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(Un)deliberate ignorance. Discreet charm and adaptive functions of motivated ignorance

(Un)deliberate ignorance. Dyskretny urok i adaptacyjne funkcje niewiedzy

ABSTRACT

First, the author cites several of wilful ignorance and analyzes the concept in relation to related terms such as “voluntary blindness”, “information avoidance” and “negative knowledge”. Then he presents the six groups of motives distinguished by Engel and Hartwig, which may lead to the phenomenon of deliberate ignorance. The author proposes to reduce this taxonomy to three more general motives, i.e. emotional, pragmatic and moral category, and characterizes their specificity. Referring to psychoanalytic tradition and the role attributed by the modern experimental psychology to unconscious processes, he notes that not every type of motivated ignorance is preceded by a “deliberate”, conscious decision. Many manifestations of ignorance are spontaneous (but not accidental) products of the activity of unconscious processes. More or less “deliberate” ignorance is a frequent reason for potential patients to avoid or delay medical examination. The practical problem is how to counteract this unfavorable tendency.


Keywords: deliberate and non-deliberate ignorance, emotional vs. pragmatic motives, moral and legal motives

STRESZCZENIE

Na wstępie autor przytacza kilka definicji rozmyślnej niewiedzy i analizuje to pojęcie w relacji do terminów pokrewnych, takich jak „dobrowolna ślepotą”, „unikanie informacji” oraz „wiedza negatywna”. Następnie przedstawia wyróżnione przez Engela i Hartwiga sześć grup motywów, prowokujących wystąpienie zjawiska rozmyślnej niewiedzy. Autor proponuje zredukowanie tego podziału do trzech ogólniejszych motywów, tj. emocjonalnych, pragmatycznych i moralnych, charakteryzując ich specyfikę. Nawiązując do tradycji psychoanalitycznej i roli przypisywanej przez współczesną psychologię eksperymentalną procesom nieświadomym, podkreśla, że nie każdy

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rodzaj umotywowanej niewiedzy poprzedzona „rozmyślna”, świadoma decyzja. Wiele przejawów niewiedzy to spontaniczny (lecz nieprzypadkowy) produkt aktywności procesów nieświadomych. Mniej lub bardziej „rozmyślna” niewiedza jest częstym powodem unikania lub opóźniania badań medycznych przez potencjalnych pacjentów. Problemem praktycznym jest to, w jaki sposób przeciwdziałać tej niekorzystnej tendencji.

Słowa kluczowe: rozmyślna i nierozmyślna niewiedza, motywy emocjonalne i pragmatyczne, motywy moralno-prawne

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge in European culture is a rarely questioned value. Generally, we assume that it is better to know than not to know. Already in the first sentence of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle says that – “ALL men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves...”. However, in recent years, new terms have appeared that first arouse surprise and then lead to reflection. I mean terms like *deliberate ignorance* or *avoidance of information*. Related concepts are also appearing more and more often, such as *the not knowing approach* (Anderson, Goolishian, 1992; Petrucelli, 2010), *negative knowledge*¹ (Mudyń, Górniak, 1995; Gartmeier *et al.*, 2008; Mudyń, 2016; Gartmeier, Papadakis, Straser, 2017) and even *willful blindness* (Heffernan, 2011). Deliberate ignorance seems to be the most capacious and at the same time accurate term. When we start looking for its manifestations, it turns out that the phenomenon of deliberate ignorance is not something as rare and unique as it might seem. Or maybe it is something as common as the desire to broaden one’s knowledge.

Let’s start with the definition issues – how broadly this concept is understood. Gerd Gigerenzer in an article in the anthology. What scientific term or concept ought to be widely known?, justifying the need to disseminate this

concept, writes – “Deliberate ignorance can be defined as a voluntary decision not to know the answer to a question that concerns us, even if the answer does not entail any costs related to the search for answers (2017). The authors of the important article *Homo Ignorans: Deliberately Choosing Not to Know* (Hertwig, Engel, 2016) explain this term in a similar way, writing that it is – “the conscious individual or collective choice not to seek or use information” (2016, p. 360). Other authors quite similarly specify the term “information avoidance”, writing – “We define information avoidance as any behavior that aims to prevent or delay obtaining available but potentially undesirable information” (Sweeny *et al.*, 2010, p. 340). Although the quoted definitions place the emphasis differently, it is not difficult to see the common denominator, which is the avoidance of knowledge on specific issues.

Let’s start by noting that there are a lot of things that we theoretically “would like to know” and information that we could obtain but do not. There are tons of places we could see, books we could read or movies we could watch. There are also many skills we might want to learn, but – quite voluntarily – we don’t. We deliberately give it up. The question then arises whether at some point we do not commit a “sin of omission”? If we realize how vast areas of practical, theoretical and factual knowledge we give up again and again, we can come to the surprising conclusion that voluntary ignorance is our *modus vivendi* rather than an exception to the seemingly universal tendency to know more and better.

The aim of the presented text is: 1) to trace the more important contexts in which deliberate ignorance can be found; 2) to try to find a common denominator of situations in which manifestations of willful ignorance can be found; and

¹ Negative knowledge is understood as knowledge about what one does not know or cannot know and what cannot be done. Negative knowledge is sometimes contrasted with positive knowledge, and any kind of knowledge should be contrasted with anti-knowledge (for more, Mudyń, Górniak, 1995; Mudyń, 2014, 2016).

3) to confront the question about the motives and adaptive rationality of such behaviors.

DELIBERATE IGNORANCE AND ITS UNIVERSALITY

Fortunately, the quoted definitions suggest that it is rather about information that is important to us, and it is important probably because it concerns us personally. In the case of genetic tests to determine if we have a gene that almost always leads to an incurable disease (Quaid, Morris, 1993; Yaniv, Benador, Sagi, 2004), one could say that the information about test results concerns us very personally. However, in many other circumstances, deciding whether a given problem concerns us or “it’s none of my business” is not something obvious. On the contrary, it is quite problematic. Since “No one is an island”, it is not easy to decide where the line lies between “it concerns me too” and “it does not concern me”. In the globalized world, there are fewer and fewer events that “simply” do not concern us. To some extent, we are even affected by oil production limits by OPEC countries, as well as decisions to increase interest rates taken by the FED in the other hemisphere.

It is not surprising that in the previously quoted definition by Gerd Gigerenzer (2017) there is an important phrase – “to a question that concerns us”, which significantly narrows the scope of application of the term “deliberate ignorance”. In turn, in the case of the second definition (Sweeny *et al.*, 2010), the meaning of the term is also specified by the phrase “potentially undesirable information”. On an intuitive level, we somehow understand what “undesirable information” might be, but on an analytical level, this sense of clarity quickly disappears. Undoubtedly, the information that reaches us can evoke positive or negative (unpleasant) emotions. However, we cannot hastily equate “unpleasant” with “undesirable.” If I found out that I have 150 days to live, should I consider this information undesirable? In sum, “deliberate ignorance” is not a precise term, but this should not undermine the sense of searching for manifestations of this phenomenon.

The dilemma – what information can be “voluntarily” ignored and what information can

be actively sought and included in our vision of reality, we most willingly try to settle based on the **criterion of external influence** – does it apply to me? The aforementioned criterion becomes more and more problematic and blurred along with the lengthening of the time horizon of potential events. What does not concern me today may also start affecting me or my loved ones the day after tomorrow. So the complementary **criterion of personal influence** comes in handy – what I can influence and what I cannot. A fragment of a well-known prayer, attributed to various authors, comes to mind – “May I have the courage to change what I can change and the serenity to accept what I cannot change”. And as always, wisdom is still needed to be able to distinguish one from the other. We usually stop being interested in events or phenomena over which we have no clear influence.

Based on the assumption that the ordinary citizen has no influence on politics, most people stop following political events or deliberately try to limit the flow of relevant information “so as not to get nervous.” Unfortunately, you cannot count on the rule of reciprocity here – political decisions affect both the lives of those who are interested in them and those who try not to know anything about them. In the case of politics, the strategy of avoiding information, i.e. striving to know as little as possible, and if anything, then as late as possible, seems quite problematic if considered in the long term. Thus, we can conclude that our knowledge, whether practical (“know how”) or declarative (“know that”), is but a tiny island surrounded by a sea of unknowing. And if so, then any manifestations of willful ignorance should not surprise us either. In this context, the question may even arise – why do we want to know anything at all?

KINDS OF MOTIVES ACCORDING TO HERTWIG AND ENGEL RELATED TO DELIBERATE IGNORANCE

In the article *Homo ignorans...* Hertwig and Engel (2016, p. 361) proposed to distinguish six types of situations in which we often prefer not to know than to know. The proposed division introduces a certain order and, as the authors

write, constitutes a kind of road map of research areas in which the phenomenon of deliberate ignorance occurs. The advantage of their proposal is that it allows you to cover a very wide spectrum of situations that are usually not thought of at the same time, or taken into account in research conducted within individual scientific disciplines. Circumstances in which deliberate ignorance is revealed according to the mentioned authors are:

1. Emotion-regulation and regret-avoidance device;
2. Suspension-and surprise-maximization device;
3. Performance-enhancing device;
4. Element of the strategy of conduct (Strategic device);
5. Impartiality and fairness device;
6. Cognitive sustainability and information management device.

Category 4, referring to the preferred strategy, turns out to be the most diverse. Here, the authors proposed to distinguish four additional subcategories, namely:

- 4.1. Gaining bargaining advantage;
- 4.2. Self-disciplining;
- 4.3. Eschewing responsibility;
- 4.4. Avoiding claims (Avoiding liability).

The proposed taxonomy of the motives behind deliberate ignorance is a valuable contribution to gaining cognitive control over the role of willful, accepted ignorance in our lives. It shows various areas of activity in which we choose ignorance. What's more, these are decisions that are usually hard to deny adaptive rationality. Although this is an initial proposal, it turns out to be very helpful in taming a kind of terra incognita. It is a useful grouping of different situations rather than a classification in the strict sense of the word. In each category, there are facts from a few studies or observations. These facts are characterized by "family resemblance" – they are difficult to put in order, referring to the relationship of inferiority or superiority. The division proposed by Hertwig and Engel can be further specified or focused on the possibility of reducing the number of already named categories. Let's choose the latter option, in search of the "common denominator" of deliberate ignorance. Without going

into details, it can be assumed that the first two categories distinguished by the authors refer simply to the **regulation of emotions**, while the remaining four fit quite well under the banner of **effectiveness and (long-term) action strategy**.

It seems that the division proposed by Hartwig and Engel can be further simplified by dividing all the motives responsible for preferring deliberate ignorance into: 1) **emotional**, 2) **pragmatic**, and 3) **moral and legal**. The first two categories basically coincide with the motives previously distinguished by the authors, i.e. with "emotion regulation" and "effectiveness and strategy of action." Moral motives, however, deserve a separate category. Considering that moral norms are often followed by legal codifications, we should rather talk about moral and legal motives. There would be quite a wide range of motives corresponding to (deliberate) ignorance.

EMOTION REGULATION. EMOTIONAL COSTS AS A SIGNIFICANT MOTIVE FOR DELIBERATE IGNORANCE

As for the first two categories distinguished by the authors of *Homo ignorans*, let us note that they are an attempt to control one's emotions. Regardless of whether I'm reluctant to get information that will probably turn out to be "bad news", or whether I don't want to know the plot and ending of the movie I'm going to watch, in both cases I try to influence my own emotions in the desired direction. The only difference is that in the first case I try to minimize the negative emotional costs, while in the second I prevent the decrease in the intensity of the desired emotions associated with watching the movie. It is important that in both cases it is not about the effectiveness of action – whether in the sense of economy of effort or increasing the chances of achieving a long-term goal.

The broad category of "emotion regulation" also includes all situations where obtaining new information or expanding one's knowledge leads to dilemmas and internal conflicts. This may be associated with a conflict of social and professional roles, with a conflict of applicable social norms or values accepted by the individual. Conflict can also result from the clash of one's own

needs (interests) with the needs of other people. If we find out, for example, that someone (from the circle of people close to us) needs help, we may have a dilemma whether to give up our own plans or routine duties and hurry to help, or decide (reinterpreting the whole situation appropriately) that our intervention is not necessary nor justified, because, for example, we are not competent enough. If in a public place we accidentally witness an event that resembles an accident, we can try to find out something happened or safely assume that nothing happened.

The reluctance to recognize and respond to signals of violence in the immediate environment suggests that although we generally prefer to know, in situations where “knowing” entails additional emotional costs, we willingly adhere to the Asian motto that it is better “not to see, not to hear and not speak.” This strategy often makes itself known, e.g. in the context of victims of violence, in the sense of not noticing and disregarding the signals of violence, leading to the passive attitude of bystanders (cf. Kubacka-Jasiecka, 2004). The dilemma faced by doctors and medical staff in general is whether, when, and how to inform the patient about his health, and in particular about the unfavorable prognosis associated with the disease.

Everyone expects good news, but only some would prefer to “find out the worst” as soon as possible. Thus, Yaniv and Benador (2004) conducted a questionnaire study on a sample of 167 Hebrew University students of social sciences and employees of organizations associated with Jerusalem, aged 22–40, who volunteered. The subjects represented the general population, in the sense that they did not belong to the risk group of the disease, the description of which was made available to them. The manual describes the course of Huntington’s disease, which is genetic, which means that the holders of the appropriate gene inevitably develop the disease between the ages of 35 and 50. The disease is incurable and leads to progressive physical and mental degradation within about 10 years. It can be said that the probability of the occurrence of this disease in the “holders” of a given gene is almost 100%, if only they live long enough. The respondents answered the question whether

they would like to obtain information about their “genetic status” using a four-point scale, from (1) “I would definitely prefer not to know” to (4) “I would definitely prefer to know.” A stronger or a weaker version of “not know” was chosen by 48% of respondents. People who would prefer not to know most often justified it by the lack of an effective method of treatment (65%), saying that “Such knowledge is useless until there is a way to treat or prevent this disease.” They also often justified their decisions with negative emotional consequences, such as medication, stress, depression – “I wouldn’t want to live in constant anxiety.” On the other hand, people who claimed that they would rather know, most often (76%) referred to arguments that they could plan their future better. Although in the cited studies (only) 48% of the respondents declared that they would rather not know, it should be added that the respondents did not come from the risk group, and the probability of having this gene in the population is negligible, i.e. 1:10,000, and participants were informed about. So the risk of being one of those burdened people was very low.

In other studies (Quaid, Morris, 1993), the proportion of people deciding to undergo genetic testing was much smaller, accounting for less than 20%. These results, due to the different context and methodology, are not very comparable. The latter may be slightly underestimated, as people declaring that they would undergo the test were to partially participate in the costs.

In turn, research conducted on a representative sample of the population in Germany shows that 85–90% of respondents do not want to know about potential negative events. However, with regard to positive events – depending on demographic variables – 40–70% of respondents would rather remain ignorant (Gigerenzer, Garcia-Retamero, 2017).

When looking for an answer to the question why we prefer not to know, we can also refer to the Mudyń pilot study (2017), conducted via the Internet on a group of 48 people (24 women and 24 men) aged 21–72. The respondents were asked, among others, whether there are any questions that are important to them but to which they would prefer not to know the answer. Among the questions formulated by the respondents,

personal issues dominated (85%), while questions considered non-personal accounted for only 15%. It is significant that among the personal questions dominated issues related to the circumstances of death of one's own or relatives. They accounted for 45% of all personal questions to which the respondents preferred not to know the answer. These questions were formulated spontaneously, without any direction, i.e. respondents were not asked whether they would like to know the circumstances of their own death.

The results quoted, both the latter and the previous ones, shed a lot enough of light on the question: What and why we prefer not to know. Broadly speaking, the quoted results direct our attention to the emotional costs associated with content that could be described as "bad news" or "stressful events."

EFFECTIVENESS AND STRATEGY AS A MOTIVE OF DELIBERATE IGNORANCE

Some doubts may be raised by the suggestion that the category "impartiality and fairness" distinguished by the authors should also be included in the superior category "Effectiveness and strategy of operation." Nevertheless, impartiality, resulting from the lack of additional, substantively irrelevant information, can be treated as one of the conditions for better accuracy (and thus effectiveness) of decisions. If, for example, in accordance with the "blind-blind review" procedure, the reviewer does not know whose text he is reviewing, this is a factor that favors a more accurate assessment, i.e. a better decision. If the members of the jury, evaluating candidates for the conservatory, only hear their performance, without seeing the performers and without knowing their gender or race, it will probably increase the substantive accuracy of the decisions made. Thus, decisions will be more in line with the declared criteria, and therefore more fair.

In accordance with the principle of equifinality, it is also worth noting that various motives may lead to similar effects or consequences (if not for the perpetrator himself, then for his environment). This also applies to the previously cited examples, interpreted from the point of view of the effectiveness of the actions taken.

For example, we can strive for impartiality in the belief that in the long run it leads to more favorable practical consequences, conducive to the effective implementation of goals. However, we can also strive for impartiality, guided above all by moral values, doing the same in the name of honesty or justice. Thus, another, multi-criteria division of motives for deliberately preferring ignorance over knowledge is also conceivable.

MORAL AND LEGAL ASPECTS OF DELIBERATE IGNORANCE

Let us note at the beginning that moral norms usually correspond quite well with the religious precepts present in a given culture. A question arises – to which we do not know the answer – why were Adam and Eve forbidden to eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? Was this ban supposed to protect them from the negative consequences of knowledge? And is "Curiosity is the first step to hell"?

On the other hand, striving to expand one's own knowledge, understood as an element of personal development (and perhaps also respect for external reality), can be treated as an unwritten moral imperative. For by ignoring the laws of nature, social norms and the needs of other people, we cannot free ourselves from self-centeredness and selfishness. The idea of the common good then remains an empty, incomprehensible concept.

The decision not to know something, to give up trying to find out, may simply result from respecting the right to the privacy of others. We respect them whenever, for example, we decide not to read someone's private correspondence, not to view someone's e-mails or text messages. We do the same if we resign from eavesdropping on other people, or we resign from gossiping about absent people. A fairly widely accepted moral norm also considers it reprehensible to spy on other people, especially in intimate situations, although of course we could learn something new on such occasions.

The legal regulations codify to some extent customary law and moral norms in force in a given community. Determining the boundary

between the knowledge and ignorance of the accused is a difficult and very important element in the process of adjudicating on the guilt of the accused. At least since the time of Emperor Justinian, it has been assumed that *Ignorantia legis non excusat* (ignorance of the law is no excuse) or even that *Ignorantia iuris nocet* (ignorance of the law is harmful). However, knowing or not knowing the relevant rule is only one aspect of the problem. It is equally important to determine the state of mind of the perpetrator at the time of committing the prohibited act, which is not an easy and often contentious matter, and doubts in this matter are a frequently used line of defence. In the Penal Code we read that – “He does not commit a crime who commits a prohibited act in justified ignorance of its unlawfulness...” (Art. 30, § 1). And further – “No crime is committed who, due to mental illness, mental retardation or other disturbance of mental activities, was unable to recognize its meaning or control his conduct at the time of the act” (Art. 31, § 1).

The cited circumstances in a sense include ignorance as a mitigating circumstance, but note that this is not “deliberate ignorance.” The case becomes more complicated when there is a suspicion that the accused had all the data and reasons to know or find out, and deliberately did not do so. Willful blindness is not an excuse. In the next paragraph of the Penal Code, we also find – fortunately – quite unambiguous wording that the previous paragraphs do not apply if – “the perpetrator was intoxicated or intoxicated causing the exclusion or limitation of sanity, which he foresaw or could have foreseen” (Art. 31, § 3). In conclusion, assessing the state of consciousness (knowledge and ignorance) of the accused is a difficult problem, but ignorance, if deliberate, does not absolve him from responsibility.

Themis, personifying justice, is usually depicted with a blindfold, which symbolizes her impartiality, resulting somewhat from her blindness to non-substantive information regarding the status of the people being tried, in terms of social position, property, gender, race, class or religious affiliation. Some are of the opinion that even the information whether the defendant has a previous criminal record can influence the court’s decisions.

SOME QUESTIONS AND DOUBTS

Taking into account the prevalence of deliberate ignorance, we can come to the surprising conclusion that – contrary to appearances – striving to expand one’s knowledge, i.e. reducing the areas of one’s own ignorance, is the exception rather than the rule. It is forced either by immediate needs, or it is a kind of luxury, called disinterested curiosity. Such a disinterested cognitive attitude is an element of a development-oriented strategy. It is something natural in the early stages of ontogenetic development. For an adult, due to the implementation of numerous tasks and responsibilities and the limitation of widely understood cognitive and other resources, the dominant way of being is to maintain the status quo. This means focusing on the protection of resources, manifested by cognitive and behavioral conservatism. Each change is inevitably associated with psychological costs, as it entails the need to reorganize established habits and assimilate a package of new information. In later periods of individual life, the natural “curiosity of people and the world” increasingly gives way to various versions of conservatism, the purpose of which is to defend already held beliefs, assessments, habits, etc. One would like to say that the deliberate acceptance of ignorance is a common and natural state. We are immersed in a sea of ignorance, from which – in the name of survival – we try to fish out plankton.

On the theoretical level, at least two questions arise: 1) Where is the line between “deliberate” and “spontaneous ignorance” and in what proportions do they stand in relation to each other? 2) What strategies do we have to defend our ignorance? 3) What are the defense mechanisms of ignorance at different levels of mental functioning?

It is not difficult to imagine examples of situations that fall into the broad category of “deliberate ignorance.” Starting with the simplest – we can ask the interlocutor to change the topic of conversation that we are not interested in, we can leave the lecture, turn off the radio or ignore the content of the book after reading the title. We can switch the TV channel or look away so as not to watch drastic scenes or listen to forecasts about

trends in the global economy. We can opt out of watching a news show or a documentary about the life of termites or whatever. In all these cases, we are dealing with an intentional, and therefore a conscious decision. On the other hand, it is known that a huge part of our decisions is made below the threshold of consciousness, somehow automatically and without reflection.

In modern psychology (in part because of Sigmund Freud and his followers), the role of the unconscious is appreciated. However, many years had to pass before academic psychology acquired tools enabling the study of unconscious processes in controlled experimental conditions, using, for this purpose, e.g. an objective indicator which is precisely recorded reaction time. In the context of the psychoanalytic vision of man, the concept of ignorance gains some importance but ceases to be a “deliberate”, i.e. a deliberate, consciously controlled decision of the individual. Ignorance, considered from the psychoanalytical perspective, becomes something “undeliberate”, becomes the effect of the purposeful but unconscious activity of the mental apparatus. The concept of *ego defense mechanisms* which (despite ambivalent attitudes towards psychoanalysis), entered psychology, and in particular *repression* and *suppression*, remind us that ignorance is sometimes purposeful and motivated by the interests of the individual. It reduces internal conflicts, it can also temporarily protect against fear or guilt. However, decisions about “what not to know” or what to “stop knowing” are usually made at an unconscious level. The intentional nature of the unconscious is revealed, as Freud (1987) argued in (non-accidental) mistaken acts, such as forgetting or losing something etc.

It is also worth mentioning that in the context of experimental psychology, the concept of “perceptual defense” appeared a long time ago, suggesting that signals (including verbal ones) related to negative emotions are suppressed already at the level of perception, which may manifest itself, among others, in longer reaction time needed for a given signal identification (Bruner, Postman, 1947).

CLOSING REMARKS

In sum, the question of the boundaries between deliberate and undeliberate ignorance, that is, as it were, between controlled and spontaneous ignorance, must remain open. However, one can risk the thesis that spontaneous, “unintentional ignorance” is associated primarily with the regulation of negative emotions, while deliberate ignorance is usually motivated by pragmatic considerations (“effectiveness and strategy of action”).

A very practical and at the same time chronic problem of the Health Care System is that patients decide to contact a doctor only in the advanced stage of the disease. Apart from other systemic conditions, it seems that many people avoid periodic examinations so as not to be confronted with potentially undesirable information for as long as possible. It can be assumed that properly designed social campaigns could change this state of affairs to some extent. In addition to the already used methods, actions that direct the addressees’ attention to the positive aspects and consequences of such research, offering, for example, small incentives and even symbolic gratifications, seem promising. On the other hand, it is known that referring to negative consequences intensifies anxiety and is a counterproductive strategy.

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