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Knowledge Avoidance – Consistency, Taxonomy, and Etiology

Abstract

Often, our reluctance to accept new ideas is the obstacle to advancing knowledge. This reluctance also plays an important role in unethical behavior. Yet, despite being widely recognized as a major factor in moral misconduct across the ethical spectrum, knowledge avoidance is plagued by a lack of clarity about the precise nature and characteristics of the epistemic phenomena it encompasses. First, these phenomena appear to be contradictory, since avoidance usually requires knowledge of what is to be avoided, and thus avoidance of knowledge seems impossible. Second, knowledge avoidance seems to be an umbrella term that encompasses a variety of different doxastic states. And third, the reasons and motivations for knowledge avoidance seem to encompass biological factors as well as ontological and psychological aspects. Drawing on both traditional and contemporary philosophical literature, the present paper aims to shed light on all these faces of knowledge avoidance by exploring problems related to its consistency, taxonomy, and etiology. The essay concludes with an examination of the moral dimensions of these phenomena. It explores the problem of responsibility and culpability, and even the potential benefits of knowledge avoidance.

Keywords

knowledge avoidance, willful ignorance, denialism, biased belief formation, culpability

I. Instead of an Introduction: Adam on a Diet

Imagine Adam refusing the apple offered by Eve with the reply: "Thank you, darling, but I'll pass. I'm not interested in what it has to reveal, I like things the way they are." Such a scenario might not differ much from Plato's allegory of the cave, where prisoners are reluctant to leave their comfort zone and begin a rather painful quest for knowledge. Indeed, it seems that Aristotle's first sentence in *Metaphysics*, proclaiming the universal curiosity of mankind, must be supplemented by our desire to remain ignorant. We're not just "philosophers" in love with wisdom. We're also "sophophobes", individuals that are afraid of knowledge, especially when we suspect that the truth might shatter our world. Citing various sources, Selene Arfini and Lorenzo Magnani thus claim that "[v]arious psychological studies have now confirmed that there are different situations in which the majority of people would not want to know something to avoid pain, regret, or anxiety".[1]

For example, many communication problems are not due to a lack of appropriate information or the perceived complexity of ideas that are difficult to

1 Selene Arfini, Lorenzo Magnani, "Embodied Irrationality? Knowledge Avoidance, Willful Ignorance, and the Paradox of Autonomy", *Frontiers in Psychology* 12 (2021), art. no. 769591, doi: https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.769591, p. 1.

understand. On the contrary, the obstacle to the advancement of knowledge is often our reluctance to accept new ideas. This may be particularly the case in the field of ethics: as Michele Moody-Adams points out, it often seems as if the "the principal barrier to moral progress in beliefs is not ignorance of a revolutionary new moral idea, but affected ignorance of what can, and should, already be known".[2] Consider, for example, the following testimony from a veteran of the Vietnam War:

"And certainly, for my last eight or nine months in Vietnam, I ceased to think, I quite literally ceased to think about why I was there or what I was doing. The sole purpose for my being in Vietnam at that point was to stay alive until I could get out. Then the reason for that is that, you know, the kinds of questions that began to present themselves were just, the questions themselves were ugly and I didn't want to know the answers. It's, it's like banging on a door, you knock on a door and the door opens slightly and behind that door it's dark and there's loud noises coming like there's wild animals in there or something and you peer into the darkness and you can't see what's there but you can hear all this ugly stuff. You want to step into that room? No way, you just sort of back out quietly pull the door shut behind you and walk away from it and that's what was going on. The questions themselves were too ugly to even ask, let alone if I had to deal with the answers."[3]

Similar confessions abound in the literature of war, and emotional, cultural, and physical distancing from the "target" in order to increase the "shooting rate" is considered a core psychological strategy in the training of modern combatants:

"Indeed, the history of warfare can be seen as a history of increasingly more effective mechanisms for enabling and conditioning men to overcome their innate resistance to killing their fellow human beings."[4]

To think that the atrocities committed in war are due to a simple lack of information would be a grave mistake. When war crimes involve ignorance, that ignorance is often motivated.

Wars, to be sure, are not the only areas of human moral life in which we have to deal with motivated lack of knowledge. In environmental ethics, denial and willful ignorance play a central role in public nonresponse to climate change or other pollution-related problems.[5] Here, too, the "information deficit model", according to which "information is the limiting factor" in public response to climate change issues, seems flawed.[6] Similarly, the animal-industrial complex is said to be driven by "carnism", an ideology that enables industrial meat production and, according to Joy, relies on invisibility, reflecting "the defenses of avoidance and denial".[7]

"Knowledge avoidance", then, seems to be widely recognized as a major factor in moral abuse across the ethical spectrum. But what might be its broadest tentative definition? The term is closely associated with Stanley Cavell's work in the fields of Shakespeare, tragedy, ethics, and Wittgenstein. For Cavell, traditional philosophical skepticism is not a consequence of our epistemic deficiency, but an existential lack. the "cause of skepticism" is namely "the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle".[8] The concept describes ignorance caused by the epistemic agent and could therefore be understood as an effort to remain ignorant, echoing Soshana Felman's understanding of what she calls "active ignorance", emphasizing that ignorance should not be understood as a mere lack of knowledge:

"Ignorance, in other words, is not a passive state of absence – a simple lack of information: it is an active dynamic of negation, an active refusal of information."[9]

However, although it appears to play an important role in explaining a variety of different phenomena and behaviors, knowledge avoidance is nevertheless plagued by a lack of clarity about the precise nature and characteristics of the epistemic phenomena it encompasses. Undoubtedly, one of the most pressing problems with doxastic attitudes related to our quest for ignorance is their paradoxical nature: it seems that the avoidance of knowledge already presupposes the knowledge of what is to be avoided – but if this is so, then what should not be known is already known, and there is nothing left to avoid. For example, denialism appears to be logically inconsistent, since it apparently requires that an epistemic agent must simultaneously hold a proposition *p* to be true and not hold it to be true (or hold it to be true and be completely unaware of it). What is more, it would seem that the agent would have to want something that she knows to be true not to be true. Needless to say, these difficulties need to be addressed if knowledge avoidance is to remain a useful explanatory tool, and so the first part of the paper attempts to shed some light on possible ways to resolve these issues.

As will become clear in the analysis in the second part of this paper, "knowledge avoidance" is actually an umbrella term that encompasses several quite different epistemic phenomena. Indeed, in the literature a plethora of names is linked to doxastic attitudes or positions toward a proposition associated with ignorance, confirming Michael J. Smithson's point that "[o]ne difficulty plaguing 'ignorance' is that the scattered literature on the topic lacks an agreed-on nomenclature".[10] Thus, it is not clear how "denialism", "willful ignorance", "self-deception", and "epistemic vices" relate to and differ from each other. Indeed, even "willful ignorance" seems to have several synonyms, including "deliberate", "active", "strategic", "contrived", "intentional", "voluntary

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Michele M. Moody-Adams, "The Idea of Moral Progress", *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999) 3, pp. 168–185.

3
William Daniel Ehrhart in an interview with David Hoffman, "Magnificent Storyteller Soldier Reveals What He Saw In Vietnam", *YouTube* (19 July 2018). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tixOyiR8B-8 (accessed on 30 April 2025), time 6:30–7:40.

4
Dave Grossman, *On Killing. The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*, Little, Brown and Company, New York 2009, p. 13.

5
Cf. Tomaž Grušovnik, Reingard Spannring, Karen Syse Lykke (eds.), *Environmental and Animal Abuse Denial. Averting Our Gaze*, Lexington, Lanham 2020.

6
Cf. Kari Marie Norgaard, *Living in Denial. Climate Change, Emotions, and Everyday Life*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge 2011.

7
Melanie Joy, *Why We Love Dogs, Eat Pigs, and Wear Cows. An Introduction to Carnism*, Conari Press, San Francisco 2010, p. 21.

8
Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason – Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1979, p. 493.

9
Shoshana Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education. Teaching Terminable and Interminable", *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982), pp. 21–44, here pp. 29–30.

10
Michael J. Smithson, "Social Theories of Ignorance", in: Robert N. Proctor, Londa Schiebinger (eds.), *Agnotology. The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2008, pp. 209–229, here p. 209.

ignorance", and "willful blindness". In addition, idioms such as "turning a blind eye", "burying one's head in the sand", "averting one's gaze", "living a lie", and others[11] frequently appear as descriptors of avoidance of knowledge. This richness of expression may indeed indicate that doxastic states associated with active ignorance are a familiar and regular feature of our lives. But it also hinders our understanding of the issues at hand by obscuring important differences between different epistemic phenomena. The central part of the discussion will therefore aim at analyzing the basic structure of epistemic phenomena related to knowledge avoidance. Thus, the paper will attempt to draw at least preliminary boundaries between voluntary ignorance, denialism, and some other states that can be associated with knowledge avoidance. The third part of the paper is devoted to the etiology of the epistemic phenomena studied, briefly touching on causes or reasons for motivated ignoring, and linking them to ethical considerations in the concluding section. As it turns out, imagining Adam dieting by refusing to eat the Fruit of Knowledge seems to be more complex than one might think at first glance.

II. Consistency of Adam's Diet: Is It Possible to Intentionally Avoid Knowledge?

Undoubtedly, the most pressing issue surrounding epistemic phenomena related to the avoidance of knowledge is their logical inconsistency. In short, how is it possible to know and not know at the same time? How can I voluntarily ignore something if "voluntarily" presupposes 1) that I know what I want and 2) that knowledge excludes ignorance? Namely, once I avoid something, I must know what I am avoiding if I am to successfully avoid it; but if I know what I am avoiding, then by definition I cannot remain ignorant of that knowledge; and since knowledge and ignorance are mutually exclusive, it seems that "avoiding knowledge" is an impossible proposition.

Following Alfred Mele's approach,[12] it makes sense to view the problem of inconsistency in voluntary knowledge avoidance as two related but distinct paradoxes: the first can be called a "static" puzzle and the other a "dynamic" puzzle.

a) *Static puzzle*: the static puzzle, or paradox, is related to the idea that an intentionally ignorant person must at the same time have and not have a belief that *p*.[13] Let's take the example of our Adam: in order to be voluntarily ignorant, he must at the same time know and not know what the knowledge resulting from eating the forbidden fruit will bring.

b) *Dynamic puzzle*: the dynamic paradox is similar to the static paradox, except that it refers to willing what one is not supposed to know: it seems that will already presupposes knowledge of what is willed, and so willing not to know seems to be an oxymoron. So the diet impossibly requires Adam to choose with full awareness what he is not supposed to know.

Perhaps one of the best ways to tackle these puzzles is found in Ian Dewesee Boyd's paper on self-deception,[14] where he divides attempts to solve the problem into intentionalist and non-intentionalist approaches. Intentionalist approaches are named after the idea that avoiding knowledge requires intention on the part of the epistemic agent. In other words, if I want to deceive myself, I must have the intention to do so. However, as we have seen, this seems to

be contradictory. Intentionalist approaches attempt to reconcile this contradiction by proposing a temporal disparity between incongruent epistemic states or suggesting that different regions of the cognitive apparatus hold incommensurable epistemic states. On the other hand, non-intentionalist approaches attempt to explain knowledge avoidance without resorting to contradictory epistemic states. The deflationary or revisionist approach aims to amend our comprehension of knowledge avoidance by separating it from the notion that it resembles deceiving others. According to this view, one might avoid knowledge without intending to do so. In fact, what appears to be knowledge avoidance might instead be motivated reasoning or belief formation. The content or adjustment approach aims to eliminate this contradiction by positing that the epistemic agent who evades knowledge need not have knowledge of *p*, but rather can merely have a suspicion of *p*. Let us examine these strategies more closely.

α) *Temporal difference*

This approach deals with the contradiction of knowledge avoidance by positing that an intentionally ignorant individual both holds and does not hold proposition *p*, but not concurrently. Everyday instances of this epistemic phenomenon may involve attempting to eliminate unpleasant thoughts. For example, imagine I receive a tedious assignment from my university that I am required to complete within three months. Initially (t_1), the mere thought of having this responsibility overwhelms me and causes me unease. Consequently, I make a conscious effort to avoid thoughts related to the task. During t_2, I find myself relaxing over the weekend, spending time with family and friends or even becoming absorbed in my smartphone. At this time, I have managed to ignore my assignment and the psychological weight it brings. This scenario is comparable to the concept of "motivated forgetting",[15] which includes instances of the suppression of unwelcome traumatic memories by those impacted by wars or natural disasters.

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For a list of idioms see: Stanley Cohen, *States of Denial. Knowing About Atrocities and Suffering*, Polity, Cambridge 2001, pp. 1–2; Eviatar Zerubavel, *The Elephant in the Room – Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2006, pp. 3–6.

12
Alfred R. Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2001.

13
With respect to self-deception, Mele defines the puzzle as consisting of an individual simultaneously holding contradictory beliefs $p\&\neg p$. In the case of knowledge avoidance, however, the paradox is not necessarily about holding contradictory beliefs, but about having contradictory epistemic states: it requires a person to have and not have a belief that *p* (and not necessarily to have two contradictory beliefs ($p\&\neg p$)). Indeed, there is a difference between having $p\&\neg p$ (e.g., thinking that I am naked and not naked) and having and not having *p* (thinking that I am naked and not thinking anything about my nakedness). An interesting consequence of this is that a person can be in contradictory epistemic states without necessarily having contradictory beliefs.

14
Ian Deweese-Boyd, "Self-Deception", in: Edward N. Zalta (ed.), The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2021 Edition). Available at: https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/self-deception/ (accessed on 30 April 2025). Boyd's paper focuses solely on self-deception. However, it is still worthwhile to try to apply his approach to a more general problem of knowledge avoidance.

15
See Michael C. Anderson, Benjamin J. Levy, "Suppressing Unwanted Memories", *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 18 (2009) 4, pp. 189–194, doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01634.x.

However, it appears that this approach can only account for a minor portion of instances involving a deliberate avoidance of knowledge. Indeed, in most paradigmatic cases of knowledge avoidance, such as denialism and willful ignorance (the taxonomy of these states will be discussed in the next section), there does not seem to be a significant difference between t_1 and t_2. In instances of dissociative amnesia or cognitive dissonance (e.g., avoiding information about the detrimental effects of smoking while being a smoker), the subject, by definition, has concurrent thought processes that are mutually exclusive. Here, it is evident that the temporal difference approach cannot eliminate the initial paradoxes.

β) *Split mind*

The basic idea of the "split mind" or "psychological partitioning" approach is to divide the mind into different regions, similar to the Freudian psychodynamic paradigm. One of the earliest such attempts can be found in Kant's section on duties to oneself as a moral being in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant is one of the first authors to explicitly expose the paradox of lying to oneself, noting that "to deceive oneself on purpose seems to contain a contradiction".[16] His solution to this paradox is a split between oneself and one's "*inner* judge", who is thought of as another person.[17] A more modern, though structurally similar, idea was put forward by Amelie Oxenberg-Rorty. Asserting that a picture of a rationally integrated self leaves little room for self-deception, she suggested that

"… an alternative picture of the self, as a system composed of relatively autonomous subsystems initially seems hospitable to the possibility of self-deception. The second picture demystifies and naturalizes self-deception, and even to some extent explains it, by characterizing the self as a complexly divided entity for whom rational Integration is a task and an ideal rather than a starting point."[18]

Applying this idea to doxastic states related to unconscious avoidance of knowledge, we can say that it is possible for a person as a whole to remain ignorant of *p* because of his or her divided cognitive life: while one psychic region (or cognitive subsystem) knows *p*, the other, relatively autonomous and independent of the first, tries to remain ignorant of it.

We could say that the main problem with this approach is that it fails while it succeeds: namely, by dividing the mind, the strategy also does away with the identity of the deceived and the deceiver, and thus "undermines the possibility of strict self-deception".[19] Indeed, as Sartre famously observed in his *Being and Nothingness*, this strategy "places me in the same relation to myself that the Other is in respect to me".[20] What, then, makes these different parts a whole? That is, how are these seemingly independent processes bound together into a personality? This problem is similar to the problem posed by Hume's bundle theory of the self, where it is not clear what makes different perceptions "my" perceptions, perceptions of a self, when there is no self to bind them together. Moreover, how can one process know what it has to hide from the other if it is truly independent and autonomous?

"In a word, how could the censor discern the impulses needing to be repressed without being conscious of discerning them? How can we conceive of a knowledge which is ignorant of itself?"[21]

In fact, the split-mind strategy merely transposes the puzzle to the next ontological level, where it reappears without really being solved: for it requires autonomous processes to be simultaneously aware and unaware of each other, we require them to know and not know what the contents of neighboring processes are.

Due to these challenges, certain theoreticians have embraced alternative methods for resolving self-deception conundrums, rejecting the notion of conventional intention-based tactics and their presumptions. As previously stated, these alternative methods are categorized into the "deflationary" and "attitude or content adjustment" approaches.

γ) *Deflationary approach*

Deflationary approaches reject the notion that unconscious intentions play a role in active knowledge avoidance caused by the epistemic agent. Instead, ignorance resulting from these actions is explained as a consequence of motivated errors rather than explicit intent.

Upon considering the nature of self-deception, Mele argues that understanding this epistemic phenomenon based on traditional deception is erroneous. Self-deception phenomena can be explained through the lens of "motivationally biased beliefs",[22] according to the author's perspective. This theory suggests that self-deception can occur without explicit paradoxical intent. For example, consider Mele's illustration of Beth, a child whose father passed away prematurely. Beth finds solace in recalling memories where she received her father's undivided attention and discomfort in recollecting occasions where a sibling took the spotlight. As a result, Beth is motivated to focus on the former memories while dismissing the latter.[23] Consequently, Beth has convinced herself that she was her father's favorite, leading to a state of self-deception without any conscious attempt to deceive herself.

Some instances of active knowledge avoidance may be explained through this approach, but its ability to address phenomena such as dissociative amnesia is questionable. There appears to be too much internal psychological tension in that state to attribute it to something as benign as "motivated error". On the other hand, it may be too hasty to completely reject the deflationary approach in these situations. It is possible to consider that the avoidance of traumatic experiences is motivated, even if not "intentional" in the strict sense of the word. The insights provided by Mele's research

16
Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, transl. and ed. by Mary Gregor, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, II.I. §9.

17
Ibid., italics in original.

18
Amelie Oksenberg-Rorty, "The Deceptive Self: Liars and Layers", *Analyse & Kritik* 7 (1985) 2, pp. 141–161, here p. 144, doi: https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-1985-0204.

19
Ibid.

20
Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, transl. by Hazel E. Barnes, Washington Square Press, New York 1993, p. 51.

21
Ibid., pp. 52–53.

22
A. R. Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 28.

23
Ibid.

into self-deceptive states could be applicable to other doxastic states resulting from epistemic agents causing ignorance. Perhaps we can hypothesize that certain cognitive biases arise due to the motivated formation of biased beliefs, leading to ignorance. For example, with the Dunning-Kruger effect,[24] one's ignorance of one's true (in)competence can plausibly be said to be a product of biased cognition rather than knowledge avoidance.

δ) *Attitude or content adjustment approach*

This approach attempts to solve the static puzzle by implying that actively ignorant agents, who are themselves the cause of their ignorance, do not hold contradictory beliefs p and $\neg p$ at the same time. Rather than having inconsistent beliefs, they may be perceived as holding a belief in p and only a suspicion $\neg p$. We could also simply say that "a desire-influenced treatment of data has the result both that the person does not acquire the true belief and that he or she does acquire (or retain) the false belief".[25] This approach involves altering the agent's attitude towards p, such as from belief to suspicion, or modifying the content of their belief. This strategy implies that voluntary ignoring does not require epistemic agents to hold conflicting beliefs simultaneously or have conflicting mental states.

Which of the above approaches is most successful in resolving the consistency puzzles of knowledge avoidance? The answer to this question is closely related to the type of knowledge avoidance in question. As we will see in the next section, knowledge avoidance seems to be an umbrella term that covers a wide variety of epistemic states that are more or less susceptible to the consistency charge. When further consideration is given to this issue, it becomes evident that numerous cognitive biases can be attributed to susceptibility to motivated errors. Thus, a deflationary approach may be appropriate when describing certain cases of self-deception. On the other hand, willful or voluntary ignorance, which refers to the purposeful maintenance of ignorance, may not be as contradictory as it initially appears. Rather, it can be viewed as a straightforward example of one's recognition of their ignorance that one chooses to preserve. Indeed, it is perfectly consistent to say that one is unaware of the exact number of exoplanets in our universe and that one is ignorant of the contents of the letter on the table. Therefore, it is also consistent to choose to remain in these states voluntarily. In fact, it is even possible to represent our ignorance graphically: DeNicola illustrates this with an ancient map, which he describes as "a wondrous image of the interplay of knowledge and ignorance",[26] that displays both *Oikumene* – the inhabited and known world – as well as *Terra Incognita*. Indeed, "[t]he first and fundamental act of reason […] is the drawing of the line", and although "we do not dwell *in* ignorance, we dwell *with* ignorance: our knowledge is bounded by ignorance".[27] In such cases, the adjustment approach may be the most suitable since we are acknowledging our ignorance not of the exact content of p (e.g., the exact number of exoplanets or the exact content of a letter), but of some property of p in a general sense (we are aware that there are some exoplanets out there but we do not know precisely how many, and we are also aware that the letter has some, perhaps disturbing, content). Even the temporal approach may have some explanatory power: indeed, the example with which we have illustrated it seems plausible. On the other hand, the split mind approach, which Mele refers to as "mental exotica",[28] is the most problematic due to ontological and

logical reasons, as it attempts to account for the contradictions by positing contradictory states of mind.

III. The Varieties of Adam's Diet: Taxonomy of Knowledge Avoidance

Having cleared the way for the central part of this paper by showing how we can retain the general idea of knowledge avoidance as a viable, non-contradictory concept, it is time to look at the proposed taxonomy of epistemic states related to active ignorance. Before proceeding, however, three brief preliminary methodological remarks are in order. Firstly, the proposed taxonomy may not encompass all instances of avoidance of knowledge. On the contrary, it aims to allow for future additions of other related epistemic states or a more subtle analysis of the presented categories. Secondly, Ralph Hertwig and Christoph Engel[29] recently proposed a taxonomy of "deliberate" ignorance. However, their taxonomy is based on a list of reasons and purposes why we ignore information instead of the structural features of these epistemic states. While I find their reflections valuable, I prefer to refer to that aspect of analysis as "etiology" instead of "taxonomy". In other words, I understand taxonomy to be the anatomy or structure of doxastic states. Thirdly, later Wittgenstein demonstrated that trying to find strict definitions for words used in natural language often proves futile. Indeed, things that can be classified under the category of "game" may not share one essential feature, but are related by "family resemblances".[30] Avoiding knowledge may be no different, and so it makes sense to be a little wary of classifications and taxonomies in this area, since they can decouple phenomena from their contexts and sacrifice their richness. As we will see, concrete situations of knowledge often encompass multiple doxastic states, and separating them from their natural complexity would be counterproductive. Nevertheless, given the complexity of epistemic states related to knowledge avoidance on the one hand, and their usefulness as explanatory tools on the other, it is worth trying to provide at least a tentative taxonomy.

In the most general sense, my taxonomy, which focuses on the onto-epistemological structure of the phenomena, proposes three parameters to which we can refer when describing individual instances of knowledge avoidance. Especially the first two parameters represent a continuum, which means that

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David Dunning *et al*., "Why People Fail to Recognize Their Own Incompetence", *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 12 (2003) 3, pp. 83–87, doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.01235.

25
A. R. Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 60.

26
Daniel R. DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance. The Surprising Impact of What We Do Not Know*, MIT Press, Cambridge (MA) 2017, p. 65.

27
Ibid., pp. 66–67. Emphasis in original.

28
A. R. Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 4.

29
Ralph Hertwig, Christoph Engel, "Homo Ignorans: Deliberately Choosing Not to Know", in: Ralph Hertwig, Christoph Engel (eds.), *Deliberate Ignorance. Choosing Not to Know*, MIT Press, Cambridge 2021, pp. 3–17.

30
Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, transl. by Gertrude E. M. Anscombe, Blackwell, Oxford 1958, §§ 67–68, pp. 30e–31e.

we could graphically represent them as belts (see the figure below), which further implies that instances of knowledge avoidance can be spread along these lines without sharp boundaries and with smooth transitions, sometimes even merging with each other. The first parameter describes (un)consciousness of intention: at one end we have instances of knowledge avoidance, where the epistemic agent is fully aware of her intention to remain ignorant, while at the other end we have epistemic phenomena that do not seem to be consciously motivated by subjects. As can be seen from the map below, instances without conscious intention could include epistemic phenomena with unconscious motivation, but more on this point later. The second parameter indicates the doxastic attitude of the epistemic agent towards the proposition *p*. The agent may lack knowledge or suspicion of *p*, or she may weakly or strongly suspect *p*, or even have factual knowledge of *p*. As we will see, these two parameters describe most of the epistemic states associated with knowledge avoidance. However, some authors suggest that the activity of the epistemic agent may be significant, particularly when considering potential culpability related to conscious voluntary ignorance. Therefore, the third parameter specifically pertains to this characteristic. As noted, we can create a preliminary map of the knowledge avoidance taxonomy with the help of these parameters:

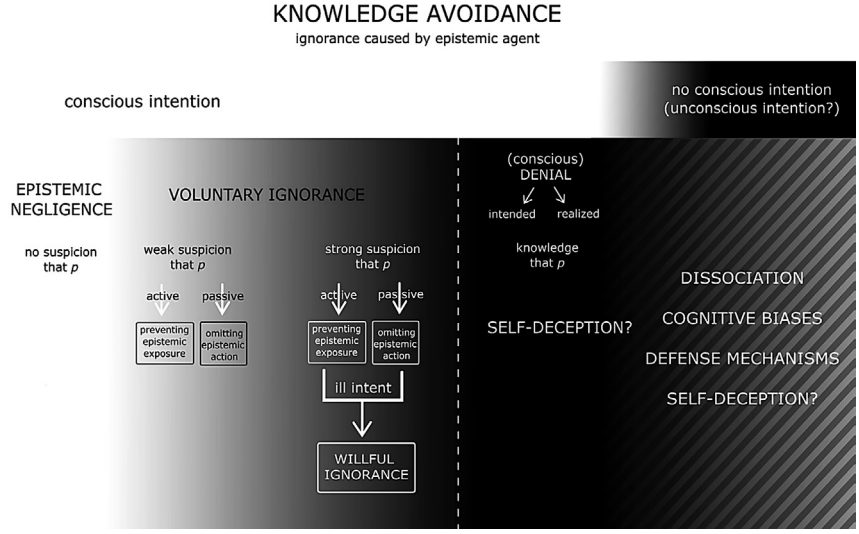

Figure 1: A map of knowledge avoidance.

III.I Voluntary Ignorance, Willful Ignorance, and Epistemic Negligence

Voluntary ignorance is sometimes called willful, deliberate, or intentional ignorance: as mentioned in the Introduction, there are in fact many adjectives used to describe what I refer to here as "voluntary" ignorance. I choose the adjective "voluntary" because it has by far the longest history, going back to Thomas Aquinas and his still relevant analysis of *ignorantia voluntaria*.[31] In short, voluntary ignorance describes doxastic states in which the epistemic agent consciously avoids knowledge of proposition *p* without actually knowing it. Some common examples of voluntary ignorance include refusing to open a letter because we suspect it will bring bad news, or the more troublesome case of not wanting to know what is in the suitcase we have received

from an unknown person in order to have a defense if we are caught at the border. Referring to our Adam story, we could say that Adam is voluntarily ignorant when he consciously refuses to take the apple because he suspects that the knowledge it brings is unsettling. Voluntary ignorance can thus be seen on the left side of the spectrum in the map above, for two reasons: first, because it is an intentionally induced state, and second, because the doxastic attitude of an epistemic agent towards the proposition *p* in voluntary ignoring does not entail knowledge of *p*.

One of the more interesting aspects of voluntary ignorance is the question whether suspicion of *p* is necessary for voluntary ignoring. While some theoreticians think warranted suspicion of *p* (having a well-grounded idea about the content of the avoided proposition *p*) is necessary for voluntary ignorance,[32] others reject this and think that not even an agent's awareness of being voluntarily ignorant is a prerequisite for this epistemic phenomenon.[33]

Excluding the epistemic agent's awareness might be too broad a definition of voluntary ignorance, covering all sorts of different forms of knowledge avoidance and even other examples of ignorance.[34] On the other hand, the view that suspicion is a necessary condition for voluntary ignorance appears to be more grounded. This is because it is problematic to describe an epistemic agent as voluntarily ignorant of *p* if they have no suspicion of *p* whatsoever. Consider the following example: let's say I hear my dog chewing on something while I'm watching television. I'm convinced she's chewing on one of her many

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Aquinas considers ignorance as a cause of sin in the first part of the second part of the *Summa*, specifically in 76. question, which is divided into four articles: 1) whether ignorance can be considered a cause of sin; 2) whether ignorance is a sin; 3) whether ignorance excuses sin; and 4) whether ignorance diminishes sin. His standard example of voluntary ignorance is as follows: "Now it happens sometimes that such like ignorance is directly and essentially voluntary, as when a man is purposely ignorant that he may sin more freely […]." – Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, transl. by Laurence Shapcote, ed. by John Mortensen, Enrique Alarcón, Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012, I–II, Q. 76, a. 4. Available at: https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I-II (accessed on 30 April 2025). However, as we will soon see, Aquinas's instances of voluntary ignorance are actually examples of what is called "willful" (sometimes "wilful") ignorance in contemporary English legal and moral debates.

32

Cf. Kevin Lynch, "Willful ignorance and self-deception", *Philosophical Studies* 173 (2016), pp. 505–523, ovdje pp. 512–513. Lynch proposes four elements of willful ignorance: (1) *p* is true. (2) *S* has warranted suspicion that *p*. (3) There are some actions, *v*, such that were *S* to do them, he would find out whether *p*, or there are some actions, *u*, such that were *S* not to do them, he would find out whether *p*, and *S* knows this. (4) Neither doing *v* nor not doing *u* would be exorbitantly demanding for *S*, and also, *v* and *u* are not instances of act types that it would be exorbitantly demanding for *S* to consistently do/not do. It is important to note that Lynch speaks of "willful" ignorance, not "voluntary" ignorance – I will return to the proposed distinction between the two later; for now, suffice it to say that for me willful ignorance is a special case of voluntary ignorance.

33

Jan Willem Wieland, "Willful Ignorance", *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20 (2017), pp. 105–119, here p. 116. Wieland also uses the term "willful" ignorance, but his definition seems to encompass what I call, for the reasons given below, "voluntary ignorance".

34

When Wieland says that "one may be fully unaware that one is willfully ignorant" (p. 116), he may mean that "one can be completely unaware of what one is actively ignorant of". There is, in fact, an important difference between "being unaware that one is ignorant" and "being unaware of what one is ignorant of": while the latter case represents epistemic negligence (see the map), the former is relevant for forms of active knowledge avoidance without conscious intention (as described below), where the attribution of voluntariness becomes problematic.

toys scattered around the living room, and because the TV show is captivating, I decide to remain ignorant of the nature of the exact object she's chewing on. As it happens, this time the dog accidentally chews a piece of chocolate that she found on the kitchen floor. As a result, she gets seizures. Now, even though I consciously refused to familiarize myself with the chewed object, it seems very far-fetched to say that I was voluntarily ignorant of my dog's self-poisoning activity and her future seizures, since I didn't have the slightest idea about them. If we allowed voluntary ignorance to be possible without any suspicion, then we could hold people voluntarily ignorant of all sorts of facts and states of affairs with which they are unfamiliar and about which they have not the remotest idea. But if we have not the remotest idea of what is going on, then it seems that we cannot be said to be voluntarily ignorant of it: for how could we avoid something of which we have absolutely no idea?

It seems that the epistemic state covering these examples is much more accurately described as "epistemic negligence", i.e., the epistemic agent's failure to be acquainted with relevant facts due to her idleness, recklessness, or other factors that prevent epistemic exposure. In these cases, the agent's ignorance may be actively caused (e.g., by deliberately refusing to inspect or listen or some other action) and thus is a form of knowledge avoidance, but since the agent has no specific idea of what she is missing (she does not have the suspicion that *p*), she cannot be said to be voluntarily ignorant of *p*. Cases in which someone misses an important piece of information because they refuse contact with facts on principle would then be cases of epistemic negligence. To take another example, imagine someone who has no idea about puppy mills, and who also categorically refuses to listen to animal rights activists, dismissing them before they have a chance to talk to her. Perhaps she does not want to be reminded of the details of animal slaughter. This time, however, the activists were trying to raise awareness about puppy mills. In this case, the person cannot be said to be voluntarily ignorant of puppy mills, since she has no idea they exist. She can, however, be said to be epistemically negligent because she prevented herself from learning about the abuse of pets.

In the map above, epistemic negligence as a consequence of agent's active decision to omit epistemic exposure is located on the far left of the image, since the agent has a clear conscious intention to remain ignorant but has no suspicion about *p*. It is perhaps worth noting that epistemic negligence in this sense can be caused either by a categorical refusal to come into contact with knowledge or by false beliefs. In any case, the phenomenon deserves further study in the future.

In the proposed taxonomy, willful ignorance is presented as a special kind of voluntary ignorance, because I'm following Lynch's intuition that the adjective "willful" has a pejorative connotation, and thus requires something like the "ill intent" of voluntary ignorance to be considered "willful." However, ill intent alone may not be sufficient for an epistemic state to qualify as a culpable case of willful ignorance. As we have seen, Lynch adds other requirements, including the knowledge that performing a not too difficult and dangerous action would reveal the avoided information. Alexander Sarch points out that some legal definitions add even stronger restrictions, demanding that subject's "motive for taking the ignorance-preserving actions […] was to set up a defense in the event of prosecution".[35] Also, some courts even require that a subject "deliberately takes affirmative steps to prevent oneself from obtaining more information about *p* that would establish whether *p* is

true",[36] before declaring them willfully ignorant. This is then the reason why I propose a distinction between "active" and "passive" voluntary ignorance. "Active" voluntary ignorance thus requires some action on the part of the epistemic agent that prevents knowledge of *p* from arising, while "passive" has no such requirement. Returning to the earlier example of Adam, if Adam simply refused to take the apple, then we could consider him to be only passively voluntarily ignorant; but if Adam actively avoided Eve, perhaps hiding in some remote corner of the garden and running away at the slightest sight of her, then we could consider him to be actively voluntarily ignorant. Real-life examples include refusing to look in the mailbox for fear of discovering an unwanted letter (passive), or deliberately deleting one's last name from the mailbox so as not to receive the mail in the first place (active). Of course, the difference between "passive" and "active" is sometimes difficult to describe, because one type of action can be seen as inaction of another type. For example, "turning a blind eye" could be understood as either active ("averting one's gaze") or inactive ("blindness"). This suggests that specific differences between weak and strong voluntary ignorance are highly context sensitive.

From the above discussion, we can see that consistency puzzles do not pose a threat to voluntary ignorance or epistemic negligence. In fact, we could count voluntary ignorance as an example of attitude and content approach to the puzzles, since this doxastic state requires that the epistemic agent has only the suspicion of *p*, and not the actual knowledge of it. But this changes with conscious denial.

III.II Conscious Denial

One of the crucial differences between epistemic states that involve conscious avoidance of knowledge is the doxastic attitude of the agent: if voluntary ignorance involves only suspicion of *p*, then conscious denial involves actual knowledge of *p*. Using our Adam's diet metaphor, we could say that Adam would be in conscious denial if he ate the apple and then consciously refused to acknowledge this fact. He might try to convince himself that he had actually eaten something else, or perhaps that he had not eaten at all. Conscious denial would then actually describe two epistemic states: 1) a state where epistemic agent knows *p* and wants not to know it and 2) a state where epistemic agent successfully disposed of knowledge that *p*. Let us refer to these states as the "intended" and "realized" states of conscious denial, respectively. Concrete cases of intended conscious denial usually involve situations in which individuals struggle with knowledge, such as when they attempt to reinterpret their behavior in order to justify it and rid themselves of a guilty conscience. A common strategy is the use of euphemisms: the list of such cases is long, from the infamous "collateral damage" of war to calling laboratory animals "models". An interesting recent case was the renaming of the barbed wire installed on the southern Slovenian border to prevent migrants and refugees from crossing the border as a "technical obstacle".[37] If these strategies are

35
Alexander Sarch, "Willful Ignorance in law and morality", *Philosophy Compass* 13 (2018) 5, pp. 1–11, here p. 4, doi: https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12490.

36
Ibid.

37
Vlado Miheljak, "Koliko imen premore ograja? (Tehnične ovire najprej v glavi, nato na meji)", *Mladina* (13 November 2015). Available at: https://www.mladina.si/170709/koliko-imen-premore-ograja/ (accessed on 30 April 2025).

successful and the subjects manage to get rid of unwanted knowledge, then we have a case of realized conscious denial. Another example of the latter is successful motivated forgetting. The epistemic behavior of agents in conscious denial can thus be quite different from voluntary ignorance.

As can easily be seen, conscious denial is a rather contradictory state of mind in which static and dynamic puzzles apply. At first glance, it might seem that we can solve these puzzles by applying the temporal difference strategy: we could assume that Adam first had the knowledge that *p* in t_1, and then convinced himself to the contrary in t_2. But if this were true, then Adam could not really be said to be in denial, since he would not be having two contradictory thoughts at the same time. In other words, if denial were successful, it would cease to be denial. If Adam succeeds in denying that he ate the apple, then he is precisely no longer in denial, because for him there is nothing left to deny – he has already gotten rid of the troublesome knowledge. If, on the other hand, we say that for conscious denial it is sufficient for a person to have only the intention of getting rid of *p*, then again this would not be a true denial, because again a person would not (yet) have two contradictory thoughts. The split mind strategy does not seem to work either, because it is contradictory in itself, and because it requires unconscious thoughts, which by definition do not apply to conscious denial. The same goes for the content and attitude adjustment approach: the denial namely requires two contradictory states of mind (that of knowing and not knowing *p*), and not mere suspicion or perhaps doubt. Maybe the deflationary approach could then work here, at least to a certain extent, namely in the sense that it would reinterpret the conscious denial either as an intention to get rid of *p* or as perhaps the motivated forgetting mentioned above. In this sense, strictly speaking, conscious denial would not exist – what we call "denial" in this case is precisely one of the two states identified above: either 1) a state that wants to be denial (intended denial), or 2) a state of realized denial that itself ceased to be denial, as mentioned above. Despite all the difficulties, however, I think it is worthwhile to retain conscious denial as a special and separate epistemic state with the two distinct forms mentioned above. The reason for this is that it represents a unique epistemic state that is common and yet quite different from voluntary ignorance on the one hand and other forms of knowledge avoidance (biases, motivated belief formation, etc.) on the other.

Of course, what is here called conscious denial should not be confused with psychoanalytic defense mechanisms or broader social epistemic phenomena, which may actually encompass a variety of different doxastic states related to knowledge avoidance. Indeed, much attention has been paid to "denialism", from Anna Freud's[38] writings to Eviatar Zerubavel's more sociological take on the subject to Stanley Cohen's[39] admirable analysis of the epistemic phenomenon. Since Freudian disavowal and abnegation can be seen as driven by unconscious motives, they are clearly distinct from the epistemic state I am trying to identify in this section, which is also why I refer to it with the adjective conscious. In the map proposed here, the psychoanalytic defense mechanisms can be found on the other side of the map in the unconscious or no conscious intention side in the checked part of the belt – the reason for this choice lies in the fact that their nature is often disputed (but more on this in the next section).

Another form of knowledge avoidance that involves knowledge of *p* and conscious intent may be self-deception. Since the nature of this concept is

also highly controversial,[40] I leave its categorization open, aware that the self-deceptive states may also exhibit internal diversity, making it difficult to subsume the phenomena under a single category.

III.III Knowledge Avoidance without Conscious Intention

It is widely believed that epistemic agents can avoid knowledge without explicit conscious intention, that is, either without any intention or perhaps with unconscious intention. Typically, epistemic phenomena such as dissociation,[41] cognitive biases, and sometimes self-deception are counted among these doxastic attitudes. The partitioning of cognition into parallel and relatively independent subsystems is, as we have seen, advocated by the "split mind" approach, which features prominently as a theory in explanations of self-deception, and which is why self-deception is partially included in the "no conscious intention" category in the map. The Freudian concepts of *Verneinung* ("negation")[42] and *Verleugnung* ("disavowal") can also be considered part of this group of epistemic phenomena, since in both cases the subject is neither fully aware of the negated fact nor has a conscious intention to avoid the information. Other psychoanalytic defenses, including rationalization, projection, and repression, can also be viewed as unconscious active avoidance of knowledge.

I'm including all of these epistemic phenomena in the checked part of the map to indicate their contested nature. Namely, as I mentioned earlier, unconscious intentions are often considered an oxymoron, and thus authors have proposed various other strategies for dealing with, for example, denial or self-deception, including Mele's deflationary approach to self-deception mentioned above. In short, it seems that at least some of these phenomena can be better described as a consequence of ignorance production rather than knowledge avoidance, as is the case with motivated biased belief formation. In this case, ignorance is not a product of avoidance but of bias.

The discussion of these phenomena, their existence, further taxonomy, and exact nature is far too complex for the present purpose. Nevertheless, they must at least be acknowledged as contested states because, as said, for many theorists they seem to play a crucial role in knowledge avoidance. Undoubtedly, further analysis is due in this region of the proposed map.

38
Cf. Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, Carnac Books, London 1966.

39
Cohen divides different denial-related states according to their psychological status (conscious/unconscious), content (literal/interpretive/implicatory), organization (personal/cultural/official), time (historical/contemporary), agency (victim/perpetrator/observer), and space and place (one's own/elsewhere). See S. Cohen, *States of Denial*, pp. 1–20.

40
Ian Deweese-Boyd provides a good overview of the debate about the nature of self-deception in the above mentioned "Self-Deception" paper.

41
For definition and discussion of alternative conceptualizations see: Ellert R. S. Nijenhuis, Onno van der Hart, "Dissociation in Trauma. A New Definition and Comparison with Previous Formulations", *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation* 12 (2011) 4, pp. 416–445, doi: https://doi.org/10.1080/15299732.2011.570592.

42
Sigmund Freud, "Negation", in: James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 19, *The Ego and the Id and Other Works*, transl. by James Strachey – Anna Freud, Hogarth Press, London 1971, pp. 235–242.

IV. The Reasons for Adam's Diet: Etiology of Knowledge Avoidance

Knowledge is often seen as something valuable and good, so why would one choose to be ignorant? Why, then, would Adam avoid the apple or deny eating it at all? Indeed, if Francis Bacon's and later Hobbes' famous statement *scientia potentia est* is true, does motivated ignorance imply something like epistemic masochism, a form of self-inflicted weakness? Surprisingly or not, the answer to these questions is a resounding no:

"Ignorance is not always a negative aspect of human affairs. It is an essential component in social relations, organizations, and culture. People are motivated to create and maintain ignorance, often systematically."[43]

Indeed, the avoidance of knowledge has a vital function for our survival, and may even be a constitutive element of our consciousness, which must necessarily exclude some stimuli in order to focus on others and thus establish itself.

However, let's try to be a little more systematic in our presentation of the various origins of information avoidance. One way to sketch out a typology of reasons and causes for motivated ignorance is to distinguish between causes that are related to conscious intention and those that are not related to conscious intention (i.e., are either related to unconscious intention or are unintentional). The former can be seen as different reasons people have for ignoring *p*, while the latter class attempts to shed more general light on the nature of active ignorance. Nevertheless, what holds true for the taxonomy of knowledge avoidance also holds true for the typology of its etiology: it is difficult to draw straight lines and to categorize causes precisely, since different epistemic states may have the same causes, and different causes may produce similar states.

Perhaps the most robust theories in the last unconscious or unintentional category are represented by biological explanations and analogies of active ignorance. Freud, for example, compares the "conscious system" and the "mental apparatus" to the

"… living vesicle with its receptive cortical layer. This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli […]. *Protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of* stimuli."[44]

As we can see, in this case the avoidance of information can almost be seen as a feature of homeostasis: its main function is conservative and it helps the organism – or "mental apparatus" – in its self-preservation by protecting it from destabilizing influences. The same function is attributed to knowledge avoidance in Leon Festinger's theory of cognitive dissonance, whose two main hypotheses are that "the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance", and that "[w]hen dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance".[45] Festinger's theory, however, is cognitive and does not exclude conscious efforts to avoid information. The rich diversity of doxastic states associated with knowledge avoidance must be kept in mind when considering their origins, which in turn makes analysis all the more complex.

Returning to biological approaches to explaining active ignorance, we must mention Robert Trivers' innovative attempt to understand self-deception through evolution. In short, Trivers argues that self-deception helps us deceive others and thus increases our survival and reproduction rates. How exactly? Here is his explanation:

"… self-deception evolves in the service of deception – the better to fool others. Sometimes it also benefits deception by saving on cognitive load during the act, and at times it also provides an easy defense against accusations of deception (namely, I was unconscious of my actions). In the first case, the self-deceived fails to give off the cues that go with consciously mediated deception, thus escaping detection. In the second, the actual process of deception is rendered cognitively less expensive by keeping part of the truth in the unconscious. That is, the brain can act more efficiently when it is unaware of the ongoing contradiction. And in the third case, the deception, when detected, is more easily defended against – that is, rationalized – to others as being unconsciously propagated."[46]

So here we have a theory that again sees the function of active ignorance in survival, but this time in a more aggressive way: ignorance helps us to behave in ways that give us an advantage over others. Types of knowledge avoidance that could be explained by this theoretical vehicle include those without conscious intent.

In addition to organic, evolutionary, and cognitive attempts to explain the origins of the avoidance of knowledge, another curious approach deserves our attention, and that is Nietzsche's consideration of forgetting. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, in the chapter "On the Three Metamorphoses", Nietzsche praises the figure of the child above the camel and the lion: if the camel is capable of carrying the heavy existential weight of being, and if the lion is necessary for rebellion against old values and freedom, then the child is capable of the "innocence and forgetting" necessary for "the game of creation".[47] Here it seems that active ignorance is a prerequisite for the "wheel of creation", reminiscent of Platonic myths of the soul's journey through the cycle of life as well as Vedic Indian māyā, "that creative power (*śakti*) of Brahman that brings the illusory appearance of multiplicity into existence, analogous to the way a magician makes one thing appear as something else".[48] However, it is not

43
M. J. Smithson, "Social Theories of Ignorance", p. 209.

44
Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in: J. Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 18, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works (7–64)*, transl. by James Strachey – Anna Freud, Hogarth Press, London 1955, p. 27; emphases in the original.

45
Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 1957, p. 3.

46
Robert Trivers, *The Folly of Fools. The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life*, Basic Books, New York 2011, p. 4.

47
Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra. A Book for All and None*, transl. by Adrian del Caro, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 17.

48
Frederic F. Fost, "Playful Illusion: The Making of Worlds in Advaita Vedanta", *Philosophy East and West* 48 (1998) 3, pp. 387–405, here p. 387. Future analysis undoubtedly requires more attention to this concept as well as to avidyā in the sense that the latter is "the cause of rebirth, *saṃsāra*". Cf. Stephen Kaplan, "Vidyā and Avidyā: Simultaneous or Coterminous? A Holographic Model to Illuminate the Advaita Debate", *Philosophy East and West* 57 (2007) 2, pp. 178–203, here p. 178.

entirely clear whether these concepts can be seen as the origins of knowledge avoidance, or whether they apply to other epistemic states that are not related to motivated ignorance, at least not from the agent's point of view.

Turning to the conscious reasons that different people might have for avoiding knowledge, we can first point out that they apply only to those doxastic states that are a consequence of the agent's explicit intention, namely voluntary ignorance, epistemic negligence, and conscious denial. As mentioned at the beginning of the second part of the paper, Hertwig and Engel recently proposed an exhaustive list[49] of the various reasons why individuals may choose to voluntarily ignore information and knowledge. This list includes:

a) Emotion regulation and regret-avoidance

We may choose to voluntarily ignore information in order to preserve our cherished beliefs: not going to the doctor to avoid potential "bad news" may allow people to avoid thoughts about losing their autonomy. Similarly, avoiding discussion of academic success among peers may help them avoid envy and jealousy.

b) Suspense and surprise-maximization

Perhaps the best known and clearest example is the avoidance of spoiler warnings.

c) Performance enhancing

feedback can be detrimental to performance, especially if it diverts attention from the task to the self and thus depletes cognitive capacity, or if the feedback is strongly negative and thus discouraging. In these cases, it is better to remain consciously unaware of one's performance.

d) Strategic ignorance

Hertwig and Engel discuss four different reasons for strategic ignorance:

1. Gaining a bargaining advantage

Not knowing how costly a failure in negotiations could be may allow one to be more daring and go further in one's demands and thus get a better deal. Conversely, those who have this information may be more cautious and willing to accept a worse deal because they are aware of all the consequences of failing to reach a deal.

2. Self-discipline

Sometimes it is better not to learn about something, because knowing that it is not as harmful as one thought might lead to behavior that one might later regret. For example, not knowing how successful HIV medications are might cause someone to be cautious and avoid taking health risks.

3. Eschewing responsibility

Avoiding knowledge of the consequences of one's actions may help one to be more comfortable with disregarding others. As noted in the introduction, military training in the twentieth century sought to distance combatants from their "targets". The development of autonomous weapons can be seen as another step in this direction: by letting systems "decide" when to "pull the trigger", responsibility is effectively removed, which is a dangerous precedent on the modern battlefield.[50]

4. Avoiding liability

Perhaps the most clichéd example is the refusal to look in the secret compartment of drugs when taking them across the border, so that if caught, one can always claim ignorance as a defense, a scenario made famous by the United States v. Jewell case. There may also be institutional examples of this motive: a company may avoid funding research into the adverse effects of using a product so that it can avoid liability if the product turns out to be harmful. However, this reason is often difficult to distinguish from motives connected with responsibility.

e) Impartiality

Often, information is avoided in order to make a more objective judgment. This includes blind peer review and anonymity of participants. In fact, justice is traditionally depicted as the blindfolded goddess Lady Justice. Her eyes are covered so that justice can be applied without regard to the characteristics of individuals that are irrelevant to the judgment. In this sense, she is a metaphor for morally desirable voluntary ignorance.

f) Cognitive sustainability and information management

Actively ignoring certain information in order to "stay on track" seems to be necessary for many tasks: for example, if one waited until one had read "everything that has been written on the subject", one might never begin to write. Indeed, I am inclined to compare this latter idea with Nietzsche's intuition that ignorance is in some sense a prerequisite for creativity.

As mentioned above, concrete practical examples of knowledge avoidance can be a mixture of different types of knowledge avoidance, and it is not surprising that the same applies to their reasons and motives. In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that the typology of knowledge avoidance etiology is still a work in progress.

49
As mentioned earlier, Hertwig and Engel call this "taxonomy". Cf. R. Hertwig, C. Engel, "Homo Ignorans", pp. 5–11. Many of the examples used to illustrate the listed categories are my own.

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Cf. also Tomaž Grušovnik, "Automation of violence and the disappearance of moral responsibility", in: Marjan Krisper, Franci Pivec, Matjaž Gams (eds.), *Etika in stroka. Zbornik 22. Mednarodne multikonference Informacijska družba - IS 2019, 9. oktober 2019: zvezek D = Professional Ethics. Proceedings of the 22nd International Multiconference Information Society - IS 2019*, Institut "Jožef Stefan", Ljubljana 2019, pp. 12–14.

V. Instead of a Conclusion: The Moral Dimensions of Adam's Diet

Should we praise or blame Adam for his diet, or perhaps neither? Not surprisingly, the answer to this question depends on the content of the knowledge being avoided and the circumstances in which it is occurring. In any case, research on knowledge avoidance deserves our attention primarily because of its importance for moral development. As we saw in the introduction, these epistemic phenomena are related to some of the most pressing ethical dilemmas we face. Of course, it is impossible to assess the moral value of all the nuances of active ignoring in a few paragraphs in the conclusion. The main goal of the present paper was to provide a preliminary analysis of the coherence, structure, and etiology of knowledge avoidance, hopefully paving the way for a future in-depth study. Nevertheless, some main directions of such an ethical investigation can already be indicated with the help of the present analysis and the existing rich literature on the subject, especially on willful ignorance.

Focusing first on epistemic phenomena on the conscious intention side of the spectrum, both voluntary ignorance and denialism seem culpable if they contribute to a morally problematic outcome. In the case of voluntary ignoring in legal contexts, Douglas Husak's treatment of "willful ignorance or blindness" is often accepted as a starting point for reflection. Husak's definition of (criminally culpable) willful ignorance is as follows:

> "… a defendant is willfully blind of an incriminating proposition of fact p when he is suspicious that p is true, fails to pursue reliable, quick, and ordinary measures that would enable him to learn the truth of p, and, finally, has a conscious desire to remain ignorant of p to avoid blame or liability in the event the truth emerges."[51]

According to the basic model, willful ignorance in this case is just as inculpatory as full knowledge, because "omitting inquiry manifests precisely the same degree of disregard for others' interests as manifested in knowingly acting criminally".[52] In turn, Sarch's examination of this doxastic state claims that willful ignorance involves a sufficiently serious suspicion of *p* and a deliberate failure to take steps to inform oneself about *p*.[53] Sarch also refers to the "quality of will theory" to understand the moral and criminal culpability of what I call strong voluntary ignorance. This theory holds that one is morally culpable for an action to the extent that it manifests ill-will, in the sense of insufficient consideration of the moral reasons for acting as one does. In addition, Sarch mentions two different tests for assessing the culpability of willful ignorance. The first, which Sarch prefers, is the "duty-based test" and links the culpability of willful ignorance to a breach of the duty to inform oneself without sound justification. The second is the "counterfactual test" and says that "willfully ignorant actor is as culpable as a knowing wrongdoer iff she'd act the same way even with full knowledge".[54] While the counterfactual test may be appropriate for moral evaluation, it is problematic in legal contexts because, as Sarch points out, it violates the principle that punishment should be based only on actual conduct (and not on counterfactual situations).

Realized conscious denial does not seem to differ much from willful ignorance in this respect: euphemism or successful intentionally motivated forgetting would be culpable if it helped to bring about a morally blameworthy result. However, judgment seems to be a bit more complicated when it comes

only to intended conscious denial: following legal analogies, it seems problematic to blame someone only on the basis of their intentions. On the other hand, the very act of trying to get rid of knowledge seems to be problematic in certain circumstances: the very act of deliberately trying to forget something that should be remembered (e.g., the Holocaust) seems deplorable. In fact, we often try to prevent the fading of memory by commemorating events. In effect, not only forgetting, but even failing to commemorate, sometimes seems morally wrong. One could perhaps tentatively conclude that the very act of trying to forget something that has actively contributed to moral harm is somewhat deplorable; and that it is definitely morally wrong if that forgetting would actively contribute to further moral wrongdoing.

Between voluntary ignorance and conscious denial lies epistemic negligence, which seems difficult to evaluate morally: on the one hand, it could be as deplorable as voluntary ignoring (if the agent is particularly reckless), but on the other hand, it could be more benign, as in the above case of the poisoned dog, where the owner could be held accountable for his general negligence but not for his specific malice.

Judgment becomes even more problematic when we turn to epistemic phenomena of knowledge avoidance without apparent conscious intention. At first glance, it seems that one cannot be held responsible for unconscious motivations, be they classic Freudian defense mechanisms or motivated biased belief formation. These mechanisms operate without any conscious control, whereas guilt seems to be inextricably linked to choice, which is by definition something conscious. On the other hand, if one is responsible for one's biased belief formation, then it would seem that one could also be responsible for this kind of knowledge avoidance. The argument could be purely Aristotelian – while one may not be directly responsible for one's actions in a drunken state, one can still be held responsible for getting drunk in the first place, and thus indirectly responsible for any actions taken while intoxicated.

> "Indeed, legislators also impose corrective treatments for ignorance itself, if the agent seems to be responsible for the ignorance. A drunk, for instance, pays a double penalty; for the principle is in him, since he controls whether he gets drunk, and his getting drunk causes his ignorance."[55]

However, this line of thinking may raise an interesting problem: since knowledge avoidance may often be caused by ideologies (such as the carnism mentioned in the introduction), an interesting question emerges: can people be held accountable for ignorance that is a consequence of their immersion in ideology? Since this state is not brought about by any deliberate conscious choice, it seems to be beyond moral evaluation. However, it can be argued that these individuals fail in their duty to inform themselves about

51
Douglas Husak, *Ignorance of Law. A Philosophical Inquiry*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2016, pp. 220–221.

52
Gideon Yaffe, "The Point of Mens Rea: The Case of Willful Ignorance", *Criminal Law and Philosophy* 12 (2018) 1, pp. 19–44, here p. 19, doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/s11572-016-9408-3.

53
A. Sarch, "Willful Ignorance in Law and Morality", p. 2.

54
Ibid., p. 8.

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Cf. Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, transl. by Terence Irwin, Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 1999, 1113b, p. 38.

their surroundings, the functioning of their societies, morals and customs, the political apparatus, and so on. For example, Aquinas was convinced that people who "lack knowledge of those things that one has a natural aptitude to know"[56] can be held accountable for their ignorance, and the "duty to be informed" is also one of the core duties of a citizen in a modern democracy.[57] However, the moral seriousness of failing to fulfill this duty can be seen as dependent on other circumstances, and it is only in fully democratic states where citizens are encouraged to be and remain informed that it becomes a dereliction. In other words, following Lynch's analysis of willful ignorance, we can say that failure to inform is no longer problematic if obtaining knowledge is too dangerous or demanding for an individual.[58] Specifically, we can say that being uninformed in an authoritarian state is less morally problematic than remaining ignorant under a functioning democratic constitution.

So far we have only examined the negative moral consequences of active ignorance. In light of our previous section, however, it is not difficult to see that active ignorance could also be morally praiseworthy. As we have seen, voluntary ignorance can be seen as a disciplinary device or an information management strategy, and thus could even be a virtuous character trait. Indeed, in some cases voluntary ignorance seems to amount to a duty: as an examiner of national philosophy exams, I am obliged to remain ignorant of the authors of the essays I am grading. The same, of course, applies to blind reviewers, members of various juries, and anyone else involved in an impartial evaluation in which knowledge of certain facts might adversely affect the impartiality of one's decision. Moreover, individuals also seem to have a right to remain ignorant: DeNicola reminds us of the *Declaration on the Rights of the Patient*, which states that individuals have the right not to be informed about their medical condition unless that information is essential to protect another person's life.[59] If I suspect that I have incurable cancer and fear that this information will ruin the days I have left, I have the right to ask my doctor not to tell me the results of the medical examination.

Where there is one person's right, there is usually another person's duty, and so it seems that not only do we have the right to remain ignorant, but in certain cases we also have a duty to respect people's wishes to remain ignorant. Indeed, it seems that in those cases where ignorance is not harmful to others, we have a duty to allow individuals to decide for themselves whether they want to come into contact with information such as "graphic content". In addition, we have a duty to ask parents of minors whether they want their children to be exposed to information that may be considered sensitive. In any case, we have a duty to protect children from potential psychological harm that may result from exposure to distressing information. However, we walk a fine line in discussing the right to remain ignorant and the corresponding duty to respect an individual's wish to avoid knowledge: stepping out of an ideologically constructed cocoon of information is in itself a disturbing and unpleasant experience, which is often one of the reasons why we choose to remain ignorant; if we were to claim that we have a right to remain ignorant because we have a right not to be hurt by what ideology has taught us is "inappropriate content", then by respecting that right we are ideological to the core, since we are helping to perpetuate the problematic value system. Thus it seems necessary to add that our right to remain ignorant may be overridden if there is a substantial risk that our ignorance will result in the perpetuation of injustice or the suffering of third parties.

Given the complexity of the doxastic states associated with ignorance, it is not surprising that their moral consequences are manifold. As noted above, the present concluding sketch was only intended to scratch the surface of this rich environment. Hopefully, however, the preceding sections will provide a canvas for later, more elaborate work.[60]

Tomaž Grušovnik

Izbjegavanje znanja – konzistentnost, taksonomija i etiologija

Sažetak

Često je prepreka napretku znanja naša nevoljkost da prihvatimo nove ideje. Aktivna ignorantnost, stoga, također igra važnu ulogu u neetičnom ponašanju. Ipak, unatoč tome što je široko prepoznato kao glavni čimbenik moralnog prijestupa unutar čitavog spektra etičnosti, izbjegavanje znanja suočava se s nedostatkom jasnoće u pogledu točne prirode i obilježja epistemičkih pojava koje obuhvaća. Prvo, te se pojave čine kontradiktornima s obzirom na to da izbjegavanje obično zahtijeva znanje o onome što se izbjegava, pa se stoga čini da je izbjegavanje znanja nemoguće. Drugo, čini se da je izbjegavanje znanja krovni termin koji obuhvaća različita doksastička stanja. I treće, razlozi i motivacije za izbjegavanje znanja čini se da obuhvaćaju biološke čimbenike, kao i ontološke i psihološke aspekte. Oslanjajući se na tradicionalnu i suvremenu filozofsku literaturu, ovaj rad ima za cilj rasvijetliti sva ta lica izbjegavanja znanja istražujući probleme povezane s njegovom konzistencijom, taksonomijom i etiologijom. Članak stvar zaključuje ispitivanjem moralnih dimenzija tih pojava. Istražuje se problem odgovornosti i krivnje, čak i moguće koristi izbjegavanja znanja.

Ključne riječi

izbjegavanje znanja, voljna ignorantnost, denijalizam, oblikovanje pristranog vjerovanja, krivica

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Th. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I–II, Q. 76, a. 2.

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In Proclamation 3786, U. S. President Lyndon B. Johnson declared this duty: "Our citizens […] must also seek to refresh and improve their knowledge of how our government operates under the Constitution and how they can participate in it. Only in this way can they assume the full responsibilities of citizenship and make our government more truly of, by, and for the people." – *Code of Federal Regulations: 1967 Compilation of Title 3 – The President*, US Government Printing Office, Washington D.C. 1968, p. 53.

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Cf. K. Lynch, "Willful ignorance and self-deception".

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D. R. DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance*, p. 106.

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Tomaž Grušovnik

Wissensvermeidung – Konsistenz, Taxonomie und Ätiologie

Zusammenfassung

Oftmals ist die größte Hürde für den Aufstieg des Wissens unsere Abneigung, neue Ideen anzunehmen. Aktive Ignoranz spielt daher ebenfalls eine gewichtige Rolle im unethischen Verhalten. Doch obzwar Wissensvermeidung weithin als wesentlicher Faktor für moralisches Fehlverhalten über das gesamte ethische Spektrum hinweg anerkannt ist, leidet sie unter einem Mangel an Klarheit hinsichtlich der genauen Natur und Eigenschaften der epistemischen Phänomene, die sie umgreift. Erstens scheinen diese Phänomene widersprüchlich zu sein, da Vermeidung üblicherweise Wissen über das zu Vermeidende voraussetzt – und somit erscheint die Vermeidung von Wissen als undenkbar. Zweitens scheint Wissensvermeidung ein Oberbegriff zu sein, der eine Vielzahl differenter doxastischer Zustände umschließt. Und drittens scheinen die Gründe und Motivationen für die Wissensvermeidung sowohl biologische Faktoren als auch ontologische und psychologische Aspekte zu umfassen. Gestützt auf sowohl traditionelle als auch zeitgenössische philosophische Literatur setzt sich der vorliegende Beitrag zum Ziel, Licht auf all diese Facetten der Wissensvermeidung zu werfen, indem er Problemstellungen im Zusammenhang mit deren Konsistenz, Taxonomie und Ätiologie erforscht. Der Beitrag schließt mit einer Untersuchung der moralischen Dimensionen dieser Phänomene ab. Er untersucht die Problematik von Verantwortung und Schuld und beleuchtet sogar die potenziellen Vorteile der Wissensvermeidung.

Schlüsselwörter

Wissensvermeidung, vorsätzliche Ignoranz, Denialismus, voreingenommene Überzeugungsbildung, Schuld

Tomaž Grušovnik

L'évitement de la connaissance – Cohérence, taxinomie et étiologie

Résumé

Il est fréquent que l'obstacle au progrès de la connaissance réside dans notre réticence à accepter de nouvelles idées. L'ignorance active joue ainsi un rôle important dans les comportements non éthiques. Pourtant, bien que largement reconnue comme un facteur majeur de faute morale à travers le spectre éthique, l'évitement de la connaissance souffre d'un manque de clarté quant à la nature précise et aux caractéristiques des phénomènes épistémiques qu'il recouvre. Premièrement, ces phénomènes semblent contradictoires, car éviter quelque chose suppose généralement d'en avoir connaissance, rendant ainsi paradoxal l'évitement de la connaissance. Deuxièmement, l'évitement de la connaissance semble être un terme générique englobant une diversité d'états doxatiques. Troisièmement, les raisons et les motivations de cet évitement semblent inclure des facteurs biologiques, ainsi des dimensions ontologiques et psychologiques. S'appuyant sur la littérature philosophique, à la fois classique et contemporaine, cet article vise à éclairer ces différentes facettes de l'évitement de la connaissance, en abordant les problèmes liés à sa cohérence, sa taxonomie et son étiologie. Il se conclut par un examen des dimensions morales de ces phénomènes, en examinant les questions de responsabilité, de culpabilité, et même les bénéfices potentiels que pourrait comporter l'évitement de la connaissance.

Mots-clés

évitement de la connaissance, ignorance volontaire, négationnisme, formation biaisée des croyances, culpabilité