

“Ignorance is Bliss”: Is this Sustainable in Epistemology?

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ABSTRACT

The adage "Ignorance is bliss" has been extensively examined in epistemology, philosophy, psychology, and sociology, prompting inquiry into the sustainability and potential advantages of ignorance in the quest for knowledge. Traditional epistemology emphasises knowledge acquisition, however, new viewpoints indicate that ignorance, in its numerous manifestations, is essential to intellectual inquiry, psychological health, and social frameworks. This study examines the essence and definitions of ignorance, encompassing both a mere absence of knowledge and the deliberate perpetuation of lies and epistemic practices. It analyses the epistemic value of ignorance, its psychological and social ramifications, and the ethical consequences of its intentional promotion. A comparative investigation of African, Asian, and Western viewpoints elucidates how diverse cultures perceive ignorance and its function in knowledge generation. This study advocates for a balanced epistemological perspective that recognises both the constraints and the possible advantages of ignorance in human cognition and social interaction.

Keywords: Ignorance, Epistemology, Knowledge, Psychology, Ethics, Human Condition and Sociology.

INTRODUCTION

The proverb "Ignorance is bliss" is sometimes used to imply that a lack of awareness regarding certain realities may result in happiness or tranquillity. This assertion, derived from Thomas Gray's 1742 poem *On a Distant Prospect of Eton College*, has transformed into a wider philosophical discourse on the function of ignorance in human knowledge and comprehension. The full version of the line reads, “Where ignorance is bliss, Tis folly to be wise.” But in academic circles, the often shortened version is used as “Ignorance is Bliss” which literally can be taken as an excuse to be lazy with one’s mind not to seek to know but rather remain happier in ignorance. Popularized in George Orwell’s “1984” (“Nineteen Eighty-Four”), on the consequences of repressive regimentation of people and behaviours within the society (Secker & Warburg 1949, 18-25). The interpretation of this term might vary between positive and negative implications, contingent upon one's perspective. In certain respects, the state of being uninformed might be regarded as a state of contentment, as there exist certain circumstances that lie outside the realm of our influence (Packard 2023, accessed October 18, 2023).

In epistemology, which typically emphasises the quest for knowledge, ignorance is frequently regarded as a hindrance to be surmounted. Recent philosophical and transdisciplinary conversations, however, have contested this perspective, proposing that ignorance may occasionally fulfil a productive or essential role.

This study investigates the sustainability of ignorance in epistemology, analysing its definitions, interpretations, and ramifications across several fields. In the domain of epistemology, ignorance is not only the lack of information; it may also be a consciously sustained state, influenced by cognitive biases, societal frameworks, and moral factors. Philosophers like Goldman and Olsson define ignorance as an absence of

real belief, but others, such Medina and Mills, contend that ignorance is intentionally generated and perpetuated within systems of power and oppression.

In addition to epistemology, the psychological and sociological aspects of ignorance illustrate its intricate influence on human cognition and social interactions. Cognitive research, such as the Dunning-Kruger effect, illustrates how ignorance may result in overconfidence, whereas Terror Management Theory posits that ignorance may provide psychological solace amid existential dread. Conversely, sociological frameworks like agnotology—the examination of culturally generated ignorance—demonstrate how ignorance is frequently perpetuated for political or economic purposes.

This study provides a comparative analysis of how various philosophical traditions conceptualise ignorance to contextualise the argument. African, Asian, and Western viewpoints provide diverse views on the epistemic significance of ignorance, encompassing its influence on social cohesiveness and its effects on individual enlightenment and ethical choices.

This study contends that although ignorance may offer transient psychological solace or function as a mechanism for preserving authority, it is an unsustainable epistemological strategy if it results in intellectual stagnation or ethical transgressions. A balanced approach that recognises both the necessity and the perils of ignorance is essential for a thorough understanding of knowledge in human society. The ensuing debate will rigorously analyse the relationship between knowledge and ignorance, evaluating the circumstances in which ignorance may be deemed "blissful" and if this condition can be maintained within an epistemological context.

Epistemology and its Nature

Epistemology, as a course in Philosophy, is the theory of knowledge, focusing on the relationship between the mind and reality. It explores the nature of knowledge, including truth, belief, reason, evidence, and reliability. The field considers various psychological routes to knowledge, such as introspection, perception, memory, testimony, and intuition. It also considers the nature of known reality, such as how we know our own minds and others, social and mental realities, and the route to scientific knowledge (Steup and Neta 2020, accessed on October 18, 2023).

A significant portion of conventional epistemological discourse, particularly within the realm of analytical epistemology, commonly assumes two key premises. Firstly, it posits that the primary objective of epistemology is the augmentation of knowledge. Secondly, it asserts that methods of acquiring information that are autonomous in nature are inherently superior to those that rely on external sources or influences (Townley 2011, xvi). The field of epistemology is required to consider the concept of epistemic dependence and consequently provide due attention to the phenomenon of ignorance.

The Definition and Conceptions of Ignorance

Ignorance matters because as epistemic agents interact with one another and we share information as theorists and as people concerned with knowledge, we are dealing with ignorance as much as with knowledge. Yet, until recently, philosophers interested in knowledge have paid little attention to ignorance. Epistemologists have tended to ignore this. Most epistemologists have assumed that acquiring knowledge supplemented knowledge sharing testimony accounts (Townley 2011, xvi).

Michael Smithson, one of the first sociologists to investigate the phenomenon (1989), has recently provided this succinct overview of what ignorance may be: "Ignorance can be viewed as an absence or neglect of information, a failure to understand information, a mental state, a moral condition, a public problem, an economic commodity, a manufactured product, or an aspect of a culture." (Smithson 2015, 385). To understand ignorance, we are going to look at three conceptions of ignorance. (1) ignorance as lack of

knowledge/true belief, (2) ignorance as actively upheld false outlooks and (3) ignorance as substantive epistemic practice.

Scholars like LeMorvan (LeMorvan2011, 335-344) and Zimmerman (Zimmerman 2009, 785-787) hold the view that ignorance is a lack of knowledge. This definition is what Townley termed simple ignorance. This definition is widely termed the standard conception of ignorance in epistemology. The saying “Ignorance is bliss” would be sustainable in epistemology with this definition because if one intentionally remains ignorant of important truths or facts, it can hinder intellectual growth and personal development. A commitment to lifelong learning and the pursuit of knowledge is often considered valuable for personal and societal progress. Other scholars like Goldman and Olsson (Goldman and Olsson 2009, 19-41) and Peels (Peels 2010, 57-67) challenged LeMorvan and Zimmerman’s definition of Ignorance and defined ignorance as a lack of true belief, which they called New View of ignorance. This definition of theirs is more or less the same as Goldman and Olsson’s definition.

Bailey moves further in the definition of ignorance. He sees ignorance as a negative condition with detrimental effects on oppressed subjects in unjust societies (Bailey 2007, 77-94). El Kassar calls this definition the underlying conception of ignorance in the field of ignorance “as actively upheld false outlooks” (Kassar2018, 300-310). To expatiate this definition, Mills has introduced the concept of white ignorance that is “meant to denote an ignorance among whites – an absence of belief, a false belief, a set of false beliefs, a pervasively deforming outlook – that [is] not contingent but causally linked to their whiteness” (Mills2015, 217). In the same vein, Medina picks out a kind of ignorance, active ignorance, that is fed by epistemic vices – in particular, arrogance, laziness and closed-mindedness. Active ignorance is an ignorance that occurs with the active participation of the subject and with a battery of defence mechanisms, [it is] an ignorance that is not easy to undo and correct, for this requires retraining – the reconfiguration of epistemic attitudes and habits – as well as social change (Medina 2013, 39).

Alcoff extends the concept of ignorance by conceptualising it as a “substantive epistemic practice” (Alcoff 2007, 39), including many belief-forming practices at the individual, societal, and institutional levels. The individual’s understanding of ignorance, as conceptualised by her, encompasses both intentional and systemic aspects. The concept of ignorance as a form of inadequate epistemic behaviour has been discussed in mainstream epistemology. However, a novel perspective has emerged, which posits that ignorance should not be viewed solely as a consequence of negligent epistemic practices, but rather as a distinct and meaningful epistemic practice in its own right. Individual conceptions cannot adequately capture ignorance, which necessitates an integrated conception of ignorance. Although one may choose to remain on the level prior to the reaction between the various conceptions, one may also choose to advance to the level after the reaction.

In an effort to present an integrated conception of ignorance, Kassar defines Ignorance as “a disposition of an epistemic agent that manifests itself in her beliefs – either she has no belief about p or a false belief – and her epistemic attitudes (doxastic attitudes, epistemic virtues, epistemic vices)” (Kassar 2018, 307). According to this unified view, ignorance has two components: a doxastic and an epistemic attitude component. The doxastic element comprises ignorance/false belief or a false belief. The epistemic attitude component consists of doxastic attitudes, such as disbelief and suspension; epistemic virtues, such as open-mindedness and curiosity; and epistemic vices, such as arrogance and closed-mindedness.

Ignorance in Epistemology

After careful examination of the definitions and conceptualizations of ignorance proposed by scholars, it can be confidently asserted that ignorance is a tenable notion within the field of epistemology. Despite the commonly known adage “Ignorance is bliss,” prevailing within the realm of epistemology is a prevailing presupposition that ignorance, at most, constitutes a necessary malevolence (Townley 2011, xvi).

Pritchard argues that ignorance can indeed have epistemic value (Pritchard 2016, 132-143). This implies that ignorance is not wholly detrimental; it may, in some ways, facilitate learning, inquiry, or comprehension. For instance, ignorance may foster curiosity, result in novel discoveries, or emphasise knowledge gaps that require resolution. Consider a scientist who is engaged in the development of a cure for a disease. They are initially unaware of the precise solution. Nevertheless, this ignorance inspires them to enquire, experiment, and investigate a variety of potential outcomes. The absence of this initial ignorance would render research, inquiry, and the desire to pursue answers unnecessary. In this regard, ignorance is epistemically valuable due to its critical function in the acquisition of knowledge.

Another illustration is demonstrated in the field of education. A pupil who is unable to solve a complex mathematical problem may experience feelings of ignorance. Nevertheless, this ignorance motivates them to engage in research, seek assistance, and engage in practice until they have mastered the concept. Their comprehension and critical thinking abilities are enhanced through the process of overcoming ignorance. Consequently, the sentence implies that ignorance is not always detrimental; rather, it can serve as an advantageous starting point for acquiring knowledge and obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the world.

Moreover, McBrayer reinforces the notion that ignorance can be a sustainable and even spiritually meaningful aspect of epistemology. Throughout history, theologians and philosophers have recognized that humans are often in ignorance of the highest object of knowledge, such as God. In these traditions, embracing certain forms of ignorance is not a hindrance but rather a path to a more fulfilling religious or philosophical life (McBrayer 2016, 144-159).

Townley highlights the danger of epistemophilia, an excessive desire for knowledge. This insatiable thirst for knowledge can lead to negative consequences, including exploitation, appropriation, and exclusion. In this context, acknowledging the value of ignorance can act as a counterbalance to the relentless pursuit of knowledge, fostering a more balanced and harmonious epistemology. It is through the selective embrace of ignorance that we can mitigate the potential harms associated with epistemophilia (Townley 2011, xvi).

Furthermore, Townley underscores that an amount of ignorance is theoretically necessary for an adequate epistemology (Townley 2011, xvi). This emphasises the idea that a balance between knowledge and ignorance is essential for the well-being of a community of knowers. In this context, "ignorance is bliss" can be seen as contributing to the cohesion and balance of a knowledge-seeking community. It ensures that the pursuit of knowledge is sustainable, harmonious, and conducive to the well-being of individuals and the collective.

Psychological Perspectives on Ignorance and Well-being

While ignorance has epistemic value, as we have argued above, we also contend that in most cases, it is a major roadblock to success. Much incompetence, according to Dunning and Kruger (1999, 1122), stems from a lack of knowledge. They argue that individuals who overestimate their capabilities frequently assume that they are more proficient than they are, which results in their undertaking of assignments that they are unable to complete effectively. In professional settings, they make poor employment decisions and misjudge the abilities of individuals in everyday life due to their inability to recognise genuine talent in others, which blinds them to the skills and expertise that could complement or transcend their own. Furthermore, they are oblivious to the full extent of their incompetence, which can lead to hazardous decision-making as they are unable to comprehend the subject matter they are unfamiliar with. Additionally, this lack of awareness hinders their ability to accurately evaluate the subpar results of their performance and the performance of those in whom they have placed their faith, thereby perpetuating a cycle of flawed judgment and misguided confidence. This illusion of knowing can alleviate stress and improve subjective well-being since individuals remain oblivious to their limits. This illusory confidence is ultimately unsustainable, as real-world obstacles frequently compel individuals to acknowledge their ignorance, which may result in pain.

Greenberg, Pyszczynski, and Solomon (1986), who propose the Terror Management Theory, argue that a lack of knowledge about existential risks might yield psychological solace. By evading unsettling knowledge—such as mortality—individuals might preserve a sense of security and well-being. Although advantageous in the short term, a lack of knowledge of reality can impede successful decision-making, especially in domains necessitating risk awareness and long-term strategy.

Studies in cognitive psychology demonstrate that excessive amounts of knowledge can induce stress, prompting individuals to employ tactics of selective ignorance to alleviate cognitive burden (Schwartz 2004). Although this may enhance well-being by alleviating worry, it can also lead to suboptimal decision-making, especially when individuals disregard essential facts pertinent to their health, money, or relationships.

Sociological Perspectives on Ignorance

Sociologists Proctor and Schiebinger (2008) developed the idea of agnotology, which investigates the social construction and perpetuation of ignorance. Industries and political groups have historically distorted knowledge to further commercial and ideological agendas (e.g., disinformation from the tobacco industry). This ignorance, however advantageous to some groups, can harm public welfare by obstructing informed decision-making.

Michael Schudson (1998) emphasises the influence of political ignorance on democratic participation. A certain level of ignorance may enable individuals to evade the cognitive strain of grappling with intricate political matters, but it can also result in disengagement, exploitation, and the deterioration of democratic institutions. Consequently, although ignorance may provide temporary psychological solace, its societal repercussions can be extensive and harmful.

Sociological studies indicate that collective ignorance may enhance social cohesiveness by solidifying common views and diminishing cognitive dissonance (Sunstein 2001). This type of ignorance may perpetuate detrimental attitudes, obstruct advancement, and hinder society from confronting systemic problems like inequality and climate change.

Ethical Implications of Ignorance

When ignorance is intentionally fostered or exploited for personal, corporate, or political gain, its ethical implications become apparent. In the past, governments, media entities, and corporations have employed selective omission or misinformation to influence public opinion and maintain narrative control (Oreskes & Conway 2010). This raises ethical concerns regarding the obligation of institutions to cultivate an informed citizenry. For instance, the tobacco industry is a notable illustration of intentional misinformation. For decades, tobacco companies have suppressed research that links smoking to cancer and heart disease while simultaneously fostering scepticism regarding scientific findings (Oreskes & Conway 2010). The ethical repercussions of suppressing knowledge were exemplified by the deliberate cultivation of ignorance, which resulted in millions of preventable fatalities and a delayed public health response.

Ignorance can function as a social control mechanism, as marginalised communities are systematically denied access to education and knowledge (Freire 1970). This form of epistemic inequity guarantees the perpetuation of power imbalances, thereby reinforcing systemic inequalities. Ethical frameworks necessitate an examination of the beneficiaries and victims of ignorance. For instance, the systemic denial of educational opportunities to African Americans during the era of racial segregation in the United States resulted in generational cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement. The political and economic disadvantages of marginalised groups were guaranteed by policies that impeded access to quality education. This case emphasises the institutionalisation of illiteracy to perpetuate social inequalities.

Individuals and societies are ethically obligated to pursue knowledge, particularly when ignorance has detrimental repercussions. Kitcher (2011) advocates for the concept of well-ordered science, which posits

that epistemic communities should collaborate to address knowledge gaps that impact public well-being. Wilful ignorance regarding matters such as climate change, public health, and human rights is not only morally negligent but also unsustainable, according to ethical considerations. For example, during the initial phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, certain governments and communities downplayed the severity of the virus, disregarding scientific warnings regarding its transmission and impact. Ultimately, this wilful ignorance resulted in preventable illness and mortality by causing delayed responses, inadequate healthcare preparedness, and pervasive misinformation. A more ethical approach would have entailed global collaboration among epistemic communities to promptly resolve knowledge gaps and implement evidence-based public health measures following Kitcher's (2011) concept of well-ordered science. It is morally indefensible and socially unsustainable to neglect such responsibilities in public health.

“Ignorance is Bliss”: A Comparative Analysis from African, Asian, and Western Perspectives

African Perspectives on Ignorance and Knowledge

In several African philosophical traditions, knowledge is intricately linked to collective wisdom and social cohesion. The Ubuntu worldview, prominent throughout southern Africa, stresses connection and communal welfare (Ramose 1999). In this perspective, ignorance is perceived not as joy but as an impediment to societal advancement and ethical accountability. Akan philosophy emphasises the notion of "*Nkyinkyim*," which underscores adaptation and perpetual learning, signifying that knowledge is crucial for managing life's intricacies (Wiredu, 1996). Furthermore, historical events like colonialism have underscored the perils of enforced ignorance, rendering access to information an essential component of emancipation and self-determination (WaThiong'o, 1986).

Asian Perspectives: Ignorance in Buddhist and Confucian Thought

Asian viewpoints on ignorance differ significantly, especially between Buddhist and Confucian traditions. In Buddhism, ignorance (*avidya*) is a primary source of sorrow (*dukkha*) and is seen as a hindrance to enlightenment (Rahula, 1974). Ignorance, rather than fostering happiness, engenders attachment and delusion, obstructing persons from achieving genuine calm. Conversely, Confucianism sees knowledge as essential for ethical development and societal harmony. Confucius underscored the importance of learning (*xué*) as a lifelong endeavour crucial for moral leadership and ethical existence (Analects, 2:15). Certain interpretations of Daoism, especially in Laozi's *Dao De Jing*, indicate that an overabundance of information and intellectualism may result in discord, suggesting that an equilibrium between knowledge and simplicity is optimal (Laozi, trans. Ames & Hall, 2003).

Western Philosophical Perspectives on Ignorance

Western traditions provide a dual view of ignorance. Classical Greek philosophy, especially in the writings of Socrates, promotes the quest for knowledge as a pathway to attaining a happy life. Socrates' renowned declaration that "the only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing" (Plato, *Apology*, 21d) underscores the paradox of ignorance: recognising one's ignorance is the initial step towards wisdom. Subsequently, Western intellectuals, especially within the Romantic and postmodern frameworks, have examined the possible solace found in ignorance. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762) contended that an overabundance of information and rationality may undermine human purity, but Friedrich Nietzsche (1887) cautioned that confronting hard realities can be psychologically burdensome, prompting humans to favour soothing illusions (*On the Genealogy of Morality*). Contemporary psychology corroborates this viewpoint since studies reveal that cognitive biases frequently drive individuals to favour ignorance when confronted with unsettling truths (Friedman, 2023).

CONCLUSION

Although the adage "ignorance is bliss" may appear paradoxical in epistemology, a variety of philosophical and empirical perspectives indicate that its veracity is conditional rather than absolute. Psychology and

sociology demonstrate that ignorance may offer transient cognitive and emotional relief, but it may also result in long-term stagnation and poorly informed decision-making. In the same vein, a comparative analysis of African, Asian, and Western perspectives emphasises that ignorance is context-dependent—at times perceived as a hindrance to development, a plea for equilibrium, or a temporary solace. In the end, the most sustainable approach is a balanced epistemic approach that prioritises knowledge while acknowledging the limitations of human cognition, thereby balancing intellectual and societal advancement with well-being.

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