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AVOIDING KNOWLEDGE: TAXONOMY, CONSISTENCY, AND ETIOLOGY

I. Instead of an introduction: Adam on a diet

Imagine Adam refusing to take the apple offered by Eve with a reply: “Thanks darling, but I’ll pass this one. I’m not interested in what it has to reveal, I like having things the way they are.” Such a scenario would perhaps not be much different from Plato’s Allegory of the cave where captives are reluctant to step out of their comfort zone and embark on a rather painful quest for knowledge. Indeed, it seems that Aristotle’s first sentence of *Metaphysics*, announcing the universal curiosity of humankind, has to be complemented by our desire to remain ignorant. We are not only “philosophers” in love with wisdom, but also “sophophobes” fearful and weary of knowledge, especially if we suspect that the truth might shatter our world. Drawing from different sources, Selene Arfini and Lorenzo Magnani thus claim that “Various 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

Many problems associated with communication are thus not at all related to lack of appropriate information or supposed complexity of ideas that are hard to understand. On the contrary, the obstacle to the advancement of knowledge is often our reluctance to accept new ideas. This might especially be the case in ethics: as Michele Moody-Adams points out, it often seems that “the principal barrier to moral progress in beliefs is not ignorance of a

¹ Selene Arfini and Lorenzo Magnani, “Embodied Irrationality? Knowledge Avoidance, Willful Ignorance, and the Paradox of Autonomy”, *Frontiers in Psychology* 12, 769591, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.769591, p. 1.

revolutionary new moral idea, but affected ignorance of what can, and should, already be known.”² Consider, for example, the following testimony of a Vietnam war veteran:

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 war literature, and emotional, cultural as well as physical distancing from the “target” to raise the “shooting rate” is considered a core psychological strategy in training 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

We would make a grave mistake if we would think that the atrocities committed in war are due to a simple lack of information. Indeed, if ignorance is a part of war crimes, then this ignorance is often motivated.

Wars are, to be sure, not the only areas of human moral life where we deal with motivated lack of knowledge. In environmental ethics denialism and willful ignorance play central roles in public nonresponse to climate change or other pollution-related issues.⁵ Here, the “Information deficit model,” according to which “information is the limiting factor” in the

² Michele Moody-Adams, “The Idea of Moral Progress”, *Metaphilosophy* 30 (1999) 3, pp. 168-185, doi: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24439208>.

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 August 26, 2021), 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, and Karen Syse Lykke (Eds.), *Environmental and Animal Abuse Denial: Averting OurGaze*. Lexington, Lanham, 2020.

public response to climate change issues, seems to be flawed as well.⁶ Similarly, the Animal-Industrial Complex is claimed to be powered by “carnism,” an ideology that enables industrial meat production and, according to Joy, relies on invisibility, reflecting “... the defenses *avoidance* and *denial*.”⁷

Even though knowledge avoidance is widely recognized as one of the most important factors of moral abuse across the ethical spectrum, it is nonetheless plagued with a lack of clarity regarding the precise nature and distinctive features of epistemic phenomena associated with it. A plethora of names is linked to doxastic attitudes or positions toward a proposition associated with ignorance, confirming Michael J. Smithson’s point that “One difficulty plaguing ‘ignorance’ is that the scattered literature on the topic lacks an agreed-on nomenclature.”⁸ Thus it is not clear how “denialism,” “willful ignorance,” “self-deception,” and “epistemic vices” relate to and differ from each other. Indeed, even for “willful ignorance” there seem to be several synonyms, including “deliberate,” “active,” “strategic,” “contrived,” “intentional,” “voluntary ignorance,” and “willful blindness.” Moreover, idioms such as “turning a blind eye,” “burying your head in the sand,” “averting your gaze,” “living a lie,” and others⁹ commonly surface as descriptors of avoidance of knowledge. This richness of expression may indeed indicate that doxastic states associated with intentional ignorance are a well-known and regular feature in our lives. However, it also obstructs our understanding of the issues at hand by covering up important differences between diverse epistemic phenomena.

The first and the central part of the present paper thus aims to analyze the basic structure of epistemic phenomena related to knowledge avoidance: it tries to draw at least provisional lines between voluntary ignorance, denialism, and some other states that can be associated with active ignorance. This examination will at the same time also pave the way

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 Michael J. Smithson, “Social Theories of Ignorance.” In Robert N. Proctor & Londa Schiebinger (eds.), *Agnology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp. 209–229 (2008), p. 209

⁹ 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.

for the second part which addresses one of the most pressing issues related to doxastic attitudes connected with our quest for ignorance: their purportedly paradoxical character. Indeed, willful ignoring seems to be logically inconsistent, since it simultaneously presupposes knowing and not knowing. If namely willing presupposes knowing what I want and if knowledge excludes ignorance, then the epistemic phenomenon seems to be contradictory. As we shall see, this problem generated interesting literature in connection with self-deception. The third part of the paper will be dedicated to the etiology of examined epistemic phenomena, briefly touching upon causes or reasons for motivated ignoring and connecting them to ethical reflections in the concluding section.

II. TAXONOMY OF ACTIVE IGNORANCE

The term “knowledge avoidance” is closely related to Stanley Cavell’s writings on Shakespeare, tragedy, ethics, and Wittgenstein. Traditional philosophical skepticism was, for instance, seen by Cavell not as a consequence of our epistemic deficiency, but as 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.”¹⁰ However, as exposed in the introduction, this term likely covers a variety of epistemic phenomena and lacks an agreed-on definition. Here I would like to provisionally describe it as an effort to be ignorant, mirroring Shoshana Felman’s definition of “active ignorance,” emphasizing that ignorance should not be viewed as a mere want 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.”¹¹ As we will see shortly, this avoidance has at least three parameters: (un)consciousness of epistemic agent’s intent, knowledge of avoided proposition that p (agent may or may not be familiar with the knowledge that she is avoiding), and activity vs. passivity in the context of the epistemic activity.

But before we proceed it is worth noting three things: firstly, what I offer may not be a comprehensive taxonomy in the sense that it covers all possible instances of avoidance of knowledge. On the contrary, it wants to leave the door open for potential later additions of

¹⁰ Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason – Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979, p. 493.

¹¹ Shoshana Felman, *Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable*. *Yale French Studies*, No. 63, pp. 29-30.

other epistemic states or a more nuanced analysis of the presented categories. Secondly, a taxonomy of “deliberate” ignorance was recently proposed by Ralph Hertwig and Christoph Engel.¹² However, they base their taxonomy on a list of causes – or reasons and purposes – why we ignore information, and not on the structural features of these epistemic states. While I think their reflections are indispensable, I do prefer to call that part of analysis “etiology” and not “taxonomy.” That is to say, I understand taxonomy to be the anatomy or constitution of doxastic states. Thirdly, later Wittgenstein showed us that it is often futile to look for strict definitions of words that are used in natural language: indeed, items that can be subsumed under the concept of “game” do not necessarily all share one essential feature but are related through “family resemblances.”¹³ The same could be true for the avoidance of knowledge, and thus it makes sense to be a bit wary of classifications and taxonomies in this area since they may uncouple phenomena from their contexts and sacrifice their richness.¹⁴ Indeed, as it will become clear, concrete epistemic situations are often a mixture of two or more doxastic states and we would do them harm if we were to uncouple them from their natural complexity. Nonetheless, this does not imply that categorizations are not useful even if they are never able to capture the diversity of phenomena: for instance, it makes perfect sense to distinguish between individual and collective games or between the board and ball games, even if there is no such thing as the essential component of a game and even if the borders of different categories remain porous. Keeping all these considerations in mind let us finally turn to the proposed taxonomy of doxastic attitudes related to deliberate ignorance.

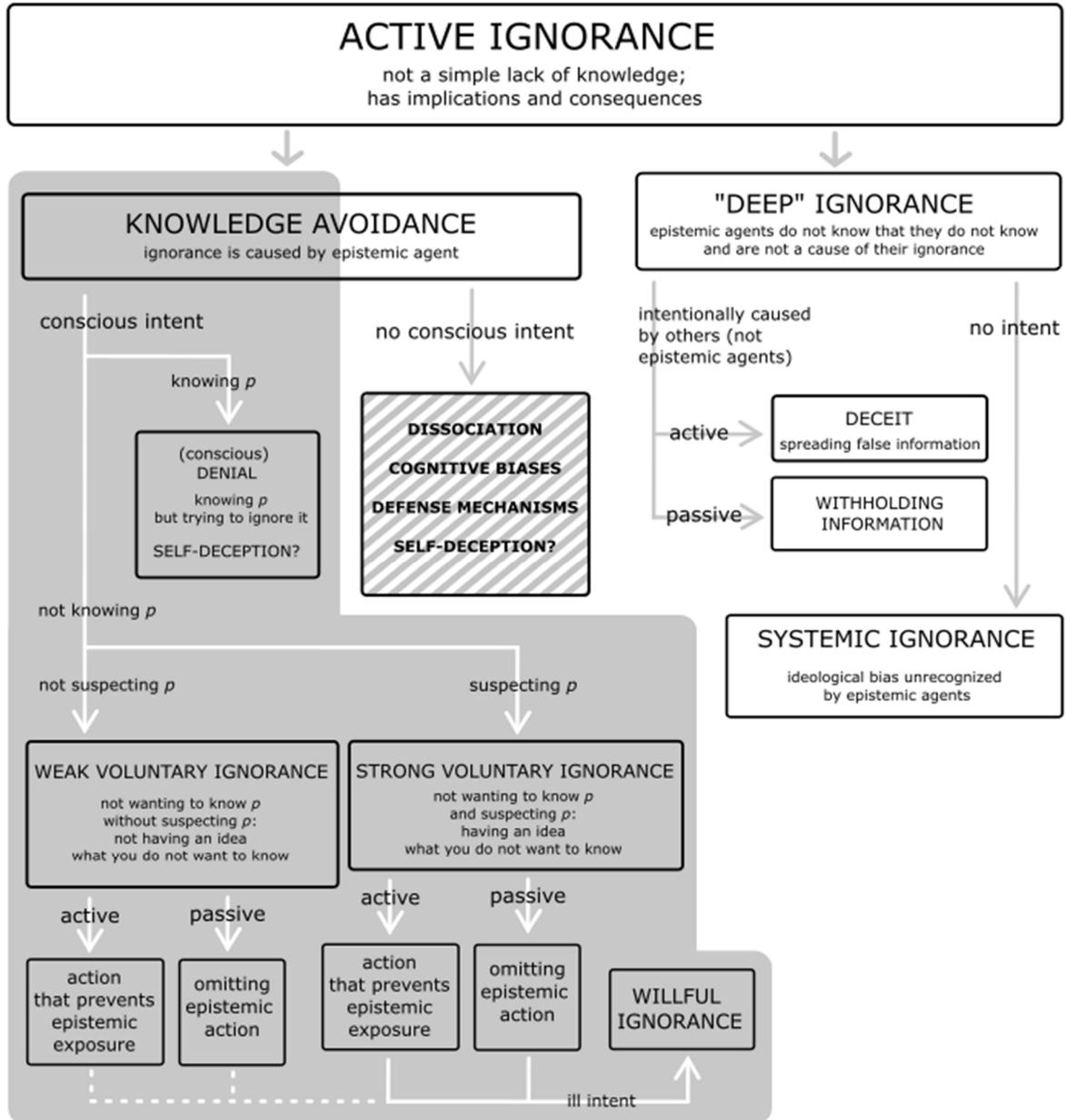
To have a clearer picture of the proposed analysis, let us look at the map of what I will refer to as “active” ignorance.

¹² “Homo Ignorans: Deliberately Choosing Not to Know.” In Ralph Hertwig & Christoph Engel (eds.), *Deliberate Ignorance: Choosing Not to Know*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2021.

¹³ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (tr. Gertrude E. M. Anscombe). Oxford: Blackwell, 1958, §§ 67-68, pp. 30e-31e.

¹⁴ Cf. Smithson, “Social Theories of Ignorance,” p. 211; for a similar point about lists of fallacies that are artificially applied to natural languages in critical discourse analysis, see Igor Ž. Žagar, *Four Critical Essays on Argumentation*. Ljubljana; Pedagoški inštitut, 2021, pp. 37-66.

Figure 1: Map of active ignorance



What I call “active” ignorance is a bit different from Felman’s definition¹⁵ and could also be called “effective” ignorance in the sense that it has a considerable impact on our lives. It seems that this understanding resembles Daniel DeNicola’s description of ignorance as a cluster of distinctive states and not a mere lack of knowledge: “... ignorance, *not-knowing*, may be manifested as a distinctive mental state, or more accurately, a cluster of related states. This means that the concept has discernible content; it is more than absence or negation; its negativity may be substantive ... In short, the negativity possessed by the concept of ignorance is not emptiness.”¹⁶

II.1 “Deep” ignorance: deceit, withholding information, and systemic ignorance

The first major difference between epistemic phenomena in the area of active ignorance is between knowledge avoidance and something that could perhaps be called “deep” ignorance.¹⁷ The latter term describes all those states where ignorance is effective (and in two cases – deceit and withholding of information – also explicitly intentionally caused) but where it cannot be said that epistemic agents are aware of it. The existence of the ignored proposition *p* is thus beyond the grasp of “deeply ignorant” individuals and they cannot be said to “know” it in any meaningful – even if only “unconscious” – way. To put it simply: we can say that in a deeply ignorant state one does not even know that one is ignorant, pointing to the fact that “below some threshold, ignorance does not recognize itself.”¹⁸ Indeed, it is worth noting that describing someone as “deeply” ignorant makes sense only from a meta-perspective, since “*it requires knowledge to identify ignorance.*”¹⁹ In other words: the fact that I am deeply ignorant can be acknowledged only by an external observer that has both, knowledge of *p* as well as knowledge of my ignorance of *p*. The moment the ignorant agent would try to describe herself as deeply ignorant, she would namely cease to be in that state, since she would then already know that she does not know *p*.

¹⁵ In the present taxonomy “avoidance of knowledge” namely seems to cover Felman’s term.

¹⁶ Daniel R. DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Do Not Know*. MIT Press, Cambridge/MA, 2017, p. 18.

¹⁷ Deep ignorance is caused “meta-ignorance.” Meta-ignorance (“not knowing that we don’t know”) is a term used by Smithson and it stands in opposition to “conscious ignorance” (“knowing that we don’t know”). Cf.: Smithson, “Social Theories of Ignorance,” p. 210.

¹⁸ DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance*, p. 6.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 20. Emphasis in original.

Obvious cases of intentionally caused deep ignorance include either active manipulation²⁰ or passive silence²¹ about important information. What is crucial here is, however, that the deceived epistemic agents are not aware that they have been lied to (or that important data are not being shared with them), even though their biases might help the deceivers accomplish their goals. This means that deep ignorance may tie in well with active forms of knowledge avoidance, implying that specific situations could be mixtures of both, deep ignorance as well as avoidance. The second form of deep ignorance is “systemic” ignorance: examples can include collective blindness that is structurally caused by dominating ideologies, from speciesism (that makes us overlook similarities between humans and animals) to sexism (that makes us imperceptible to gender-related inequalities). The important difference between systemic ignorance and deceit or withholding of information is that the first is not intentionally caused by human agents. It would be undoubtedly interesting to examine the notion of “agency” involved in self-propagating systemic ignorance, but this lies well beyond the scope of the present analysis.

II.2 Knowledge avoidance

In contrast to deep ignorance, knowledge avoidance presupposes the explicit endeavor of epistemic agents that want to become or remain ignorant. Subjects can either have conscious awareness of this or they may be unaware of it.

II.2.1 Knowledge avoidance without conscious intent

²⁰ One recent candidate among many is false informing about the progress in Afghanistan war (with the presupposition that the public believed it). Cf.: Craig Whitlock, »At War With The Truth«, *The Washington Post*, 9.12.2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>, accessed 29.3.2022.

²¹ Practical example includes covering up the consequences of nuclear tests in Polynesia: »Moruroa Files: Investigation into French nuclear test in the Pacific«, <https://moruroa-files.org/en/investigation/moruroa-files>, accessed 30.9.2021.

Later cases in which epistemic agents avoid knowledge without conscious effort entail epistemic phenomena such as dissociation,²² cognitive biases, and likely also self-deception. It should be emphasized that in dissociation intentional effort to avoid information could be a part of cognitive subsystems but that the epistemic subject as an individual person is not aware of it (and that it is in this sense that it is not “conscious”). Dividing the cognition into parallel and relatively independent subsystems is, as we will see in the second part, advocated by the “split mind approach,” featuring prominently as a theory in self-deception explanations. Because of this self-deception is partially included in the “no conscious intent” category. Freudian notions of *Verneinung* (“negation”)²³ and *Verleugnung* (“disavowal”) can also be viewed as a 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 intent to avoid the information. Other psychoanalytic defense mechanisms, including rationalization, projection, and repression, can similarly be viewed as an unconscious active avoidance of knowledge.

However, not all instances of knowledge avoidance presuppose counter-intuitive theories such as the mentioned split mind approach that has to explain simultaneous knowing and not knowing. These are, to be sure, problematic for many thinkers, including already Jean-Paul Sartre (see below) as well as Alfred Mele who more recently called them “mental exotica,”²⁴ and this is why avoidance of knowledge without conscious intent appears on the map in a box with linear pattern emphasizing its rather controversial features. Indeed, knowledge avoidance can also be a rather straightforward conscious process, speaking to the fact that doxastic states connected with effective ignorance exhibit rich diversity. The present paper focuses precisely on these states (highlighted in gray on the map) that seem to be partially neglected in the rich philosophical literature on the topic of denial and ignorance, or at least not well differentiated from nonintentional or unconscious ones which, if nothing else, seem to differ in their moral gravity.

II.2.2 Knowledge avoidance with conscious intent

²² For definition and discussion of alternative conceptualizations see Ellert R. S. Nijenhuis and Onno van der Hart, Dissociation in Trauma: A New Definition and Comparison with Previous Formulations, *Journal of Trauma & Dissociation*, 12, pp. 416-445, 2011.

²³ Sigmund Freud, “Negation,” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (tr. James Strachey and Anna Freud), vol. 19: *The Ego and the Id and Other Works* (235-239). London: Hogarth Press, 1971.

²⁴ Alfred R. Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, p.4.

The main structural division between intentional states of knowledge avoidance is related to their epistemological status: on the one side of the map we thus have (conscious) denial which presupposes the agent's acquaintance with the proposition p , differing clearly from those states positioned on the other side of the map where the agent does not (yet) know p . Indeed, as Stanley Cohen remarks, "In order to use the term 'denial' to describe a person's statement 'I didn't know', one has to assume that she knew or knows about what it is that she claims not to know – otherwise the term 'denial' is inappropriate. Strictly speaking, this is the *only* legitimate use of the term 'denial'."²⁵ Returning to the opening case of Adam and his intentional ignorance, the difference between these states can be described as the difference between Adam that refuses to take the apple, and Adam that already ate from the forbidden fruit but now wants to get rid of the unwelcome consequences of his actions. As we can quickly see, the difference between the two Adams is important and certainly connected with their epistemic behavior: if the voluntarily ignorant Adam can still rest at ease, the Adam in denial jumps from one rationalizing strategy to another in his attempt at getting rid of the acquired troublesome knowledge.

II.2.2.1 Conscious denial

Concrete cases of conscious denial often entail euphemizing: the list of such instances is long, from infamous "collateral damage" in war to calling lab animals "models." One interesting more recent case was renaming barbed wire that was set up on the southern Slovenian border to stop migrants and refugees from crossing the border as a "technical obstacle."²⁶ As indicated, conscious denial may be a rather unstable state, and the agent's effort to deny p may indeed be successful, whereby such an epistemic action likely entails motivated forgetting.

Needless to say, a lot of attention has been dedicated to "denialism," from Anna Freud's writings²⁷ to Eviatar Zerubavel's more sociological take on the subject and Stanley

²⁵ Cohen, *States of Denial*, p. 5-6. Emphasis in original.

²⁶ Vlado Miheljak, »Koliko imen premore ograja? (Tehnične ovire najprej v glavi, nato na meji), *Mladina*, 13.11.2015, <https://www.mladina.si/170709/koliko-imen-premore-ograjaj/>, accessed 1.4.2022.

²⁷ Cf. Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, London: Carnac Books, 1966.

Cohen's admirable analysis²⁸ of the epistemic phenomenon. Sometimes the epistemic phenomenon is understood as potentially both, a conscious as well as an unconscious state: in such cases, its unconscious forms are often recognized as psychological defense mechanisms.

Another form of knowledge avoidance that entails knowledge of p and conscious intent may be self-deception. Since the nature of the concept is highly disputed,²⁹ I am leaving its categorization open with the awareness that the self-deceptive states may also exhibit internal diversity, thus making it hard to subsume the phenomena under one single category.

II.2.2.2 Weak and strong voluntary ignorance

Zooming in on intentional varieties of knowledge avoidance without actual knowledge of p we finally arrive at voluntary, deliberate, willful, strategic, or intentional ignorance – as mentioned in the introduction, there are namely many adjectives used to describe slightly different forms of what I am calling “voluntary” ignorance. I am choosing the adjective “voluntary” because it has by far the longest history going back to Thomas Aquinas and his still relevant analysis of *ignorantia voluntaria*.³⁰ However, as we will quickly see, what Aquinas had in mind under “voluntary” ignorance is in contemporary English legal and moral debates called “willful” (sometimes “wilful”) ignorance. In short, voluntary ignorance describes doxastic states where the epistemic agent avoids knowledge of proposition p without actually knowing it.

²⁸ 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 Cohen, *States of Denial*, pp. 1-20.

²⁹ Ian Deweese-Boyd provides a good overview of the debate about the nature of self-deception in "Self-Deception", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/self-deception/>, accessed 1.4.2022.

³⁰ Aquinas considers ignorance as the cause of the sin in the first part of the second part of *Summa*, specifically in 76. question, subdivided into four articles: 1) whether ignorance can be considered as a cause of sin; 2) whether ignorance is a sin; 3) whether ignorance excuses from sin; and 4) whether ignorance diminishes sin. His standard example of voluntary ignorance is the following: “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* (tr. Laurence Shapcote, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón), Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012, I-II, Q. 76, a. 4, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I-II>, accessed 2.4.2022.

The basic difference between different species of voluntary ignorance is bound up with the agent's potential suspicion of p . Some theorists think that warranted suspicion that p (having a well-grounded idea about the contents of the avoided proposition p) is necessary for voluntary ignorance³¹ while others dismiss this and think that not even an agent's awareness of being voluntarily ignorant is a prerequisite for this epistemic phenomenon.³² While excluding the agent's awareness could be too wide of a definition, covering all sorts of different forms of active ignorance, including even deep ignorance,³³ the demand that suspicion is a necessary condition for voluntary ignorance leaves out some interesting cases. The ones excluded are those where agents in principle refuse contact with knowledge: according to this account, for instance, someone that categorically does not want to listen to WWII stories and has no suspicion of Slovenian extrajudicial executions cannot be said to be voluntarily ignorant of them. Several cases of what I think should rightfully count as voluntary ignoring would thus not be included in the definition, including the extent and peculiarities of environmental degradation as well as harsh realities of the animal slaughtering process: imagine someone categorically refusing to listen to animal rights activists and thus missing out on information about the staggering number of animals slaughtered for food

³¹ Kevin Lynch, "Willful ignorance and self-deception," *Philosophical Studies* (2016), nr. 173, p. 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 talks about "willful", not "voluntary" ignorance – I will return to the proposed distinction between both later; here it suffices to say that for me willful ignorance presents special case of voluntary ignoring.

³² Jan Willem Wieland, "Willful Ignorance," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* (2017), vol. 20, p. 116. Wieland also uses the term "willful" ignorance but his definition seems to encompass what I – for the reasons given below – call "voluntary ignoring."

³³ When Wieland says that "one may be fully unaware that one is willfully ignorant," (p. 116) he perhaps means that "one can be fully unaware of what one is voluntarily ignorant." There is, namely, an important difference between "being unaware that one is ignorant" and "being unaware of what one is ignorant": while the latter case represents "weak voluntary ignorance" (see below), the first case is significant for forms of active knowledge avoidance without conscious intent (as described above) where the ascription of voluntariness becomes problematic.

annually; even though such a person would have no idea and thus no suspicion that the number is more than 70 billion individual animals,³⁴ it still makes some sense to say that they are voluntarily ignorant of the scale of meat production.

Perhaps one difficulty plaguing suspicion precondition is the vagueness of the term “suspicion.” Namely, it is not very clear what exactly should count as the “suspicion” in the above case of extrajudicial executions: would “having a feeling that something bad happened in WWII” already count, or should we aim for something stronger? Is “People may have been killed unjustly” enough or should we only consider suspicions like “Perhaps there was a lot of revenge and ideological violence in 1945 in Slovenia.” Because of these difficulties, I opt for a wider definition of voluntary ignorance, reserving the suspicion precondition only for the most reprehensible and legally culpable cases of willful ignorance. The distinction between suspecting p and not having the slightest idea about what is avoided thus does seem to be important at least in assessing the moral gravity of voluntary ignoring. Because of this I – for the lack of better words – propose calling voluntary ignorance without suspicion p “weak,” while the “strong” variety represents those cases where voluntarily ignorant epistemic agents can be said to have a reasonably strong suspicion that p .

II.2.2.1.1 Willful ignorance

As can be seen in the map, the “willful ignorance” represents a special variety of voluntary ignorance: I’m following Lynch’s intuition here that the adjective “willful” carries with it a pejorative connotation, and thus demand something like an “ill intent” of voluntary ignorance to consider it as “willful.” Only ill intent may, however, not be enough for an epistemic state to qualify as a culpable instance of willful ignorance. As we have seen, Lynch adds other preconditions, including knowledge that performing a not too difficult and dangerous action would disclose 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

³⁴ Cf. Our World in Data, “Yearly number of animals slaughtered for meat, World, 1961-2018,” <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/animals-slaughtered-for-meat>, accessed 15. 4. 2022.

³⁵ Alexander Sarch, “Willful Ignorance in law and morality,” *Philosophy Compass*, 2018, 13, <https://doi.org/10.1111/phc3.12490>, p. 4.

from obtaining more information about p that would establish whether p is true,”³⁶ before declaring them willfully ignorant, which is lastly the reason why I am discerning between “active” and “passive” voluntary ignoring. “Active” voluntary ignorance thus necessitates an action from the epistemic agent that prevents knowledge of p to arise while “passive” does not have such a requirement. Returning to the initial example of Adam: if Adam simply refuses to take the apple, then we could consider him as only passively voluntarily ignorant; however, if Adam were to actively avoid Eve, hiding perhaps in some remote corner of the garden and running away at the slightest sighting of her, then we could consider him actively voluntarily ignorant. Real-life examples include refusing to look in the mailbox for fear of spotting an unwanted letter (passive) or intentionally deleting one’s surname from the mailbox in order not to be able to receive the mail in the first place (active). Of course, the difference between “passive” and “active” is sometimes tricky to describe, because one type of action can be seen as the inaction of some other type. For instance, “turning a blind eye” could be understood either as active (“averting the gaze”) or as inaction (“blindness”). This points to the fact that specific differences between weak and strong voluntary ignorance are highly sensitive to the context.

As mentioned above, taxonomies of ignorance can be many, many can follow different criteria of division, and many can be useful for specific purposes. Keeping this in mind the proposed map does not aim to become an exclusive typology; rather, it tries to organize doxastic states bound up with active ignorance according to their epistemic structural features, offering an insight into their complexity as well as providing an independent reference point for other similar classifications.

III. CONSISTENCY OF KNOWLEDGE AVOIDANCE

Undoubtedly the most pressing issue surrounding epistemic phenomena related to avoidance of knowledge is their logical inconsistency. In short: how is it possible to know and not to 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, as soon as I avoid something, I must know what I am avoiding if I want to be successful in circumnavigating it; but if I know what I am avoiding, then by definition I cannot remain

³⁶ Ibid.

ignorant about this knowledge; and since knowledge and ignorance mutually exclude each other, it seems that “knowledge avoidance” is an impossible undertaking.

Following Alfred Mele’s approach,³⁷ it makes sense to view the problem of inconsistency of voluntary knowledge avoidance as two related, albeit different paradoxes: the first one can be called “static” and the other “dynamic puzzle.”

a) *Static puzzle*

The static puzzle or paradox is related to the idea that an intentionally ignorant person must have and not have a belief p at the same time.³⁸ Let’s take the example of our Adam: to be voluntarily ignorant he must at the same time know what the knowledge resulting from the consummation of the forbidden fruit will bring and not know it. That is, the epistemic diet demands from Adam that he is already aware of his nakedness to willingly protect himself from the knowledge of wearing no clothes.

b) *Dynamic puzzle*

The dynamic paradox is similar to the static only that it refers to the willing what one is supposed not to know: it namely seems that volition already presupposes the knowledge of what is willed and so willing not to know seems to be an oxymoron. The diet thus impossibly demands that Adam chooses with full awareness what he is supposed not to know. It seems impossible to imagine Adam voluntarily choosing to remain ignorant since this already presupposes that he knows what will be revealed after he consumes the fruit – but if he knows this, then he is precisely not ignorant. On the contrary, it seems that Adam’s avoidance of the thought of being naked already presupposes his intimate awareness of it.

Needless to say, these difficulties have to be addressed to retain knowledge avoidance as a useful explanatory tool. However, as we will quickly see with the help of the analysis in the previous section, the puzzles do not apply to the majority of the doxastic states

³⁷ Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001.

³⁸ Mele (cf. Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 6-7) defines the puzzle as consisting of an individual simultaneously holding contradictory beliefs $p \& \neg p$. However, for knowledge avoidance the case is a little bit different. Here the paradox is not necessarily about holding contradictory beliefs but about having contradictory epistemic states: it demands from a person to have and not have a belief that p (and not to have $p \& \neg p$). This can be clearly seen in our Adam case: in order to be voluntarily ignorant, Adam does not have to have $p \& \neg p$ (“I am naked” and “I am not naked”); it is enough to have p (think “I am naked”) and not have p (not thinking anything about his nakedness). In other words: there is a difference between having $\neg p$ (I am not naked) and not having p (not knowing anything about one's nakedness). One interesting consequence of this is that a person may be in contradictory epistemic states without necessarily having contradictory beliefs.

connected with active ignorance. As already mentioned, the problem applies more or less only to the states listed in the patterned box since they indeed demand that epistemic agents simultaneously have conflicting states of mind. This, however, is not the case either in deep ignorance or in conscious knowledge avoidance. Let's take a closer look at this claim.

Deep ignorance does not suffer from this problem, since it is wholly consistent to say that one does not know what one does not know. Looking at the "conscious knowledge avoidance" part of the map it also seems that the states there are consistent: it doesn't seem to be contradictory to imagine someone trying to get rid of proposition p : for instance, it makes perfect sense to say that I'm trying to forget about my worries and fall asleep. Voluntary ignorance, however, may pose a more serious problem: here one indeed has to have a contradictory intention of avoiding what one does not want to know, or at least so it seems. The truth is that this intention may again not be as contradictory as it looks at the first sight. It can be viewed as a simple instance of knowledge of one's ignorance that wants to be preserved. There is nothing inconsistent in saying that one does not know exactly how many exoplanets there are in our universe nor that one is ignorant about the contents of the letter on the table, and thus there is also nothing inconsistent about voluntarily remaining in these states.

It is even possible to graphically represent our ignorance: DeNicola gives an example of an ancient map, "a wondrous image of the interplay of knowledge and ignorance,"³⁹ that displays both *Oikumene* – the inhabited and known world – as well as *Terra Incognita*. Indeed: "The first and fundamental act of reason ... is the drawing of the line ... our knowledge is bounded by ignorance."⁴⁰ Perhaps the illusion of inconsistency of voluntary ignorance arises because deep and "shallow" ignorance are not sufficiently differentiated. When hearing the word "ignorance" we may spontaneously think about a complete lack of knowledge, together with the lack of awareness of this lack. Precisely because of this confusion it is vital to understand that doxastic states connected with ignorance seem to be much more diverse than those related to knowledge. One of the most basic differences thus seems to be between knowing what one does not know and not knowing one does not know.⁴¹

³⁹ DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance*, p. 65.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 65-66.

⁴¹ This difference can be traced back to the famous "Johari" window, named after psychologists Joseph Luft and Herrington Ingham who developed it in order to represent the interaction between what is known about oneself to oneself and what to others (cf. John Newstrom in Stephen Rubinfeld, "The Johari Window: A Reconceptualization", *Developments in Business Simulation & Experiential Exercises*, 1. 10 (1983)). It was

If deep and voluntary ignorance, as well as conscious denial, can be cleared of the inconsistency charge, the story with knowledge avoidance without conscious intent (patterned box on the map) becomes more complicated. These states seemingly do presuppose that an agent is and simultaneously is not aware *of the same proposition p*: self-deception, at least on traditional accounts, thus presupposes that a subject is simultaneously the deceiver (aware of *p*) and the deceived individual (unaware of *p*). The static and dynamic puzzles do apply here and one way to approach them is to follow Ian Deweese-Boyd⁴² and divide the puzzle-solving strategies into “intentional” and “revisionist.” The first strategies are more traditional and rely on the idea that these doxastic states are intentional. We can subdivide the intentional approach into two categories, temporal difference and the above-mentioned split mind.

α) Temporal difference

Our first suggestion tries to tackle the issue by saying that an intentionally ignorant individual holds and does not hold *p*, but not at the same time. Everyday examples of this epistemic phenomenon may include our efforts to get rid of unpleasant thoughts. Imagine I get a boring assignment at my faculty that I am supposed to accomplish within three months. For the first days (t_1) the thoughts of having to take care of this task are eating away at my peace of mind, and so I decide consistently not to think about it. In due time (t_2) I find myself relaxing over the weekend, spending time with family and friends, I even get bored in front of my smartphone. I have succeeded in becoming ignorant of my assignment and the psychological burden it brings with it. This case does not seem to be much different from “motivated forgetting,”⁴³ including examples of suppression of unwanted traumatic memories by victims of wars or natural catastrophes.

However, it should be clear that this attempt cannot explain away the above difficulty. Indeed, it seems to apply only to a small fraction of the doxastic states described in

infamously referred to by Donald Rumsfeld at a press conference about the lack of evidence about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq (Donald Rumsfeld, “News Transcript: DoD News Briefing – Secretary Rumsfeld and Gen. Myers, February 12, 2002, 11:30 AM EDT,” US Department of Defense, <https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>, accessed 29.6.2020.). This speech was in turn picked up by Slavoj Žižek in his analysis of the issue: Slavoj Žižek, “What Rumsfeld Doesn't Know That He Knows about Abu Ghraib,” *In These Times*, 21. 5. 2004, <https://www.lacan.com/zizekrumsfeld.htm>, accessed 29. 6. 2020.

⁴² Deweese-Boyd, “Self-Deception.” It’s worth emphasizing that Deweese-Boyd lists this strategies only in relation to self-deception.

⁴³ See Michael C. Anderson and Benjamin J. Levy, “Suppressing Unwanted Memories,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, vol. 18, no. 4, August 2009, pp. 189-194. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20696029>.

the previous section (perhaps it could be classified as successful conscious denial) and not at all to the states listed in the patterned box. Indeed, in those latter states, there seems to be no significant difference between t_1 and t_2 : in dissociative amnesia or psychoanalytic defense mechanisms, the subject by definition has concurrent thought processes that are mutually exclusive. Here the temporal difference approach clearly cannot do the job of explaining away the initial paradoxes.

β) *Split mind*

Instances of dissociative amnesia or typical defense mechanisms guide us straight to the next strategy: “psychological partitioning” or more simply “split mind.” The basic idea here 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, stating that “to deceive oneself on purpose seems to contain a contradiction.”⁴⁴ His solution to this paradox is a split between oneself and his “*inner judge*, who is thought of as another person.”⁴⁵ A more modern albeit structurally similar idea was put forth by Amelie Oxenberg-Rorty. Maintaining that a picture of a rationally integrated self makes little room for self-deception, she proposed 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.”⁴⁶ Applying this idea to doxastic states related to knowledge avoidance without conscious intent, we can say that it is possible that a person as a whole can remain ignorant of p because of 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.

The problem with this approach is that it fails while succeeding: namely, by dividing the mind, the strategy also does away with the identity of the deceived and the deceiver and

⁴⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals* (trans. and ed. Mary Gregor). Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1996, II.I. §9.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, italics in original.

⁴⁶ Amelie Oxenberg-Rorty, “The Deceptive Self: Liars and Layers,” *Analyse & Kritik*, (1985), <https://doi.org/10.1515/auk-1985-0204>, 141-161 p. 144.

thus “undermines the possibility of strict self-deception.”⁴⁷ Indeed, as Sartre famously spotted in his *Being and Nothingness*, this strategy “places me in the same relation to myself that the Other is in respect to me.”⁴⁸ What, then, does make these different parts one whole? That is, how are those seemingly independent processes tied into *one* personality? This problem is similar to the issue faced by Hume’s bundle theory of Self where it is not clear what makes different perceptions “my” perceptions, perception of one Self if there is no Self that could bind them together. Moreover, how can one process know what it has to conceal 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?”⁴⁹ Indeed, the split mind strategy may only transpose the puzzle onto the next level where it reappears without really being solved: for now, we demand that the autonomous processes are at the same time both aware and unaware of each other, we demand that they know and do not know what the contents of neighboring processes are.

Because of these problems some theoreticians endorsed alternative approaches to solving self-deception puzzles dismissing the idea of traditional intention-based strategies and their presuppositions. These can be further divided into the “deflationary” and “attitude or content adjustment” approaches. Again, we are considering them here in relation to all knowledge avoidance states without conscious intent.

γ) Deflationary approach

Deflationary approaches deny that there are unconscious intentions involved in active knowledge avoidance caused by the epistemic agent. Ignorance that results from their actions is thus explained as a consequence of motivated errors and not explicit intent.

Reflecting on the nature of self-deception, Mele thus thinks that it is wrong to understand this epistemic phenomenon based on traditional deception. According to him, self-deception phenomena can be explained with the help of “motivationally biased beliefs.”⁵⁰ This view proposes that we can be self-deceived without any explicit paradoxical intent. Take for instance the following example from Mele: Beth, the child whose father died prematurely, finds it comforting to remember instances when she was in the spotlight of her father’s

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, (tr. Hazel E. Barnes), Washington Square Press, New York, 1993, p. 51.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 52-53.

⁵⁰ Mele, *Self-Deception Unmasked*, p. 28.

attention and unpleasant to attend to memories that place a sibling in that spotlight. Accordingly, Beth will be motivated to focus on the former memories while dismissing the latter.⁵¹ Consequently, she becomes convinced that she was her father's favorite. As a result, Beth is in a state we might describe as "self-deception" without ever having an intention of deceiving herself.

It seems that some instances of active knowledge avoidance without the agent's conscious intent can be explained with this approach, but it is doubtful whether it could tackle phenomena such as dissociative amnesia. There simply seems to be too much internal psychological tension present in that state for it to be explained by something as benign as "motivated error." On the other hand, it may be premature to entirely dismiss the deflationary approach in these cases: perhaps one could indeed view the avoidance of traumatic events as motivated albeit not "intentional" in the strict sense. Mele's insights into self-deceptive states may thus prove to be relevant also for other doxastic states connected with ignorance caused by epistemic agents.

δ) Attitude or content adjustment approach

This approach tries to tackle the static puzzle, implying that actively ignorant agents who are themselves the cause of their ignorance do not simultaneously hold contradictory beliefs p and $\neg p$. Indeed, instead of holding contradictory beliefs, they could be seen as holding a belief p and (only) a suspicion that $\neg p$, or we could simply say that "a desire influenced the 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."⁵² This latter approach thus has to do with changing the agent's attitude towards p (from belief to suspicion, for instance) or with changing the contents of her belief. Indeed, this strategy might be connected with the above realization that voluntary ignoring does not presuppose that epistemic agents simultaneously hold conflicting beliefs nor that they are in conflicting states of mind.

The inconsistency problem is, as we have seen, much more problematic for doxastic states such as self-deception, defense mechanisms, and dissociative amnesia than for other versions of intentional knowledge avoidance. It might not even be problematic for "ordinary" cognitive biases which can be explained as susceptibility to motivated errors. However, it remains to be

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., p. 60.

seen how exactly the doxastic puzzles will be solved for all cases of self-deception, dissociative amnesia, and psychoanalytic defense mechanisms.

IV. ETIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE AVOIDANCE

Knowledge is often considered to be something worthy and good, so why would one choose to be ignorant? Indeed, if the famous Francis Bacon's and later Hobbes' statement *scientia potentia est* holds, does motivated ignorance imply something like epistemic masochism, a form of a self-inflicted weakness? Surprisingly or not, the answer to these questions is decisive *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."⁵³ Indeed, knowledge avoidance has a vital function in our survival and may even be a constitutive element of our awareness which has to necessarily exclude some stimuli to focus on others and thus establish itself.

However, let's try to be a bit more systematic in our representation of different origins of avoiding information. One way to sketch out a typology of reasons and causes for motivated ignorance is to differentiate between causes related to conscious intent and those that are not bound up with conscious intent (so they are either coupled with unconscious intent or are unintentional). The first can be seen as different reasons people have for ignoring *p*, while the last class tries to shed a more general light on the nature of active ignorance.

Perhaps the most robust theories in the last unconscious or unintentional category are represented by biological explanations and analogies of active ignorance. Freud, for instance, compares the "conscious system" and "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."⁵⁴ As we can see, avoiding information can, in this case, be seen almost as a feature of homeostasis: its main function is conservative and it helps the

⁵³ Smithson, "Social Theories of Ignorance," p. 209.

⁵⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (tr. James Strachey and Anna Freud), vol. 18: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle, Group Psychology and Other Works* (7-64). London: Hogarth Press, 1955, p. 27; emphases in the original.

organism – or “mental apparatus” – with its self-preservation by protecting it from destabilizing influences. The same function is ascribed to avoidance of knowledge in Leon Festinger’s theory of cognitive dissonance, the main two hypotheses of which are that “the existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance,” and that “When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.”⁵⁵ Festinger’s theory is, however, cognitive and it does not exclude conscious effort of avoiding information, something we have called above “voluntary ignorance.” We have to keep in mind the rich diversity of doxastic states connected with knowledge avoidance when considering their origins which in turn makes our analysis all the more complex.

If we return to biological approaches in explaining active ignorance we must mention Robert Trivers’ innovative attempt at understanding self-deception with the help of evolution. In short, Trivers’ stake is that self-deception helps us in deceiving others and thus boosts our survival and reproduction rate. How exactly? This 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.”⁵⁶

Here, then, we have a theory that sees the function of active ignorance again in survival, but this time in a more aggressive way: ignorance helps us with the behavior that gets us an advantage over others. Types of knowledge avoidance that could be explained with the help of this theoretical vehicle include those without conscious intent.

Besides organic, evolutionary, and cognitive attempts at explaining the origins of knowledge avoidance another curious approach merits our attention, and that is Nietzsche’s consideration of forgetting. In *Thus Spake Zarathustra* in the chapter “On the Three

⁵⁵ Leon Festinger, *a Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1957, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Robert Trivers, *The Folly of Fools: The Logic of Deceit and Self-Deception in Human Life*, New York: Basic Books, 2011, p. 4.

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 required for rebellion against old values and freedom, then the child is capable of “innocence and forgetting,” necessary for “the game of creation.”⁵⁷ 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.”⁵⁸ However, it is not clear whether these concepts could be seen as origins of knowledge avoidance or whether they apply only to systemic ignorance.

Turning to conscious reasons different persons might have for knowledge avoidance we can first point out that they apply only to those doxastic states that are a consequence of the agent’s explicit intent, namely voluntary ignorance and conscious denial. As mentioned at the beginning of the second part of the paper, recently Hertwig and Engel proposed an exhaustive list⁵⁹ of the different reasons individuals may choose to voluntarily ignore information and knowledge. This list includes the following:

a) Emotion regulation and regret-avoidance

We can choose to voluntarily ignore information to preserve their cherished beliefs: not visiting a doctor to avoid potential “bad news” can enable people to avoid thoughts about the loss of their autonomy. Similarly, avoiding discussion about academic success among peers can help them avoid envy and jealousy.

b) Suspense and surprise-maximization

Perhaps the most well-known and clean-cut example is avoiding spoiler alerts.

c) Performance enhancing

⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None* (tr. Adrian del Caro). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 17.

⁵⁸ Frederic F. Fost, “Playful Illusion: The Making of Worlds in Advaita Vedanta.” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 48, no. 3, 1998, p. 387. Future analysis indubitably requires more attention to this concept as well as to *avidyā* in the sense that the latter is “the cause of rebirth, *saṃsāra*” (Stephen Kaplan, “Vidyā and Avidyā: Simultaneous or Coterminous?: A Holographic Model to Illuminate the Advaita Debate.” *Philosophy East and West*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2007, p. 178).

⁵⁹ As mentioned earlier, Hertwig and Engel call this “taxonomy.” Cf. “Homo Ignorans: Deliberately Choosing Not to Know,” pp. 5-11. Examples that illustrate listed categories are often my own.

Feedback can impair one's performance, especially if it turns the attention away from the task and towards the self and so depletes cognitive capacities or if the feedback is strongly negative, thus disheartening individuals. In these cases, then, it is better to remain consciously ignorant of one's performance.

d) Strategic ignorance

Hertwig and Engel discuss four different reasons for strategic ignorance:

1. Gaining bargaining advantage: not knowing how costly a breakdown in negotiations might be can enable one to be more daring and go further in their demands and thus get a better deal. Conversely, the one who has this information may be more cautious and prepared to accept a poorer deal because they are aware of all the consequences if the deal is not struck.

2. Self-discipline: sometimes it is better not to inform oneself about something since knowing that it is not as detrimental as one thought might induce behavior that one may later regret. Not informing themselves about how successful HIV medication is might induce somebody to remain careful and avoid taking health risks.

3. Eschewing responsibility: avoiding knowledge about the outcome of one's actions may help one to be more at ease with one's disregard for others. As pointed out in the introduction, military training in the twentieth century tried to distance combatants from their "targets." The development of autonomous weapons may be seen as another step in this direction: by letting systems "decide" when to "pull the trigger," the responsibility is effectively removed, which is a dangerous precedent on the modern battlefield.⁶⁰

4. Avoiding liability: perhaps the most cliché example is refusing to look into the secret compartment with drugs when taking it over the border so that if caught one can always refer to one's ignorance as a defense, a scenario that became famous after the *United States v Jewell* case. There could, however, also be institutional examples of this motive: a firm may avoid funding research into the adverse effects of using a product so that it can avoid liability if it turns out that the item was harmful. This reason is, however, often difficult to distinguish from motives connected with responsibility.

⁶⁰ Tomaž Grušovnik, Automation of violence and the disappearance of moral responsibility. In Marjan Krisper, Franci Pivec, and 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*. Ljubljana: Institut "Jožef Stefan", 2019, pp. 12-14.

http://library.ijs.si/Stacks/Proceedings/InformationSociety/2019/IS2019_Volume_D%20-%20Etika%20in%20stroka.pdf.

e) Impartiality

Often information is avoided so that a more objective judgment can be made. This includes blind peer reviews as well as the anonymity of contestants. Indeed, justice is traditionally portrayed as the blindfolded goddess Lady Justice. Her eyes are covered so that justice can be applied without regard to the properties of individuals that are irrelevant to the judgment. In this sense, it is a metaphor for morally desirable voluntary ignorance.

f) Cognitive sustainability and information management

Voluntarily ignoring certain information to “stay on track” seems to be necessary to complete many tasks: for instance, if one would wait till one reads “everything that has been written about the subject,” one would perhaps never start writing her- or himself. Indeed, I am inclined to compare this latter idea with Nietzsche’s intuition that ignorance is in a way a precondition of creativity.

As mentioned, concrete practical examples of active ignorance can be a mixture of different types of knowledge avoidance and it would not be surprising if the same would hold for its reasons and motives.

V. INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: THE MORAL RELEVANCE OF ACTIVE IGNORANCE

Research on knowledge avoidance merits our attention predominantly because of its importance for moral development. As we have seen in the introduction, it is namely bound up with some of the most pressing ethical dilemmas we are facing. Of course, it is impossible to assess the moral value of all the exposed nuances of active ignoring in a few paragraphs in the conclusion. The main aim of the present paper was thus a preliminary analysis of structure, coherence, and etiology of knowledge avoidance that hopefully paves the way for a future in-depth examination. Nonetheless, some main directions of such investigation can, hopefully, already be indicated with the help of present analysis and existing rich literature on the subject, especially willful ignorance.

Following our taxonomy, it may seem appropriate to start investigating the difference between the moral gravity of avoidance of knowledge and deep ignorance. Of course, intent to deceive others is blameworthy and culpable. Indeed, with the help of something I will call the “counterfactual culpability test,” we can perhaps even claim that if retaining information has the same negative consequences as deceiving, then it is also equally

blameworthy. Not sharing information about the gravity of a nuclear disaster would thus, for instance, be equally reprehensible as lying about it.

This, however, obviously only holds for intentionally caused deep ignorance; what about its systemic types? Can people be held accountable for ignorance which is a consequence of their immersion in ideology? Since this state is not brought about by any intentional conscious choice, it seems that it lies beyond moral valuation. However, one may claim that these individuals fail in their duty to inform themselves about their surroundings, the functioning of their societies, morals and mores, political apparatus, and so on. Aquinas was, for instance, convinced that people who have a “lack of knowledge of those things that one has a natural aptitude to know”⁶¹ could be held accountable for their ignorance, and the “duty to stay informed” is one of the core duties of a citizen in a modern democracy.⁶² The moral gravity of failure to perform this duty can, however, be seen as dependent on other circumstances and it is dereliction only in fully democratic states that encourage citizens to be and stay informed. In other words: following Lynch’s analysis of willful ignorance, we can say that failure to inform oneself ceases to be problematic if it is too dangerous or demanding for an individual.⁶³ In concrete terms, we can say that being uninformed in an authoritarian state is less morally problematic than remaining ignorant under a functioning democratic constitution.

On the knowledge avoidance side of the spectrum, the moral diagnosis of caused ignorance is still more complicated. Here knowledge avoidance without conscious intent seems to be the least morally grave. Indeed, subjects normally suffer because of mental states such as dissociative amnesia or defense mechanisms and could hardly be said to be morally responsible for their ignorance in any way (except perhaps if they were reckless and intentionally exposed themselves to situations that could induce such states, which seems to be a very rare case).

On the conscious spectrum, both, voluntary ignorance, as well as conscious denialism, seem to be culpable. In the case of voluntary ignoring within legal contexts

⁶¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q. 76, a. 2.

⁶² The US president Lyndon B. Johnson stated this duty in Proclamation 3786: “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*. Washington D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1968, p. 53.

⁶³ Cf. Lynch, “Willful ignorance and self-deception.”

Douglas Husak's treatment of "willful ignorance or blindness" is often accepted as a starting point of reflection. Husak's definition of (criminally culpable) willful ignorance runs 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."⁶⁴ According to the basic model, willful ignorance is in this case as inculpatory as full knowledge, since "omitting inquiry manifests precisely the same degree of disregard for others' interests as manifested in knowingly acting criminally."⁶⁵ In turn, Sarch's examination of this doxastic state claims that willful ignorance entails sufficiently serious suspicion of p and deliberate failure to take steps to inform oneself about p.⁶⁶ Sarch also refers to the "quality of will theory" to understand moral and criminal culpability of what I call strong voluntary ignorance. This theory holds that one is morally culpable for action to the extent it manifests ill will, in the sense of insufficient regard for the moral reasons that bear on how to act.⁶⁷ In addition to that, Sarch mentions two different tests for assessing the culpability of willful ignorance. The first one which is preferred by Sarch is the "duty-based test" and connects the culpability of willful ignorance to a breach of duty to inform oneself without sound justification. The second one is the "counterfactual test" and says that a "willfully ignorant actor is as culpable as a knowing wrongdoer iff she'd act the same way even with full knowledge."⁶⁸ While the counterfactual test might be appropriate for moral assessment, it is problematic in legal contexts, because it – as Sarch points out – runs counter to the principle that punishment should be imposed only based on actual conduct (and not on counterfactual situations).

So far we have been examining only the negative moral consequences of active ignoring. Keeping in mind our previous section it is, however, not difficult to see that active ignorance could also be morally praiseworthy. As we have seen, voluntary ignorance may be viewed as a disciplinary device or an information-management strategy and could thus even be a virtuous character trait. Indeed, it seems that in some instances voluntary ignorance even

⁶⁴ Douglas Husak, *Ignorance of Law: A Philosophical Inquiry*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 220-21.

⁶⁵ Gideon Yaffe, "The Point of Mens Rea: The Case of Willful Ignorance." *Criminal Law and Philosophy*, no. 12, 2018, p. 19.

⁶⁶ Sarch, "Willful Ignorance in Law and Morality," p. 2.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

amounts to a duty: being an examiner of national tests from philosophy I am obliged to remain ignorant about the authors of the essays I am assessing. The same, of course, also applies to blind peer reviewers, members of various juries, and anyone that is involved in unbiased evaluation where knowledge about certain facts could negatively influence the impartiality of one's decision.

Moreover, individuals also seem to have a right to remain ignorant: DeNicola thus reminds us of the Declaration on the Rights of the Patient which says that individuals have the right not to be informed about their medical condition unless this information is essential for protecting another person's life.⁶⁹ If I suspect having incurable cancer and thus fear that this information will spoil the days that I have left, I have the right to ask my doctor not to inform me about the results of the medical examination.

Where there is one person's right, there is normally also another person's duty, and so it seems that we do not only possess the right to remain ignorant but in certain cases also a duty to respect people's wish to remain ignorant. Indeed, it seems that in those cases where ignorance is not harmful to third parties we have a duty to enable individuals to decide for themselves whether they want to come in contact with information such as "graphic content." In addition to that, we are also obliged to ask parents of minors if they allow their children to come in contact with what may be deemed sensitive information. In any case, we have the duty to protect children from potential psychological harm that might result from contact with distressing information. In the discussion about rights to remain ignorant and corresponding duties to respect individuals' wishes to avoid knowledge we are, however, walking a thin line: stepping out of ideologically constructed information cocoon is namely in itself a troubling and unpleasant experience that is often one of the reasons why we choose to remain ignorant; if we would now claim that we have a right to remain ignorant because we have a right not to be hurt by what ideology has taught us to be "improper content," then by respecting this right we are ideological through and through since we are precisely helping to uphold the problematic value system. Thus it seems necessary to add that our right to remain ignorant can be overridden if the risk that our ignorance will result in the perpetuation of injustice or suffering of third parties is substantial.

Given the complexity of doxastic states related to ignorance, it is unsurprising that their moral consequences are many and varied. As mentioned, the present concluding sketch

⁶⁹ DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance*, p. 106.

was only intended to scratch the surface of this rich environs. Hopefully, the preceding sections do, however, offer a canvas for later more elaborate work.