused by agent-specific features, rather than features shared by all human knowers.

Finally, in my fourth chapter, I engage in practical inquiry into how this state of not-knowing is produced in cases of motivated ignorance. I argue that, one way that agential insensitivity is produced in cases of motivated ignorance is by an agent's motives exerting influence on their cognitive processes (which I call *motivated cognition*), especially when these

motives are affective ones. I proceed by examining two of the motivated cognitive tendencies described by psychologists—the tendency to pay more attention to evidence that confirms what we want to believe, and the tendency to evaluate evidence in favor of things we don't want to believe more harshly than evidence in favor of things we do want to believe. These tendencies can lead to attention and uptake failures, respectively. Since our motives are socially shaped, the production of motivated ignorance is a deeply social process even though it takes place largely at the level of individual cognition.

CHAPTER 1: PAVING THE WAY FOR A UNIFIED ACCOUNT OF IGNORANCE

In this chapter, I argue that the view of ignorance held by most contemporary mainstream epistemologists (which I will call *the mainstream view of ignorance*) and the view of ignorance held by most epistemologists of ignorance (which I will call *the active view of ignorance*) are more compatible than they seem at first glance, thus making it possible to develop an account of ignorance that combines elements of both views. Although the active view is generally understood to be opposed to the mainstream view, I claim that they are actually not contradictory because the accounts are addressing two different questions. This insight is important because it opens up the possibility of developing an account of ignorance that addresses both of these questions. I will call such an account a *unified account of ignorance*. In my dissertation, I am offering a unified account of one kind of ignorance in particular, namely motivated ignorance.

This chapter is divided into three sections. In the first section, I introduce the mainstream view of ignorance. In the second section, I explain the active view of ignorance and introduce three main objections that epistemologists of ignorance raise against common conceptions of ignorance. Finally, in the third section, I argue that the mainstream view is compatible with the active view because they are addressing two different questions. It is this fact that prevents the three objections raised by epistemologists of ignorance from applying to the mainstream account of ignorance.

1. The Mainstream View of Ignorance

Ignorance is commonly conceived by mainstream epistemologists as a lack of knowledge. This view presents knowledge and ignorance as diametrically opposed. Alvin

Goldman and Erik Olsson, for instance, express this point forcefully, holding that knowledge and ignorance are not just opposites but complements. They say, “Not only do knowledge and ignorance contrast with one another but they seem to exhaust the alternatives, at least for a specified person and fact” (Goldman and Olsson 2009, 19). This means that for any true statement p , “ S is ignorant of p if and only if S doesn’t know that p ” (Goldman and Olsson 2009, 20).³ In other words, for any true statement p , one can either know that p or be ignorant of p —hence, if S knows that p , then S is not ignorant of p , and if S does not know that p , then S is ignorant of p . In addition to being complementary, knowledge and ignorance are often valued differently—it is generally undesirable to be ignorant of something and the ideal is to be able to replace as much of our ignorance as possible with knowledge. Although there are variations between authors in the details, this basic conception of ignorance is widely shared among mainstream epistemologists. Hence I will call it the *mainstream view of ignorance*.

In fact, most mainstream epistemologists do not address ignorance in great detail.⁴ When ignorance is mentioned, it is usually in passing and without much attempt at analysis or definition. Epistemology has historically focused on questions such as “What is knowledge?” “What makes our beliefs justified?” “What is it that distinguishes true belief from knowledge?”

³ Goldman and Olsson specify that this only applies to true propositions. This is because Goldman distinguishes “*error* (false belief) and *ignorance* (the absence of true belief)” (Goldman 1999, 5, emphasis in original). This means that if p is false, neither knowledge that p nor ignorance of p is possible, only erroneous belief that p . I don’t think that you have to agree with this to hold that knowledge and ignorance are complements. For example, I think knowledge and ignorance are still complementary in Unger’s definition of ignorance that I discuss later in this section, which doesn’t need to specify whether p is true or false.

⁴ Philosophers from branches of philosophy outside of epistemology, however, occasionally take up questions of ignorance when it impinges on their concerns. For example, there are debates within ethics about the notion of culpable ignorance which seek to answer questions about when ignorance, and in turn actions committed or omitted due to ignorance, are blameworthy. (See, for example, Holly Smith (1983), “Culpable Ignorance,” *The Philosophical Review*, 92(4): 543-571; James Montmarquet (1995), “Culpable Ignorance and Excuses,” *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 80 (1): 41-49; Michael Zimmerman (1997), “Moral Responsibility and Ignorance,” *Ethics*, 107 (3): 410-426; and Gideon Rosen (2003), “Culpability and Ignorance,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 103(1): 61-84.) There is also a good deal of work looking at the role of ignorance in science. Going into these bodies of literature is beyond the scope of this chapter in which I will be focusing only on the treatment of ignorance in the field of epistemology.

etc. With this focus, ignorance fell into knowledge's shadow in most work in mainstream epistemology, not being seen as worthy of attention in its own right.⁵

There are, however, a few epistemologists who directly attend to ignorance. Often when epistemologists make use of the concept of ignorance, it is in the service of skepticism.⁶ For example, both Peter Unger and Keith Lehrer frame their arguments for global skepticism in terms of ignorance. In his 1971 article "Why Not Skepticism?" Lehrer refers to his position that "no one knows anything, not even that no one knows anything" as "an agnoiology" (theory of ignorance) rather than an epistemology (Lehrer 1971, 56).⁷ In the same spirit, Unger calls his 1975 book in which he argues in favor of global skepticism *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*. In both cases we see global skepticism being explicitly equated with universal ignorance.

In drawing this connection between skepticism and ignorance both Unger and Lehrer mobilize a conception of ignorance that echoes the one discussed above. Unger explicitly does so, defining ignorance as follows:

⁵ Cynthia Townley points out that this neglect of ignorance by epistemologists seems even more stark when we compare it to the attention that, for example, ethicists give to evil and vice and social-political philosophers give to injustice (Townley 2011, ix, xxi).

⁶ I focus on arguments for global skepticism in what follows, but the mainstream view of ignorance can also be appealed to in arguments for particular forms of local skepticism. One example can be seen in the debate about whether vagueness makes knowledge impossible. In this debate, the "epistemic view," one of the main proponents of which is Timothy Williamson, sees vagueness as a kind of ignorance, by which it is meant that a *p* that is vague is "either unknowably true or unknowably false" (Williamson (1992), "Vagueness and Ignorance," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 66: 146). The opposing view is one in which there is no fact of the matter about *p* and thus nothing to know or be ignorant of. (Although David Barnett points out that both of these views exclude the possibility of knowledge (Barnett (2011), "Does Vagueness Exclude Knowledge?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 82(1): 22-45.).)

⁷ Lehrer borrows the term 'agnoiology' from James Ferrier, a 19th century Scottish philosopher. Ferrier's main work, the *Institutes of Metaphysic*, is divided into three sections—Epistemology, Agnoiology, and Ontology (Keefe 2007, 297). Lehrer's sense of ignorance, however, does not quite match Ferrier's. Ferrier was not only not a skeptic, but also did not adhere to the mainstream view of ignorance that Lehrer seems to embrace. For Ferrier, not any lack of knowledge qualified as ignorance—ignorance was a failure to know what could be known and thus was an intellectual defect. Jenny Keefe summarizes his view as follows: "In Ferrier's account ignorance is the inability to know what can be known; it is an intellectual shortcoming, a defective knowledge. He is not saying that we are ignorant of that which we know but precisely the opposite: we are ignorant of what we do not but could know. He believes that when there is ignorance, there is a lack of knowledge about something that could be the object of knowledge for some intelligence" (Keefe 2007, 303).

I will say that a being is *ignorant* as to whether something is so if and only if the being does *not know* that it is so and also does *not know* that it is not so; that is, just in the case the being does not know whether or not the thing is so. And I will say that the sceptical conclusion we now seek to yield may be put like this: Everybody is always *ignorant of everything*.” (Unger 1975, 93-94, emphasis his)

Lehrer does not explicitly define ignorance like Unger, but the mainstream conception of ignorance is implicit in the framing of his global skepticism as an agnology—ignorance *must* be a lack of knowledge in order for a theory that no one knows anything to be a theory of ignorance. Ignorance is thus understood by these philosophers (explicitly by Unger and implicitly by Lehrer) to be the state of lacking knowledge that we are permanently in if we accept the radical skeptical argument that knowledge is not possible.

According to this sort of view, anything that causes someone to fall short of knowing some true statement *p* (whether by failing to believe that *p*, falsely believing that not-*p*, or truly believing that *p* in a way that is not justified or warranted) is enough to make someone ignorant of *p*. I’ll call this the *strong sense* of ignorance because, as we’ll see, it correlates with the strong sense of knowledge in which knowledge requires justification or warrant in addition to true belief. The exception to this is a view such as Goldman and Olsson’s, in which ignorance is equated with a lack of true belief and knowledge is equated with true belief. I will call this the *weak sense* of ignorance because it correlates with the weak sense of knowledge in which knowledge requires only true belief. In their view, truly believing that *p* in a way that is not justified or warranted does not make one ignorant of *p*. Goldman and Olsson support this point by saying,

If I ask you how many people in the room know that Vienna is the capital of Austria, you will tally up the number of people in the room who possess the information that Vienna is the capital of Austria. Everyone in the room who possesses the information counts as knowing the fact; everybody else in the room is ignorant of it. It doesn’t really matter, in this context, where someone apprised of the information got it. Even if they received the information from somebody

they knew wasn't trustworthy, they would still be counted as cognizant of the fact, that is, as knowing it rather than as being unaware of it. (Goldman and Olsson 2009, 19–20)⁸

Here they seek to show that under ordinary circumstances we would not count someone as ignorant of p if they had a true belief that p (evidenced in this case by their possession of the information that Vienna is the capital of Austria), regardless of how they came to hold this belief. According to their view, we might say of someone who had a true belief that p but got it from an untrustworthy source that they believe p unjustifiably or without fulfilling an anti-Gettier condition, but we wouldn't say that they are ignorant of p (Goldman and Olsson 2009, 20).

Goldman and Olsson still see themselves as presenting a version of the mainstream view of ignorance. However, ignorance is a lack of knowledge on their model only because they accept the weak sense of knowledge. If one instead accepts the strong sense of knowledge, then their definition of ignorance no longer presents us with a version of ignorance that fits in with the mainstream view, since it is possible to not know (due to having an unjustified or unwarranted true belief) but also not be ignorant.⁹ This means that ignorance would no longer be the complement of knowledge.¹⁰

⁸ Goldman and Olsson borrow this example from John Hawthorne.

⁹ In fact, some people hold exactly this type of view in which ignorance is seen as a lack of true belief *as opposed to* a lack of knowledge (let's call this *the alternative view of ignorance*). René van Woudenberg, for example, argues that "not every instance of not-knowing is a case of ignorance," even though he explicitly endorses Goldman's view that ignorance is the absence of true belief (van Woudenberg 2009, 373). This is because he accepts that a person doesn't know that p if their true belief that p is unjustified or unwarranted but also maintains that this doesn't make them ignorant of p . Rik Peels also endorses the alternative view and has been engaged in a debate with Pierre LeMorvan about whether this view or the mainstream view (which they call the "standard view") is correct for several years (starting with Rik Peels (2010), "What Is Ignorance?" *Philosophia*, 38:57–67 and Pierre LeMorvan (2011), "A Reply to Peels." *Philosophia*, 39:335–344). Weighing in on this debate is beyond the scope of my project. I focus on the mainstream view in my chapter due to its being the most widely endorsed by mainstream epistemologists and the most widely critiqued by epistemologists of ignorance.

¹⁰ Goldman and Olsson use this fact to argue in favor of accepting the weak sense of knowledge. They argue that since it is intuitive that knowledge and ignorance are complements and they can't be complements if we don't accept the weak sense of knowledge, we should accept that true belief is in fact knowledge.

Epistemologists who use ignorance to advance skeptical arguments, however, must deploy the strong sense of ignorance. This is because most skeptical arguments, including those of Unger and Lehrer, turn on showing that knowledge is impossible because it is impossible for our beliefs to be justified or warranted. Lehrer's argument that no one knows anything, for example, relies on the assumption that "if a man knows *that p*, then he is completely justified in believing *that p*" and then seeks to show that it is impossible for a belief to be completely justified (Lehrer 1971, 57, italics in original). This could not be called a theory of ignorance using the weak sense of ignorance, in which a true belief failing to be justified or warranted does not make it a case of ignorance.

2. The Active View of Ignorance

With the mainstream view of ignorance in place, I will now examine the active view of ignorance. Epistemologists of ignorance generally challenge the usual ways of thinking about ignorance and its role in the social production of knowledge. They see ignorance as a complex phenomenon that ought to be studied with the same care that epistemologists devote to knowledge. According to Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, the aim of the epistemology of ignorance is to "[identify] different forms of ignorance, examining how they are produced and sustained, and what role they play in knowledge practices" (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, 1). Epistemologists of ignorance have thus sought to complicate the common conception of ignorance as a simple lack of knowledge by arguing that there are different forms of ignorance.

In particular, epistemologists of ignorance have argued that there is an *active* form of ignorance which can be cultivated or maintained by individuals or groups in order to avoid

unwanted knowledge.¹¹ To say that this form of ignorance is active means that its development and perpetuation requires the participation of those who are ignorant—it is a result of their actions and inactions and its cultivation or maintenance is often supported by social structures. Epistemologists of ignorance were not trying to say that ignorance is *always* actively cultivated and maintained. They recognized that ignorance can also be the result of our limitations as human knowers—we lack the faculties, time, resources, or access to relevant information necessary to know all there is to know. The development of this ignorance does not require the participation of those who are affected by it, thus making it a *passive* form of ignorance. Rather, epistemologists of ignorance aimed to shed light on actively produced ignorance as a distinct and important (though often neglected) form of ignorance. Much of their work centered on exploring the social-political conditions that led to the development of particular instances of actively produced ignorance.¹² Because this focus on actively produced ignorance is central to their view, I will call it the *active view of ignorance*.

Finally, epistemologists of ignorance have examined how ignorance shapes our knowledge practices and what we know. In fact, they generally think that we can't fully understand knowledge without understanding ignorance, and thus see studying ignorance as an integral part of epistemology proper. Departing from mainstream epistemology's focus on knowledge largely to the exclusion of ignorance opened the space for new questions to be asked about knowledge and ignorance, such as, "How is ignorance produced and maintained?" "Who benefits from the production and maintenance of ignorance?" "How are knowledge and

¹¹ I use "cultivated" and "maintained" here to try to capture the participation of the ignorant subject in the formation and continuation of actively produced ignorance, respectively.

¹² Tuana, for example, examines how ignorance about women's reproductive health has been produced throughout history and Charles Mills examines the social, political, and cognitive mechanisms that lead to the production of white ignorance about racial oppression (Tuana 2006, Mills 2007).

ignorance related?” “How does the social world impact the production of ignorance and knowledge?” and so on.

Epistemologists of ignorance have generally taken their accounts to challenge the way that ignorance is commonly conceived of. Their criticisms have not, however, targeted a single account of ignorance. Rather, various epistemologists of ignorance have objected to a collection of commonly held and seemingly plausible ideas about ignorance. In general, they think that this standard picture is too simplistic, and that it overlooks the multifaceted nature of ignorance and its production.

If we examine commonalities between these various criticisms, we can identify three main objections that epistemologists of ignorance make to the standard picture of ignorance. First, they reject its characterization of ignorance as a purely passive phenomenon. Second, they deny that ignorance is simply the complement of knowledge, as the standard picture suggests. Finally, they oppose the idea that ignorance is a gap, lack, or absence. I will call these objections *the passivity objection*, *the complementarity objection*, and *the negativity objection*, respectively. As we’ll see, these objections are all intertwined, but in the following parts I will explain them separately for the sake of clarity.

2.1. The Passivity Objection

First, epistemologists of ignorance reject the notion that ignorance is always a passive phenomenon. As I said above, they are not disputing the fact that *some* ignorance is passively formed but are arguing that this is not the only kind of ignorance. Perhaps the most important insight offered by epistemologists of ignorance is that ignorance can also be constructed—it is “often an active social production” (Bailey 2007, 77). Frye, for example, writes that

ignorance is not something simple: it is not a simple lack, absence or emptiness, and it is not a passive state. Ignorance of this sort—the determined ignorance most white Americans have of American Indian tribes and clans, the ostrichlike ignorance most white Americans have of the histories of Asian peoples in this country, the impoverishing ignorance most white Americans have of Black language—ignorance of these sorts is a complex result of many acts and many negligences. To begin to appreciate this one need only hear the active verb ‘to ignore’ in the word ‘ignorance’. Our ignorance is perpetuated for us in many ways and we have many ways of perpetuating it ourselves. (Frye 1983, 118–119)

Here Frye denies that a purely passive conception of ignorance is sufficient to describe the ignorance of most white Americans about other racial groups. For Frye, this kind of ignorance does not involve simply not knowing something, but *ignoring* something an individual or group does not want to know. This kind of ignoring does not happen passively, but is the result of many actions and negligences on the part of an individual or group, often within a wider social-political structure that supports and encourages this ignoring.¹³

The passivity objection is then at heart about how (and why) ignorance comes to be. Epistemologists of ignorance think it is mistaken to view all ignorance as “an accidental by-product of the limited time and resources that human beings have to investigate and understand their world” (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, 1).¹⁴ They think that some ignorance is instead better understood as “a practice with supporting social causes as complex as those involved in knowledge practices” (Tuana 2004, 195). We see here that what really separates the active form of ignorance from the passive form is a difference in how and why they are formed. Actively produced ignorance is itself a practice rather than a by-product of knowledge practices. It has

¹³ It is important to note here that both actions *and* inactions are active ways of maintaining ignorance. As Medina says, “Even if indirectly, by omission and inaction, one becomes an active participant in one’s own ignorance if one lets it sit and grow, paying no attention to its roots and its ramifications. One’s *inattention* to the ignorance one partakes in becomes *complicity* and *active participation*. ... One’s participation in the collective bodies of ignorance one has inherited becomes *active*, because one acts on it and fails to act against it, whether one knows it or not, and whether one wills it or not” (Medina 2012, 140).

¹⁴ When epistemologists of ignorance specify that actively produced ignorance is not accidental, they don’t seem to mean that passively formed ignorance is a result of chance or is formed for no reason, but that its formation lacks the particular causes that they are interested in, namely social-political structures or individual/group actions in the context of social-political structures.

social-structural causes instead of causes solely rooted in the limitations of human knowers. In short, it is cultivated by the actions and avoidances of individuals and groups in the context of a social structure that informs these, and thus requires the participation of those who are ignorant (even in cases that involve negligence).

Different ideas of what produces ignorance also led to different ideas about what will change it. One reason epistemologists of ignorance reject purely passive conceptions of ignorance is because they give the impression that acquiring more information or knowledge will always eliminate ignorance. This may well work if ignorance is passive—if it is just a lack of knowledge based on limited time or resources or one's not having encountered the right information. However, if ignorance is being actively produced on the individual or social level, then things are not that simple. Charles Mills, for example, explains how the ignorance most white people have about racial realities can fail to be straightforwardly eliminated by knowledge. In describing this phenomenon, which he calls 'white ignorance', Mills asks us to

...imagine an ignorance that resists. Imagine an ignorance that fights back. Imagine an ignorance militant, aggressive, not to be intimidated, an ignorance that is active, dynamic, that refuses to go quietly—not at all confined to the illiterate and uneducated but propagated at the highest levels of the land, indeed presenting itself unblushingly as *knowledge*. (Mills 2007, 13, emphasis in original)

We see here that, like Frye, Mills explicitly rejects a passive conception of ignorance. In his view, actively produced ignorance doesn't always disappear in response to evidence. Instead, "it insulates itself against refutation" (Mills 2007, 19). Part of actively producing ignorance, according to Mills, is developing the social and cognitive mechanisms, such as enshrining some events rather than others in the public memory, that allow individuals and groups to maintain this ignorance and defend it against possible attacks. This makes it possible for a person who is ignorant in this way to, as Frye puts it, "be right there and see and hear, and yet not know" (Frye

1983, 120). As such, the active form of ignorance can be developed to serve as a shield against unwanted knowledge.

To the extent that our standard ways of thinking about ignorance are committed to a purely passive view of ignorance, then, these ways of thinking need to be revised.

Epistemologists of ignorance have shown that one important form of ignorance is actively cultivated and maintained. The passivity objection demands that this type of ignorance be taken into account.

2.2. The Complementarity Objection

Second, many epistemologists of ignorance object to seeing knowledge and ignorance as complementary. Seeing knowledge and ignorance as complements, as we saw above, involves seeing them as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive. On this view, ignorance is what knowledge is not. Sullivan and Tuana think that this characterization of ignorance explains why the term ‘epistemology of ignorance’ seems strange to some philosophers. As they explain:

Given that epistemology is the study of how one knows and ignorance is a condition of not knowing, epistemology would seem to have nothing to do with ignorance. At best, it might appear that the two concepts are related in that epistemology studies the operations of knowledge with the goal of eliminating ignorance. But in either case, epistemology and ignorance seem diametrically opposed. (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, 1)

The heart of the complementarity objection seems to be that when knowledge and ignorance are seen as diametrically opposed in this way, ignorance either becomes viewed as irrelevant to epistemology or as an obstacle to be eliminated by epistemology.¹⁵

In the first case, assuming that ignorance is complementary to knowledge often leads epistemologists to pay less attention to ignorance than to knowledge—there is no need to attend

¹⁵ It is probably worth noting that this is not actually the goal of most mainstream epistemology. The former option of viewing ignorance as irrelevant to epistemology seems much more prevalent.

to ignorance carefully because its nature will become clear when we know what knowledge is. Epistemologists of ignorance not only reject this line of thought, but they often see understanding ignorance as crucial to understanding knowledge. Tuana says, for example, “If we are to fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of features that account for why something is known, we must also understand the practices that account for *not* knowing, that is, for our own *lack* of knowledge about a phenomena [sic]” (Tuana 2004, 194-195). For epistemologists of ignorance, knowledge, ignorance, and their relative modes of production are intimately related and so studying ignorance should also be seen as a major task of epistemology.

The second possible outcome of accepting the complementarity thesis is that it may lead one to think that it is always possible for knowledge to directly eliminate ignorance, and vice versa. If eradicating ignorance is a goal of epistemology, as Sullivan and Tuana think it is, then gaining knowledge must be able to eradicate ignorance. Many epistemologists of ignorance think this paints an inaccurate picture of the relationship between knowledge and ignorance. They argue that, once we understand more about how ignorance is produced and sustained, we see that the relationship is not always so straightforward. Shannon Sullivan, for example, argues that knowledge and ignorance often intertwine and inform one another and so cannot always be understood as separate and opposed. She says that ignorance is not always a lack of knowledge, but can also be “an active production of particular kinds of knowledge for various social and political purposes” (Sullivan 2007, 154). In other words, ignorance is not always missing knowledge, but it can also take the form of particular kinds of distorted knowledge. In turn, we also have to “peek behind knowledge ... to see what unknowledges help compose it and upon which that knowledge depends” (Sullivan 2007, 154). In Sullivan’s view, then, ignorance can be

formed by or rest on knowledge and knowledge can likewise be formed by or rest on ignorance. In order to better capture this mutually informing relationship, Sullivan calls this kind of ignorance “ignorance/knowledge” (Sullivan 2007, 154). This locution is not meant to collapse knowledge and ignorance into one thing but to challenge the complementarity of ignorance and knowledge—thus casting doubt on views like Goldman and Olsson’s which see a person as necessarily either knowing or being ignorant of any given truth.¹⁶

To illustrate, consider Sullivan’s example of the ignorance/knowledge that people from the U.S. often have of Puerto Rico. In an effort to keep European nations out of Latin America in the aftermath of the Spanish-American War, the United States legally established Puerto Rico as a colony in 1900. The colonization reflected the conflicted feelings that the U.S. had towards Puerto Rico: “Too vital to U.S. interests to be allowed independence, Puerto Rico also was perceived as being too dissimilar to the United States to incorporate into the Union” (Sullivan 2007, 157). When Puerto Rico became a colony of the United States, most people in the U.S. knew very little about it, though many were curious. The U.S. government made efforts to satisfy this curiosity by providing knowledge about Puerto Rico that reflected what it wanted its citizens to know about the islands. This knowledge about Puerto Rico was filtered through a nationalistic lens, mostly focusing on how the island could benefit the United States. For example, the island’s name was changed to “Porto Rico” in the Treaty of Paris so it would be easier for English speakers to pronounce, Puerto Ricans were portrayed as docile and capable of being

¹⁶ Lorraine Code argues that it is mainstream epistemologists’ focus on knowledge of individual propositions that creates the illusion that knowledge and ignorance are complementary. If we are just focusing on a single *p*, then a claim like Goldman and Olsson’s that the only two options are that we either know that *p* or we are ignorant of *p* seems intuitive. However, Code thinks this loses sight of the context and complexities of ignorance. She says, “Nonetheless, the *S*-knows-that-*p* epistemology, of which I have been consistently critical, holds a straightforward ignorance/knowledge opposition in place, together with an equally straightforward assumption that knowledge achieved can erase ignorance with one stroke. Singly asserted propositions are like that: open to counterassertion that annuls their claims. In fact, integral to the structures of mainstream epistemology is this either/or (either knowledge or ignorance) structure that is too crude to engage well with the complexities—the ecological questions and the responsibility imperatives, both epistemic and moral—invoked by ignorance” (Code 2007, 157).

civilized with guidance from the U.S., and World Fair exhibits about Puerto Rico focused on what natural resources the island offered rather than the Puerto Rican people and their cultural practices (Sullivan 2007, 158-160). Sullivan says of this that

United Staters' ignorance of their new possessions needed to be fought with a particular kind of knowledge that would "justify... the acquisition of new territory" and the United States' new position as owners of overseas colonies (ibid.). The lack of United Staters' knowledge of their new colonies was to be filled with a knowledge built of certain ways of not knowing them. United Staters' ignorance of Puerto Rico would not so much be eliminated as it would be replaced by an ignorance/knowledge of various facets of Puerto Rican life and culture, actively produced to serve the interests of white U.S. citizens. (Sullivan 2007, 157-158, quote from U.S. diplomat William Buchanan in Duany 2002, 45)

Sullivan's point here is that the lack of knowledge that people in the U.S. had about Puerto Rico was not simply eliminated by knowledge. Rather, it was replaced by a new kind of ignorance (ignorance/knowledge) which incorporated particular kinds of knowledge that presented the version of Puerto Rico that the U.S. government wanted its citizens to see. She says, "Why do I know so little about Puerto Rico? Because, seemingly, there is so little that is worth knowing: Puerto Ricans are a childlike, ignorant people, helplessly dependent upon the United States for any and all solutions to the island's problems. This is to say that I know so little about Puerto Rico because I know so much about it" (Sullivan 2007, 168). There is not a strict distinction between knowledge and ignorance in this case, according to Sullivan, nor does one straightforwardly eliminate the other.

Although I will later challenge some aspects of Sullivan's interpretation of the Puerto Rico case, I think we should take the point that knowledge of one sort can be used as an instrument to create or enforce ignorance of another (often closely related) sort, and vice versa. Thus, as the complementarity objection claims, the standard picture of ignorance goes wrong in portraying knowledge and ignorance as simplistically opposed to one another.

2.3. The Negativity Objection

Third, many epistemologists of ignorance object to the characterization of ignorance as a gap, lack, or absence. We saw Frye make this complaint above. Tuana also seems bothered by this characterization, saying, “Ignorance in the realm of science is typically depicted as a gap in knowledge: something that we do not (yet) know. But the condition of not knowing is not (always) that simple” (Tuana 2006, 3). Frye and Tuana both take issue with the common characterization of ignorance in negative terms. According to this picture, ignorance is not a positive presence; it is just the non-presence of knowledge.

This picture is problematic, first of all, because it reinforces the idea that ignorance can only be passive. Ignorance that is actively cultivated and maintained does not arise simply because knowledge is absent, but because of the actions and negligences of individuals or groups, which are often reinforced by social-political formations. Characterizing ignorance as a lack or absence of knowledge, then, encourages us to overlook this form of ignorance.

The characterization of ignorance in negative terms is also a problem because it reinforces the idea that knowledge always eliminates ignorance. As Sullivan and Tuana say, “Ignorance often is thought of as a gap in knowledge, as an epistemic oversight that easily could be remedied once it has been noticed” (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, 1). Characterizing ignorance as a gap in, lack of, or absence of knowledge creates the impression that this gap is just waiting to be filled—we need only encounter the right knowledge with which to fill it and the ignorance will be eliminated. This idea is what Tuana is referring to when she objects to ignorance being depicted as “something that we do not (yet) know” (Tuana 2006, 3). Mills also objects to this idea when he says that ignorance is mistakenly seen as “the darkness retreating before the spread of Enlightenment” (Mills 2007, 13). He is dismissing the notion that, as we progress through

time, humans are steadily and inevitably filling in the ignorance that lies outside their collective knowledge.

As we've seen, epistemologists of ignorance think this picture is inaccurate for two main reasons. First, it doesn't take the possibility of an active form of ignorance into account. As was discussed above, when ignorance is actively cultivated and maintained, it will resist being replaced by knowledge. Second, it oversimplifies the relationship between knowledge and ignorance. As we saw Sullivan argue earlier, ignorance is not always simply replaced by knowledge, but can actually be reinforced by it. Conceiving of ignorance in negative terms, then, is problematic insofar as it encourages us to develop other misconceptions about ignorance, its relation to knowledge, and how it should (and can) be addressed.

3. More Compatible Than They Seem

Having explained the basics of the mainstream view and the objections epistemologists of ignorance make against standard conceptions of ignorance, we can now assess whether these objections in fact apply to the mainstream view. While these objections may seem to apply to the mainstream view at first glance, a more careful look suggests otherwise. In fact, the mainstream view and active view are more compatible than they may first appear to be.

Before explaining why the views are compatible, let's first try to understand why they seem to be in conflict. To start with, the complementarity and negativity objections are criticizing actual tenets of the mainstream view. The mainstream view *does* see knowledge and ignorance as complements, and it does define ignorance in primarily negative terms as a lack of knowledge. There would then appear to be a conflict between the two views.

Whether the passivity objection points to an apparent conflict with the mainstream view is less straightforward than with the other objections. This is because, unlike in the cases of the complementarity and negativity objections, epistemologists who support the mainstream view generally do not explicitly say that ignorance is passive. However, while these epistemologists may not say that ignorance is passive, they also do not say that it can be active.¹⁷ The mainstream view again seems to be in conflict with the active view, then, since the active view demands the recognition of a form of ignorance that is actively produced.

These apparent conflicts between the mainstream view and the active view turn out to be illusory, however, once we realize that the views are engaging in two different lines of inquiry. Ultimately the mainstream view is exploring *what it means for an individual to be ignorant*, while the active view is exploring *how ignorance can be produced*. I will call these two lines of inquiry *conceptual inquiry* and *practical inquiry*, respectively. It is only when we mistakenly take the views to be answering the same question that they seem to be in conflict. The two views are only incompatible, then, if they are each taken to give us a complete account of ignorance, which neither can give on its own.

When we take the mainstream and active views to be answering the same question, they seem to be in conflict. The mainstream view seems simplistic and inaccurate to epistemologists of ignorance because it is unable to account for the different ways ignorance is produced and the varied forms of ignorance (including an active form) that grow out of them. On the other hand, the active view seems lacking from the mainstream viewpoint because it has no clear account of the nature of ignorance. Moreover, some of those who favor the active view seem to wrongly deny that knowledge and ignorance are incompatible or complementary.

¹⁷ In his 1999 book *Knowledge in a Social World*, Goldman does entertain the possibility of ignorance having social causes, but doesn't seem to think that actively produced ignorance is very prevalent or influential (Goldman 1999).

Rather than witnessing a genuine conflict, what we are seeing here is that the two views are addressing different questions. This means that the accounts are not opposed but parallel to one another. The mainstream view is addressing the question of what it means to be ignorant. This question is pursued in relation to other questions mainstream epistemologists are seeking to answer. The global skeptics who make use of a concept of ignorance, for example, are pursuing questions such as “What is knowledge?” “What are the conditions for the possibility of knowledge?” and “Is it possible for these conditions to be fulfilled?”. Since most mainstream epistemologists are concerned with knowledge, they take up the question of what ignorance is insofar as it is of interest to answering these other questions about knowledge. It is also taken up in the same way these other questions are—by looking for the conditions under which an individual knower can be said to be ignorant of some statement *p*.

The active view, on the other hand, is addressing the question of how ignorance is produced. As in the case of the mainstream view, this question is pursued in relation to other questions epistemologists of ignorance are seeking to answer. Epistemologists of ignorance working in the philosophy of science tradition, for example, are concerned with the production of ignorance as it relates to the production of knowledge. They generally do not share the concerns of mainstream epistemologists just discussed, but are instead concerned with how (scientific) knowledge is produced or not produced. Tuana, for example, says, “If we are to enrich our understanding of *the production of knowledge in a particular field*, then we must also examine the ways in which not knowing is sustained and sometimes even constructed” (Tuana 2006, 3, emphasis added). Her stated goal is not to understand what knowledge is, but to understand knowledge production, which leads her and others who share her goal to focus on the production of ignorance. Likewise, because most epistemologists of ignorance are feminist philosophers or

critical race theorists, they are interested in questions such as how social-political structures aid the production of ignorance and how actively produced ignorance reinforces various forms of oppression. Their theories thus pay more attention to the roles of social-political structures and power in the production of ignorance and knowledge than mainstream theories.

Looking at the complementarity and negativity objections more closely supports seeing these accounts as pursuing two different lines of inquiry. The apparent conflict between the two views on these points dissipates once we realize this.

Let me explain the type of reconciliation I have in mind. Start with the complementarity objection. To say that ignorance and knowledge are complements is to say that being ignorant of a fact entails not knowing that fact, and conversely. This view presents ignorance and knowledge as contrasting and mutually exclusive. At first glance, there seems to be a conflict between the mainstream and active views because some epistemologists of ignorance reject the complementarity thesis while most mainstream epistemologists endorse it. Once we look closer, we see not only that the mainstream and active views are addressing different questions, but that tensions within the active view can help us tease out the distinctions between these lines of inquiry.

Examining the question of what it means to be ignorant leads most mainstream epistemologists to conclude that it is not possible for an individual to both know and be ignorant of a given true statement. It is not clear that many epistemologists of ignorance would actually reject this idea if they were to also engage in conceptual inquiry. Most epistemologists of ignorance seem to accept that ignorance is distinct from knowledge and that to be ignorant of something means that we do not know that thing. In fact, many actually see themselves as advocating the pursuit of knowledge (as opposed to ignorance) or at least condemning ignorance.

The two most explicit examples of this are Charles Mills and Linda Martín Alcoff. While Mills rejects seeing ignorance as “the passive obverse to knowledge,” it’s clear from other remarks of Mills’ that he is primarily objecting to the element of passivity here rather than to seeing ignorance as complementary to knowledge (Mills 2007, 13). Mills sees the creation of an epistemology of ignorance as “a preliminary to reformulating an epistemology that will give us genuine knowledge” (Mills 2007, 16). In other words, he ultimately sees his theory as an exercise in “veritistic epistemology,” which is epistemology that is concerned with “truth-determination” and the production of knowledge (Mills 2007, 16, quoting from Goldman 1999). In order to preserve this orientation, he has to avail himself of notions of truth, reality, and knowledge that contrast with falsity, illusion, and ignorance. Without this contrast, epistemologies of ignorance lose their normative purpose—they cannot claim to be moving us closer to truth or knowledge but only offering another competing interpretation of the world.

Alcoff seeks to ground her observations about ignorance in a notion of truth for the same reason. She argues that ultimately any claims made about how ignorance is produced are claims about truth—they are trying to establish that this is how things really are. She says, “Any claim that charges ignorance must have access to the alternative to ignorance, must judge ignorance on the basis of some standard, and thus make a claim of improved reference and reliability” (Alcoff 2007, 54).¹⁸ Without this standard, again, we run into the problem of missing normative force. Yet, Alcoff also asserts that ignorance can be “a *substantive* epistemic practice in itself” rather than “a feature of *neglectful* epistemic practice,” which is a way of saying that ignorance can be actively produced (Alcoff 2007, 40, emphasis hers).

¹⁸ The standard of truth that Alcoff advocates is not one which is independent of social-political influences. On the contrary, Alcoff (following Horkheimer) thinks knowledge and truth are intertwined with power and social-political structures since “our best empirical descriptions refer not to found objects but to products of human praxis” (Alcoff 2007, 54-55). What she is objecting to is a postmodernist rejection of truth and a pragmatic conception of truth in which what is true is simply what has shown itself to be useful.

In the cases just considered, we have two supporters of the active view of ignorance not only openly embracing the thesis that knowledge and ignorance are complementary, but also arguing that it is necessary to preserve this contrast between knowledge or truth and ignorance for their theories to have any normative force.¹⁹ This should lead us to believe that seeing knowledge and ignorance as complementary when asking conceptual questions about ignorance doesn't present problems for the active view.

So what are we to make of Sullivan's claims about ignorance/knowledge, then? Sullivan takes the strongest stand against conceiving of ignorance and knowledge as complementary. However, I think it is arguable that she provides us with examples of something more like what Mills calls ignorance "presenting itself unblushingly as knowledge" rather than examples of ignorance composed of knowledge (or vice versa). It seems wrong, for example, to claim (as Sullivan does) that it is *knowledge* that "Puerto Ricans are a childlike, ignorant people, helplessly dependent upon the United States for any and all solutions to the island's problems" that is keeping those in the U.S. ignorant about Puerto Ricans, since this statement is actually false (Sullivan 2007, 168). It's surely more accurate to say that these ideas about Puerto Ricans wrongly *pass for* knowledge about Puerto Ricans. If this is the case, some of the force of Sullivan's argument is lost, since knowledge and ignorance remain more conceptually distinct than she wants to claim. What actually seem to be intertwined are the *production of* knowledge and that of ignorance, not ignorance and knowledge themselves. Her examples provide us with cases of ignorance being produced through the dissemination of misinformation (or selective information) which passes as knowledge, and likewise ignorance informing what comes to pass

¹⁹ We can see the beginnings of a unified account of ignorance in the work of proponents of the active view who share the mainstream epistemologists' interest in knowledge rather than strictly knowledge production, such as Mills and Alcoff. This is evidenced by their endorsement of the complementarity of knowledge and ignorance. This lends further credence to the fact that the main tenets of these views are compatible and that the conflict arises from a clash in motivating questions.

as knowledge and shaping what actual knowledge is able to be produced. All of this should suggest that conceptual inquiry about ignorance can lead us to see knowledge and ignorance as complementary, at the same time that practical inquiry about ignorance can lead us to conclude that complementarity doesn't hold when it comes to how knowledge and ignorance are produced. (That is to say, the productions of knowledge and of ignorance are not mutually exclusive and opposed, but can work in concert and reinforce one another.) These two conclusions are not contradictory.

We see a similar pattern at work when we examine the negativity objection. Epistemologists of ignorance seem to be more concerned with the passivity implied by negative definitions than with the negative definitions themselves. For example, when Sullivan and Tuana present the active view as an alternative to the mainstream view, they say, "Sometimes *what we do not know* is not a mere gap in knowledge, the accidental result of an epistemological oversight. Especially in the case of racial oppression, *a lack of knowledge or an unlearning of something previously known* often is actively produced for the purposes of domination and exploitation" (Sullivan and Tuana 2007, 1, emphasis mine). In this quote, Sullivan and Tuana use the phrases "what we do not know," "a lack of knowledge," and "an unlearning of something previously known" as stand-ins for the word 'ignorance.' This signals that it is not the negative characterization of ignorance that troubles Sullivan and Tuana, but rather the mistake of viewing certain lacks of knowledge as passive rather than actively produced. Mills likewise uses a primarily negative idea of ignorance. He calls ignorance "a non-knowing", and says that he "will use *ignorance* to cover both false belief and the absence of true belief" (Mills 2007, 16, emphasis his). What Mills is mainly interested in is not giving a more positive characterization of ignorance, but emphasizing that white ignorance is actively produced. Finally, Frye also

emphasizes passivity over negativity when, after saying that ignorance is “not a simple lack, absence or emptiness, and it is not a passive state,” she goes on to only present arguments against ignorance being a passive state and never returns to the other claims (Frye 1983, 118–119). What we see from these examples is that conceptual inquiry can lead us to see ignorance as a lack of knowledge at the same time that practical inquiry can lead us to see that this negative characterization of ignorance should not be allowed to create the impression that ignorance is always passively produced. Again, these two conclusions are not contradictory.

4. Conclusion

It seems, then, that the central tenets of the mainstream view of ignorance and the active view of ignorance are more compatible than they originally appeared to be. This realization makes it possible to develop a unified account of ignorance which seeks to answer both conceptual and practical questions about ignorance. A unified account of ignorance is thus able to incorporate the insights of both the mainstream and active views in order to offer a more robust understanding of ignorance. According to the unified view, all ignorance is a state of not knowing, but there are also different forms of ignorance which are produced in distinctive ways (including active forms which require the participation of the ignorant).

In the rest of my dissertation, I offer a unified account not of ignorance as a whole, but of one particular form of ignorance, which I call motivated ignorance. This account seeks to answer both conceptual questions about what it means to say a person is motivatedly ignorant and practical questions about how motivated ignorance is produced. In this chapter, I established that this kind of unified account is *possible* by showing that these two lines of inquiry are not necessarily in conflict. In the next chapter, I will present a case for why this kind of unified

account is also *desirable*. In other words, I will show why we would want to offer a unified account of motivated ignorance even if it is possible.

CHAPTER 2: WHY A UNIFIED ACCOUNT?

A unified account of ignorance combines both the methodologies and substantive insights of the mainstream and active views of ignorance discussed in the last chapter. It combines the methodologies of the views by giving both a conceptual analysis of what it means for a subject to be ignorant (characteristic of the mainstream view of ignorance), and a practical analysis of how ignorance is produced (characteristic of the active view of ignorance). It also combines the insights of both views by holding that to be ignorant of something means to not know that thing, as the mainstream view does, while still observing that there are different forms of ignorance that are produced in distinctive ways (including actively-produced forms), as the active view does.

In my dissertation I will be offering a unified account, not of ignorance in general, but of one particular kind of ignorance, namely motivated ignorance. I define *motivated ignorance* as a state of not-knowing that is cultivated or maintained by an epistemic agent in order to fulfill some motive of theirs. In this chapter, I explain why an account of motivated ignorance should be a unified account. This involves demonstrating why it is beneficial for my account of motivated ignorance to draw on the methodologies and main insights of both the mainstream and active views rather than only one or the other. I identify three main kinds of benefits.

First, there is the benefit which comes from combining the *methodologies* of the mainstream and active views (conceptual and practical analysis, respectively).²⁰ This is the benefit of having *multiple axes of analysis*, which allows my account to explain more aspects of

²⁰ Throughout this chapter I will use the terms *conceptual analysis* and *practical analysis* to refer to the general methodologies engaged in by the mainstream and active views, respectively. I will use the terms *mainstream view* and *active view* when I am talking not just about the methodologies of the views but also their content/particular tenets. I understand the mainstream and active views as each providing only one way of applying their respective methodologies.

ignorance and draw from the methodological strengths of both kinds of inquiry. Second, there are the benefits which come from combining the *substantive insights* of the mainstream and active views. These benefits are the *preservation of normative force* derived from tenets of the mainstream view and the *avoidance of passivity* derived from tenets of the active view.

Third, there is the benefit which comes from combining the ways that each account conceptualizes *epistemic subjects*. This combination is beneficial because it allows us to theorize about the motivated ignorance of *epistemic agents*. By *epistemic agents* I mean knowers who are socially situated, but still individuated.²¹ A unified account of motivated ignorance is able to examine what it means for knowers who are socially situated, but still individuated, to be motivatedly ignorant and what it means to produce motivated ignorance in socially situated, but still individuated, knowers. Neither the mainstream nor the active view provides this kind of analysis, which is necessary for understanding motivated ignorance for reasons I will discuss below.

This chapter will unfold in three sections. In the first section, I explain the benefit of combining the methodologies of the mainstream and active view. In the second, I explain the benefits of combining the substantive conclusions of both views. In the third, I explain the benefits of combining the ways of conceptualizing the epistemic subject of each view.

1. Benefits of Combining Conceptual and Practical Analysis

A unified account of ignorance combines the methodologies of the mainstream and active views by engaging in both conceptual and practical analysis. Doing so gives this kind of account

²¹ From here on I will use the term *epistemic agents* to refer to single socially situated knowers (i.e. an individual knower located within a particular time, place, set of social relations, etc. and with a particular psychological make-up, set of background experiences, etc.) and *individuated knowers* to refer to single, discrete knowers who can be denoted by *S* in the statement *S* knows that/is ignorant of *p*.

a methodological advantage over the mainstream and active views by *multiplying its axes of analysis*. Multiplying an account's axes of analysis involves increasing both the *questions* asked by the account and the *procedures* used to answer questions. Each of these increases has a positive effect on the account. Increasing the questions asked by my account allows it to explain more aspects of motivated ignorance, while increasing the procedures used allows it to mobilize the methodological strengths of both conceptual and practical analysis.

Conceptual analysis of ignorance asks the question of what it means to say that a subject is ignorant. Its purpose is to help us get clear about when it is appropriate to deploy the concept of ignorance, which gives us insight into its meaning and use. This kind of analysis generally proceeds by determining the conditions under which it is true to say that some person *S* is ignorant of some proposition *p*. The strength of conceptual analysis is that it brings greater clarity to a theory of ignorance by helping us draw useful distinctions between concepts, disambiguate our use of a concept, and determine precisely what we are (and are not) talking about.

Practical analysis of ignorance, on the other hand, asks the question of how ignorance is produced. Its purpose is to help us understand how ignorance is actually formed in practice. It generally proceeds by examining the various social, political, historical, and individual practices which give rise to ignorance. The strength of practical analysis is that it provides us with a way to explore the many different causes of ignorance, identify different forms of ignorance through exploring different modes of production, and helps us make sense of how individual episodes of ignorance which may otherwise seem isolated relate to one another by examining the workings of ignorance at the structural level.

Engaging in both conceptual and practical analysis, rather than just one or the other, benefits my account of motivated ignorance by multiplying its axes of analysis. This involves increasing both the questions asked by the account and the procedures used to answer questions. Each of these increases has a different effect on the account, which I will now discuss in turn.

Increasing the questions asked by my account enables it to gain insight into more aspects of motivated ignorance than it could by asking conceptual or practical questions alone. This is because each of these kinds of questions allows us to look at motivated ignorance from a different angle. By examining the subject from more angles, aspects of motivated ignorance are brought to light which would be missed when only looking from one angle. A unified account of motivated ignorance is thus able to examine both what it means for a subject to be motivatedly ignorant of something and how motivated ignorance is produced, whereas a single-axis account such as the mainstream or active view could only examine one or the other. It helps us understand both the state of not-knowing which characterizes motivated ignorance and how this particular state of not-knowing can be cultivated and maintained by a subject.

Similarly, increasing the procedures employed by my account enables it to draw on the methodological strengths of conceptual and practical analysis that I discussed above. These strengths follow from *how* each kind of analysis is carried out. Having two axes of analysis, then, allows my account to examine motivated ignorance in more ways than an account with a single axis of analysis can and each of these ways comes with its own advantages. Engaging in conceptual analysis can help my account achieve a clear understanding of my terms, for example, while engaging in practical analysis can help reveal how motivated ignorance is actually produced at the cognitive and social levels.

2. Benefits of Combining Insights from the Mainstream and Active Views

A unified account of ignorance combines not just the methodologies of the mainstream and active views, but the central conclusions that these views draw using their respective methodologies. It follows the mainstream view in conceiving of ignorance as a state of not-knowing, which means that ignorance and knowledge are complementary in this kind of account. In observing that individual knowers can participate in the production of this state of not-knowing, a unified account follows the active view. The attention to the production of ignorance which makes this observation possible is also adopted from the active view, which asserts the value and necessity of studying ignorance and its production directly. Because it can conceive of motivated ignorance as both a state of not-knowing and also actively-produced, a unified account of motivated ignorance has substantive, not just methodological, advantages over one rooted only in the insights of either the mainstream or active view. These advantages are that my account is able to *preserve its normative force* and also to *avoid implying that ignorance is passive*. I will address each of these advantages in turn.

Accepting the complementarity of knowledge and ignorance allows my account to be an example of what Charles Mills (following Alvin Goldman) calls “veritistic epistemology,” which is epistemology that is concerned with “truth-determination” and the production of knowledge (Mills 2007, 16, quoting from Goldman 1999). As we saw last chapter, both Mills and Linda Martín Alcoff have argued that preserving a concept of knowledge and truth to contrast with ignorance and falsity is crucial if an account of ignorance is to have any normative force. That is to say, if an account of ignorance wants to retain the ability to judge, condemn, or seek to rectify the ignorance it examines, it must have some standard with which to do so.²² Rejecting the

²² This doesn't necessarily imply that *all* ignorance is pernicious and should be eradicated, but that if we would like to argue that *some* is (which seems difficult to contest), we will need access to a standard which we can use to do so.

complementarity of knowledge and ignorance, as some proponents of the active view (such as Shannon Sullivan) did, then endangers the normative force of an account of ignorance. One benefit of combining the insights of the mainstream and active views is that it allows a unified account of motivated ignorance to preserve its normative force by accepting the complementarity of knowledge and ignorance, and thus preserving knowledge as both distinct from ignorance and a standard against which we can judge ignorance. While the preservation of normative force is valuable for any account of ignorance, it is especially valuable for an account of motivated ignorance, since much motivated ignorance is problematic and ought to be open to critique.

However, the mainstream view's endorsement of the complementarity of knowledge and ignorance came with its own dangers. Namely, the acceptance of complementarity, when combined with the assumption that failures to know are caused by the malfunctioning or general unreliability of epistemic sources, often led mainstream accounts to imply that ignorance is only passively produced. This is because proponents of the mainstream view saw no reason to attend to how ignorance is produced due to their assumption that ignorance and knowledge are complements. If to be ignorant of some p just means to not know that p , whatever causes us to fail to know p also causes us to be ignorant of p . Most of the causes of failures to know (and thus causes of ignorance) investigated by mainstream epistemologists are in fact passive because they generally consist of the malfunctioning or unreliability of the human faculties which are taken to be sources of knowledge (i.e. perception, reason, memory). Many mainstream epistemologists, for example, use cases involving perceptual errors to illustrate failed attempts to acquire knowledge—e.g. mistaking a mule that was painted to look like a zebra for a zebra, mistaking a white wall lit up to look green for a green wall, thinking you're in front of a fire in a dressing

gown when you're actually asleep in your bed, etc. These failures mainly occur without being encouraged by the ignorant subject.

Global skeptics provide a clear illustration of this trend. These skeptics do not think there is universal ignorance specifically because of the actions or avoidances of individuals or groups or because its development is encouraged by social-political structures. Instead, global skepticism is posited because some basic feature of our epistemic situation as human knowers necessarily prevents us from obtaining knowledge. Namely, given the nature of our faculties of perception, memory, and reason, we cannot be anything but ignorant. Lehrer, for example, advocates global skepticism because it is not possible for us to show that the skeptical hypothesis is false. Because our faculties do not allow us to distinguish between a situation in which the skeptical hypothesis is true and one in which it is not, we cannot actually prove that it is not true and thus we can't be certain that we know the things we take ourselves to know. As Lehrer says, "To meet the agnological challenge of scepticism, we must provide some argument to show that the skeptical hypothesis is false and that the beliefs of common sense are correct. ...The challenge cannot be met" (Lehrer 1971, 62). The ignorance Lehrer posits here is not actively produced in the sense of interest to epistemologists of ignorance—it is simply the result of the limited faculties of humans and does not require the motivated participation of ignorant subjects.

Epistemologists of ignorance object to purely passive conceptions of ignorance not only because they promote a simplistic idea of how ignorance is formed, but because this error can in turn create a simplistic idea of how to correct ignorance (if we just find the relevant information, we can fill in the gap). In the case of the global skeptics the latter possibility does not arise since global skeptics do not think ignorance can be corrected. However, as Mills points out, thinking of the causes of ignorance in the way that they do has led mainstream responses to skepticism

astray in other ways. He says, “The paradigm exemplars of phenomena likely to foster mistaken belief—optical illusions, hallucinations, phantom limbs, dreams—were by their very banality universal to the human condition and the epistemic remedies prescribed—for example, rejecting all but the indubitable—correspondingly abstract and general” (Mills 2007, 13). Mills’ point here is that focusing on failures of human faculties as the model of how we can become ignorant leads us to focus on “abstract” ways of trying to avoid ignorance (e.g. checking our beliefs for coherence, examining whether our methods of knowledge acquisition are reliable, assessing whether we have responsibly formed our beliefs, etc.). With this focus, the mainstream view misses the social-political causes of an active form of ignorance and the different solutions they require (e.g. changing hierarchical power structures, addressing group-based credibility deficits, expanding collective epistemic resources to include those of marginalized groups, etc.).

A unified account of ignorance prevents the acceptance of the complementarity of knowledge and ignorance from having this implication. This is because it embraces the active view's conclusion that ignorant subjects can participate in the production of their own ignorance with the support of wider social-political structures. A unified account thus does not share the assumption of the mainstream view that failures to know are produced solely (or even primarily) by the malfunctioning or inherent flaws of our sources of knowledge. It was only when paired with this assumption that the complementarity of knowledge and ignorance implied that ignorance is always (or usually) passive. Acceptance of the active view's conclusion that there are many different ways that ignorance can be produced thus has the benefit of preventing a unified account's acceptance of the complementarity of knowledge and ignorance from foreclosing the possibility of active forms of ignorance. While preventing this foreclosure is

important for any account of ignorance, it is especially crucial for my account since this foreclosure would make motivated ignorance impossible.

Combining the central conclusions of the mainstream and active views thus allows me to conceive of motivated ignorance as an actively produced state of not-knowing. This is good for two reasons. First, it gives me access to the normative resources of “veritistic epistemology”. Second, it leaves no doubt that passive and unpurposeful gaps in knowledge don’t comprise the whole story of human ignorance.

3. Benefits of Combining the Mainstream and Active Models of Epistemic Subjects

Finally, combining the mainstream and active view's concepts of epistemic subjects allows a unified account to understand ignorant subjects as both socially situated and individuated, which is necessary for theorizing about motivated ignorance. Because motivated ignorance is cultivated and maintained by an epistemic agent in order to fulfill their motives, we cannot understand it without leaving a place for agents and motives in the account. This requires individuating between agents in order to understand the motivatedly ignorant agent in their particularity—their emotional/psychological profile, needs and desires, cognitive abilities and limitations, and so forth. However, it also requires understanding the motivatedly ignorant agent as socially situated, since many of the factors just listed will be impacted by the agent's occupation of a particular social, political, and historical location.

A unified account of motivated ignorance is thus able to inquire into what it means for knowers who are socially situated, but still individuated, to be motivatedly ignorant, and how motivated ignorance is produced in socially situated, but still individuated, knowers. Neither the mainstream nor the active view provides this kind of analysis, since the mainstream view fails to

see knowers as socially situated and the active view tends to lose sight of individuated knowers in favor of focusing on social groups. However, a unified account is better equipped to provide this kind of analysis since it is equipped with the tools to operate at both the structural level (by which I mean the level of social groups and their relations both to one another and to social institutions) and the level of individuated knowers. In the following sections I will examine how my account improves on the conceptual analysis of the mainstream view and the practical analysis of the active view by making this change.

3.1. Reframing the Conceptual Analysis of the Mainstream View

As stated above, understanding what it means for a subject to be motivatedly ignorant will require examining this subject in both their particularity and wider social context—neither of which can be done if we are only examining the ignorance of generic knowers, as the mainstream view does. This means that the conceptual analysis of a unified account will have to operate on a different model of the epistemic subject than the mainstream view's.

The mainstream view is prevented from seeing ignorant subjects as both particular and socially situated because it abstracts away from the social-political-historical context of knowers and does not examine ignorance at the structural level. When Goldman and Olsson, for example, say that for any true statement p , “ S is ignorant of p if and only if S doesn't know that p ,” they are intentionally abstracting away from any particulars about the ignorant subject (Goldman and Olsson 2009, 20). S is supposed to stand for any single human knower, regardless of that knower's particular features or context. Likewise, as I pointed out earlier, global skeptics generally appeal to the limitations of what are taken to be faculties which all humans share (e.g. perception, memory, reason) in order to argue that all human beings are ignorant. This argument

is again meant to extend to every human knower, regardless of context. The mainstream view thus provides an analysis of what it means for a single, discrete subject to be ignorant, but this subject is treated as simply a generic human knower that is interchangeable with any other human knower. It offers an account of what it means for a generic individuated knower to be ignorant, but not what it means for a socially situated epistemic agent to be ignorant.

Epistemologists of ignorance have given us reason to believe that thinking of an ignorant subject in this manner is not sufficient for understanding actively ignorant subjects (and, by extension, motivatedly ignorant subjects). Mills, for example, argues that white people are commonly ignorant of the realities of the racialized social-political system in which they play a part. He describes this form of ignorance (white ignorance) as "structural group-based miscognition" (Mills 2007, 13). By this he means that white people as a group are cognitively disposed to misperceive and misunderstand particular aspects of their world precisely because of their location within the racialized social order.

Alcoff uses Sandra Harding's standpoint theory to make a similar point. Alcoff observes that our social group identities can confer epistemic advantages or disadvantages relative to particular areas of inquiry, and this can make certain groups more prone to ignorance about certain things. One cause of this is that people from different social groups tend to have different experiences which can shape how they see the world and what makes sense to them. As Alcoff says,

Group identity makes an epistemically relevant difference, then, not because identity alone can settle questions of justification, or because groups follow different procedures for justifying claims, but simply because groups will sometimes operate with different starting belief sets based on their social location and their group-related experiences, and these starting belief sets will inform their epistemic operations such as judging coherence and plausibility. (Alcoff 2007, 45)

By way of illustration, Alcoff describes a time when she shared a story with a group of academics about a friend who had been roughed up by the police and arrested on trumped-up charges. Alcoff witnessed two responses, sympathy and skepticism, which correlated with the racial and class differences of those in the room. She says that, whether their initial response was one of sympathy or skepticism, "Each group is weighing the plausibility of such a story based on its own knowledge and experience with the police and the criminal justice system" (Alcoff 2007, 45). If the different experiences of groups can guide their judgments in this way, then group differences are epistemically relevant for understanding actively-produced forms of ignorance, including motivated ignorance.

Furthermore, Mills argues that "vested white group interest in the racial status quo... needs to be recognized as a major factor in encouraging white cognitive distortions of various kinds" (Mills 2007, 34-35). In other words, the privileged social location of white people not only cognitively disposes them to misunderstand certain realities about the racial system, but also gives them an incentive to misunderstand these realities (or ignore them completely). Since they benefit from the racial system, it is not in their interest to understand its harms. Group interest can skew white cognition by affecting, for example, "the concepts favored (e.g., today's 'color blindness'), the refusal to perceive systemic discrimination, the convenient amnesia about the past and its legacy in the present, and the hostility to black testimony on continuing white privilege and the need to eliminate it to achieve racial justice" (Mills 2007, 35). Mills here demonstrates how one's social location can affect one's motives, making understanding the ignorant subject as socially situated necessary for understanding motivated ignorance.

The conceptual analysis of the mainstream view thus fails to account for precisely the aspects of the knower which epistemologists of ignorance have shown are crucial for

understanding individually cultivated but socially supported ignorance, including motivated ignorance. It only examines the ignorance of generic individuated knowers, not of socially situated epistemic agents. When examining what it means for a subject to be motivatedly ignorant, we will have to conceive of these subjects as socially situated epistemic agents rather than interchangeable, generic knowers. A unified account is better equipped to do this because it incorporates structural-level analysis into its account.

3.2. Reframing the Practical Analysis of the Active View

Understanding how motivated ignorance is produced will require examining the motivatedly ignorant subject in their particularity in order to grasp how the motives of single epistemic agents can drive them to cultivate ignorance. This cannot be done if we solely focus on the production of ignorance at the structural level without distinguishing between members of social groups, as the active view does.

The practical analysis of the active view has difficulty theorizing about ignorant agents as both individuated and socially situated because it operates primarily at the structural level. Proponents of the active view are mostly concerned with how social-political structures encourage the development of ignorance. Lorraine Code, for example, says that an epistemology of ignorance is "best conceived as a genealogical inquiry into the power relations and structures of power that sustain, condone, or condemn ignorance" (Code 2007, 227-228). This kind of "descriptive-empirical and social-historical" approach is taken by many epistemologists of ignorance, who often proceed by examining the social, political, and historical conditions which gave rise to a particular instance or kind of ignorance, as well as how power structures affect these conditions (Code 2007, 228). Two notable examples of epistemologists of ignorance who

use this approach are Nancy Tuana, who develops her theory by delving into the history of the erasure of knowledge and creation of ignorance about women's sexual and reproductive health, and Shannon Sullivan, who develops hers by examining the production of knowledge and ignorance about Puerto Rico in the United States (Tuana 2004, Tuana 2006, Sullivan 2007).

In theories such as the ones above, single knowers are always viewed in relation to their location within wider social structures. Code says, for example, "my purpose in citing 'individual' examples is to illustrate a larger point about how epistemic subjects are positioned within and contribute to perpetuating, systemic structures of ignorance in ongoing, reciprocal processes" (Code 2007, 220).²³ This quote is representative of wider trends in epistemologies of ignorance of seeing ignorance as being predominantly structural, with single knowers manifesting and perpetuating this structural ignorance. A related trend is viewing ignorance in terms of groups rather than individuals. For example, we saw arguments in the last section from Mills for the view that actively-produced ignorance is group-based. In this kind of view, the group identities and social location of knowers are the locus of ignorance (in relation to some area of inquiry), with individual agents manifesting this ignorance by virtue of their occupying that location.

This focus results in the active view being better at explaining how ignorance is produced structurally than how it is produced by single epistemic agents, because the view has difficulties individuating between knowers within social identity groups. Even when theorists want to say—as Mills does, for example—that group-based ignorance does not extend evenly to all members of the group, it is difficult to explain this within the terms of group-based theories (other than to

²³ Code, however, is perhaps the least guilty of losing sight of individuated epistemic agents, since she sees these power structures as constantly interacting with epistemic subjects who are differently situated spatially, temporally, culturally, socially, and so forth. Code says that she is concerned with "how epistemic subjects are positioned within and contribute to perpetuating, systemic structures of ignorance in ongoing, reciprocal processes" and "how ignorance works to reify sexual, racial, and colonial contracts in diverse, differently situated lives and vulnerabilities" (Code 2007, 220, 221). We see, then, a more nuanced view of situatedness and also more emphasis on the reciprocal relation between individuals and structures than is found in some accounts.

appeal to the overlapping of multiple group identities). This is partly because the group identities of epistemic agents often get privileged in these accounts over other aspects of their particularity, such as their physical, cognitive, psychological, and emotional states, personal relationships, personal motivations, and so forth.

The difficulty the active view has with individuating ignorant subjects presents an obstacle to understanding motivated ignorance because, while social-political structures can encourage and support the development of motivated ignorance, it is ultimately epistemic agents who must do the cognizing, perceiving, belief-forming, and belief-avoiding that is involved in cultivating and maintaining it. In understanding how the latter is possible, it is important to examine not just the social location of the motivatedly ignorant epistemic agent, but the other elements of their particular situation.²⁴ We also need to take into consideration that epistemic agents have a certain biological, psychological, emotional, and cognitive make-up, which also particularizes them as knowers. They have, for example, their own beliefs, desires, interests, emotional attachments, and so forth. I will call these *agent-specific features* of knowers. These features form the lens through which agents view the world. To say that these features are agent-specific is not to say that they arise in a vacuum. Our social location can impact these kinds of factors as well. We saw Mills argue above that our interests are socially shaped, for example.

Practical analysis of socially supported but individually cultivated ignorance, such as motivated ignorance, then, must examine how not just how it is structurally produced but also

²⁴ This is not to say that social location is no longer important to consider. Heidi Grasswick, for example, argues that conceiving of knowers as individuals does not preclude conceiving of them as members of groups or communities. She warns feminist epistemologists against allowing their rejection of the atomistic model of epistemic agency, in which knowers are seen as "individual, self-sufficient, and generic," to cause them to reject seeing knowers as individuals (Grasswick 2004, 89). Instead she thinks that feminist epistemologists should embrace a more social understanding of individual knowers. In her own proposed understanding of seeing knowers as *individuals-in-communities*, it is actually our situation within certain communities which individuates us as epistemic agents. Our very particularity as knowers is then deeply social on this kind of model. I seek to follow Grasswick here by operating on a deeply social understanding of individual knowers.

how it is produced by single epistemic agents. A unified account is better equipped to do this because it incorporates analysis at the level of individuated knowers.

4. Conclusion

Because a unified account provides the benefits just discussed, the account of motivated ignorance I develop in the remaining chapters of my dissertation will be this type of account. My account will provide a conceptual analysis of how to best understand the state of not-knowing that characterizes motivated ignorance. This part of my account (which I undertake in the next chapter) asks what it means for an epistemic agent to not know in this particular way, and primarily proceeds by examining the conditions under which it is appropriate to say that an agent is motivatedly ignorant. My account will also provide a practical analysis of how this particular state of not-knowing can be cultivated or maintained by an epistemic agent in order to serve some motive—thus asking how an epistemic agent can come not to know in the way that characterizes motivated ignorance. This part of my account will primarily proceed by examining psychological literature on some of the cognitive processes that can produce motivated ignorance. My account thus benefits from *multiplying its axes of analysis* by engaging in both conceptual and practical analysis.

Furthermore, by combining the insights of the mainstream and active views, I am also able to *preserve the normative force* of my account while *avoiding implied passivity*. The normative force of my account stems from conceptualizing motivated ignorance as a state of not-knowing characterized by the breakdown of the appropriate connection between belief and truth or evidence that is required for knowledge. This conception of motivated ignorance maintains a clear distinction between knowledge and ignorance. At the same time, however, my account

avoids the passivity of many mainstream accounts by arguing that this breakdown can be produced by the influence of our motives on our cognitive processes. Motivated ignorance is thus an actively produced form of ignorance since it involves the participation of the agent in their own ignorance.

Finally, my account *theorizes about the motivated ignorance of epistemic agents* by combining both the mainstream and active views' conceptions of the epistemic subject. The agent, in my account, is viewed as having a certain set of agent-specific features (with motives being the most relevant for my purposes), and also as occupying a particular social location. Understanding how ignorance is produced at the individual level of motives, emotions, and cognitive processes is key to my view, but it is also critical to understand how these agent-specific features, and thus the production of motivated ignorance at the individual level, are socially shaped.

In the remaining chapters of my dissertation, I will develop my two-part account of motivated ignorance, starting with my conceptual analysis of the state of not-knowing that characterizes motivated ignorance. I will argue that the state of not-knowing which characterizes motivated ignorance is a specific form of insensitivity to truth or evidence.

CHAPTER 3: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATED IGNORANCE

In the remaining chapters of my dissertation, I will develop my unified account of motivated ignorance. I define *motivated ignorance* as a state of not-knowing characterized by insensitivity to truth or evidence that is cultivated and maintained by an epistemic agent in order to serve some motive of theirs. Motivated ignorance is thus characterized by a particular kind of not-knowing (insensitivity to truth or evidence) which is produced in a particular way (cultivated and maintained in order to fulfill some motive). In this chapter, I will examine what it means for an agent to not-know in this particular way, while in the next I will examine the particular way that this not-knowing gets produced.

In mainstream accounts of ignorance, all ignorance is characterized as a state of not-knowing. While I do not deny this, this general definition of ignorance will need to be fine-tuned in order to understand the state of not-knowing that characterizes motivated ignorance. This is because the distinct ways in which motivated ignorance is produced demand a more nuanced understanding of what not-knowing means in this case. The question shifts from how we should conceptualize ignorance generally to how we should conceptualize ignorance that is cultivated and maintained by an epistemic agent in order to serve their motives—what does it mean for an agent to not know in this latter case? In order to answer this last question, we need to characterize motivated ignorance not simply as a state of not-knowing, but, I will argue, as a state of a particular kind of not-knowing—*insensitivity* to truth or evidence.²⁵

Moreover, I argue that the state of not-knowing which characterizes motivated ignorance

²⁵ Medina also uses the term ‘insensitivity’ in relation to active ignorance, but uses it as a more nuanced and less ableist replacement for ‘blindness’ (Medina 2012, xi). He defines ‘insensitivity’ as “the inability to listen and learn from others, the inability to call into question one’s perspective and to process epistemic friction exerted from significantly different perspectives” (Medina 2012, 17-18). My use of the term is more broad, since it goes beyond Medina’s focus on interpersonal exchanges.

is caused by *agential insensitivity*, in which the agent themselves is insensitive due to agent-specific-features (such as convictions, emotions, desires, interests, etc.). Agential insensitivity can manifest as either the failure of an agent to attend to relevant facts or evidence or the failure to appropriately adjust their beliefs in response to them once attended to. This insensitivity results in an agent's body of beliefs becoming unresponsive to truth or evidence, whether by retaining false or unwarranted beliefs or by failing to acquire true beliefs.

This understanding of motivated ignorance is rooted in Robert Nozick's concept of insensitivity. However, my account shifts the focus of Nozick's in a couple ways. First of all, I focus on *insensitive agents* rather than *insensitive beliefs*. While motivated ignorance is characterized by insensitive beliefs, it is the insensitivity of agents causing these insensitive beliefs which will be my primary focus. Second, whereas Nozick is concerned primarily with insensitivity that is caused by the limitations of human epistemic sources in tandem with features of the agent's environment (which I call *circumstantial insensitivity*), I am concerned with insensitivity caused by agent-specific features (*agential insensitivity*).

This chapter will unfold in four sections. First, I will explore the roots of my concept of agential insensitivity in Nozick's concept of insensitivity. Second, I will explain how we need to shift from focusing on insensitive beliefs to insensitive believers in order to understand motivated ignorance. In the third and fourth sections, I will develop and refine my concept of agential insensitivity.

1. Nozick's Concept of Insensitivity

For Nozick, *sensitivity* is a relationship between beliefs and facts in which beliefs change in response to changes in facts. "Perfect sensitivity," he says, "would involve beliefs and facts

varying together” (Nozick 1981, 176). Knowledge, for Nozick, does not require perfect sensitivity (in which beliefs and facts vary together in all possible situations) but only subjunctive sensitivity (in which beliefs and facts vary together in situations that would or might obtain if the antecedent of the specified subjunctive conditional were true) (Nozick 1981, 176). Specifically, knowledge that p requires a person’s beliefs and facts to vary together in situations that would or might obtain if p were true and those that would or might obtain if p were false. A person knows that p , then, if both of the following conditionals are true: “If p weren’t true, S wouldn’t believe that p ” and “if p were true, he [S] would believe it” (Nozick 1981, 172, 176). In Nozick’s view, whether or not these conditionals are true can be determined by seeing whether the consequent holds in the closest possible worlds to the actual world in which the antecedent holds. A person knows that p , then, “when he not only does truly believe it, but also would truly believe it and wouldn’t falsely believe it. He not only actually has a true belief, he subjunctively has one” (Nozick 1981, 178). Nozick calls this particular form of subjunctive sensitivity *tracking the truth*. He says, “To know is to have a belief that tracks the truth. Knowledge is a particular way of being connected to the world, having a specific real factual connection to the world: tracking it” (Nozick 1981, 178).

If a belief is *insensitive*, on the other hand, it lacks this factual connection to the world—it fails to track the truth. Insensitivity, then, is a failure of beliefs and facts to vary together in which one’s beliefs do not change in response to changes in facts. For Nozick, this either means that in one or more of the closest possible worlds to the actual world in which p is true, S does not believe that p or that in one or more of the closest possible worlds to the actual world in which p is not true, S believes that p .

One example Nozick uses to illustrate is that of a man in a tank who is made to believe

through direct stimulation of his brain that he is in a tank. This person, according to Nozick, does not know he is in a tank because, while he possesses a true belief to that effect, this belief is not sensitive. He says, "It is not true of him there that if he were in the tank he would believe it; for in the closest world (or situation) to his own where he is in the tank but they don't give him the belief that he is (much less instill the belief that he isn't) he doesn't believe he is in the tank" (Nozick 1981, 177). Since the man in the tank's belief that he is in the tank does not track the truth, he does not in fact know he is in the tank even if he truly believes it. If one's belief that p is insensitive to truth, then, one does not know that p . In other words, one is ignorant of p if one's belief that p is insensitive to truth.

It is also possible to be insensitive to evidence, not just truth, on Nozick's account. In this case, insensitivity involves a failure to track evidence in which a person's beliefs do not change in response to changes in evidence. For Nozick, tracking evidence is a way of tracking the truth (and thus attaining knowledge). This is because evidence stands in a real factual relationship to the world, like beliefs that track the truth do. The relationship between a piece of evidence e and the hypothesis h that it is evidence for is also a subjunctive one, according to Nozick. Something can be said to be strong evidence for some hypothesis if both of the following subjunctive conditionals are true: "if h were the case e would be the case" and "if h weren't true, e wouldn't hold" (Nozick 1981, 248).²⁶ Strong evidence, then, "stands in the same relationship to the hypothesis as belief does to the truth when belief tracks the truth"—that is to say, strong

²⁶ If both of these conditionals hold, then e is *strong evidence* for h . However, Nozick acknowledges that we don't always have such strong evidence and presents a weaker version of the subjunctive relationship to describe cases in which we don't. Something e is *weak evidence* for h if both of the following subjunctive conditionals are true, "if h were true e would hold" and "if h were false, e might be false" (Nozick 1981, 250). We can see here that the second conditional is weakened. When someone's belief tracks weak evidence rather than strong evidence, Nozick says that this person "almost-knows" (Nozick 1981, 259). He says, "In almost-knowing, our belief stands in a real, probabilistic connection to the fact, a connection that barely falls short of tracking" (Nozick 1981, 259). Whether evidence is weak or strong, then, it is still in a real factual connection to the world—the difference is just whether this connection is subjunctive or probabilistic. Since it is this factual connection to the world that interests me, it doesn't matter to my account whether we are dealing with weak or strong evidence.

evidence “tracks the truth of what it is evidence for” (Nozick 1981, 249). Evidence will change in response to changes in what it is evidence for. Tracking strong evidence, then, leads to knowledge because it forms a tracking chain in which a person’s belief in a hypothesis varies with the evidence in favor of that hypothesis, which in turn varies with the truth of that hypothesis.

Another way a belief can be insensitive, therefore, is to fail to track evidence. Since evidence stands in a factual connection to the world, if a belief fails to change in response to changes in evidence it also fails to change in response to changes in the truth. If one's belief that p fails to track evidence, one again does not know that p since this means that one's belief does not track the truth. Having a belief that p which is insensitive to either truth or evidence are thus ways of being ignorant of p for Nozick.

2. Two Shifts in Focus

The heart of Nozick’s concept of sensitivity, then, is that it marks a factual connection between our beliefs and the world which is characterized by responsiveness—when our beliefs are sensitive, they respond appropriately to the presence or absence of truth or evidence and this is how they are connected to the world. When our beliefs do not respond appropriately to the presence or absence of truth or evidence, this connection to the world breaks down. I’ll call this kind of insensitivity *belief-insensitivity*.

When a person is motivatedly ignorant, their beliefs are insensitive in this sense. However, what truly distinguishes motivated ignorance from other forms of ignorance is *why* these beliefs are insensitive—namely, because the believer is personally insensitive in a certain sort of way. In order to understand such insensitivity, we will need to think in terms of

insensitive epistemic agents, rather than insensitive beliefs. In doing so, I understand myself to be shifting the focus of Nozick's account, rather than changing it. I will explain this terminological shift first and then develop my account of agential insensitivity once it is in place.

As I've said, in order to analyze agential insensitivity, we will have to shift the focus of Nozick's account from insensitive *beliefs* to insensitive *believers*. Of course, the believer is always lingering in the background of Nozick's account in that there can't be beliefs without believers. It is *someone's* belief state which tracks the truth, and it tracks it when that person believes that *p* if *p* is true and does not believe that *p* if *p* is false. Beliefs thus only track the truth if believers do. Moreover, sensitivity's role in defining knowledge also connects it back to the knowing subject. Nozick says, for example, that knowledge is "a particular way of being connected to the world, having a specific real factual connection to the world: tracking it" (Nozick 1981, 178). In this quote, it is the *knower* who is connected to the world, albeit through their beliefs. What I would like to do is focus more *explicitly* on the insensitive believer, so that we are speaking not mainly in terms of beliefs which fail to change in response to changes in facts or evidence, but in terms of believers who fail to adjust to their beliefs in response to changes in facts or evidence. This latter phrasing emphasizes the disconnect between believers and the world (which I will call *believer-insensitivity*), rather than between beliefs and the world (*belief-insensitivity*), in order to explore how the former can cause the latter.

Understanding agential insensitivity also requires focusing on the insensitive believer in a more robust sense than Nozick does—not just as a generic knower in a physical environment, but as a particular epistemic agent in a specific social, political, historical, and physical location. According to the latter way of seeing insensitive believers, they are understood to possess certain agent-specific features (such as a specific biological, psychological, emotional, and cognitive

make-up, as well as desires, interests, emotional attachments, and so forth) that particularize them as knowers. If we see insensitive believers as generic and interchangeable human knowers, we can't appreciate the insensitivity which can arise from these agent-specific features, rather than from features that all humans share.

However, the particularity of agents needs to be understood socially, since a knower's social, political, historical location and membership within various communities can affect their agent-specific traits.²⁷ Heidi Grasswick, for example, argues that what particular epistemic skills a given knower possesses is shaped by their location within many communities. According to Grasswick, particular communities encourage the development of certain epistemic skills based on their shared interests, goals, priorities, commitments, and so forth. It is then the various communities in which a knower develops epistemically (whether the communities in which they were brought up or those which they belonged to later in life) which shape that knower's particular set of epistemic skills, from basic cognitive capacities to more specialized skills that come with, say, studying a particular field. She says,

The history of having lived within specific communities, and having learned a wide range of epistemic skills within those communities contributes to the "particularization" of individual knowers and differentiates them. These specific locations and epistemic skill sets limit the individuals' capacities to know the world on their own. ... This tenet of the InC [individuals-in-communities] view is stronger than an empiricist's acknowledgment that we only have access to a limited amount of evidence from any particular empirical location. According to the InC view, knowers are also limited by their social situatedness in the very *tools* they have available for interpreting that evidence. Such tools are broad ranging, and include informal patterns of reasoning, current standards of evidence, currently accepted theories and background assumptions, and particular techniques of measuring and investigating, all which are particularized according to one's specific communities. (Grasswick 2004, 103, emphasis in original)

So, for Grasswick, it is actually our situation within certain communities which individuates us as epistemic agents. Our very particularity as knowers is then deeply social. Moreover, our

²⁷ I will explore how in more detail next chapter.

situation within certain communities affects not just what evidence we have access to, but how we interpret that evidence, since communities can have different standards of evidence and background assumptions.

We needn't limit this insight to communities which have shared standards, commitments, or goals, however. Our membership in social identity groups can also impact what evidence we have access to and how we interpret this evidence, even though these groups are often not as robustly associated as communities. For example, in the last chapter I discussed Linda Martín Alcoff's argument that the different experiences of members of different social groups can shape how they see the world and what makes sense to them, which affects how they evaluate evidence. Feminist standpoint theorists have similarly pointed out that "social position has a bearing on what parts of the world are prominent to the knower and what parts of the world are not" (Pohlhaus Jr. 2012, 717). Members of social groups tend to have some common experiences, which often lead them to develop different "habits of expectation, attention, and concern" from members of other groups (Pohlhaus Jr. 2012, 717). What we routinely experience, then, can shape what we can know by shaping what we notice and look for in the world. If these claims are true, we will need to know more about an insensitive believer's environment than the contents of their current perceptual experiences in order to understand agential insensitivity.

3. Agential Insensitivity

With this shift in focus in place, I am now able to develop my concept of agential insensitivity. I will use *agential insensitivity* to mean the failure of an epistemic agent to either attend to epistemically relevant evidence that is available to them or to appropriately adjust their beliefs in response to this evidence. Agential insensitivity is thus a form of believer-insensitivity.

Either of these failures results in the severing of the connection between one's beliefs and the world which characterizes belief-sensitivity for Nozick, since one is not adjusting one's beliefs in order to reflect the relevant facts or evidence.

Discussing agential insensitivity requires another shift in focus from Nozick's account, since he focuses on belief-insensitivity that is caused by a different kind of believer-insensitivity (which I call *circumstantial insensitivity*). Nozick mostly examines cases of belief-insensitivity in which a person has a true belief but, because of some quirk about their environment which they are unable to detect, their belief state is not appropriately connected to the world. The limitations of the epistemic sources that humans rely on to know (perception, memory, testimony, etc.) are a main source of the believer-insensitivity that is causing the belief-sensitivity that we witness in these kinds of cases. The agent is prevented from adjusting their beliefs in response to changes in evidence because they cannot detect that evidence with normal human faculties. Because the agent is unable to be sensitive to this evidence, their beliefs are insensitive.

For example, one case Nozick uses is that of a person who reads in the newspaper that the dictator of his country has been killed and forms a true belief to that effect. However, after this article is printed, there is a massive media campaign denying that the dictator has been killed. Everyone who hears these denials believes them, but this person happens not to hear them and so continues to believe the truth. This is not a case of knowledge, Nozick argues, because "if he had heard the denials, he too would have believed them, just like everyone else. His belief is not sensitively tuned to the truth" (Nozick 1981, 177). The belief in this case (like the belief in the tank case mentioned earlier) fails to be connected to the world in the appropriate way due to the knower's inability to detect some unusual feature of their environment using the epistemic

sources that humans rely on to know.

The source of the believer-insensitivity in these cases, however, is not just the limitations of the epistemic sources that humans rely on, but these limitations as they interact with certain features of the agent's external environment. In other words, the epistemic breakdown which takes place in these kinds of cases occurs both because something is amiss with the agent's environment and also because the agent's faculties are not able to detect what is amiss. In the tank case, for example, it is the combination of being in a tank having his brain manipulated and possessing faculties of perception which do not allow him to detect this which result in the man floating in the tank not knowing he is floating in a tank. Likewise, in the dictator case, it is the combined effect of the deceptive news campaign and the fact that humans rely on testimony that they are not in a position to empirically verify for a great deal of their knowledge that results in the person in the example not knowing that the dictator had been killed. Even if these sources are otherwise reliable (i.e. in other circumstances this person could form the same belief using the same source and this belief would be sensitive), they are not capable of detecting the particular environmental quirks involved in these cases and so the beliefs formed in these cases are not sensitive. This is why I call this kind of believer-insensitivity *circumstantial insensitivity*.

Believer-insensitivity can also arise from the agent-specific features of a knower—including their emotions, desires, interests, beliefs, commitments, values, and so forth.²⁸ I will call this kind of believer-insensitivity *agential insensitivity*.²⁹ The crux of the distinction between circumstantial and agential insensitivity is that they involve different kinds of features of an

²⁸ I do not mean to imply here that these are the only two kinds of insensitivity.

²⁹ There is, of course, a sense in which these kinds of agent-specific features are shared by all humans, in that all humans have emotions, beliefs, desires, interests, and so forth. In this sense, the development of agential insensitivity is as universally shared by humans as the development of circumstantial insensitivity. What I mean to focus on here, however, is not how these *kinds* of features make humans in general prone to insensitivity (which they do), but how the particular manifestation of these features in a specific epistemic agent can lead that agent to be insensitive.

agent. In the former, the relevant features are ones that are inherent to all human knowers, whereas the features relevant to the latter are ones that are specific to that particular agent.

Similar to how circumstantial insensitivity grows out of the interplay between an agent's features and their external environment, agential insensitivity stems from the interplay between an agent's features and their wider social context. However, the nature of the latter interplay is different. In cases of circumstantial insensitivity, something in the agent's external environment is amiss in such a way that knower cannot detect what is amiss using the perceptual and cognitive faculties that humans ordinarily rely on. We can imagine taking the same agent with the same agent-specific features and putting them in a different setting in which this environmental abnormality no longer exists. If we did this, the agent would return to being sensitive. Take the tank case, for example. If we removed the man from the tank and had him instead roam the lab, his beliefs about his situation would be set aright fairly quickly. Likewise with the dictator case. If the cover-up was exposed or had never happened, the citizen would have been safe in his knowledge that the dictator is dead. All that is needed to rectify circumstantial insensitivity is a change in external circumstances.

This is not the case with agential insensitivity. This is because social context affects not just what data are perceived or received through testimony like the material environment does, but also the very lens we use for viewing this data. The epistemic breakdown here occurs because something is amiss with our agent-specific features (or amiss with the social context which shapes them) which makes us ill-equipped to acquire knowledge about our environment. If we are to imagine a scenario in which agential insensitivity is rectified, something will have to be changed about the agent, not just their external environment. We cannot solve the problem by simply moving the same agent with the same intrinsic features to a new setting. Moreover,

because the agent-specific features that will need to be changed are often shaped by the social location of agents, aspects of this location would need to be changed in many cases as well.

Let's return to Alcoff's example from last chapter. Alcoff says that whether or not the academics at her dinner party found someone's testimony about a friend being roughed-up by the police for no reason plausible or not was correlated with their race and class. She concludes that this is because the different experiences that are typical for members of different groups tend to shape the starting belief sets that they use to judge the plausibility of the testimony. Consider a skeptical white middle-class academic at Alcoff's dinner party, for example. This academic is insensitive to the truth—whether the testimony Alcoff gives is true or false, they will not believe it. This is an example of agential insensitivity because it stems from the academic's starting belief set, which is an agent-specific feature. Moreover, this starting belief set is shaped in large part by the academic's social location as a white, middle-class person. We can see then that, unlike in cases of circumstantial insensitivity, we cannot simply take this person and present them with the same information in a different material setting. Instead, we would have to change this person's starting belief set, which, because of its partial roots in their social location, would likely involve giving them different experiences than the race/class-typical ones they had (say, living or working in different communities, having trusting relationships with people of other races, etc.). Because agential insensitivity involves the psychological “lens” that people use to interpret evidence, addressing it is much less straightforward. Both personal and environmental-based reforms will be complicated.

The effect this shift in focus has is to draw out further implications of Nozick's work. It sheds light on the fact that the range of things that can make an agent insensitive is wider than it may at first seem. We can be unresponsive to changes in truth or evidence not just because of a

gap between the limits of our human faculties and the information in the external environment, but because something is amiss with our agent-specific features or the social context which shapes them. Our agent-specific features and/or social context can be such that we are unable to effectively respond to truth or evidence.

4. Agential Insensitivity in More Detail

Let's look further into what agential insensitivity involves. In order for us to respond appropriately to truth or evidence in the way required to be believer-sensitive, we must both attend to the facts or evidence that are epistemically relevant and change our beliefs to reflect these facts or evidence once we are aware of them. A person is agentially insensitive when they either fail to attend to epistemically relevant facts or evidence (which I will call an *attention failure*) or fail to change their beliefs in response to relevant facts or evidence that have been attended to (which I will call an *uptake failure*). In either case, the agent is unresponsive to the presence or absence of facts or evidence—the difference is just a matter of why.

4.1. Attention Failures

I will now explore attention and uptake failures in more detail, starting with the former. In particular, I want to examine why they are characteristic of agential, and not circumstantial insensitivity. Again, an attention failure occurs when an agent fails to attend to epistemically relevant facts or evidence. I take someone to be attending to evidence if they are consciously aware of it, and this evidence is foregrounded in their awareness. An object is foregrounded in this way when one's focus is directed toward it. For example, as I type, I am consciously aware of the sun shining on my table, but my computer screen is foregrounded in my awareness.

According to my use of attention, then, I would be attending to my computer screen, not to the sun shining on my table. To attend to something in this way involves taking the object of one's attention to be important or relevant enough to direct one's cognitive energies towards. If something is attended to, it is a candidate for further investigation or thought.

One thing to note here is that the facts or evidence that are overlooked in an attention failure must be epistemically relevant. People cannot attend to every piece of information that crosses their path—there are simply too many. I take a fact or piece of evidence to be *epistemically relevant* if it is pertinent for acquiring knowledge about a particular subject.³⁰ Evidence is then always epistemically relevant relative to some inquiry. I also take what is epistemically relevant to be judged objectively. That is to say that what is epistemically relevant is what *actually is* pertinent for acquiring knowledge about a particular subject, not what *seems* pertinent from the agent's perspective. It is thus possible for evidence that is epistemically relevant not to seem so to a particular agent.

In many cases, however, there will still be more epistemically relevant evidence than a person can attend to. I will thus add the further constraint that the epistemically relevant evidence which is overlooked in an attention failure must also be available to the agent. I take a fact or piece of evidence to be *available* to an agent if they are able to access it without an inordinately large amount of effort, given their faculties, time, and resources. What evidence is available to an agent should be judged based on what the agent *would* be able to access if they put in a reasonable amount of effort. What counts as a reasonable amount of effort will be context-dependent. For example, if someone is writing an article on a particular topic, it would be reasonable to expect them to devote more time scouring for information than if a person is just

³⁰ Both what counts as evidence and what evidence counts as epistemically relevant are under debate. It is beyond the scope of my project to offer a detailed account of either, however, and I will thus make use of a commonsense notion of evidence and relevance here.

trying to be a well-informed citizen. Availability is thus context-relative, since what is considered available to an agent depends on the faculties and resources of an agent, but is not subjective, since it is not judged on the basis of what an agent thinks is available to them.

This requirement for the overlooked evidence to be available to an agent marks a major distinction between circumstantial and agential insensitivity. In most cases of circumstantial insensitivity, the agent fails to attend to certain facts or evidence because they are not accessible to the agent. In the tank case, for example, due to the man in the tank's environment and limited faculties, there is no available evidence which will allow him to know he is in the tank. It is not simply that he *does not* attend to epistemically relevant facts or evidence, but that he *cannot*. In many cases of agential insensitivity, on the other hand, the agent *could* attend to these facts or evidence but does not due to the influence of certain agent-specific features.

We can see examples of attention failures in the epistemology of ignorance literature. Nancy Tuana presents us with one such example attention failure when she discusses a category of ignorance which involves "topics that *we do not even know that we do not know* because our current interests, beliefs, and theories obscure them" (Tuana 2006, 6, emphasis hers). If we are ignorant in the way that she describes, we are insensitive because our current interests, beliefs and theories prevent us from seeing certain facts or evidence as worthy of our attention. This kind of ignorance thus appears to be characterized by agential insensitivity in the form of attention failures.

We can see this more clearly in the example that Tuana provides of the lack of medical knowledge of clitoral structures in the twentieth century. One way this manifests is in the failure of medical textbooks from this century to include the clitoris in any detail (or sometimes even at all) when describing and depicting female genitalia. Tuana argues that this inattention to the

clitoris is caused by a focus on reproduction within the medical profession (which itself reflects sexist and androcentric biases within this male-dominated field). Because medical professionals were concerned with the reproductive, rather than sexual, capacities of women and the clitoris is not directly linked to reproduction, there was little attention paid to it. Tuana's claim is supported by the fact that the medical community actually had studied the structures and functions of the clitoris in earlier centuries when female orgasms were thought to be linked to conception, and not only ceased to study the clitoris but ignored prior research that had been done on it once this was no longer thought to be the case. Tuana says of this,

The emphasis on knowledge of reproduction became a barrier to knowledge of the clitoris and what knowledge scientists had developed quickly became forgotten. Hence, while scientists were becoming increasingly ignorant concerning clitoral physiology, their emphasis on reproduction precluded their knowledge of this fact. (Tuana 2006, 7)

What we see in this example is an attention failure. Medical professionals failed to know about clitoral structures because they failed to pay attention to the relevant facts or evidence which would lead to this knowledge. Moreover, this evidence was available to them—they could have accessed it if they had devoted the same time and effort to studying the clitoris as they did to studying the penis and it is reasonable to expect them to do so, as anatomists. Nevertheless, their interests as well as their beliefs and attitudes about women prevented them from attending to facts or evidence that were in fact relevant, rendering them insensitive.

4.2. Uptake Failures

Agential insensitivity can also involve uptake failures. An uptake failure occurs when an agent fails to change their beliefs in response to epistemically relevant facts or evidence that have been attended to. The problem here is not that evidence is not noticed, but that it does not

have the impact it should on the agent's beliefs because it is misinterpreted, explained away, or not followed to its conclusions. Uptake failures also distinguish agential insensitivity from circumstantial insensitivity. Cases of circumstantial insensitivity involve someone who, because of their environment and the limitations of their epistemic sources, *cannot* detect some epistemically relevant evidence. If their environment or faculties were otherwise, the agent would likely change their beliefs. In the dictator case, for example, say the regime is overthrown and the cover-up of the dictator's death is revealed to the whole country. The environment has been returned to normal and there is now nothing to prevent the citizens of the country from truly believing (and knowing) that the dictator is dead. Likely most of them were circumstantially insensitive and will believe that the dictator is dead. However, we can imagine some agentially insensitive citizens who don't change their beliefs. In this case, they resist doing so out of attachment to the dictator, not wanting to believe they had been deceived, etc. As we see here, in cases of agential insensitivity, it is not that the agent cannot attend to epistemically relevant evidence, but that they *will not*.

We can also see examples of uptake failures in the epistemology of ignorance literature. For instance, Tuana presents us with an example of an uptake failure when she discusses a different category of ignorance which she calls "willful ignorance". When someone is willfully ignorant, according to Tuana, "they do not know and they do not want to know," which can lead them to actively cultivate or maintain ignorance (Tuana 2006, 10). While willful ignorance need not always or only involve uptake failures, it often does because one frequently needs to avoid forming unwanted beliefs in the face of facts or evidence in order to cultivate and maintain ignorance.

We can see an uptake failure at work in Tuana's example of ignorance about incest in the

United States. Tuana draws on historian Lynn Sacco's account the denial of incest in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century to provide an illustration of this willful ignorance. Sacco explains that, in the 1890s, new technology was developed for detecting gonorrhea, which revealed that more girls between the ages of five and nine were infected than doctors had previously thought. Moreover, these girls were of from all different classes and races, which challenged what doctors believed—and wanted to believe—about who was capable of incest. Sacco says,

Physicians who believed that only “foreign,” “primitive,” or “ignorant” men abused their daughters assumed that incest was contained within African American, immigrant, poor, and working-class families. When the incidence of gonorrhea among the daughters of white middle- and upper-class men suggested otherwise, health care professionals revised their views on gonorrhea, not incest (Tuana 2006, 12, citing Sacco 2002, 81)

When these doctors were faced with evidence that contradicted what they wanted to believe about incest, they found ways to interpret the evidence that did not require them to revise those beliefs—positing that these girls must have contracted gonorrhea through contact with toilet seats rather than sexual contact. The ignorance about incest discussed here is an example of agential insensitivity in the form of an uptake failure because the doctors are not simply failing to attend to evidence, but striving to prevent evidence that they have attended to from changing their beliefs in undesirable ways.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that the state of not-knowing that characterizes motivated ignorance is best understood as one of belief-insensitivity that is caused by agential insensitivity. Agential insensitivity can involve attention failures, in which an agent fails to attend to evidence that is both epistemically relevant and available to them, or uptake failures, in which an agent

fails to change their beliefs in response to evidence that they have attended to.

These kinds of failures only occur because agential insensitivity is rooted in the agent-specific features of a knower. This is because these kinds of features form the lens through which we attend to, interpret, and evaluate evidence. While our human faculties affect what evidence is available to us, our agent-specific features affect how we process the evidence that is available to us. This is the key difference between circumstantial insensitivity, which arises because certain epistemically relevant evidence is unavailable to a knower due to the limitations of human faculties, and agential insensitivity, which arises because a knower fails to appropriately respond to relevant evidence that is available to them. While the circumstantially insensitive agent cannot know, the agentially insensitive agent can know, but does not.³¹

In cases of motivated ignorance, agential insensitivity is rooted in one kind of agent-specific feature, namely motives. If an agent is motivatedly ignorant, then, their beliefs do not respond to truth or evidence due to that agent's failure to attend to relevant available evidence or adjust their beliefs in response to evidence that they have attended to. Moreover, these attention and uptake failures are cultivated and maintained in order to serve an agent's motives. In the next chapter, I will explore some of the ways that an agent's motives can drive them to cultivate and maintain attention and uptake failures, and in turn motivated ignorance.

³¹ Agential insensitivity gives us a way of thinking about the resistance to evidence that many epistemologists of ignorance, such as Frye and Mills, have identified as a feature of actively produced forms of ignorance. This suggests that this may provide a useful tool for understanding other forms of actively produced ignorance besides motivated ignorance.

CHAPTER 4: A PRACTICAL ANALYSIS OF MOTIVATED IGNORANCE

In the last chapter I gave a conceptual analysis of the state of not-knowing that characterizes motivated ignorance. I argued that this state of not-knowing is best understood as belief-insensitivity which is caused by *agential insensitivity*. Agential insensitivity occurs when an epistemic agent fails to either attend to available epistemically relevant evidence (which I call an *attention failure*) or to appropriately adjust their beliefs in response to this evidence (which I call an *uptake failure*). However, as I said at the beginning of last chapter, motivated ignorance is characterized not only by a particular kind of not-knowing, but a particular kind of not-knowing *which is produced in a certain way*. Namely, it is cultivated and maintained by an epistemic agent in order to serve their motives. On my account, motivated ignorance is thus understood as belief-insensitivity that is caused by an attention or uptake failure that an epistemic agent is driven by their motives to cultivate or maintain.

In this chapter, I give a practical analysis of how agential insensitivity can be produced in cases of motivated ignorance.³² My overall goal is to provide an account of how motivated ignorance can be produced in individual epistemic agents that takes into account the fact that these agents are socially situated. I argue that one important way that agential insensitivity is produced in cases of motivated ignorance is by an agent's motives exerting influence on their cognitive processes (which I will call *motivated cognition*), especially when these motives are affective ones. Since these motives are socially shaped, the production of motivated ignorance is a deeply social process even though it takes place largely at the level of individual agents.

³² As a reminder, practical analysis asks the question of how ignorance is produced. Its purpose is to help us understand how ignorance is actually formed in practice. It generally proceeds by examining the various social, political, historical, and individual practices which give rise to ignorance.

This chapter will unfold in three sections. In the first section, I will explain what I mean by ‘motive’ and ‘motivation’. In the second, I will examine some of the existing social-psychological work on motivated cognition in order to show that some of the motivated cognitive tendencies observed result in attention and uptake failures. It follows from this observation that agential insensitivity (and in turn motivated ignorance) can be produced by the influence of motives on our cognitive processes. I will focus on two tendencies in particular—the tendency to focus on evidence that confirms what one wants to believe, which leads to attention failures, and the tendency to evaluate evidence in favor of an undesired conclusion more harshly, which leads to uptake failures. I also examine how each of these cognitive tendencies have been found to be more pronounced when the motives involved are *affective*. Finally, in the third section, I examine some ways that our social location impacts our motives and our emotions, in order to establish that even though we are speaking in terms of an individual agent's motives, emotions, and cognitive processes, the production of motivated ignorance is still socially shaped.

Before I continue, I want to point out that viewing motivated cognition as central to the cultivation and maintenance of motivated ignorance is not unprecedented. Most notably, Charles Mills views white ignorance as a cognitive phenomenon in which white group interests (which count as a type of motive on my account) distort the cognition of white people. In fact, he also appeals to the work of cognitive psychologists who describe a link between interests (motives) and cognition, but criticizes this work for its "framing individualism" which keeps it from accounting for the effects of racial group interests on cognition rather than just individual interests (Mills 2007, 34). This is problematic for Mills because he understands white ignorance as a cognitive dysfunction which operates on the "physico-biological" level, but whose causes lie on the "socio-structural" level (Mills 2007, 20). In other words, white ignorance operates through

the distorted cognition of individual agents, but this distorted cognition is driven by structural group interests. While cognitive psychology can help us understand the former, he doesn't think it is equipped to explain the latter as long as it retains its individualistic framework. One thing I take myself to be doing in this chapter is taking up Mills' call to "extrapolate some of this literature [on motivated cognition] to a social context—one informed by the realities of race" (and, I would add, of sex, class, sexuality, and so forth) (Mills 2007, 34).

Mills examines many different ways that interests (motives) can affect cognition, saying, "At all levels, interests may shape cognition, influencing what and how we see, what we and society choose to remember, whose testimony is solicited and whose is not, and which facts and frameworks are sought out and accepted" (Mills 2007, 24). While I acknowledge that all of these different factors are important for understanding the production of socially supported forms of ignorance, I will focus only on how motives exert influence on the cognitive processes (i.e. the psychological mechanisms by which information is processed) of individual agents. This is both because understanding motivated ignorance in particular requires insight into how it is produced by individual epistemic agents, and because it is this area that seems to be most underdeveloped in Mills' own theory, as well as those by other epistemologists of ignorance.

1. What Are Motives?

If a person is motivatedly ignorant, then they not only fail to attend to epistemically relevant evidence that is available to them or to appropriately adjust their beliefs in response to this evidence, but they are driven by their motives to do so. I use *motives* to mean the desires, interests, needs, or goals which guide a person's actions. The motives which play a role in motivated ignorance can be direct or indirect, conscious or unconscious, intentional or

unintentional, cognitive or affective. For the remainder of this section, I will examine each of these distinctions in order to clarify how I understand the notion of a motive, since this concept is the foundation of the rest of my argument.

First, the motives involved in motivated ignorance need not be directly concerned with not knowing something. In other words, the agential insensitivity of a motivatedly ignorant agent does not need to be motivated explicitly by a desire, need or goal not to know something (although it can be). Rather it can be motivated more indirectly, by seemingly unrelated motives such as desiring to think the best of yourself and those you care about, or to continue living contentedly as you have been. All that is required for a motive to drive the cultivation and maintenance of attention and uptake failures, then, is that it leads one, even indirectly, to engage in actions and cognitive activities which cultivate or maintain these failures.

Second, these motives also need not be conscious. In general, we need not realize what our motives are in order for them to direct our actions. In fact, it seems like we are often bad at this—sometimes only realizing when we reflect back on an event later why we behaved in the way that we did. There is no reason to think that things would be different when it comes to the actions and cognitive activities required to cultivate and maintain attention and uptake failures. In fact, it seems like this cultivation and maintenance can often be aided by not being aware of our motives. Uptake failures, for example, may be most easily cultivated or maintained when the agent takes themselves to be objectively weighing the evidence at hand.

Third, it does not follow from the fact that the cultivation or maintenance of agential insensitivity is driven by the motives of individual agents in cases of motivated ignorance that this insensitivity is always intentionally cultivated or maintained.³³ This is because attention and

³³ I will follow Alfred Mele in stipulating that to do something *intentionally* means that one was *trying* to do that thing (Mele 2001, 15). Also, to be clear, my reason for emphasizing that motivated ignorance does not always have

uptake failures can be purposive without always being intentional. In other words, while these failures *serve* some purpose, they are often not cultivated or maintained with the *intention of serving* that purpose.³⁴ For example, say someone who admires their sister overlooks or misinterprets evidence of some wrongdoing of hers, which allows them to continue believing that she has not done what she in fact did. In this case, their overlooking or misinterpretation of the evidence allows them to cultivate insensitivity to the truth about their sister's actions, which in turn fulfills their desire to continue admiring her. We don't need to suppose that the sibling in this example overlooked or misinterpreted the evidence in their possession as part of an effort to continue admiring their sister in order for this to count as an instance of motivated ignorance. The only thing required is that the insensitivity that is cultivated *does in fact* serve this purpose.

Fourth, while we sometimes have cognitive motives for cultivating agential insensitivity in cases of motivated ignorance, often our motives are primarily affective ones.³⁵ For example, someone could be motivated to ignore information that is inconsistent with their current beliefs because of the burdensome mental effort involved in belief revision. This would be a case of

to be intentional is not to try to excuse subjects who are motivatedly ignorant (I will not be taking a stance on when motivated ignorance is blameworthy in this project, but I do believe that it oftentimes is). Rather, I aim to create an account of motivated ignorance that reflects current understandings of how such a phenomenon could operate, many of which suggest that sub- or non-intentional processes are involved. (I will examine some of this literature later in this chapter.) Taking motivated ignorance to be not always intentional also avoids some of the problems that an intentionalist account would run into, such as having to explain how we can deliberately seek to ignore something (since we would have to at some level know and acknowledge what we are ignoring in order to direct our efforts).

³⁴ Philosophers, such as Alfred Mele and Mark Johnston, who advocate for a non-intentionalist account of self-deception (in which self-deception is seen as simply a species of motivated cognition) also sometimes make use of such a distinction. For example, Mark Johnston argues that self-deception is carried out by subintentional mental processes, which are "processes that serve some interests of the self-deceiver, processes whose existence within the self-deceiver's psychic economy depends on this fact, but processes that are not necessarily initiated by the self-deceiver for the sake of those interests or for any other reason" (Johnston 1988, 65). These processes are thus purposive, since they only exist because they serve the interests of the subject, but not intentional because they are not initiated by the subject for the purpose of serving those interests. Some examples he gives of subintentional mental processes are denial, repression, and wishful thinking. The cognitive tendencies I discuss later could arguably be considered to be subintentional mental processes.

³⁵ As we will see later, current research suggests that the divide between these is not as thick as it was once thought to be (see, for example, Thagard 2008). Moreover, this fact seems to be one of the things that makes it possible for us to develop motivated ignorance to begin with.

cognitively motivated agential insensitivity, since it is driven by their cognitive goals (in this case, to have a consistent set of beliefs that is relatively stable).³⁶ However, in many cases it is not simply our cognitive motives that are driving us to cultivate agential insensitivity.

Consider, for example, a case in which someone encounters information that is not only inconsistent with their current beliefs, but which, if the agent came to believe it, would require them to revise a number of beliefs that are central to their self-conception or otherwise emotionally charged. Suppose someone points out to a liberal white person, say, that their behavior in a certain instance was racist. This would not only be inconsistent with their current beliefs about themselves (i.e. that they are not racist, that they are color-blind, etc.) but would challenge beliefs about themselves that they are emotionally invested in. They don't just believe that they are not racist or are color-blind, they believe that these are *good* or *admirable* qualities to have—believing that they are color-blind and not racist is a way of believing that they are a good person. If their beliefs on this front are mistaken, then it is not a mere factual error that is at stake, but an error which results in them no longer possessing qualities which they think are needed in order to be a good person. It should be no surprise, then, that the cultivation of agential insensitivity can be (and often is) emotionally motivated.

Finally, it is important to note that my focus on ignorance that is driven by motives thus understood narrows the scope of my project. Specifically, it places ignorance that is cultivated or maintained *for us*, rather than *by us* or *with our assistance* outside the scope of my project. Not all of the cases of actively produced ignorance discussed by epistemologists of ignorance are cases of motivated ignorance, then, since they do not always involve agential insensitivity which

³⁶ A comparable example exists in the literature on motivated reasoning in which Kunda maintains that there are two kinds of motivated reasoning-- "reasoning driven by accuracy goals" (when people are motivated to believe accurately) and "reasoning driven by directional goals" (when people are motivated to believe a particular thing) (Kunda 1990, 481-482).

is cultivated or maintained to serve some motive. Cases involving people being deprived of information by external sources, for instance, would not necessarily be classified as motivated ignorance on my model, since they involve an individual knower being denied access to facts or evidence, rather than being motivated to avoid them or avoid adjusting their beliefs when possessing them. This is only true, however, so long as they are not driven by their motives to be complicit in this denial of access.

To illustrate, consider Charles Mills' examples of "collective amnesia" (i.e. the forgetting of certain events by a group which is achieved by omitting these events from the collective memory of the group as enshrined in things such as holidays, monuments, and textbooks) (Mills 2007, 29). One case that Mills discusses is that of the Belgian government's cover-up of the deaths of ten million Congolese that took place in the Belgian Congo during the height of Belgium's exploitation of the area's rubber resources in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The journalist Adam Hochschild reports that the Belgian government destroyed records of the deaths in state archives and omitted them from official historical accounts, including the exhibits in the Brussels Royal Museum of Central Africa (Mills 2007, 29). Mills says of this that

a "deliberate forgetting" as an "active deed" was achieved (293–95), a purging of official memory so thorough and efficient that a Belgian ambassador to West Africa in the 1970s was astonished by the "slander" on his country in a Liberian newspaper's passing reference to the genocide: "I learned that there had been this huge campaign, in the international press, from 1900 to 1910; millions of people had died, but we Belgians knew absolutely nothing about it" (297) (Mills 2007, 29-30, quotes from Hochschild 1998).

Whether we are looking at a case of motivated ignorance here depends on whose ignorance we are talking about. The ignorance the ambassador cited above had before being exposed to the truth by international newspapers would not count as motivated ignorance, for two reasons. First, assuming that the cover-up was as effective as Hochschild says, no evidence

about the incident would have been available to him, nor would he have reason to suspect that such evidence existed. Second, we can see from the fact that the ambassador did in fact change his beliefs after receiving the relevant evidence that, if he had somehow encountered the evidence earlier, he likely would have changed his beliefs. So, while the ambassador's ignorance is actively produced ignorance—having been deliberately created by the Belgian government—it is not motivated ignorance, since the ambassador's absence of belief is neither due to agential insensitivity nor to his personal motives. Hence, motivated ignorance should be thought of as just one species of actively produced ignorance—and, although important, certainly not the only (or only interesting) one.

Nevertheless, the Congolese incident could easily have involved genuine motivated ignorance on the parts of some participants. For instance, suppose that the Belgian ambassador reported his findings about the Congolese deaths to some government officials after he returned to Belgium, but that the officials ignored or failed to change their beliefs in the face of the ambassador's evidence—due to, say, desiring to think the best of the country they love or simply wanting to save face. The officials would count as motivatedly ignorant since they have access to relevant evidence, but their motives prevent them from appropriately responding to this evidence. Their lack of belief is thus attributable to motivated agential insensitivity.

2. How Do Motives Influence Agential Insensitivity?

When an epistemic agent is motivatedly ignorant, then, they are driven by their motives (whether cognitive or affective, conscious or not) to cultivate or maintain attention and uptake failures (whether intentionally or not). In this section, I explore some of the existing social-psychological work on the impact of motives on our cognitive processes in order to show that

some of the motivated cognitive tendencies described by psychologists result in attention and uptake failures. This being the case, then agential insensitivity can be produced by the influence of motives on our cognitive processes.

There has been a good deal of psychological work studying the effects of motivation on cognition.³⁷ In general, most psychologists agree that motives affect cognition "by directing people's cognitive processes (e.g., their recall, information search, or attributions) in ways that help to ensure they reach their desired conclusions" (Molden and Higgins 2005, 297). One way of understanding motivated cognition, then, is as involving a tracking relationship in which a person's belief tracks their motives rather than facts or evidence. In other words, when a person's cognition is motivated, this person changes their beliefs mainly in response to changes in their motives rather than changes in facts or evidence.

It should be noted that this sensitivity to motives is not perfect, however, since we cannot believe anything we wish simply because we desire it to be true. If the evidence against our belief mounts too high, we may be forced to change it (e.g. I can't believe that I can fly, even if I really desire to be able to fly, because the evidence against this belief is too bountiful and strong to be ignored or interpreted away). Psychologist Ziva Kunda also suggests that "people motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion attempt to be rational and to construct a justification of their desired conclusion that would persuade a dispassionate observer" (Kunda 1990, 482-483). In other words, they try to muster up enough evidence to support their belief, even if they twist it in the process.³⁸

³⁷ This phenomenon has been discussed by psychologists under the label of motivated reasoning, thinking, cognition, and belief. I have decided to stick with "motivated cognition," since it is broad enough in scope to encapsulate the other terms.

³⁸ However, Kunda notes that "The objectivity of this process [of justifying one's conclusion] is illusory because people do not realize that the process is biased by their goals" (Kunda 1990, 483). In other words, people can make use of the very same cognitive methods used to come to a desired conclusion to then justify coming to that

The sensitivity to motives which characterizes motivated cognition need not be perfect, though. We can instead formulate a weakened version of Nozick's subjunctive sensitivity to describe it as follows. An agent (*S*) is sensitive to motives if they satisfy the following two conditions: 1) If *S* was motivated to believe *p* and the evidence against *p* was not too strong, *S* would believe that *p*, and 2) If *S* was motivated not to believe that *p* and the evidence in favor of *p* was not too strong, *S* would not believe that *p*.

My main concern is not with how people reach their desired conclusions as much as it is with how people avoid undesired conclusions. In most cases, though, this is simply a shift in focus, since reaching desired conclusions often involves steering away from undesired conclusions, and vice versa. For example, if it is true that people who are trying to come to a desired conclusion try to muster up enough evidence to justify believing this conclusion, it then seems likely that the reverse would be true of those trying to avoid an undesirable conclusion—namely, that they would seek to avoid or discredit evidence that supports the undesirable conclusion in order to remain justified in their disbelief. Social-psychological researchers have found evidence of this as well. I present some of this evidence in the remainder of this section.

I will focus my discussion on two motivated cognitive tendencies that give rise to agential insensitivity. While I don't want to suggest that these are the only cognitive tendencies involved in cultivating agential insensitivity, I think these tendencies are a good place to start due to their influence over what evidence we attend to and how we interpret that evidence.³⁹ First, I

conclusion. Many feminist philosophers of science and feminist epistemologists (such as Lorraine Code, Sandra Harding, and Lynn Hankinson Nelson) give similar arguments that our justification structures are shaped by our interests and our social location.

³⁹ I also don't want to suggest that the cognitive tendencies studied by social psychologists are the only ways that motivated agential insensitivity can be produced. Gaile Pohlhaus Jr. discusses a form of ignorance called willful hermeneutical ignorance, which occurs when knowers from dominant groups refuse to use epistemic resources developed by members of oppressed groups (Pohlhaus Jr. 2012, 722). While this also seems to be a form of motivated ignorance, involving agential insensitivity which is cultivated and maintained to serve the motives of

will examine the tendency to pay more attention to evidence that confirms what we want to believe, which leads to attention failures. Second, I will examine the tendency to evaluate evidence in favor of an undesired conclusion more harshly, which leads to uptake failures. As I examine each of these tendencies, I will also look into how they have been found to be more pronounced when the motives involved are affective ones.

2.1. Motivated Attention Failures

One way that social psychologists have found that our motives can affect our cognition is to influence what evidence we attend to. They have observed, for example, that we have a tendency to pay more attention to evidence that supports what we want to believe. This tendency is typically known as *confirmation bias*. Confirmation bias can involve both selective attention to confirming evidence over other evidence, as well as cutting off searches for evidence prematurely after finding confirming evidence. As I explain below, either cognitive strategy can result in attention failures, and this result becomes even more likely when the motives involved are affective.

First, confirmation bias can involve selective attention to evidence that confirms what we want to believe over that which does not. Kunda, for example, has offered evidence that our motives can influence what memories we access to support a desired conclusion. In one pertinent study (Santioso, Kunda, and Fong 1990), subjects were asked to share autobiographical memories which reflected their standing on an introversion-extraversion scale. The researchers found that "Subjects led to view introversion as desirable were more likely to generate introverted memories first and generate more introverted memories than did subjects led to view

those in dominant groups, it doesn't seem to be rooted in the cognitive tendencies that I have identified. However, it is not the aim of my project to give an exhaustive account of all of the ways that motivated ignorance is produced.

extraversion as more desirable" (Kunda 1990, 485). Similarly, Charles Taber and Milton Lodge found that "when given a chance to pick and choose what information to look at—rather than when presented with pro and con arguments—people will actively seek out sympathetic, nonthreatening sources," especially when they are already knowledgeable about a topic (Taber and Lodge 2006, 763). In this study, participants were given access to sixteen articles on the topic of either gun control or affirmative action, which were identified only by their sources (actual organizations, such as the NRA or NAACP, whose stance on the issue was made clear to the participants ahead of time). Participants were told to choose eight articles to read in order to prepare to educate a fellow student on the issue. Taber and Lodge found that "For all groups examined, proponents of the issue sought out more supporting than opposing arguments, and this difference was quite substantial for sophisticates [those knowledgeable about politics] in both studies and for both issues. When given the chance, sophisticated respondents selected arguments from like-minded groups 70-75% of the time" (Taber and Lodge 2006, 763).

Studies have also suggested that the length of the search for evidence is affected by motives. Namely, they suggest that desires for positive-self evaluations "motivate decreased processing and quick acceptance of favorable evidence, and increased processing and hesitant acceptance of unfavorable evidence" (Molden and Higgins 2005, 299). Peter Ditto and David Lopez present a few cases in which this effect was demonstrated. In one case, subjects were told that they were receiving a newly developed test for a fake medical condition in which a particular enzyme is absent from the body. They were told that this enzyme deficiency caused people to have pancreatic problems later in life. The subjects were then shown how to administer the test (which involved dipping a fake test strip into a cup of their saliva and waiting for it to change color), told that the test took 10-60 seconds to work, and led to a room in which they

were unknowingly videotaped while taking the test. The study found that subjects who were led to believe that they had the enzyme deficiency took an average of thirty seconds longer to decide that their test was complete, and 52% retested themselves (sometimes multiple times) as opposed to only 18% of those who were led to believe that they did not have the deficiency (Ditto and Lopez 1992, 576). Ditto and Lopez take this as evidence that "less information seems required to reach a preferred conclusion than a nonpreferred one" (Ditto and Lopez 1992, 576). In other words, people cut off their search for evidence earlier when they are able to find evidence that agrees with their desired conclusion. On the other hand, they lengthen their search if the evidence they find supports an undesired conclusion, hoping to turn up some evidence that contradicts this conclusion.

However it manifests, confirmation bias can lead to attention failures. This is because, by conducting searches for evidence that are biased toward evidence that confirms what we want to believe and cutting off these searches when we find such evidence, we can effectively steer our attention away from evidence in favor of undesired conclusions. We see this at work in the Taber and Lodge study mentioned above. Even though participants were told to examine the information in an evenhanded way, they still read more articles from sources who agreed with their stance, and thus moved their attention away from articles that they were likely to disagree with. In some cases, the effect was severe. One example given is that "on average sophisticated [politically knowledgeable] opponents of stricter gun control sought out six arguments of the NRA or the Republican Party and only two arguments from the opposition" (Taber and Lodge, 2006, 764). This type of strategic avoidance of evidence is a clear instance of attention failure.

There is reason to think that confirmation bias is even more likely to lead to attention failures when the motives involved are affective. This is partly because emotions themselves are

directors of attention, as a number of philosophers have noted. Catherine Elgin, for example, argues that "Emotions are sources of salience. They fix patterns of attention, highlighting certain features of a domain and obscuring others" (Elgin 2008, 43). When something is salient to us, we pay attention to it because it is a cue that it is relevant. As Michael Brady points out, emotions not only make us pay attention to certain things, but are "of central importance for making *the value of* objects and events salient for us" (Brady 2013, 23, emphasis his). Emotions, then, can alert us to what is relevant or valuable and therefore worth attending to by making different aspects of our experience salient.

One of Elgin's examples involves the contrasts between the kinds of things a woman is likely to notice while walking down the street at night in two different scenarios. In the first scenario, she hears a stranger's footsteps behind her and becomes afraid. Consequently, she's likely to notice that no one is around, that her shoes would make it difficult to run, and so on. In the second scenario, the footsteps belong to a neighbor walking their dog. In this nonthreatening situation, she's more likely to notice the gentle breeze, the scent of flowers, and the moon being out (Elgin 2008, 43-44). Elgin says of this case, "My fear does not just deliver the information that I feel I am in danger. It also orients me to my surroundings, highlighting aspects I otherwise overlook" (Elgin 2008, 43). Our emotions, then, can motivate us to pay attention to aspects of our surroundings or situation that we may have otherwise overlooked as irrelevant.

Brady takes Elgin's claim further by arguing that emotions don't simply direct our attention, but also "*capture and consume* attention" (Brady 2013, 92, emphasis his). This is to say that objects and events made salient by our emotions "hold sway over us, often making it difficult for us to disengage our attention and shift focus elsewhere" (Brady 2013, 92). An example he gives is of a person awoken by a sound downstairs in the middle of the night, whose

fear keeps them listening carefully for further noises, searching for explanations, and developing plans for what to do next until a reason is found to stop being afraid (Brady 2013, 92). Brady argues that the prolonged consumption of attention induced by emotions (which he calls emotional persistence) is epistemically important because it allows us to gather more evidence in order to evaluate our initial emotional appraisals of the situation.

While emotions are useful for directing our attention to relevant aspects of our environment, they can also direct it to aspects of it that are irrelevant. This is what makes affective confirmation bias more likely to cause attention failures. For example, Taber and Lodge suspect that their finding a stronger confirmation bias effect than previous psychological studies is "at least partly due to the affectively tepid issues and arguments that have been used" to test for confirmation bias in the past, as opposed to "the more contentious and challenging political issues and arguments found in real-world politics" that they used (Taber and Lodge 2006, 764). While emotions can, as Elgin points out, make us attend to relevant details in our surroundings in order to protect ourselves, it can also lead us to attend to irrelevant details or to turn our attention away from potentially relevant ones that spur negative emotions.

Moreover, emotional persistence may exacerbate cognitive tendencies like the one discussed by Ditto and Lopez above. This is because the persistence of a negative emotion can enable a prolonged search for evidence that contradicts the undesired conclusion and deactivates the negative emotion. As we saw in the Ditto and Lopez experiment, fear of having a serious disease captured and consumed the attention of the test subjects, and resulted in them spending a long period furiously searching for evidence that the results were not true.

2.2. Motivated Uptake Failures

Motives can affect not just what evidence we focus on, but also how we evaluate that evidence. Molden and Higgins, for example, say, "In general, individuals tend to (1) give more credence to, and be more optimistic about, the validity of information that supports or confirms their standing as kind, competent, and healthy people; and (2) be more skeptical and cautious about information that threatens this standing" (Molden and Higgins 2005, 298). We can thus engage in what Ditto and Lopez call, "motivated skepticism"—holding evidence that supports undesired conclusions to higher standards of evaluation than evidence that supports desired conclusions. This cognitive tendency is typically known as *disconfirmation bias*. In this section, I seek to show here that disconfirmation bias can result in uptake failures, and that, as with confirmation bias, this result becomes even more likely when the motives involved are affective.

When we return to the enzyme deficiency study just discussed above, we can see motivated disconfirmation biases at work. Not only did study participants who were led to believe that they had the enzyme deficiency take longer to decide that the test was over and engage in more retesting, but they also reported more skepticism about the validity of the test. They were both more likely to perceive the enzyme deficiency and pancreatic disease as less serious and more common, and more likely to see the saliva test as an inaccurate indicator of the enzyme deficiency than those who were led to believe that they didn't have the deficiency (Ditto and Lopez 1992, 575). In a variation on this study, subjects who were led to believe that the presence of the fake enzyme was unhealthy not only rated the saliva test as more inaccurate but also provided more alternative explanations for why they tested positive for the enzyme than those who were led to believe that the presence of the enzyme was healthy (Ditto and Lopez

1992, 578). Ditto and Lopez take this as evidence that "people are less critical consumers of preference-consistent than preference-inconsistent information" (Ditto and Lopez 1992, 578).

Similar results are seen in a study referenced by Kunda (Kunda 1987) in which subjects read an article that claimed that caffeine has health risks for women. The study found that women who consumed a lot of caffeine were less convinced by the article's arguments than women who didn't consume much caffeine, while there was no difference between men based on their caffeine consumption. Kunda concludes, "Thus only subjects who stood to suffer serious personal implications if the article were true doubted its truth" (Kunda 1990, 489). Studies like this one suggest that if we are presented evidence against a conclusion we are invested in believing (in this case, that I am healthy and that what I like is not harming me), or in favor of believing something that we are invested in not believing (in this case, that something I like is harming me and I should likely stop consuming it), we will be more likely to evaluate it harshly.

This cognitive tendency to hold evidence in favor of undesired conclusions to higher evaluative standards enables an agent to keep this evidence from changing their beliefs to the extent that it should, thus resulting in uptake failures. If an agent works harder to discredit evidence in favor of an undesirable conclusion, as we saw subjects do in the above studies, then they can feel justified in not changing their beliefs to reflect this evidence.

Consider the reaction of many white people to evidence of disproportionate police violence against black citizens. Many white people respond to such evidence with skepticism. For example, a Washington Post-ABC News poll from December 2014 found that 60% of white respondents reported that they were confident that the police treat white and black people equally, compared to only 20% of black respondents (Balz and Clement 2014).⁴⁰ The poll also

⁴⁰ When the political orientation of white respondents is taken into account, a further break becomes clear, with more than 80% of white Republicans expressing confidence that the police treat white and black people equally, as

found that “There is a 2-to-1 gap between whites and blacks on whether police are adequately trained to avoid the use of excessive force, and slightly larger differences on whether the police try hard to maintain good relations with varied community groups and whether they are held accountable for any misconduct” (Balz and Clement 2014). This poll was, importantly, taken after the high-profile killings of two black men, Michael Brown and Eric Garner, by white police officers and the subsequent acquittals of the officers involved in each case. Both incidents were not only widely publicized, but followed by highly visible protests (especially in the wake of Brown’s shooting) led by black citizens. Even after such incidents and the outpouring of black protest and testimony about their experiences following them, many white people remained skeptical that there is any unequal treatment of black people by the police. It’s instructive to contrast this skepticism with the lack of skepticism that many white people express about the ability of the justice system to work correctly. For example, a Pew Research Center poll reported that whites were significantly more confident in the investigations into the Brown shooting. The report says, “About half of whites (52%) say they have a great deal or fair amount of confidence in the investigations, compared with just 18% of blacks. Roughly three-quarters of blacks (76%) have little or no confidence in the investigations, with 45% saying they have no confidence at all” (Pew Research Center 2014).

In addition to this lingering skepticism, whites are often seen to grasp for alternative explanations of incidents of police violence. For example, the Washington Post-ABC News poll cited above found that “while 6 in 10 whites see the Ferguson [Michael Brown] and Staten Island [Eric Garner] killings as isolated cases, 3 in 4 blacks say they are a sign of a broader problem in

opposed to about 40% of white Democrats (Balz and Clement 2014). However, it is important to note that even the lower confidence of white Democrats is twice as high as the confidence of black respondents.

the treatment of African Americans by police” (Balz and Clement 2014).⁴¹ The “isolated incident” theory is only one of the many alternate explanations given by whites. (Other examples include, for instance, the theories that black people commit more crimes and so are rightfully targeted by police, that the officers' fears were justified in such incidents, that these things wouldn't happen if black people just complied with police orders, etc.) This kind of case arguably involves disconfirmation bias, echoing the same patterns of explaining away evidence, and displaying more skepticism toward evidence that confirms an undesired conclusion than a desired one, that we witnessed in the psychological studies above. Moreover, this disconfirmation bias led to uptake failures, since it caused many white agents to fail to appropriately change their beliefs in response to their evidence.

It seems that disconfirmation bias is also more likely to lead to uptake failures when the motives involved are affective (rather than purely cognitive). This is likely because emotions can also influence how we interpret evidence. Elgin, for example, argues that emotions don't just lead us to notice new or different facts, but also to orient ourselves differently to our surroundings. By this she means that our emotions provide a "frame of reference" which shapes what we notice and how we interpret, evaluate, and interact with our surroundings (Elgin 2008, 46). Peter Goldie argues that this makes it difficult to detect when a emotion is misleading us because the emotion "skews the epistemic landscape" (Goldie 2008, 159). That is to say, the emotion becomes the heuristic (or, as Elgin puts it, the frame of reference) through which we view evidence, which makes it extremely difficult to not only evaluate this evidence in an emotionally neutral way but to even view the impact of the emotion on our evaluations, since we

⁴¹ There is a similar polarization between white Republicans and white Democrats here, with 80% of white Republicans saying that the two killings were isolated incidents, as opposed to 40% of white Democrats. However, this is again almost double the number of black respondents (25%) that saw the incidents as isolated.

can only make this assessment from within the emotional heuristic.⁴² This can have the result that "evidence which we might otherwise, through cool and calm deliberative thinking, take to count against our emotion we now ignore, or even take to be confirmatory of our suspicions" (Goldie 2008, 159). Our emotions, then, serve as the lens through which we evaluate evidence and this lens can color what we see.

When the motives involved are affective, this strengthens the effects of disconfirmation bias, increasing the likelihood that they will lead to uptake failures. For example, in a study by Kari Edwards and Edward E. Smith (Edwards and Smith 1996), subjects were given an argument against capital punishment to read, and told to judge the strength of the argument and write down any thoughts, feelings, or arguments they had in response to it. The study found that those subjects who reported being in favor of capital punishment not only judged the argument to be weaker, but generated more refuting arguments than those who reported being against capital punishment. Moreover, the number of refuting arguments generated by supporters of capital punishment was greater than the number of supporting arguments generated by opponents. These results present further evidence for a motivated disconfirmation bias, suggesting that people judge more harshly and work harder to discredit arguments that are incompatible with their prior beliefs (Edwards and Smith 1996, 18).

However, Edwards and Smith found that those who reported high levels of emotional conviction about their pro-death penalty beliefs generated even more refuting arguments and even fewer supporting arguments than those who reported low levels of emotional conviction about this view. They also generated more redundant arguments. Edwards and Smith take this as "evidence that this bias is accentuated when prior beliefs are associated with emotional conviction" (Edwards and Smith 1996, 18). Taber and Lodge also had a similar outcome with

⁴² This is similar to Kunda's point about the skewing of justificatory structures by motivation.

regard to the strength of the prior attitudes of participants for or against the issues—the stronger the prior attitudes of the participants were, the more disconfirmation bias they displayed. We can see from these kinds of studies that the effects of disconfirmation bias can be exacerbated when combined with affective influences.

In summary, the research just reviewed presents reasons to think that our motives can influence our cognitive processes, affecting both what evidence we attend to and how we evaluate this evidence. I've examined two main cognitive tendencies described by psychologists—confirmation bias and disconfirmation bias—and I've shown that these tendencies can result in attention and uptake failures respectively. Moreover, the likelihood that these tendencies will result in attention and uptake failures increases when the motives involved are affective. All of this demonstrates that, at the level of individual epistemic agents, agential insensitivity (and in turn motivated ignorance) can be produced by motivated cognition.

3. How Does Social Location Impact Our Motives?

In the last section, I argued that motivated ignorance can be produced by an individual agent's motives exerting influence on their cognitive processes. However, this should not be taken to imply that this process is an entirely internal process that is not influenced by an individual's context. In this section I will argue that because our social location shapes our motives, the production of motivated ignorance is a social process, as well as a cognitive one.

Our motives can be influenced by our social, political, and historical location. For the purposes of this chapter, I will focus on the influence of social location—that is, what social identity groups one belongs to and where one fits into the (often hierarchical) structures of relations between social groups. In particular, I will examine two ways that our social location

can influence our motives.⁴³ First, our location within social hierarchies can give us group-related motives. Second, our social location can shape our emotions. (In addition to being powerful motivators, emotions also amplify the biases I described above.) I will address each of these in turn.

3.1. Effects of Social Location on Motives

Social psychologists generally only focus on agent-centered motives, such as self-affirmation, but feminist philosophers and critical philosophers of race have argued that our social location can shape our motives themselves. I will look at some of these arguments here.

Being members of dominant or subordinated groups in social hierarchies can give us motives to either ignore or attend to the social hierarchy and its effects. One reason is that, as Sandra Harding says, "members of oppressed groups have fewer interests in ignorance about the social order and fewer reasons to invest in maintaining or justifying the status quo than do dominant groups" (Harding 1991, 126, cited in Alcoff 2007, 43). Members of dominant groups will generally have more reasons to be invested in preserving current social arrangements, since these arrangements often favor their interests over those of other groups. Ignoring the harms caused by unjust social arrangements helps serve this end. Conversely, members of subordinated groups will generally have more reasons to challenge these social hierarchies which disadvantage them, and thus fewer reasons to ignore the harms caused by these systems. Not only is it not in their interest to cultivate ignorance about present social arrangements, but it is in their interest to understand social structures that are actively harming them. As Alcoff points out, members of

⁴³ I do not take these to be the only ways that our social location affects our motives, but they are the ones I've chosen to focus on.

subordinated groups "need to know the true reality of the social conditions within which one must survive" (Alcoff 2007, 44).

Moreover, Mills argues that we must take group interests into account, and not just individual interests, when seeking to understand the cognitive dysfunctions at the heart of white ignorance (and arguably ignorance specific to other social groups). In other words, individual agents can be driven to cultivate ignorance because they desire to promote the well-being of a social group to which they belong, rather than themselves individually. In this vein, Mills cites a study by Donald Kinder and Lynn Sanders finding that white people's political opinions are shaped by their perceptions of "the threats blacks appear to pose to whites' collective well-being, not their personal welfare" (Kinder and Sanders 1996, 85, cited in Mills 2007, 35). Even if an agent doesn't stand to directly benefit (or doesn't believe that they stand to benefit), they might still be motivated to maintain the dominance of their social group.

Even the kinds of individual motives that social psychologists focus on, such as positive self-evaluation, will still be shaped by our location in social hierarchies. For example, for an upper-class white person, maintaining a positive self-evaluation might require cultivating ignorance about racial and class realities so they can see themselves as having earned everything they have and as not contributing to others' suffering. For a lower-class black person, maintaining a positive self-evaluation might instead require understanding racial and class realities and challenging dominant ways of interpreting their social position and experiences. If we are to truly socialize how we think about motivated cognition, it seems like we will have to further examine how the shape taken by our individual motives will be affected by our social location.

Finally, holding certain beliefs can also be a marker of membership in a certain group, such that the threatening of that belief threatens one's group identity or ability to be a part of that group. A member of such a group thus has a motive to hold on to these identity-specific beliefs. Dan Kahan points out, for example, that beliefs "bear social meanings—that they are, in fact, generally understood (tacitly, at least) to convey that the individuals who espouse them are committed to one group rather than another" (Kahan 2013, 419). Because of this role that beliefs can play, Kahan argues that agents can have an incentive to espouse certain beliefs as a way of expressing our membership in a group. Expressing these beliefs "conveys individuals' membership in and loyalty to groups on whom they depend for various forms of support, emotional, material, and otherwise" (Kahan 2013, 419). Kahan's examples center on political identities, such as how one's stance on issues like gun control and climate change signal one's party membership. But his claim could surely be extended to other groups as well. Our desire to preserve our group identity, therefore, can also provide us with motives.

3.2. Effect of Social Location on Emotions

Our social location can also affect our emotions, which, as we saw earlier, can have a large impact on our motives and the effects they have on cognition. Feminist philosophers who theorize about emotion argue that which emotions and emotional expressions make sense varies by social context. The point here is not just that emotions and their expressions are culturally specific, but that different social groups within a culture will have different norms of emotion. Margaret Urban Walker says, "Feminist studies of emotion reveal that patterns of relationship and social requirements for people's roles and behavior, for example, those created by gender, age, and race privilege, have an impact on what emotions tend to be experienced, recognized,

expressed, and identified by different individuals" (Walker 2007, 104). For example, what emotions are deemed normal and acceptable are different for men and for women, and what kinds of emotional expressions are deemed normal and acceptable are different for black women, Latinas, Asian American women, and white women.

Beyond seeing emotions in general as being socially shaped, it is important for our purposes to acknowledge the role that emotions play in motivating dominant and subordinated groups to ignore or attend to social hierarchies. The motives discussed in earlier sections are not just examples of coldly calculated self-interest, but are often viscerally felt and involve complex emotions such as guilt, shame, and anger. For example, Uma Narayan argues that the feelings that accompany oppression can alert members of oppressed groups that something is wrong. Often, this will lead members of oppressed groups to attend to subtler forms of oppression that members of non-oppressed groups may miss. She says, for example,

An insider [a member of an oppressed group] who is sensitized to such prejudiced attitudes will often pick up cues ranging from facial expressions to body language that an outsider [someone who is not a member of that group] may simply fail to spot and will often also be alerted by her own feelings of unease about the person or situation. As a consequence, the insider is far more likely than the outsider to know the extent to which a form of oppression permeates a society and affects the lives of its victims and of the very subtle forms in which it can operate. (Narayan 1988, 10)

Emotion here serves as a way of detecting the salience of evidence that goes unnoticed by members of non-oppressed groups. It furthermore motivates an oppressed person to examine the situation further than a non-oppressed person who lacks these emotional cues might. Narayan thus concludes that the oppressed possess "knowledge that is at least partly constituted by and conferred by the emotional responses of the oppressed to their oppression" (Narayan 1988, 9). Audre Lorde makes a similar point, arguing that anger "is loaded with information and energy," and that when we ignore or fear this anger we lose a valuable source of insight and knowledge

(Lorde 2007, 127). She believes both that the oppressed can learn from their own anger, and also that members of dominant groups ought to learn from expressions of anger by members of oppressed groups, rather than dismissing or avoiding them.

Conversely, the negative emotions that come with confronting the realities of social hierarchies can motivate members of dominant groups to avoid evidence of these realities. For example, Lorde examines the roles that guilt plays in members of dominant groups' ignoring of what can be learned from oppressed groups' anger (and in ignoring their role in oppressive structures more generally). She explains that guilt is a common reaction by white women to the anger of women of color. This reaction usually results in white women shutting down the conversation, often by deflecting attention from what is being expressed by the woman of color to the manner in which it is being expressed or to the white woman's own hurt feelings.

Lorde gives an example of a white woman who responded to her anger by saying, "Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you." In response, Lorde asks, "But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?" (Lorde 2007, 125). Here Lorde is pointing out that these ways of deflecting are ultimately based not on a fear of the anger itself, but a fear of the message expressed by the anger. In other words, women of color are saying things that white women do not want to hear because they reveal undesirable things about themselves (such as that they harbor racist attitudes, have harmed other women, or ought to start doing things differently). Moreover, these things are not just undesirable but trigger unpleasant feelings of guilt. By deflecting attention on to the anger itself or their own hurt feelings, white women can avoid hearing these things and ease their own feelings of guilt. In this way, white guilt serves to preserve ignorance, rather than address it. Lorde says, "Yet all too often guilt is just another name for impotence, for defensiveness

destructive of communication; it becomes a device to protect ignorance and the continuation of things the way they are, the ultimate protection for changelessness" (Lorde 2007, 130).

There is no reason to think that Lorde's insights only apply to white women's ignorance. As it becomes increasingly unacceptable to be racist, sexist, homophobic, etc. in the public sphere and in many places in the U.S., for example, the ability of many members of dominant groups to see themselves as good people becomes intertwined with their ability to see themselves as not being any of these things. Moreover, many members of dominant groups will experience a tension between self-interested motives to preserve the status quo (or at the very least not to rock the boat) and motives to see oneself as a basically good person who doesn't harm others. Both of the tensions just mentioned create conditions that are ripe for the cultivation of agential insensitivity.

Consider the case of police violence discussed earlier. By coming up with alternative explanations for greater rates of police violence toward black citizens, white agents have been able to continue believing that white and black citizens are treated equally by the police. For many white people, the impetus to cultivate this particular uptake failure likely comes from not wanting to face what the unequal treatment of black and white citizens by the police would mean about them and their country. James Baldwin makes a similar point, saying, "White America remains unable to believe that Black America's grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country" (Baldwin 1985, 536, cited in Spelman 2007, 119). According to Elizabeth Spelman, the type of white person is that Baldwin is speaking of is not a white supremacist, but one who exhibits a "cowardly form of racism" (Spelman 2007, 124). These individuals would find the reality of black grievances to be shameful (unlike the white supremacist), but would rather avoid this

shame by ignoring the issue than challenge the status quo in order to address the source of the grievances. For Spelman and Baldwin, then, fear of a truth that would be shameful to them drives the cultivation of ignorance about the truth of black grievances in this kind of white agent. The police violence case involves the same type of phenomenon. By explaining away the unequal treatment of blacks by police, whites can avoid having to face the full effects of shame-inducing realities, while still maintaining their positive self-evaluation as not racist.

4. Conclusion

In cases of motivated ignorance, agential insensitivity is cultivated and maintained in order to serve an agent's motives. In this chapter, I provided an account of one key way in which this creation or perpetuation of agential insensitivity can occur—namely, through the influence of motives (such as desires, interests, and needs) on the cognitive processes of agents. In order to develop this account I examined some of the psychological literature on motivated cognition, focusing on two cognitive tendencies in particular (confirmation bias and disconfirmation bias), and showed that these tendencies can lead to attention and uptake failures, especially when the motives involved are affective ones.

While motivated cognition is likely not the only way that motivated ignorance can be produced, I think it is an important one to understand for two main reasons. First, it lends concrete support to the intuitions of many epistemologists of ignorance that socially supported forms ignorance can also be perpetuated by individuals, and that these individuals seem to be invested in this perpetuation in many cases. Beyond support, it offers more a detailed insight into how this perpetuation can occur at the individual cognitive level that is lacking in many active

accounts. This kind of insight is particularly helpful for fleshing out accounts such as Mills' which posit that there is a cognitive component to actively produced ignorance.

Second, it demonstrates that an analysis of motivated ignorance that focuses on the motives, emotions, and cognitive processes of individual agents doesn't have to lose sight of the social side of the phenomenon. This is because the motives and emotions of individual agents can themselves be influenced by the social location of these agents, making the production of motivated ignorance a deeply social process. I suggested some ways that this influence can manifest in this chapter, such as by affecting how invested we are in learning about or ignoring the effects of unjust social arrangements, as well as what kinds of emotions will be experienced when presented with facts about these arrangements. I have also tried throughout my project to incorporate examples that highlight the influence of social location on motivated ignorance.

CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have defended a conceptual account of the state of not-knowing that characterizes motivated ignorance, as well as a practical account of how this state of not-knowing can be produced. Through these analyses, I've developed a two-part definition of motivated ignorance. Motivated ignorance, according to my definition, is the state of not-knowing that results from agential insensitivity that's cultivated or maintained to serve some motive—to satisfy a desire or advance an interest, for instance. I've explained how various kinds of motivated cognition can be implicated in this type of insensitivity.

On this picture, motivated ignorance is characterized by a particular state of not-knowing that is produced in a particular way. In my third chapter, I've argued that the state of not-knowing which characterizes motivated ignorance is best understood as one of belief-insensitivity that is caused by agential insensitivity. Belief-insensitivity occurs when a person's beliefs fail to change in response to changes in evidence. This is insensitivity in the most basic Nozickian sense. Belief-insensitivity, however, is caused by believer-insensitivity, which occurs when a person fails to change their beliefs in response to changes in evidence. In other words, insensitive beliefs only occur because of insensitive believers. Believer-insensitivity can be the result of an agent's inability to access epistemically relevant evidence due to the limitations of human faculties. (I call this phenomenon circumstantial insensitivity.) Alternatively, it can result from an agent's failure either to attend to epistemically relevant evidence which is available to them, or their failure to change their beliefs in response to this evidence. (I call this agential insensitivity.) Agential insensitivity is rooted in agent-specific features, such as an individual's unique psychological or cognitive traits, emotions, desires, beliefs, commitments, values, and so

forth. Motivated ignorance is characterized by agential, rather than circumstantial, insensitivity, due to the central role that an agent's motives (which are agent-specific features) play in its production. Furthermore, only agential insensitivity accounts for the resistance to evidence that many epistemologists of ignorance have identified as a feature of actively produced forms of ignorance.

In cases of motivated ignorance, agential insensitivity is cultivated and maintained in order to serve an agent's motives. One important way this cultivation and maintenance occurs is through motivated cognition (when an agent's motives exert influence on their cognitive processes). Two ways motives can influence an agent's cognitive processes are by affecting what evidence they attend to and how they evaluate this evidence. In my fourth chapter, I've examined two cognitive tendencies described by psychologists—the tendency to pay more attention to evidence in favor of desired conclusions, and the tendency to be more skeptical of evidence in favor of undesired conclusions—in order to show that these tendencies can lead to attention and uptake failures, respectively. Moreover, the likelihood of these tendencies leading to attention and uptake failures only increases when the motives involved are affective rather than purely cognitive. Since these tendencies can lead to attention and uptake failures, they are causes of agential insensitivity.

The development of this concept of motivated ignorance in this way is significant for three main reasons. First, it balances between an individual-level and structural-level analysis, thus filling in gaps in both mainstream and active accounts of ignorance. Second, it gives us a different way of thinking about how to address pernicious instances of motivated ignorance and other cultivated forms of ignorance. Third, it serves as a bridge between mainstream and active accounts of ignorance. I will address each of these in turn.

To begin with, my account balances between individual-level and structural-level analysis by examining the motivated ignorance of epistemic agents who are both particular and socially situated. I do this by examining what it means for an individual epistemic agent to be motivatedly ignorant, and how this ignorance is produced in a single agent, while also being mindful of how this agent's social location affects the production and our conceptualization of this ignorance. This is significant because it fills in gaps in both the mainstream and active accounts of ignorance.

Mainstream epistemologists tend to focus on generic, interchangeable knowers and simple cases of perceptual knowledge, which causes them to miss social-political influences on knowledge and ignorance. However, as I have shown throughout my dissertation, it is important to understand these influences in order to understand motivated ignorance, since our social location impacts the motives and emotions which drive the cultivation and maintenance of motivated ignorance. Focusing only on generic human knowers would thus produce a very limited understanding of motivated ignorance that would catch only instances rooted in motives that all humans are assumed to share, such as self-affirmation. Indeed, many actual social-psychological accounts of motivated cognition have this one-sided character, since they focus solely on motives such as wanting to think well of oneself, or wanting to be healthy. Moreover, it is often not considered how motives assumed to be universal could be experienced differently by those in different social locations. Talking about motivated ignorance in this one-dimensional way loses all of the depth brought by acknowledging how one's motives and emotions are rooted in one's social location, and it obscures the many important forms of motivated ignorance that are socially supported.

Epistemologists of ignorance, on the other hand, tend to focus on the production of ignorance in social groups and how this production is impacted by social-political structures. However, they often do not provide us with a story of how individual members of these social groups cultivate and maintain these socially supported forms of ignorance. This is problematic because, outside of cases involving things like government cover ups or textbooks written to deliberately omit or misrepresent historical events, the production of socially supported forms of ignorance always relies on individual epistemic agents ignoring or neutralizing evidence that counters their stubbornly-held beliefs, or that spurs them to believe something that they don't want to. While most epistemologists of ignorance acknowledge that this is the case, they often don't provide any detailed analysis of how such ignorance can be produced at the individual level. Charles Mills, who sees white ignorance as being largely a product of systematic cognitive dysfunctions, is an exception here, and my account seeks to flesh out his suggestive remarks by looking into what those cognitive dysfunctions could be. It is my hope that by incorporating empirical insights from social and cognitive psychology, I can show that what is happening at the cognitive level is an important part of the story of the social production of knowledge and ignorance.

My account thus attempts to fill these gaps in the mainstream and active accounts by offering an understanding of the not-knowing that characterizes one form of individually cultivated and socially supported ignorance and how particular, socially situated epistemic agents produce this not-knowing. I hope this account will not only help us understand motivated ignorance and its production, but also set a precedent for future explorations of other forms of socially supported forms of ignorance that are cultivated and maintained by individual agents.

Second, my account gives us a different way to think about how to address individually cultivated and socially supported forms of ignorance. Ignorance as it is understood in mainstream accounts—i.e., a passive and accidental lack of knowledge—can be addressed by providing facts and evidence that ignorant agents are lacking. Epistemologists of ignorance have made it clear that this model is inadequate as a general account of ignorance, since there exist active forms of ignorance that stubbornly persist in the face of contrary evidence. Because of this, information-based remedies will not be sufficient to address all forms of ignorance. However, since active accounts mostly operate on the structural level, this suggests that addressing socially supported forms of ignorance must also occur on the structural level (i.e., through changes to social-political structures). While structural level changes will likely be necessary for addressing pernicious instances of motivated ignorance due to the influence of social-political structures on our motives and emotions, we will probably also have to find interventions that can change motives and emotions on the individual level, or that can mitigate the impact of these factors on cognitive processes.⁴⁴

Finally, my account has an important conciliatory role to play, because it serves as a bridge between mainstream epistemology and epistemologies of ignorance, which are often taken to be fundamentally at odds with one another. By making use of the methodologies and insights of both kinds of epistemology, I've tried to show the possibility of a theory of active ignorance that incorporates elements of mainstream epistemology without losing sight of the social-political concerns of epistemologists of ignorance. It is my hope that this in turn helps open up space for people to continue using resources from both traditions in constructive ways.

⁴⁴ It is likely neither possible nor desirable to eradicate all motivated ignorance. What I am focused on here is thinking of ways we can address pernicious instances or forms of motivated ignorance. It is outside the scope of my project to offer an account of which forms of motivated ignorance are pernicious and which are not.

If the gap between these kinds of epistemology is bridged often enough, both sides will ideally be better able to share their distinctive intellectual and practical resources with one another.

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