

EROTETIC IGNORANCE DOES NOT REDUCE TO FACTIVE IGNORANCE

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Abstract. Nottelman (2016) and Peels (2023) identify several categories of ignorance: factive, objectual, and practical, with erotetic ignorance—understood as the lack of knowledge of answers to questions—viewed as reducible to factive ignorance. This paper argues that erotetic ignorance is not in fact reducible to factive ignorance. More precisely, erotetic knowledge does not solely involve a relationship between a subject and a true proposition or set of propositions; instead, it involves a relationship between a subject, a true proposition or set of propositions and epistemic goals of inquiry.

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I

The phenomenon of ignorance was relatively neglected within contemporary epistemological discussions. However, there has been a noticeable shift in recent times, as an increasing number of works have emerged addressing the topic. A central concern in these works is to provide a taxonomy for different types of ignorance. Thus Nottelman (2016) and Peels (2023), for example, distinguish between factive, or propositional, ignorance (lack of knowledge of a fact or true proposition, such as lack of knowledge that Meryl Streep won an Oscar for her role in *Sophie's Choice*), objectual ignorance (lack of knowledge of an entity, or lack of acquaintance with an entity, such as lack of knowledge of the Mexican spirit mescal) and practical ignorance (not knowing how to do something, such as not knowing how to drive a F1 race car). Nottelman and Peels also consider erotetic ignorance: not knowing answers to questions, such as not knowing the answer to the question of who killed John Kennedy. Yet they argue that erotetic ignorance should not be taken as a distinct fourth type of ignorance, for it can ultimately be reduced to factive ignorance: not knowing answers to questions is a matter of not knowing certain facts.

In this paper, I will argue that erotetic ignorance does not reduce to factive ignorance. If erotetic ignorance were reducible to factive ignorance, it would be expected that erotetic knowledge (knowledge of answers to questions) could likewise



be reduced to factive knowledge (knowledge of facts). However, erotetic knowledge is more nuanced than merely possessing knowledge of facts. To be more precise, erotetic knowledge does not solely involve a relationship between a subject and a true proposition or set of propositions; instead, it involves a relationship between a subject, a true proposition or set of propositions, and epistemic goals of inquiry. I will argue that this distinction is crucial. If my argument holds, then erotetic ignorance should not be construed as merely the lack of knowledge of answers to questions but rather as the lack of knowledge of answers to questions given epistemic goals of inquiry. This distinction holds significance, not merely as a minor detail, but because it situates erotetic ignorance within the broader framework of epistemology as a theory of inquiry.

As suggested by Cassam (2016), the activity of inquiry—understood as the attempt to find things out by answering to questions (Hookway 1996, 2008)—occupies a central role in our cognitive lives. As we engage in the pursuit of knowledge by answering to questions, our objective extends beyond mere acquisition of factual information. What we seek, or at least should seek, is knowledge of facts that effectively resolve our inquiries, or so I will argue.

II

Consider questions such as: Who was the first person to conquer Mount Everest? What precisely is the Higgs boson? What are the names of my beloved feline companions? And where in the world can we locate Paul McCartney at this very moment? These questions, unlike some others, have correct answers in the actual world.

When Jacques lacks knowledge of these answers, we can aptly describe his state as one of *erotetic ignorance*. In essence, he lacks the knowledge of the correct answers to these questions. However, when it comes to the question of who currently reigns as the king of Argentina, Jacques cannot be deemed ignorant. Why? Simply because there is no such individual. The question itself lacks a correct answer in the actual world. Consequently, Jacques stands free from ignorance concerning this particular question.

Nottelman (2016, p.39) is helpful in spelling out the conditions for erotetic ignorance. Given a question Q , a subject S is erotetically ignorant in respect to Q^1 if and only if:

1. S is an epistemic subject.
2. Q has at least one correct answer in the actual world.
3. S does not know any correct answer to Q .

To be more precise, when a subject S satisfies all three conditions concerning a particular question Q , S is in a state of *complete erotetic ignorance* in relation to that question.

The majority of individuals find themselves in a state of complete erotetic ignorance regarding the question of what the names of my cats are. Most individuals do not know any correct answer to this question. Nevertheless, there are exceptions, like my friend Ines, who knows that one of my cats is named Belchior while remaining ignorant of the names of my other three feline companions. Consequently, Ines is not in state of complete erotetic ignorance in this instance; instead, she finds herself in a state of *partial ignorance* concerning this question.

Again, Nottelman (2016, p.39) is helpful here, in distinguishing conditions for complete erotetic ignorance from conditions for partial erotetic ignorance. Given a question *Q*, a subject *S* is in a state of partial ignorance in respect to *Q* if and only if:

1. *S* is an epistemic subject.
2. *Q* has at least one correct answer in the actual world.
3. *S* does not know any complete correct answer to *Q*.

But what does it take for one to know a complete answer to a question *Q*? According to Karttunen's (1977) influential account, a subject *S* knows a complete answer to a question *Q* if and only if *S* knows a set of propositions, such that these propositions jointly specify *all the objects* that meet the conditions presented in *Q*.² Thus, I know a complete answer to the question of what the names of my cats are, in that I know that (in chronological order of their arrival) my first cat is called Belchior, my second cat is called Sancha, my third cat is called Lupe and my fourth cat is called Jiji. Unlike me, Ines does not know a complete answer to the question in case. Rather, she knows a partial answer to it, in that she knows a single proposition that specifies one of the objects meeting the conditions stipulated in *Q*, namely, that one of my cats is named Belchior.

If this view is correct, it might appear that erotetic ignorance ultimately boils down to factive ignorance. After all, if possessing knowledge of a complete (or even a partial) answer to a question hinges on knowing a set of propositions, then lacking knowledge of a complete (or partial) answer to a question is a matter of a lack of knowledge of a set of propositions. In simpler terms, the absence of answers to questions can be attributed to the absence of knowledge of certain facts.

The reductionist position can be made clearer if we consider the relation between erotetic ignorance and erotetic knowledge. After all, as Nottelman has pointed out, the reductionist position stems naturally from an influential and persuasive view of erotetic knowledge, giving rise to a parallel perspective of erotetic ignorance. This view can be summarized as follows:

Erotetic Knowledge

For any instance of erotetic knowledge in a world *w*, there is a set of facts in *w*, such that *S* knows those facts, and this factual knowledge is necessary and sufficient for her erotetic knowledge (Nottelman, 2016, p.44).

The set of facts in case is to be understood as a set of propositions that correctly answer a given question. Thus, there exists a set of propositions that correctly answers the question regarding the names of my cats. If an individual possesses knowledge of these propositions, she attains erotetic knowledge concerning the question at hand.

Clearly, according to this view, erotetic knowledge reduces to factive knowledge. Knowing answers to questions essentially boils down to having knowledge of specific propositions, namely, certain factual information.

From this view of erotetic knowledge, a parallel view of erotetic ignorance follows:

Erotetic Ignorance

For any instance of erotetic ignorance in a world w , there is a set of facts in w (past, present, future), such that the ignorant subject is ignorant of those facts, and this factual ignorance is necessary and sufficient for her erotetic ignorance (Nottelman, 2016, p.43).

If an individual lacks knowledge of a set of propositions—a set of facts—that correctly answers a particular question, such as the question regarding the names of my cats, she is in a state of erotetic ignorance concerning that question. Thus, according to this view, erotetic ignorance can be understood as factive ignorance. The lack of knowledge of answers to questions boils down to lack of knowledge of facts.

I will ultimately argue that this view of erotetic knowledge—and the parallel view of erotetic ignorance—are not correct as they stand, and that is why erotetic ignorance does not reduce to factive ignorance. Nonetheless, some philosophers have contested this reduction independently of whether the views just presented are correct. In the next section, I consider such arguments and reactions against them offered by reductionists such as Nottelman and Peels.

III

Rescher (2009) and Wilholt (2020) have both argued that erotetic ignorance does not reduce to factive ignorance, and they express their view in similar terms. Rescher (2009, p.28-29) writes that

... in the case of questions—unlike factual knowledge—we can be concretely specific regarding our incapacity. We cannot coherently say “ p is a specific truth (fact) I do not know”. But saying “ Q is a specific question I cannot answer” is altogether unproblematic. When we look at cognition from the angle of questions rather than that of knowledge, ignorance becomes identifiable. Erotetic ignorance—the inability to answer questions—is accordingly something quite different from propositional ignorance: the failure to know truths.

Wilholt (2020, p.199) makes a similar point:

If I conceive of a particular piece of ignorance as an item of non-knowledge—that is, a true proposition that I do not yet know—then it seems that I would only be able to direct my epistemic efforts at such an item if I already knew it—and knew it to be a true proposition. What this shows is that our conscious ignorance in the present sense cannot be understood as a set of true propositions lying out there, waiting to be discovered. Instead, our conscious ignorance is best understood as a set of *questions* (Wilholt 2020, p.199/author’s italics).

Rescher and Wilholt suggest in these passages that, when it comes to factive ignorance, there is an oddity in claiming that I am ignorant of the fact that *p*—for instance, in claiming that I am ignorant that Sifan Hassan won the women’s marathon gold medal at the 2024 Olympics. (Or else, in claiming that the fact that Sifan Hassan won the marathon gold medal at the 2024 Olympics is one I do not know). After all, in claiming ignorance of this fact I take it into account. By how can I take it into account while remaining ignorant of it?³ Yet there is no such oddity if I claim that I am ignorant of whether Sifan Hassan won the marathon gold medal at the 2024 Olympics—or, of course, of who won the women’s marathon gold medal at the 2024 Olympics.

The relevance of this discussion to the debate surrounding the reducibility of erotetic ignorance to factive ignorance lies in the idea that, to avoid perplexing constructions in a form such as “I am ignorant of the fact that *p*”, erotetic ignorance should not be construed in terms of a lack of factual knowledge. Rather, erotetic ignorance should be understood as a distinct state directed at questions. In being erotetically ignorant of whether Sifan Hassan won the marathon gold medal at the 2024 Olympics, my ignorance is directed at a question for which I lack a correct answer.

Rescher and Wilholt maintain that the outcome of their arguments is the classification of erotetic ignorance and factive ignorance as distinct types. But others are unconvinced. Nottelman (2016) and Peels (2023) suggest that the intricacies involved in cases where a subject self-ascribes ignorance of a fact do not fundamentally undermine the view according to which erotetic ignorance can ultimately be reduced to a lack of knowledge of a specific proposition or set of propositions. After all, the complexities surrounding self-ascriptions of ignorance should not serve as a definitive guide to settling questions concerning the *nature* of ignorance. It might be problematic for someone to claim ignorance of the fact that the 2024 Olympic women’s marathon gold medalist was born in Ethiopia. Yet this should not lead us to conclude that what we are ignorant of in this case is not a true proposition—a fact. As put by Peels (2023, p. 36), “being ignorant of *p* and expressing or asserting one’s

ignorance of p are simply two rather different things. Obviously, from the fact that I cannot assert my ignorance of p , it does not follow that I am not ignorant of p ".⁴

IV

Nottelman and Peels are correct in emphasizing the separation between matters concerning self-ascriptions of ignorance and matters concerning the nature of ignorance itself. However, there are independent reasons for us to believe that erotetic ignorance cannot be simply reduced to factive ignorance.

As mentioned earlier, the reductionist position relies on an influential view of erotetic knowledge, from which a parallel perspective on erotetic ignorance emerges. Nevertheless, I will now argue that this view of erotetic knowledge requires revision. Once we reevaluate this perspective, it will become apparent that erotetic knowledge does not reduce to factive knowledge. Likewise, erotetic ignorance cannot be simply equated with factive ignorance.

Erotetic knowledge is essentially about knowing answers to questions, and at the core of the view in case is the idea that knowing answers to questions is essentially a matter of having knowledge of facts. However, I would like to challenge this idea, as knowing answers to questions is not exclusively a matter of having factual knowledge.

Let me approach the issue by means of an example I adapt from Ginzburg (1995, p.468). Imagine a linguist—let's call her Sally—visiting a foreign country to deliver several lectures. Unfamiliar with the local scientific community, she seeks assistance from one of the organizers and asks him who has been attending her talks. In response, the organizer provides her with a list of names, specifically, the names of every individual who has been present at her talks.

Does Sally have erotetic knowledge regarding the question of who has been attending her talks? According to the view of erotetic knowledge advocated by Nottelman (2016), there exists a set of facts—of true propositions—in the actual world concerning who has attended Sally's talks. These facts jointly specify all the objects that meet the conditions presented in the question at hand, as put by Karttunen (1977). Moreover, knowledge of these facts is deemed necessary and sufficient for her to have erotetic knowledge concerning this particular question. After all, having knowledge of these facts, or rather, this set of propositions, is taken as the key to knowing an answer to this question.

Insofar as Sally is presented with the names of every individual who has been attending her talks, it seems that she satisfies the conditions for erotetic knowledge as proposed by Nottelman. She knows a set of facts—a set of true propositions—that are necessary and sufficient for her to have erotetic knowledge in respect to the question of who has been attending the talks.

However, there is an intriguing aspect to this example. Sally herself was not anticipating a list of names in response to her query. In fact, the names hold no significance for her. As suggested by Ginzburg (1995, p.469), Sally might have been expecting a response more in the vein of “Several cognitive phoneticians and Willshaw net experts have attended the talks”. Thus, there appears to be a sense in which she does not in fact know who has attended the talks, despite being presented with an exhaustive list of names of all the participants. In other words, even though she has been provided with a set of propositions that collectively specify all the objects meeting the conditions outlined in the question, she still seems to lack knowledge of who attended the talks.

A similar insight can be drawn from another example adapted from Ginzburg (1995, p. 465). Let us imagine that Sally is now on a flight to Rio de Janeiro. During the descent, she is fast asleep. A flight attendant wakes her up and inquires, “Do you know where you are?”. Sally gazes out of the window and responds, “I’m in Rio”. The flight attendant is relieved; unlike others, this passenger knows where she is!

Now, let’s shift to a different scenario. Picture Sally taking a cab from the airport to Rio’s city center. In the city center, the streets are dark and empty. The cab driver asks, “Do you know where you are?”. Sally responds, “I’m in Rio”. However, she remains unaware of the specific part of Rio she is in. Unsurprisingly, the cab driver becomes worried, as he believes that the passenger does not know her whereabouts.

It appears natural for us to assume that Sally knows where she is in the first scenario but fails to know it in the second. However, the position advanced by Nottelman (2016) on erotetic knowledge, as it stands, encounters difficulties in accommodating this interpretation of the case. According to this view, there should exist a specific fact or set of facts in the actual world such that if Sally knows these facts, her factual knowledge becomes both necessary and sufficient for her to know where she is. However, the crucial question is: what are these facts? Nottelman’s view is silent on this issue. But if one wishes to adhere to a position where erotetic knowledge is simply a relation between a subject and a fact or set of facts, as Nottelman does, one should defend a view according to which, in these two scenarios, knowledge of a true proposition—a fact—that specifies Sally’s location should be both necessary and sufficient for her to know where she is. Well, Sally knows that she is in Rio in the second scenario. Thus, she knows a true proposition that specifies where she is. Nevertheless, it seems that, in the second scenario, she does not in fact know where she is.

V

These cases—which we can refer to as “Sally cases”—challenge the perspective that regards erotetic knowledge as solely a relation between a subject and a fact or set

of facts. Moreover, a natural approach to consider in light of these cases involves viewing erotetic knowledge as a relationship between a subject, a set or set of facts, and an additional parameter, specifically, epistemic goals of inquiry.

To understand why this is so, let us revisit the Sally cases. In the first scenario, it appears that Sally lacks knowledge regarding who attended her talks. We can better grasp why we hesitate to attribute this piece of knowledge to Sally when we consider the organizer's response to her inquiry about the attendees of her talks. His response, which consists of a list of names that collectively identifies all the individuals present at her talks, does not directly address Sally's specific inquiry or concern. This is why the case appears intriguing, and why we hesitate to say that Sally in fact knows who attended her talks based solely on this factual information.

Likewise, in the scenario where Sally is in a cab headed to Rio's city center, her response to the driver's question about her location does not adequately address his specific concerns. While it is evident that, in this scenario, the cab driver would expect Sally to know the city she is in, his question is focused on ascertaining whether Sally knows her specific location within that city. It is Sally's failure to provide a satisfactory answer to a question aimed at determining whether she knows this specific location that makes us hesitant to attribute her the knowledge of where she is.

There is a broader point to consider here. When we pose inquiries, our expectation is not—and rightly so—merely to receive factual information, but rather *factual information that effectively addresses our particular concerns*. To put it in the terminology I favor, let me say that, in asking questions, inquirers seek not only true answers, but true answers that *resolve* their questions.⁵

What do I mean exactly by an answer resolving a question? As suggested by Ginzburg (1995, p. 465), resolvedness is relative. Whether an answer *A* resolves a given question *Q* is relative to certain mental states. More specifically, it is relative to the *epistemic goals* that an inquirer seeks to achieve with *Q*. Call these *epistemic goals of inquiry*, or simply *goals of inquiry*. They refer to the informational needs of the individual when posing questions, or, put differently, to the kind of information that the individual seeks to obtain so as to close her inquiry. For example, in our first case involving Sally, her goal of inquiry in asking who attended her talks is to find out the general professional profile of the participants, rather than obtaining a list of names.⁶ Thus, the idea is that an answer *A* resolves a question *Q* put by a subject *S* if and only if *A* meets the goals of inquiry of *S*, given the specific context in which *Q* is put.

When a question is definitively resolved—for example, when Sally finds out the general profile of her audience—a particular inquiry can be closed because its goals have been met. However, this specific inquiry may be part of a larger one. Sally may be engaged in a broader investigation into how to refine her presentation skills. Discovering the profile of her audience aids in this, but many other questions may remain

open. Additionally, closing a particular inquiry may open new ones. It may now be important for Sally to find out the specific interests of the cognitive phoneticians in her audience, who did not respond as expected to her talks.

How inquirers resolve their questions in practice raises several pragmatic issues. They should try to make their goals clear to respondents, who should then be able to identify them. Additionally, aspects of the inquirer's background knowledge may need to come to the surface. For instance, the inquirer may need to indicate what she already knows about the topic under discussion. By doing so, she enables the respondent to avoid providing redundant information or information that does not address her needs. In the scenario where Sally responds to the cab driver's question about her location by saying she is in Rio, she clearly fails to identify the inquirer's goals. This oversight likely stems from not considering what the inquirer already knows—presumably, he knows that Sally is aware of the city she is in, so he must have a different goal in mind when asking about her location. As a result, Sally's response, though factually true, fails to resolve the inquirer's question.

I cannot provide here a detailed account of how respondents can succeed in identifying goals of inquiry, or of how inquirers can make such goals clear.⁷ What is most relevant for our purposes is the following: in light of the above, knowing an answer to a question should not be seen solely as a relation between a subject and a fact. Instead, knowing an answer to a question should be understood as a relation between a subject and a fact that *genuinely resolves the question*, by meeting the inquirer's goals in putting it.

Let me assume that an answer to a question *Q* that is not only factually correct but also effectively resolves *Q* is a *proper answer* to *Q*. Given this, I propose the following revised position regarding erotetic knowledge:

Erotetic Knowledge (Revised):

In a context *C*, an individual *S* possesses erotetic knowledge with respect to a question *Q* if and only if *S* knows a proposition or a set of propositions that properly answer *Q* in *C*.

So, we have that in a context where a question is posed, whether initiated by the individual herself or by a third party, the individual has erotetic knowledge in respect to that question if and only if she knows a proposition or a set of propositions that are not only true but also resolve the question in that given context.

A consequence of this view is that an individual may have erotetic knowledge in respect to a question in a given context while lacking it in another. This may precisely describe the situation in which Sally finds herself. In the first Sally case, Sally does not lack knowledge of who attended the talks, full stop; instead, she lacks knowledge of who attended the talks in that context, in light of her specific goal of inquiry. Sally's primary objective in asking about the attendees was to gather information about the

general professional profile of the audience, rather than obtaining the specific names of the participants. It appears that if her objective had been the latter, withholding this piece of knowledge from Sally would be mistaken.

With this revised perspective of erotetic knowledge, we can also now make sense of the second Sally case, considering both of its scenarios. Sally knows where she is in the first scenario, when faced with inquiries aimed at determining whether she knows the city she is in. However, she does not know where she is in the second scenario, when confronted with inquiries aimed at determining whether she knows her precise location within the city she is in.

VI

This revised position of erotetic knowledge allows us to better understand and address the Sally cases. Moreover, it paves the way for a parallel and plausible view of erotetic ignorance. The view is the following:

Erotetic Ignorance (Revised)

In a context *C*, an individual *S* is erotetically ignorant with respect to a question *Q* if and only if *S* lacks knowledge of a proposition or a set of propositions that properly answer *Q* in *C*.⁸

In accordance with this perspective, Sally, as she reaches the city center of Rio without knowledge of her specific location, is erotetically ignorant of her whereabouts. She lacks knowledge of a proposition that properly answers the question of where she is in such a scenario. However, her state of ignorance is context-sensitive. In contexts where the goal of inquiry is to establish if Sally knows in which city she is in, she is in a position of knowledge rather than ignorance regarding the question in focus.

Sally is certainly not alone in being erotetically ignorant concerning a question in specific contexts while having knowledge in others. This phenomenon is widespread and applicable to various situations. A general practitioner may know a set of propositions that properly answer the question of what a virus is given everyday inquiries. However, the same practitioner may lack such knowledge when facing a panel of virologists in a specialized context. A politician may know a set of propositions that properly answer the question of who Mark Twain is when delivering a public homage to the American author. However, the same politician may not know who Mark Twain is in the context of a gathering of literary enthusiasts.

We could provide more examples, but it is unnecessary for our discussion. The key point to emphasize is that a reductionist perspective on erotetic ignorance, like the one advocated by Nottelman (2016), lacks the capacity to address such examples

effectively. After all, according to it, there is a set of facts such that if an individual is ignorant of those facts, this factual ignorance is necessary and sufficient for her erotetic ignorance. But this account fails to accommodate the context-sensitivity of erotetic ignorance. It cannot be reduced to a fixed list of facts in such a way that, if an individual lacks knowledge of these specific facts, she is deemed erotetically ignorant concerning a particular question, such as the question of what a virus is.

Sally, a professional linguist, may lack knowledge of a great number of facts relevant to the question of what a virus is. Yet this does not make her erotetically ignorant concerning this question, simply put. In highly specialized contexts, her lack of knowledge about certain specific facts could indeed lead to a situation where she cannot be considered as knowing what a virus is. However, it would be excessively stringent to claim that these specific facts are such that, if Sally or anyone else lacks knowledge of them, they are immediately considered erotetically ignorant concerning what a virus is. Conversely, it would be overly indulgent to assume that Sally knows what a virus is in every conceivable context, given her limited knowledge on the subject.

The conclusion we can draw from this is that we should not embrace a reductionist perspective of erotetic ignorance, one that portrays erotetic ignorance solely as a matter of a lack of knowledge of facts.

VII

At this point, one could ask: How, exactly, does the current framework for understanding erotetic knowledge and ignorance avoid being reductive in nature? After all, it still involves the reference to facts or true propositions. Doesn't this mean that the account is also reductionist, with erotetic knowledge being reduced to factive knowledge and erotetic ignorance being reduced to factive ignorance?

We should answer this question in the negative. It's important to keep in mind that in a reductive account of erotetic knowledge and ignorance, like Nottelman's (2016), factive knowledge and factive ignorance are, respectively, necessary and sufficient for erotetic knowledge and ignorance. In the view offered here, however, factive knowledge only results in erotetic knowledge if the facts known are such that they resolve the question in focus, in a given context. Similarly, factive ignorance is not solely a matter of lack of knowledge of facts. It is a matter of lack of knowledge of facts that resolve the question in focus in a given context.

The point can be made clearer if we consider that in a reductive account erotetic knowledge is a two-place relation between an individual and a true proposition or set of propositions. In the present view, however, erotetic knowledge is a three-place relation between an individual, a true proposition or set of propositions and epistemic goals of inquiry. Thus, in erotetic ignorance the missing piece of the relation is not simply a true proposition or set of propositions, but propositions that effectively resolve the question in focus.

VIII

It could be objected, however, that goals of inquiry ought not to be factored into our basic explanation of erotetic knowledge and ignorance. This view is prompted by instances where knowledge of a proposition or a set of propositions engenders erotetic knowledge in one context, but does not do so in another. But some philosophers are unimpressed by these examples. They contend that such cases can be addressed with an *invariant* approach, in which contextual variations are to be treated in pragmatic terms without affecting the basic account of erotetic knowledge and ignorance.

For instance, Braun (2006) defends a view according to which “*a proposition answers a semantic question iff it provides information about the question’s subject matter*” (2006, p.27, author’s italics). Given a question expressed by “Who is Mark Twain?”, all the sentences below in fact express propositions that answer it:

1. Mark Twain is the author of Huckleberry Finn.
2. Mark Twain is a famous American author.
3. Mark Twain is a famous author.
4. Mark Twain is an author.

According to Braun, in knowing any of these propositions, an individual can be considered as knowing who Mark Twain is. After all, in his view, “*X knows who Y is iff X knows a proposition that answers the semantic question of who Y is*” (2006, p.32). Insofar as 1-4 all provide information about the subject matter of the question of who Mark Twain is, 1-4 are answers to it. Consequently, knowing any of these propositions allows an individual to be taken as knowing who Mark Twain is.

Of course, it is conceivable that an inquirer, aware that Mark Twain was an author, may nonetheless question who he is to gain a deeper understanding of his life and works. In such a scenario, the inquirer might be frustrated to get 4) as an answer to her question. According to Braun, however, this does not mean that 4) is not an answer to the question in case. Rather, maybe the inquirer is faced with an uncooperative conversational partner. A cooperative conversational partner should aim not only to provide factual responses to questions but also to fulfill the inquirer’s underlying goals (Braun, 2006, p.33). Still, an uncooperative inquirer that ignores the inquirer’s concerns may still be answering her questions, as long as she provides information about the questions’ subject matter.

Braun thus treats goals of inquiry in pragmatic terms, maintaining that erotetic knowledge is a two-place relation between an individual and a proposition or set of propositions. Now, I agree with DeRose (2009) and Masto (2010) in thinking that Braun’s position is highly counterintuitive. It hardly seems correct to claim that

merely knowing that Hong Oak Yun is a person exceeding three inches in height, for example, equates to knowing who Hong Oak Yun is, especially not in each and every context. But I will not attempt to refute Braun's position here.⁹ Rather, I will end by briefly highlighting how the position offered in this paper is part of a more general picture of epistemology, one in which goals of inquiry are at the very center of epistemological theory.

The view I suggest in this paper is in tune with an understanding of epistemology as a theory of inquiry, as articulated by Hookway (1996, 2008).¹⁰ Within this framework, epistemic subjects are viewed fundamentally as inquirers, that is, as agents engaged in a constant effort to find things out. This process involves posing questions, both to ourselves and others, driven by specific objectives. To succeed in finding things out by means of answering to questions is not, in this picture, simply a matter of eliciting true information from the world or from others. Rather, it is a matter of answering to questions in a way such that our goals are met.

In this framework, goals of inquiry are central to epistemological theory, and a primary objective is to discern the most effective means of achieving these goals.¹¹ Thus, when epistemology is considered in terms of inquiry, it naturally follows that goals of inquiry are intrinsic to the essence of knowledge practices at large, and particularly to erotetic knowledge practices. Therefore, any analysis of erotetic knowledge—and, by extension, erotetic ignorance—must incorporate reference to these goals.

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Notes

¹Following the standard practice of the literature on the semantics of questions, I use the term “question” to refer to semantic objects expressed by interrogatives, which are understood as linguistic items. Similarly, I use “answer” to refer to semantic objects expressed by linguistic items such as responses and replies.

²In the literature on the semantics of questions, complete answers in the sense of Karttunen are said to be *weakly exhaustive*, in contrast to *strongly exhaustive* answers, that require, as put by Groenendijk & Stokhof (2011, p.1116) “in addition a closure condition: that the answer not only in fact give such an exhaustive specification, but also in addition *state* that it is exhaustive. Thus, a weakly exhaustive answer provides a complete list, a strongly exhaustive answer contains in addition the closure condition stating ‘and that’s all, folks’” (author’s italics). This distinction will not be relevant for our purposes.

³As put by Nottelman (2016, p.46), Wilholt’s point is closely related to Moore’s paradox. That is, an elocution of a sentence of the form “*p*, but I am ignorant of *p*” would be odd in a way similar to an elocution of a sentence of the form “*p*, but I do not believe that *p*”.

⁴For Nottelman, issues related to how erotetic ignorance is to be linguistically expressed are fundamentally pragmatic, and unrelated to the nature of this form of ignorance. He writes: “Still, clearly erotetic expressions are often better suited for framing research agendas compared to other sensible ways of self-ascribing ignorance: realizing that I do not know the correct answer to a question is often a good starting-point for getting to know its answer. Thus, Wilholt may indeed have pointed to a strong pragmatic reason for keeping the concept of erotetic ignorance in our repertoire. But this does not show for any instance of erotetic ignorance that it is not constituted by the subject’s factual ignorance” (2016, p. 46).

⁵Hookway (2008, p.1-2) emphasizes this by stating: “Even if our epistemic aim is to arrive at the truth or knowledge, this has to be understood in the perspective just offered. Not just any true proposition will satisfy our epistemic aims. If truth is our aim, then we seek a true proposition that answers our question or solves our problem”.

⁶Epistemic goals of inquiry, in this sense, are closely related to practical goals and can arise from them. For instance, Sally may have a practical goal of engaging in academic networking during her visit, making it crucial for her to find out the general profile of her audience.

⁷For discussion, see Hookway (1996, 2008).

⁸I am focused here on complete erotetic ignorance in relation to a question, given a certain context. However, the view can be adapted to accommodate cases of partial erotetic ignorance. To do so, we could say that in a context *C*, an individual *S* is partially erotetically ignorant with respect to a question *Q* if and only if *S* lacks knowledge of a proposition or a set of propositions that properly and completely answer *Q* in *C*. For instance, in the first Sally case, if her goal had been to obtain a list of the names of all the people who attended her talks and she received a list with only ten names out of fifty attendees, she would be considered partially ignorant in respect to the question of who attended her talks. However, delving into the details of such cases is not necessary for our current discussion.

⁹I have discussed Braun's view at length elsewhere. See Abath (2022). See also Parent (2014) for further discussion of Braun's position.

¹⁰See Kelp (2021) for another version of an inquiry-based epistemology.

¹¹For a discussion of norms of inquiry, see Friedman (2020).

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