

Responsibility for White Ignorance: A Multi-Dimensional Framework for Inquiry

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Abstract: This chapter is intended to serve as a guide for inquiry when assessing responsibility in cases of white ignorance. It develops a four-dimensional framework that maps out the normative terrain of white ignorance. The first two dimensions locate the particular normative failures featured in a case of white ignorance. The first dimension encompasses the kinds of normative standards one uses – we are interested, at least, in identifying moral and epistemic failures. The second dimension identifies different objects of assessment, including an agent, the agent’s ignorance, the downstream implications of the ignorance, and the social structures involved. By considering whether each object of assessment satisfies the relevant moral and epistemic standards, we identify the normative failings. Having located those normative failings, the third dimension encompasses the bearers of responsibility for those failures, whereas the fourth dimension considers the kinds of responsibility they bear. I develop and explain this framework in more detail, and show how it can be used to think through some core cases of white ignorance.

Keywords: white ignorance; epistemologies of ignorance; structural injustice; structural responsibility; culpable ignorance; shared responsibility

Charles Mills introduced the term *white ignorance* to capture the notion of an active form of ignorance that is rooted in white supremacy.¹ In prior work, I have suggested that we unpack this notion by understanding white ignorance in functional terms – as a kind of ignorance that is both systematically produced by and that plays a systematic role in sustaining, perpetuating, or giving rise to the social structures of white racial domination. But while this account gives us a picture of what white

¹ (Mills 1999, 2007, 2015)

ignorance is, it does not tell us who or what is responsible for white ignorance. Developing frameworks for thinking through responsibility for white ignorance is important for helping us to adjudicate appropriate targets of blame, as well as for determining what needs to be changed in the name of justice, and who should be tasked with undertaking reparative work.

In this chapter, I take up the question of how we should think about responsibility in cases of white ignorance. On my account, white ignorance is a broad phenomenon that includes many different types of cases, many of which simultaneously encompass a range of elements that require normative attention. As a result, it is difficult, if not impossible, to give a simple or general answer to the question of who is responsible for white ignorance. Therefore, my goal in this paper will not be to provide a general answer, but to offer a guide to inquiry in the form of a framework that maps out key elements of the normative terrain of white ignorance.² My framework will have four dimensions: the kinds of normative standards that are relevant to white ignorance, the potential objects of normative evaluation in cases of white ignorance, the bearers of responsibility for normative failures, and the kind of responsibility that subjects may bear. Existing work that addresses responsibility for white ignorance has mostly focused on white ignorance in the form of motivated or willful ignorance, or as ignorance that results from individuals' epistemic vices.³ While such cases form an important part of white ignorance, my framework is broader in scope and will provide a guide for inquiry that integrates attention to individuals as well as social structures; to moral as well as epistemic evaluation; to the inputs as well as the downstream consequences of white ignorance; and to backward-looking

² In thus framing the project I am following the lead of (Douglas 2014), who similarly sets out to map the normative terrain of science, and identifies four dimensions for doing so.

³ For instance, see (Medina 2013; Moody-Adams 1994; Spelman 2007; Tanesini 2020). There are also important connections between addressing responsibility for white ignorance and addressing responsibility for implicit bias. For one, there will be an overlap in cases. Further, there are key parallels in that implicit bias (like white ignorance) is a product of social forces and reinforces or reproduces injustices; therefore, addressing responsibility for both white ignorance and implicit bias requires giving attention to individual and structural factors. For an overview of discussions of responsibility for implicit bias, see (Holroyd et al. 2017).

judgments as well as forward-looking determinations about what is to be done, and by whom.

There is an important connection between white nationalist extremism and white ignorance. Although white ignorance does not only include cases of extremism, white ignorance helps to uphold white nationalist extremism. In particular, white nationalism relies on false white supremacist ideologies to prop up the movement, and depends on mythologized historical narratives to lend support to those beliefs.⁴ Thus, better understanding white ignorance and having a framework for thinking through responsibility for white ignorance can also help us to think about responsibility in connection to white nationalist extremism.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 1, I will provide a brief overview of my account of white ignorance, to demonstrate the breadth of the phenomenon. As part of this I will introduce four different cases of white ignorance, two of which will be real-life examples connected to white nationalism in the United States. In Section 2, I will go over each of the four dimensions of the framework in more detail. Lastly, in Section 3, I will show how we might apply the framework to concrete cases of white ignorance, and thus demonstrate how the framework can help us to organize our thinking about responsibility for white ignorance.

1. Overview of White Ignorance

On my account, white ignorance is a kind of ignorance that is both systematically produced by and that plays a systematic role in sustaining, perpetuating, or giving rise to the social structures of white racial domination.⁵ The functionalist nature of this account leaves us with a broad conception of white ignorance.

For instance, on this account, white ignorance can take multiple forms, including having false beliefs, lacking true beliefs, and suspending judgment about certain matters. The account also draws upon a broad conception of social structure that includes institutions, organizations, ideologies, social practices, and hierarchical group

⁴ See (Gorski et al. 2022).

⁵ I here present a basic overview of the account and gloss over more technical details. See (Martín 2020).

structures.⁶ Further, different social structural factors can be simultaneously involved in producing cases of white ignorance. At the same time, the central role of social structure does not eliminate a role for agency. The activeness, or resilience, of white ignorance is due to the actions of agents (e.g. looking away because it benefits them), as well as to structural barriers that protect, promote, ensure, or facilitate ignorance.

As a result of these features, the account encompasses a broad variety of cases. Consider, for instance, the following cases of white ignorance:

Precision Medicine - Dr. Mejilla knows that genome-wide association studies (GWAS) have shown that the safety and effectiveness of the drug tamoxifen depends on a patient's genetic profile. However, GWAS have been conducted primarily on European populations, and therefore do not provide the information that would enable Dr. Mejilla to know whether her Indigenous Latina patient, Yusimí, will be able to safely metabolize the drug.⁷ Not only does Dr. Mejilla not know how to treat patients like Yusimí, but the medical establishment as a whole does not know.

Heir Apparent - In their memoir, Derek Black – whose father was a Grand Wizard in the KKK and whose godfather is David Duke – describes their journey from heir apparent of the white nationalist movement to anti-racist activist.⁸ Derek was taught from a young age that there are inherent differences in intelligence and moral character between races, and was taught cherry-picked history that supported these beliefs. They held these beliefs until college, where being outed as a white supremacist led them to confront these beliefs.

Election Conspiracy- According to polling conducted in 2021 by PRRI, 68% of Republicans believed that the 2020 election was stolen from Trump.⁹ Among Republicans who report that they most trust Fox News for their news, 82% believed that the election was stolen. In 2023, Fox News paid a settlement of \$787.5 million in a defamation lawsuit filed by Dominion Voting Systems, an election technology company. As part of their evidence in the case, Dominion presented internal and private messages from Fox executives and employees that privately acknowledged that they did not believe the conspiracy theories, even while continuing to broadcast false statements about the election.¹⁰

⁶ (Martín 2020: 876). See also (Davidson and Kelly 2018; Haslanger 2016, 2017; Shelby 2003, 2016).

⁷ This case is taken from (Martín 2020). While Dr. Mejilla and Yusimí are fictional, racial disparities in GWAS are not. See (Popejoy and Fullerton 2016).

⁸ (Black 2024).

⁹ (Jones et al. 2021)

¹⁰ (Bauder et al. 2023)

While these cases do not encompass the full breadth of white ignorance as a phenomenon, they help to illustrate some of its range. In particular, these cases show that white ignorance includes, but is not limited to, cases of extremism; includes, but does not always involve, willful ignorance or other kinds of objectionable behavior on the part of the white ignorant agent; and can involve multiple kinds of social structures that help give rise to white racial domination. Further, it often includes multiple elements that operate simultaneously. This requires developing a broad framework that encompasses the complexity and diversity of the phenomenon.

2. The Framework: Four Dimensions of Assessment

I now turn to my main goal, which is to develop a guide for inquiry into responsibility for white ignorance by mapping out key elements of the normative terrain. This four-dimensional framework first identifies different potential objects of evaluation and highlights the different kinds of normative standards by which those objects may be evaluated – this helps us locate the normative failures involved in a particular case of white ignorance. Next, the framework asks us to consider which agents bear responsibility – and in what sense – for those normative failures.

I will give an overview of each of the four dimensions before applying this framework to the cases of white ignorance previously introduced.

2.1. Normative Standards

Recall that the notion of white ignorance is of a domination-supporting ignorance. The notion of white ignorance therefore combines moral and political concerns (insofar as it is concerned with domination) with epistemic concerns (insofar as it is concerned with ignorance).¹¹ Accordingly, there are two distinct kinds of normative evaluation that are central to assessing responsibility in cases of white

¹¹ On my account, white ignorance is understood in functional terms, as ignorance that results from and helps sustain or give rise to structures of white racial domination, and for this reason I describe it as domination-supporting. But what if we succeed in undoing white racial domination? Are agents who maintain their ignorance no longer white ignorant? If the ignorance is or was the product of structural processes that played a role in sustaining white racial domination, it is still white ignorance. We can also imagine that in this world there are still structures that produce ignorance as part of a fight to reinstate white racial domination. This, too, can still be understood as white ignorance.

ignorance: moral evaluation and epistemic evaluation.¹² Reflective of this, the first dimension of the framework encompasses the different kinds of normative standards (viz. moral standards and epistemic standards) that are involved in assessing responsibility for white ignorance.

Turning back to the normative standards, again, both moral and epistemic evaluation will be relevant to white ignorance. It is quite difficult to provide an account that properly delineates the moral and epistemic domains.¹³ Nevertheless, to give a sense of the distinct kinds of evaluation involved here, we can understand moral evaluation as being concerned with such things as harms, wrongs, justice, well-being, and fairness. In contrast, epistemic normativity is often understood as being geared towards attaining knowledge and avoiding false beliefs, and is associated with notions of rationality and justification. To illustrate these distinct forms of normative assessment through example, we can say that someone who intentionally hurts another person without good reason is morally criticizable; in contrast, a detective who ignores the overwhelming evidence indicating that suspect X committed the crime and instead believes that suspect Y is guilty is epistemically criticizable. Note that moral and epistemic standards can come into conflict: for example, if suspect X is the detective's husband and he swears to her that he is innocent, then some think that, by virtue of their relationship, the detective owes X her belief in his innocence, even if the evidence looks damning. In such a case the detective would be acting as she *morally* ought in maintaining her belief in her husband's innocence, while at the same time being epistemically criticizable for failing to believe what the overall evidence indicates.¹⁴

¹² There is a debate regarding whether political normativity is distinct from moral normativity. For instance, one might think that questions regarding how we ought to co-exist, manage conflict, and set up our social arrangements are not exhaustively answered by reference to moral principles. I here assume that political normativity is not distinct for the sake of simplicity, but I am not deeply committed to this position. If this turns out to be wrong, then we should take political normativity to be another category along this first dimension of the framework. For helpful discussion, see (Maynard and Worsnip 2018).

¹³ Here, too, there is debate as to whether the moral domain is distinct from the epistemic domain, with some arguing that epistemic normativity (or indeed all normativity) ultimately boils down to moral normativity. Linda Zagzebski, for instance, notably argues that all epistemic evaluation is a form of moral evaluation. (Zagzebski 1996)

¹⁴ It is controversial whether such conflicts exist. For an overview of the debate about epistemic partialism, see (C. Mason 2023).

Determining responsibility for white ignorance will involve evaluation with respect to moral as well as epistemic standards. One further question is whether white ignorance might also involve irreducibly “moral-epistemic” evaluations. For instance, building on Nancy Tuana’s notion of “coupled ethical-epistemic analysis,” James, Hendl, and Thomson draw out the ways in which white ignorance involves the coupling of ethical and epistemic considerations, precisely because it is ignorance that results from and perpetuates racial injustice.¹⁵ Similarly, Mason and Wilson appeal to moral-epistemic vices in determining blameworthiness in contexts of widespread cultural ignorance, which will include cases of white ignorance.¹⁶ While these authors do not express commitment to a view on which there is a distinctive, hybrid form of normative assessment that must be brought to bear in these cases (as opposed to simply thinking that one must combine distinctive moral and epistemic standards in the evaluation of these cases), one might think that white ignorance and other phenomena (e.g. epistemic injustice) that couple the epistemic and moral dimensions *do* require a distinctive, hybrid form of evaluation.¹⁷ For now, I will limit myself to appealing to a combination of moral and epistemic standards in assessing responsibility for white ignorance, while leaving open whether we should also take there to be a hybrid form of normative assessment that is called for in cases of white ignorance.

One might think that, in addition to moral and epistemic evaluation, agents are also subject to evaluation relative to professional standards. The idea is that we have expectations for individuals based on their profession or social role. For example, a detective fails as a detective if they do not follow up on leads for the cases to which they are assigned, whereas there is no such expectation of a layperson.

There seem to be two options for how to incorporate these role-specific standards. First, we can take each social role to generate its own set of standards, so that there are detective standards, nurse standards, sibling standards, and so forth. Second, we can assimilate the role standards into the moral and epistemic standards, by saying

¹⁵ (James et al. ; Tuana 2013)

¹⁶ (E. Mason and Wilson 2017)

¹⁷ (Fricker 2007)

that how an agent is morally or epistemically evaluated depends in part on the social roles that they occupy. I favor considering whether there are any role-specific responsibilities that should be taken into account when undertaking the moral and epistemic evaluations, but one could also treat this as a separate line item.

2.2. Objects of Evaluation

Whereas the first dimension comprises the different sets of normative standards that are relevant to assessing responsibility for white ignorance, the second dimension consists in the variety of objects that may be assessed relative to those standards. The objects of normative assessment in cases of white ignorance include the ignorance, the consequences of the ignorance, the agent, and the social structures involved in systematically producing ignorance of this kind.¹⁸ In different cases of white ignorance, different objects may fall short of satisfying the relevant moral or epistemic standards. I distinguish here between the objects of evaluation and the subjects that bear responsibility for those objects' normative shortcomings (to be discussed in the next section).

The Ignorance

I will start with the ignorance itself as an object of evaluation. First, from an epistemic perspective, we can ask whether the agent's ignorance is unjustified, irrational, or otherwise epistemically defective. Recall that an agent's ignorance may take different forms, or what epistemologists call doxastic states – for example, falsely believing that p , suspending judgment as to whether p is true, or having no attitude towards p at all because one has never heard anything about p .

Traditional understandings of the scope of epistemic evaluation have been rather limited. Many have thought that epistemic evaluation is limited to assessing whether a person's belief that p is justified, and a dominant, evidentialist conception takes it to be justified just in case it is supported by the evidence that the agent possesses. Note that

¹⁸ While I am trying to be comprehensive, the list I have provided here should not be taken to be exhaustive. I have chosen a particular way of carving up the potential objects of evaluation, but I recognize that there is room for disagreement as to whether we should add or collapse distinctions. For instance, epistemic assessment of the agent, the agent's doxastic state, and the process by which the agent arrives at their doxastic state are certainly going to be connected, and some may say that one is reducible to another. I think what is most important is the high-level point that we should distinguish between different objects of assessment as one dimension of normative analysis.

such a traditional conception of epistemic evaluation would be of limited use in cases of white ignorance, as it does not address cases where an agent does not have a belief that p (because, for example, they choose to suspend judgment as to p), nor does it have anything to say about intentionally avoiding evidence so as to maintain willful ignorance.

However, recent work has argued that we should expand the traditional scope of epistemic evaluation. For instance, some have argued that evidence that an agent *should have had* can impact whether the agent's doxastic state is justified, and that doxastic states other than belief (such as suspension of judgment) can be epistemically criticizable.¹⁹ These views would allow us to epistemically assess the agent's ignorance, not just where this takes the form of false belief, but for different kinds of doxastic states.

Not all cases of white ignorance will be ones where the agent's doxastic state is unjustified. For example, in cases where structural processes have disincentivized research into a subject such that there is a lack of information about the matter, agents may gather all the information there is and still remain (justifiably) ignorant (cf. *Precision Medicine*). This contrasts with cases where agents ignore, obfuscate, or avoid seeking information, reason poorly with the evidence they have, or depend on unreliable sources in forming their beliefs – in such cases, the ignorance would not be justified.

In addition to being epistemically evaluated, the ignorance can also be morally assessed. Interest in moral evaluations of ignorance has been motivated by the idea that ignorance can serve as an excuse for moral responsibility, but only if the ignorance is itself *non-culpable*.²⁰ To illustrate, suppose that Anna unknowingly put arsenic into Ben's tea, thinking it was sugar. Whether or not Anna's ignorance excuses her from

¹⁹ One can take this to affect our epistemic evaluation of the agent (the agent has failed epistemically because they did not gather evidence that they should have gathered), or one can (also) take this to affect our epistemic evaluation of the doxastic state – e.g., the belief that *not-p* is unjustified because there is evidence that one should have had that undermines the justification for the belief. The latter is often discussed under the header of normative defeat. See, for example, (Flores and Woodard 2023; Goldberg 2017; Lackey 2020; Miracchi 2019).

²⁰ See, e.g., (Rosen 2008; H. Smith 1983)

responsibility for poisoning Ben depends on whether Anna should have known that the “sugar” was arsenic. If Anna had no reason to think that something was awry, then she is innocent. However, if she knew that there was arsenic in the kitchen and failed to verify what she was putting in the tea, then Anna’s ignorance is culpable. She should have checked, and therefore known, what she was putting in the tea. Her ignorance is thus culpable, and so does not excuse her from responsibility for the poisoning.

Culpable ignorance has been divided into *tracing* and *non-tracing* cases.²¹ In tracing cases, the ignorance is culpable because it can be traced to some preceding epistemic failure. For example, Anna’s ignorance of the fact that she is poisoning Ben can be traced to a failure to determine the identity of the white powder she added to Ben’s tea.²² Given that tracing cases are primarily analyzed in terms of a preceding epistemic failure, one may wonder whether there is a moral evaluation of the ignorance at play here, or merely an epistemic criticism. While not universal, Holly Smith adds a risk condition that suggests a coupling of moral and epistemic culpability: with the risk condition, in order to be culpable, the ignorance must not just trace back to some epistemic failure, but also the epistemic failure must generate a foreseeable risk of harm.²³ The risk condition thus seems to add a distinctively moral dimension to the notion of culpable ignorance. Applying the risk condition to Anna’s case, it’s not just that Anna failed to check what the white powder was, but further, that failing to determine the identity of the white powder carries with it the foreseeable risk of poisoning someone. Ben’s death is exactly the kind of thing that one could predict might happen if one fails to check whether what one is putting in the tea is arsenic or sugar. Again, this risk condition seems to make the ignorance not just epistemically criticizable, but simultaneously morally criticizable.

Non-tracing cases of culpable ignorance, in contrast, do not trace back to any preceding failure; rather, the ignorance itself constitutes a moral failure. Whether there are such cases is controversial, but one source of support for the idea rests on the notion

²¹ Although it is controversial whether any genuine non-tracing cases exist. See, for example, (King 2009; Levy 2005; H. M. Smith 2011).

²² (H. Smith 2016)

²³ (H. Smith 1983, 2016)

that our attitudes — including what we notice or remember — reflect our values and judgments.²⁴ For example, one may think that part of being a good spouse is remembering their birthday, such that not knowing it is their birthday when the day comes around constitutes a failure to be a good spouse. The ignorance is not culpable because it traces back to some preceding failure, but itself constitutes a moral failure.

Stepping back, we have been considering the ignorance itself as one possible object of evaluation in cases of white ignorance. We have seen that ignorance can be evaluated both epistemically and morally, and in some cases — like tracing cases of culpable ignorance — the moral and epistemic evaluations seem to be coupled. It is also important to keep in mind that role-specific standards and expectations can make a difference to these moral and epistemic evaluations.

The Downstream Implications

The next possible objects of normative evaluation are the downstream effects or implications of white ignorance. Recall that white ignorance is a form of domination-sustaining ignorance. On a macro level, then, white racial domination is the primary downstream effect and the significant moral-political wrong of white ignorance, and every case of white ignorance will involve contributing to this. But further, particular cases of white ignorance will also frequently enact harms and wrongs to particular individuals, as when someone falsely believes a racist stereotype of another.²⁵

The downstream effects of white ignorance, as discussed above, are obviously going to involve moral failures — but could the effects of white ignorance also constitute epistemic failures? I think this is possible. Consider, for instance, a case of white ignorance in which there are institutional incentives not to research topic X, to the detriment of BIPOC individuals. Let us imagine that these incentives effectively discourage Charlize, among many others, from pursuing topic X. But Charlize and others' decision not to pursue X means that there is a lack of research on X and, we can further suppose, this dearth of research itself has a disincentivizing effect on future

²⁴ (A. Smith 2005; H. M. Smith 2011)

²⁵ See (Basu 2019)

potential researchers, on top of the institutional incentives that motivated Charlyze.²⁶ In such a case, it seems that the white ignorance produced by the institutional incentives itself generates epistemically damaging ripple effects. Thus, the white ignorance in this case could be said to have not only morally troubling effects, but also epistemically troubling implications. Put differently, white ignorance might bring about or constitute states of affairs that fall short of how things epistemically ought to be.

The Agent

The next possible object of assessment is the agent – does the white ignorant agent comport themselves as they should, epistemically and morally, given the resources they have? Does the agent follow the relevant moral and epistemic norms, fulfill their moral and epistemic duties, and act virtuously rather than viciously?

As previously discussed, it is controversial whether agents can be objects of epistemic assessment, or whether the scope of epistemic evaluation is limited to doxastic states (especially, beliefs). Further, there are different views as to whether or how an epistemic assessment of the agent relates to the epistemic assessment of their doxastic state. Nevertheless, I take it to be worth distinguishing the agent as an object of assessment because (1) in the moral case, the agent is a clear object of assessment; and (2) I want to leave space for views that do take agents to be subject to epistemic norms and standards, particularly in ways that might come apart from the evaluation of agents' doxastic states. Further, we should remember to take into consideration role-specific responsibilities that agents may have, and determine whether agents fulfill those expectations.

The Structures

The final objects of normative evaluation that I want to distinguish are the social structures involved in producing white ignorance. Recall that these structures can take diverse forms, including ideologies, institutions, social practices, and group-based hierarchies. I take the idea that social structures can be morally evaluated to be relatively uncontroversial – it is not unusual to judge social structures to be unjust,

²⁶ Researchers have speculated that just such an effect helps explain racial and ethnic disparities in GWAS, as in the *Precision Medicine* case. (Popejoy and Fullerton 2016)

harmful, unfair, and so on. Things are more complicated when it comes to taking social structures to be objects of epistemic evaluation. On one hand, ideologies— and particularly elements of an ideology that have propositional content, such as background assumptions— can be false, incoherent, or misleading, and thus epistemically defective. It may not be clear, however, how structures that do not have propositional contents could be taken to fall under the scope of epistemic assessment. Nonetheless, following Goldman’s sketch of a “systems-oriented social epistemology,” I want to suggest that we can epistemically evaluate social structures by considering how choices between alternative social arrangements shape epistemic outcomes by, e.g. promoting ignorance about certain subject matters.²⁷ For example, a structure in which targeted financial donations played a large role in determining the allocation of funding to medical research programs would likely result in disparities in knowledge, favoring conditions that affect predominantly wealthy populations versus conditions that are linked to poverty (e.g. exposure to environmental toxins) or that predominantly affect lower-income communities. Such a structure would be epistemically defective, insofar as it systematically fails to produce adequate knowledge about certain medical conditions.²⁸

To recap, the second dimension of the framework identifies different possible objects of normative assessment in cases of white ignorance: the ignorance itself, the downstream effects or implications of the ignorance, the agent, and the relevant social structures. In connection with the first dimension of the framework, each of these objects can be assessed morally as well as epistemically. There can be failures with respect to multiple different objects in cases of white ignorance, and indeed, failures with respect to one object are often connected to failures with respect to a different object— for example, that the ignorance is epistemically unjustified is often (though not necessarily) connected to the fact that the agent failed to behave in accordance with

²⁷ (Goldman 2005).

²⁸ Role responsibilities also seem to factor in here. There are practical constraints on all epistemic endeavors, but we expect the structure of medical research, by virtue of its role, to produce knowledge about medical conditions, and not to systematically draw attention away from certain conditions (at least, without some reasonable cost-benefit analysis).

epistemic norms. While some may disagree about how exactly we should carve up the objects of assessment, the second dimension alerts us to the need to assess white ignorance from multiple vantage points to ensure that we identify all of the relevant normative failures for which we ought to determine responsibility.

2.3. Bearers of Responsibility

Having located the particular normative shortcomings involved in a case of white ignorance using the first and second dimensions, the next question is who or what is responsible for those failures, and in what way. The third dimension covers the “who,” and concerns the subjects who bear responsibility. The bearers of responsibility may be individuals, collective agents, or institutions, and there may be multiple agents that share responsibility. For example, state governments that pass book bans to prevent children from learning about the history of slavery in the United States bear responsibility for the resulting ignorance; this responsibility is shared with other organizations and individuals who, for instance, create pressure to institute such bans. Identifying the bearers of responsibility is closely connected to the fourth dimension of the framework, as who bears responsibility depends on the kind of responsibility in question.

2.4. Orientation of Responsibility

The fourth and final dimension concerns the kind of responsibility that a subject bears – in particular, whether it is responsibility in a forward-looking or a backward-looking sense. Backward-looking responsibility is connected to blame and punishment, and is associated with attitudes like resentment, indignation, guilt, and shame. It is backward-looking in that it looks to the past to determine to whom the relevant normative shortcoming can be traced. Forward-looking responsibility, in contrast, is not concerned with who brought a problem about, but instead with who should be tasked with bringing things up to standard moving forward. That one is to blame for causing harm, and so bears backward-looking responsibility, can make it the case that one has a forward-looking responsibility to engage in reparative action. But agents can also bear forward-looking responsibility even if they are not to blame. This is clearest in cases of natural disasters: governments, aid organizations, and community members should

assist with recovery, not because they are to blame, but because of their social role and ability to help.²⁹

Backward-looking responsibility, again, relies on a notion of tracing— as a first step, to whom can the normative failing be causally traced? But causal tracing on its own is generally insufficient— if my cat knocks over and breaks a family heirloom, the cat is causally responsible for the damage, but is not responsible in the normative sense that we care about here. The agent(s) to whom the failure is traced must have violated some normative standard to be backwards-responsible for the state of affairs in question. But here, too, we can distinguish between thin and thick conceptions of backward-looking responsibility. The thin notion merely determines whether an agent satisfied or violated the relevant normative standards in bringing about the state of affairs, whereas the thicker notion is concerned with whether the agent's actions reflect poorly on their character.³⁰ How different the thin and thick notions turn out to be will depend on how one construes the normative standards, but to illustrate, suppose that a child is taught wrong principles for action by a parent, and then, acting on those principles, causes harm. The harm can be causally traced to the child and, moreover, the child violated moral principles in acting as they did— the child is thus backwards-responsible in a thin sense. However, the child's failure is not attributable to the child, but rather to the parent who misled them; it reflects negatively on the parent, not the child.³¹ I take the thin notion of backward-looking responsibility to correspond to taking the agent as an object of assessment, whereas I take the thick notion of attributability to be relevant for backward-looking responsibility.³² Backward-looking responsibility may come in degrees, and may be sensitive to a variety of factors, such as the kind of

²⁹ There are different models of forward-looking responsibility. Two dominant models are Young's Social Connections Model and Zheng's Role Ideal Model, which differ in terms of how they assign (degrees of) responsibility and what discharging one's responsibility should look like. See (Young 1990; Zheng 2018a)

³⁰ I am here drawing on Zheng's notion of attributability. (Zheng 2018b, 2018a)

³¹ One way to think about this is that we must go further back in the causal chain. However, this does not guarantee that we will always find an agent to whom the normative failure is attributable.

³² Cf. (Beck 2023)

ignorance in question, or how difficult it would have been for the agent to do otherwise.³³

I take both forward-looking and backward-looking notions of responsibility to be important for white ignorance because there are often agents acting in epistemically or morally vicious ways alongside structural mechanisms where backward-looking responsibility does not straightforwardly apply. Restricting discussions of responsibility to the forward-looking sense thus overlooks the failures for which agents are to blame, and for which they should engage in moral repair. At the same time, it is important to give attention to how we should move forward and engage in political repair. Both kinds of responsibility are important.

3. Application to Cases

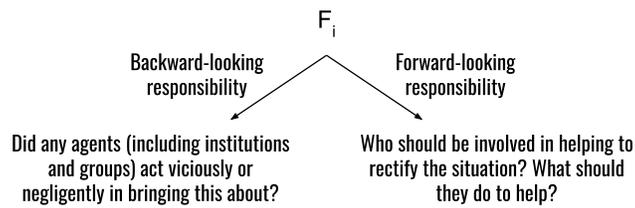
I have offered a framework that identifies four dimensions that should be considered when assessing responsibility for white ignorance. On this picture, determining responsibility for white ignorance requires assessing multiple kinds of objects for moral or epistemic failure and then determining backward- and forward-looking responsibility to individual or collective agents for those normative failures. Importantly, there can be multiple, simultaneous failures at play in any given instance of white ignorance, and multiple individual or collective agents who bear responsibility for those failures. The figure below illustrates how this framework can be used as a guide for inquiry.

³³ For some discussion of factors that affect the degree of responsibility, see (Bradford 2017; Kloosterboer and Wieland 2017; Nelkin 2016).

Step 1: Locate normative failures

		Objects of Evaluation			
		Ignorance	Implications	Agent	Structures
Normative Standards	Epistemic Failure?	✓ (F ₁)		✓ (F ₃)	✓ (F ₅)
	Moral Failure?		✓ (F ₂)	✓ (F ₄)	✓ (F ₆)

Step 2: For each failure, determine the agents that bear backward- or forward-looking responsibility



To see how this could be put into action, I will use the framework to think through the cases of white ignorance previously introduced.

In *Precision Medicine*, we can distinguish Dr. Mejilla’s ignorance from the ignorance of the medical establishment. Dr. Mejilla’s ignorance is justified given the evidence that is available, and she conducts herself as she ought to both morally and epistemically. Thus, there do not to be moral or epistemic failures with regard to her ignorance or Dr. Mejilla herself. The issue is more complicated when we consider the ignorance of the medical establishment as a whole. It seems plausible that the medical establishment should be on the lookout for such disparities and seek to rectify them. If that’s right, then the medical establishment has acted wrongly (epistemically and morally), and their ignorance is culpable. This indicates that the medical establishment bears some blame for its negligence (backward-looking responsibility), and should also take steps to rectify the situation (forward-looking responsibility).

Thus far we have focused on the agents and the ignorance as objects of assessment. Turning now to the implications of Dr. Mejilla’s and the medical establishment’s ignorance, as well as the structures that are involved in producing them, we can identify further normative failures. Specifically, the case involves (1) moral failures with respect to the consequences of the ignorance – the general injustice

that patients of color receive overall worse care due to the gaps in research, as well as Yusimi's particular experience of this injustice; and (2) moral and epistemic failures in the medical research structures and historical biases that result in the racial disparities in GWAS. Given that this first failure is a result of the second, the next question is who bears responsibility for the structural failures.

Researchers believe that the disparities in GWAS are due to multiple factors, including barriers to accessing medical centers, distrust and unwillingness to participate in medical studies due to historical abuses faced by communities of color, and methodological norms that favor building on existing data sets and patient cohorts in conducting these kinds of studies.³⁴ Based on this analysis, we can identify multiple individual and collective agents who bear responsibility in this case. First, backward-looking responsibility falls upon the researchers and the institutions involved in enacting the medical abuses that generated community distrust.³⁵ At the same time, forward-looking responsibility falls upon various agents: for instance, the medical community has a responsibility to earn community trust, funding agencies and other institutional bodies that influence the direction of research should work to eliminate disparities in research, individual researchers share a responsibility to be attentive to research disparities and do what they can to address them, and there is a collective social responsibility to ensure equitable access to medical care.

The case of Derek Black (*Heir Apparent*) is an interesting one, in part because our assessment of Derek may depend on the age at which we are considering them.³⁶ On one hand, we can suppose that a young Derek conducts himself appropriately in listening to individuals they have reason to believe are reliable authority figures, and who provide them with evidence and arguments (albeit misleading) to support their claims, particularly considering that Derek was homeschooled from third grade

³⁴ (Popejoy and Fullerton 2016)

³⁵ Further backward-looking responsibility may fall upon institutions and/or individuals insofar as they engage in negligence or other culpable behavior that underlies the barriers to medical access, or other structural factors involved in the case.

³⁶ I will focus on the young Derek. I take it that the older Derek, prior to their change of mind, does fail epistemically and morally, and bear some backward-looking responsibility for those failures.

onwards. The young Derek thus plausibly does well considered as an object of normative evaluation. However, the young Derek still forms their belief using unreliable sources and so, on some views of epistemic justification, their racist beliefs are nonetheless unjustified. Derek's ignorance had morally significant consequences – from a young age, Derek was involved in recruiting efforts, including (at age 12) creating a page for children on the white supremacist site Stormfront, founded by Derek's father.³⁷ Young Derek's ignorance was the product of epistemically and morally flawed social structures – including the echo chamber formed by their white supremacist community and the white nationalist ideology that helps form the architecture of this echo chamber.³⁸ At least for the young Derek, their family and the social structures that they are a part of are the source of the normative failures and, as before, responsibility will fall upon multiple agents. The adults in Derek's community will bear backward-looking responsibility for helping to construct and maintain the echo chamber and the ideology that helps structure it. That said, there are still a lot of open questions about how we should think about moral and epistemic responsibility in relation to echo chambers, including responsibility for being part of the echo chamber, the nature of the echo chamber, the existence of the echo chamber, and more. This is a very important area of research for understanding responsibility for white ignorance, particularly in cases of extremism.

Turning to the issue of forward-looking responsibility, another interesting and complicated question is whether anyone outside of these communities bears a forward-looking responsibility to help alter or get rid of these echo chambers, or to help extricate individuals from those echo chambers. Derek's own journey away from the white nationalist community was the product of peers who invited them into their community (e.g. repeated invitations to Shabbat dinners) and built personal relationships with them.³⁹ Do individuals have a responsibility to undertake such efforts? Are there institutional interventions that can help and that should be

³⁷ (Black 2024)

³⁸ (Gorski et al. 2022; Nguyen 2020) See (Nguyen 2020) for discussion of echo chambers.

³⁹ (Black 2024)

undertaken? These seem to be important questions for dealing with the rise of white nationalism.

The *Election Conspiracy* case has a great deal of overlap with the *Heir Apparent* case, insofar as echo chambers and trust in untrustworthy news sources play key roles in producing false, unjustified beliefs that have morally significant consequences. Thus, while we can say that the adults who believe(d) that the election was stolen bear backward- and forward-looking responsibility, the case also raises many of the same questions as to how we should think about backward- and forward-looking responsibility for echo chambers. Additionally, the case highlights the role of institutions that apparently were not themselves ignorant, but nonetheless played a key role in contributing to an epistemically bad environment, and therefore bear responsibility for doing so.

Before concluding, I want to note the extent to which verdicts in particular cases depend on empirical factors, as well as unresolved or controversial philosophical questions. For instance, determining that some normative failure is attributable to an agent depends on the extent to which the agent acted intentionally, and this may be difficult to determine in practice. Further, there remain open questions regarding, e.g., how we should think about responsibility in relation to echo chambers or how we should determine forward-looking responsibility, and these will factor into how we should ultimately determine responsibility for white ignorance. As such, the framework I have provided here certainly does not provide complete answers, but rather offers a guide for inquiry.

4. Conclusion

White ignorance is a form of domination-sustaining ignorance that encompasses a broad variety of cases. As a result, it is difficult to give a simple or general answer as to who is responsible for white ignorance. Instead, I have provided a multi-dimensional framework that can help guide inquiry into questions of responsibility. This framework distinguishes between moral and epistemic standards of assessment, applies these standards to different objects of evaluation to locate the normative failures involved in a particular case, and then, drawing on work distinguishing between backward- and

forward-looking conceptions of responsibility, identifies who bears responsibility for those normative failures. On this framework, there can be multiple simultaneous failures involved in cases of white ignorance, and multiple agents – both individual and collective – can share responsibility. The framework is not complete; it must be supplemented by empirical investigation, and it calls upon us to do more work to resolve finer-grained questions about responsibility, particularly under conditions of structural injustice. Nevertheless, the hope is that the framework can provide a useful starting point in guiding us through the normative terrain of white ignorance.

Lastly, this framework illuminates that, tempting though it may be, we shouldn't think about responsibility for extreme beliefs solely in terms of blameworthy manifestations of individual epistemic vices. Rather, we must also attend to the role of structural factors in producing and sustaining extremist belief. This is not to let individuals off the hook-- we should consider who shares blame for the structural factors involved, as well as what we should do to help with amelioration, regardless of blame.

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