

## *Inan on Objectual and Propositional Ignorance*

ERHAN DEMİRCİOĞLU

*Department of Philosophy, Koç University, Istanbul, Turkey*

*In this note, I would like to focus on the two central distinctions Inan draws between varieties of ignorance. One is the distinction between “objectual” and “propositional” ignorance, and the other is the distinction between “truth-ignorance” and “fact-ignorance,” which is a distinction between two types of propositional ignorance. According to Inan, appreciating these distinctions allow us to see what is wrong with the “received view,” according to which ignorance (or awareness of it) is “always about truth,” and enables us to “overcome our [philosophers’] propositional-bias.” I will argue for two theses. First, fact-ignorance appears to be a form of objectual ignorance; and, if this is so, there are no two distinctions but only one distinction that Inan in effect offers, which is between objectual and propositional ignorance. Second, what Inan calls “the received view” can raise some reasonable worries about objectual ignorance that are not taken into account by him.*

**Keywords:** Curiosity, epistemic desire, ignorance, awareness of ignorance, İlhan Inan.

Inan’s paper (Inan 2016) raises many interesting issues about curiosity and its relation to (awareness of) ignorance. The nature of curiosity as a mental state and whether awareness of ignorance is required for that mental state are philosophically underexplored topics by any standards, an unfortunate fact which itself calls for some reflection. Along with his previous significant works,<sup>1</sup> Inan’s this paper has the potential to be an important contribution to the unfairly limited philosophical literature on curiosity.

In this note, I would like to focus on the two central distinctions Inan draws between varieties of ignorance. One is the distinction between “objectual” and “propositional” ignorance, and the other is the distinction between “truth-ignorance” and “fact-ignorance,” which is

<sup>1</sup> See for instance Inan (2010, 2012).

a distinction between two types of propositional ignorance. According to Inan, appreciating these distinctions allow us to see what is wrong with the “received view” (286),<sup>2</sup> according to which ignorance (or awareness of it) is “always about truth” (286), and enables us to “overcome our [philosophers’] propositional-bias” (290). I will argue for two theses. First, fact-ignorance appears to be a form of objectual ignorance; and, if this is so, there are no two distinctions but only one distinction that Inan in effect offers, which is between objectual and propositional ignorance. Second, what Inan calls “the received view” can raise some reasonable worries about objectual ignorance that are not taken into account by him.

In his attempt to establish the distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance, Inan first proceeds by drawing a distinction between objectual and propositional curiosity. Inan writes:

When one is curious about who someone is, there will be a description that purports to refer to an unknown person; when one is curious about where something is there will be a description that refers to an unknown location; when one is curious about why something happened, there will be a description that refers to an unknown cause etc. This is objectual curiosity. There is then curiosity whose content is given by a full sentence which expresses a proposition in the appropriate context. This is what I call propositional curiosity. (287)

Inan’s “argument from curiosity” (286) for the distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance relies on the distinction between objectual and propositional curiosity. Inan argues that if there is a distinction between objectual and propositional curiosity along the lines specified above, then given that “the content of one’s curiosity and the content of one’s ignorance are identical” (291), then there must be a corresponding distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance, the former of which “arouses” (288) objectual curiosity and the latter of which propositional curiosity. According to Inan, since there are no good reasons to deny the distinction between objectual and propositional curiosity (see 291 and 295), there are no good reasons to deny the distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance.

I grant that Inan’s argument from curiosity is valid, and I also grant the premise that the content of one’s curiosity is the same as the content of one’s ignorance. However, a worry I have about the argument from curiosity concerns the degree of its persuasiveness and circuitousness. Let me illustrate what I mean by “persuasiveness” and “circuitousness” by an example. Suppose that Jane wonders whether inflation rates will increase next year (call the content of Jane’s wondering, *C*). And suppose that Jack gives her the following argument: inflation rates will neither decrease nor remain unchanged next year (call it *P*), therefore *C*. Now, assuming that Jack’s argument (or at least a reconstruction of it supplemented by the obvious missing premise) is valid, it is not per-

<sup>2</sup> All page references are to Inan (2016), unless otherwise noted.

suasive for Jane. Jane would not have been wondering about whether *C*, if she already had some good reasons to believe that *P*. Since both the premise and the conclusion of Jack's argument are *equally* open to question for Jane, Jack's argument does not give her any good reasons to believe the conclusion, which renders it unpersuasive. Now, suppose that noticing that his argument does not have the persuasive power he thought it has, Jack adds some premises to that argument intended as support for *P*, ending up with a longer, extended argument for *C*. However, it now seems that those premises intended as support for *P* themselves might function as reasons for *C*, rendering the argument from those premises to *P* and then to *C* unnecessarily circuitous. Assuming that Jack's longer, extended argument establishes *C*, that conclusion could also have been established without going through the roundabout way appealing to *P*. So, Jack's argument for *C* either is unpersuasive (in the case of the original version) or is (or runs the risk of being) unnecessarily circuitous (in the case of the longer, extended version).

It seems to me that something similar is going on with Inan's argument from curiosity. The distinction between objectual and propositional curiosity appears to be *as problematic as* the distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance (i.e., if one has some reason for doubting one of these distinctions, one thereby has the very same reason for doubting the other), and therefore the argument from the former (and the premise identifying the content of curiosity with that of ignorance) to the latter appears to be unpersuasive. Of course, Inan intends to provide support for the distinction between objectual and propositional curiosity by attempting to undermine some doubts philosophers might have about it, and this might be thought of as an attempt to render that distinction *less* problematic than the distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance, alleviating the worry regarding the persuasiveness of the argument from curiosity. However, the problem is that whatever reason Inan brings forth for doubting "the propositional-bias" in the case of curiosity (see especially 291) could have been easily formulated, with relevant terminological changes being made, as reason for doubting that bias in the case of ignorance, and this shows that the argument *from curiosity* for the distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance is unnecessarily circuitous: assuming that the argument from curiosity establishes the conclusion that there is a distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance, that conclusion could also have been established without going through the roundabout way appealing to the distinction between objectual and propositional curiosity.

My judgment is that Inan's argument from curiosity is unnecessarily circuitous. Of course, this does not by itself mean that Inan does not succeed in establishing the distinction between objectual and propositional curiosity, nor does it mean that the argument from curiosity for

the distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance is unsuccessful. I will take a closer look at Inan's reasons for the latter distinction later in the paper; but for now, I would like to assess Inan's distinction between two forms of propositional ignorance, truth-ignorance and fact-ignorance. According to Inan, "ignorance concerning the truth of a proposition" (299) is truth-ignorance. In the case of truth-ignorance, "there is a full sentence *s* whose truth-value is unknown to the agent" (301). However, "when an agent knows that a sentence expresses a truth but does not know the fact that makes it true" (301), what we have is fact-ignorance. According to Inan, knowing that a proposition is true does not entail knowing the fact that makes it true.

The distinction between truth-ignorance and fact-ignorance is confusing for the following reason. On a natural view, understanding a declarative sentence (or a proposition) requires knowing what needs to be the case (or, equivalently for present purposes, which fact needs to obtain) if that sentence (or proposition) is true. If this is so, then if one understands a declarative sentence and knows that that sentence is true, one cannot fail to know the fact that makes that sentence true. So, if understanding a sentence requires knowing which fact needs to obtain if that sentence is true, as it intuitively appears to be, then fact-ignorance defined as a form of *propositional* ignorance collapses into truth-ignorance: understanding a sentence allows me to know what needs to be the case if that sentence is true, and if this understanding is combined with my knowing that that sentence is true, then I thereby know the fact that makes that sentence true. Understanding a sentence bridges any gap that one might think there is between truth-ignorance and fact-ignorance as different types of *propositional* ignorance: one cannot fail to know the fact that makes the proposition that he understands and knows to be true.

I hold that Inan's distinction between truth-ignorance and fact-ignorance is best interpreted not as a distinction between two varieties of propositional ignorance but as (an attempt to reaffirm) the distinction between objectual and propositional ignorance. One reason for this pertains to the consideration just adduced: we cannot plausibly take the distinction as a distinction between two forms of propositional ignorance given that understanding a sentence requires knowing what needs to be the case if that sentence is true, and understanding a sentence plausibly requires that. This interpretation gets further support from the answer Inan provides to the question "how can one know that a proposition is true while not knowing the fact that makes it true?" Inan writes: "Now the typical way in which this could happen is when a sentence contains a term that is inostensible for the subject [a term whose referent is unknown to the subject (see 287, fn. 2)]" (297). As for the possibility of fact-ignorance, Inan also notes: "When a part of a sentence is inostensible then the whole sentence will also be inostensible" (p. 23). Now, if failure to know the fact that makes a proposition true

(fact-ignorance), as Inan says, stems from one's failure to know the referent of a term or, more generally, one's failure to know the referent of a part of a sentence, then fact-ignorance cannot be propositional (simply because referents of parts of sentences are not propositions) but at most be objectual. In fact, Inan's "fact-ignorance" is best understood as "failure to know *the object* that is a constituent of the fact that makes a proposition true" and as such it falls within the rubric of Inan's *objectual* ignorance. So, the only form of propositional ignorance that we are left with is what Inan calls truth-ignorance.

This completes my defense of the idea that despite his own advertisement, there are no two distinctions but is only one distinction that Inan in effect offers, and that is between objectual and propositional ignorance. I will now articulate some ways in which *that* distinction can be challenged.

According to Inan, objectual ignorance is the sort of ignorance the content of which cannot be captured by a declarative sentence (or a whether-question) but which can be adequately captured by a definite description.<sup>3</sup> There is a particular objection Inan considers and provides replies to against the idea that there is such a thing as irreducibly objectual ignorance. Inan writes:

In all...cases [of objectual ignorance] there is a definite description that is inostensible for the subject who is aware of his or her ignorance. If I do not know where my keys are, then "the location of my keys" is inostensible for me, given that I do not know its referent. As far as my ignorance goes it is irrelevant whether I have a hypothesis concerning what the referent of the term is. If, for instance, I entertain the idea that I may have left my keys in my office, then there is a full proposition whose truth value is unknown to me: my house keys are in my office. This proposition is also inostensible for me given that I do not know whether it is true or false, and thus I may be aware of my ignorance of it. This however is not the same ignorance as in the initial case. Being aware of my ignorance about where my keys are, is not the same thing as being aware of my ignorance about whether my keys are in my office. If I were to find out that my keys are not in my office, I would no longer be ignorant whether they are there, but that would not eliminate my ignorance about where the keys are.... If, on the other hand, I were to find out that my keys are in fact in my office, then not only the proposition, but also the definite description will become ostensible. The fact that by eliminating my propositional ignorance I thereby eliminate my objectual ignorance by no means implies that the two are identical. (293-294, see also 291)

Let us call the thesis that for every case of objectual ignorance, there is a case of propositional ignorance with which it can be identified *propositionalism about ignorance* (shortly, *PI*). If *PI* is true, then there is no such thing as irreducibly objectual ignorance. In the passage above, Inan argues for two distinct theses. First, he argues that one's objectu-

<sup>3</sup> In the case of objectual curiosity, there is, Inan writes, "always a definite description—rather than a full sentence—that refers to some unknown entity relative to the curious subject" (291).

al ignorance about, say, the whereabouts of an object,  $x$ , cannot be identified with one's propositional ignorance about whether  $x$  is in  $y$ , if  $x$  is not in  $y$ . This is, Inan maintains, because one can come to know that  $x$  is not in  $y$  and thereby remove one's propositional ignorance about whether  $x$  is in  $y$  while one's objectual ignorance about the whereabouts of  $x$  remains untouched. I take no issue with this argument and am inclined to think that it shows what it intends to show, *viz.* that PI cannot plausibly attempt to identify cases of objectual ignorance with cases in which propositions about the truth-values of which one is ignorant are *false*.

Second, Inan argues that one's objectual ignorance about, say, the whereabouts of an object,  $x$ , cannot be identified with one's propositional ignorance about whether  $x$  is in  $y$ , even if  $x$  is in  $y$ . Suppose that I am ignorant about the location of my keys, and suppose further that they are in the bathroom. Inan argues that my ignorance about the location of my keys cannot be identified by my being ignorant that they are in the bathroom. Inan admits that coming to know that they are in the bathroom, acquiring this piece of propositional knowledge, would eliminate my objectual ignorance in question; however, he maintains, as quoted in the passage above, that "by eliminating my propositional ignorance I thereby eliminate my objectual ignorance by no means implies that the two are identical."

I think the propositionalist about ignorance can rightly protest at this point. Let us call the thesis that for every case of objectual knowledge, there is a piece of propositional knowledge with which it can be identified *propositionalism about knowledge* (shortly, *PK*). The propositionalist about ignorance can now adopt the following strategy: firstly, show that PK is true, and secondly, move from PK to PI. The first step of the strategy can be plausibly based on the following sort of observation: I know where my keys are in virtue of knowing that they are in such-and-such place, say, in the bathroom. If I know that my keys are in the bathroom, that is, if I have that propositional knowledge, I also *thereby* have a piece of what Inan calls objectual knowledge about their whereabouts, *viz.* I know where my keys are. If this is so, then objectual knowledge about the location of an object is *not something extra* to propositional knowledge that they are in such-and-such place: it does not make sense to try to have objectual knowledge about the whereabouts of my keys if I already know that they are in the bathroom. (This is also true of other sorts of putatively objectual knowledge the content of which can be captured by other sorts of *wh*-questions. For instance, I know *when* the departmental meeting is in virtue of knowing *that* it is at 5 pm today.) This supports the thesis that talk of objectual knowledge is merely elliptical, a mere shorthand, for talk of propositional knowledge, which in turn supports PK.

Now, the move from PK to PI seems to be trivial: if objectual knowledge (about the whereabouts of my keys) is propositional knowledge

(that they are in such-and-such place), then lack of objectual knowledge (objectual ignorance) must be lack of propositional knowledge (propositional ignorance). I do not know where my keys are in virtue of not knowing that they are in such-and-such place. What I am ignorant of when I do not know the location of my keys is that they are in such-and-such place, and that they are in such-and-such place is a proposition. So, it appears that talk of objectual ignorance is merely elliptical, a mere shorthand, for talk of propositional ignorance and, accordingly, that PI is true.

According to Inan, there is irreducibly objectual ignorance, objectual ignorance whose content cannot be captured by a declarative sentence. I think Inan is right in insisting, for the very reasons he himself presents, that the content of objectual ignorance cannot be captured by *false* declarative sentences. However, I fail to see any good reasons why the content of objectual ignorance cannot be captured by some *true* declarative sentences. It seems obviously correct to say that failure to know where my keys are is failure to know that they are in the bathroom, if my keys are in the bathroom.

Inan is right that the fact that eliminating propositional ignorance eliminates objectual ignorance does not imply that objectual ignorance is the same as propositional ignorance. However, the question that calls for an answer is what it is that explains *that* fact: why does eliminating propositional ignorance eliminate objectual ignorance? The question receives a straightforward answer if PI is true. Inan's account, on the other hand, owes us an answer.

## References

- Inan, I. 2010. "Inostensible reference and conceptual curiosity." *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 10 (1): 21–41.
- Inan, I. 2012. *The Philosophy of Curiosity*. New York: Routledge.
- Inan, I. 2016. "Curiosity and Ignorance." *Croatian Journal of Philosophy* 16 (3): 285–303.

