

# BULLSHIT, POLITICS, AND IGNORANCE

Neil Barton

Slides available via the “Blog” section of my website

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UNIVERSITETET  
I OSLO



Forskningsrådet

- Last session we examined the phenomenon of **knowledge resistance**.
- To do so we examined the idea that **justified**, **true**, **beliefs** are closely related to knowledge (though probably **not identical** with it!).
- This week we're going to examine the “dual” notion of **ignorance**.
- We'll also look at the analysis of **bullshit** (or **humbug**).
- **Clear relationships** between these notions and knowledge resistance.

## MAIN QUESTIONS

1. What is **ignorance**?
2. What is **bullshit/humbug**?
3. What **different kinds** of each are there?

INTRODUCTION

TWO VIEWS OF IGNORANCE

SOCRATES' APOLOGY IN PLATO

FRANKFURT ON BULLSHIT

CLASSIFYING IGNORANCE

SUMMING UP

- Given that we have notions of **knowledge** and **true belief**, it's natural to think that there's a "dual" notion of **ignorance**.
- What ignorance is **not** (unless you believe that justification is **infallible**): The presence of possible **doubt**.
- Perhaps I can't rule out some **wild sceptical scenario**, but I'm not **therefore** ignorant.
- We want to avoid **full sceptical meltdown** (in Wikforss' terminology).
- **However:** Introducing **doubt** can be an **important** part of counterarguments! It's just not **sufficient** for defeating justification.

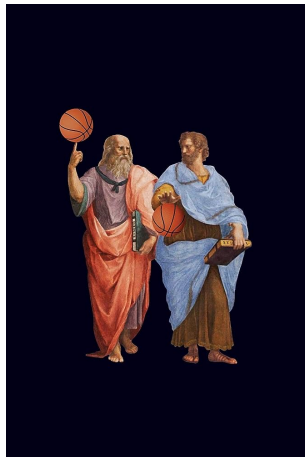
- Two options for ignorance:
- **Option 1.** (Absence of true belief.)  $S$  is **ignorant** that  $P$  iff  $S$  does not have the **true belief** that  $P$ .
- **Option 2.** (Absence of knowledge)  $S$  is **ignorant** that  $P$  iff  $S$  does not **know** that  $P$ .
- **Note:** In the two definitions we assumed that one **cannot** be ignorant that  $P$  when  $P$  is **false**.
- We say: Ignorance that  $P$ , just like knowledge that  $P$ , is **factive**.

- Which definition you use is **morally relevant**.<sup>1</sup>
- Suppose that I **falsely** believe a kardemommebolle has **not** been poisoned and give it to you (here I'm ignorant in both senses).
- Suppose I **do not know** that the kardemommebolle has not been poisoned (I may even believe that it has been, but I don't think I meet the standards for justification)!
- (Blameless) belief-ignorance **excuses**, knowledge-ignorance sometimes **does not**.
- **Observation.** There's a **debate** between these two views. Perhaps it would be better to say that there's two **useful** concepts that should be **disambiguated**.
- I'll mostly work with **knowledge**-ignorance.

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<sup>1</sup>Example taken from Pierre Le Morvan and Rik Peels' 'The Nature of Ignorance: Two Views'







- Socrates (c.470 BCE–399 BCE) famous for **interrogating** various members of the Greek (especially Athenian) community.
- Eventually accused of corrupting the youth and introducing false gods in 399 BCE, and put to death by being forced to drink **hemlock**.
- Plato (c. 420 BCE–348 BCE) **wrote down** and **developed** a lot of Socratic thought.
- **Sometimes** the **birth of philosophy** is identified with Plato.
- I don't want to commit to this (philosophy has been developed in **many** (all?) traditions).
- See Peter Adamson's podcast **The History of Philosophy without any gaps!**
- Certainly, there are a **specific** but **rich** traditions that continue to develop through the last two-thousand-and-a-bit years.

- **Point 1.** Reading Plato is **hard**.
- Often (**unlike** many contemporary philosophy papers) the strategy is not clearly stated.
- Can be helpful to view dialogues as a series of **interrelated arguments** with an **overarching theme** for consideration, rather than a tight argument for a **single point**.

- **Point 2.** Socrates and Plato were **best buds** (or, at least, it **seems** that way).
- Dialogues are **historically interesting**, but be careful not to take **too literally**!

Plato:

SOCRATES: Is it not true that  $p$ ?

GLAUCON: I agree.

CEPHALUS: It would seem so.

POLEMARCHUS: Necessarily.

THRASYMACHUS: Yes, Socrates.

ALCIBIADES: Certainly, Socrates.

PAUSANIAS: Quite so, if we are to be consistent.

ARISTOPHANES: Assuredly.

ERYXIMACHUS: The argument certainly points that way.

PHAEDO: By all means.

PHAEDRUS: What you say is true, Socrates.

—From ‘Philosophers proofs that  $p$ ’

- The *Apology* consists of Plato's account of Socrates' **rebuttal** to his charges at trial.
- **Helpful** to contrast Plato's version with Xenophon's.
- Because of its difficult nature, we'll just highlight a couple of **overarching themes**.

- **Theme.** Ignorance is **pervasive**, including amongst **decision-makers**.
- Socrates points out that many politicians are **ignorant**.
- Possibly in part because they have to (pretend to) know about **many** different areas.
- **For us:** **Testimony** and **communal knowledge** are important.
- e.g. Plausibly **we** know the outcome of most legal cases, without any **one** of us knowing.

- **Theme.** Accusing someone of **producing ignorance** (or **being ignorant**) can be **damaging**.
- Compare with **knowledge resistance** from last session.
- We have to distinguish the **philosophical analysis** of ignorance from the **lexical effects** (e.g. how the word makes people feel) of our use of the word “ignorance”/“ignorant”.
- But these lexical effects shouldn’t be **disregarded**, and are **philosophically interesting** in their own right!





- Harry Frankfurt (1929–2023), born David Bernard Stern (never knew biological parents).
- Adopted as a baby and given the name Harry Gordon Frankfurt.
- Went on to work at Princeton University, Ohio State University, SUNY Binghamton, Rockefeller University, and Yale.
- Wide ranging interests, also on philosophy of **caring** and **importance**.

- Frankfurt's essay 'On Bullshit' originally a journal article in *Raritan Quarterly Review*, republished in 2005 and became a **bestseller**.
- After comparing with Max Black's definition of "humbug", Frankfurt (roughly) defines bullshit as:
- **Talking about something **without** caring whether what one says is **true**.**
- **Note:** Bullshit doesn't require you to say **false things**.
- I might say a bunch of **truths** in the service of **bullshit**.
- e.g. A politician failing to answer a question by simply **describing irrelevant** or **tangential** facts.
- Cf. Paxman vs. Howard "Did you threaten to overrule him?" asked **12 times**.

- Contrast the following:
- **Misinformation** is **false** or **inaccurate** information.
- **Disinformation** is false information **deliberately intended to deceive**.
- **Bullshit** speaking **without regard for the truth**.
- **All** can be dangerous.
- Particular focus on **misinformation** and **disinformation**, especially since the advent of the **internet** (and **political actors** use thereof).
- But bullshit can result in **ignorance** too (since it can prevent knowledge about a **particular question**).
- But because it is not always **false**, it can be **hard to call out**.
- There might not be any concrete **falsehoods** that can be pointed towards.

There are **known knowns**. These are things we know that we know. There are **known unknowns**. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also **unknown unknowns**. There are things we don't know we don't know.

—Donald Rumsfeld



- We can start **classifying** ignorance into different kinds.<sup>2</sup>
- **Conscious ignorance.** Occurs when we **know** that we **don't know**.
- e.g. Exactly how many stars are there in the observable universe?
- e.g. What colour socks was Erna Solberg wearing on 4. February 1976?
- e.g. Is every even number greater than 2 the sum of two primes? (Goldbach's Conjecture)

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<sup>2</sup>See Torsten Wilholt: 'On Knowing What One Does Not Know: Ignorance and the Aims of Research'

- **Opaque ignorance.** Occurs when we **don't know** that we **don't know**.
- e.g. Questions we haven't **properly considered**.
- e.g. My situation with respect to Erna Solberg's socks prior to prepping these lectures.
- e.g. Many **false beliefs** (especially ones **strongly held**)!

- **Deep ignorance.** No candidate answers without **decisive objections**.
- e.g. How can we effect a meaningful response to climate change?

- **Thoroughly opaque ignorance.** We can't even **articulate the relevant question** about the ignorance.
- e.g. Hypatia's ignorance about leptons and motor cars.



- Some **interesting implications**.
- **Observation**. Ignorance can be **weaponised**.
- **Disinformation and Misinformation**. For example, tobacco industry's funding of research into **explaining away** tobacco-caused disease.
- Apparent science trying to **explain away** the existence of climate change.
- These attempt generate **opaque** ignorance (which can be hard to combat) by inculcating **false beliefs**.

- **But bullshit may have a role too.** One might also be able, via **bullshit**, to maintain opaque ignorance by **distraction**.
- e.g. It's often said that politicians **time** the announcement of **controversial policies** to coincide with **other events**.
- e.g. On 13 July 1994, Silvio Berlusconi passed an emergency decree that freed hundreds of politicians with pending corruption charges on the day Italy qualified for the final of the FIFA World Cup.

- **Observation.** For scientific enterprises, it may be that some kinds of ignorance are **especially attractive**.
- e.g. **Conscious** but **deep** ignorance.
- Other times we may believe that our ignorance is likely to be **thorough** (e.g. a question about an **as-yet-undiscovered** physical theory).
- When we are suspicious that a field will be subject to **thoroughly** opaque ignorance, we'll need **new concepts**.
- **Advanced point.** The development of **relativistic** physics necessitated the development of two concepts of **mass** (classical mechanics has **just one**).

- **Observation.** New concepts may be needed in the **political** context too.
- **Example.** Miranda Fricker gives the example of **sexual harassment**.
- Prior to it being named and having a concept for the phenomenon, folks (especially women) were not well equipped to convey the experience (and **related harms**).
- Moreover, society was poorly equipped to **understand** them.
- Plausibly (though this is **controversial!**) we have **thoroughly opaque ignorance** until the relevant concept is properly **incorporated**.
- This kind of phenomenon is often called **hermeneutic injustice** by philosophers.
- **Upshot.** Generation of new and modification of old concepts can be **needed** to combat ignorance, even in the socio-political domain.
- It's **not** just confined to esoteric areas of science.

- This session we've seen an examination of different kinds of **ignorance** and the relationship to **misinformation**, **disinformation**, and **humbug/bullshit**.
- There are **links** between all of them.
- **Hope.** By understanding the different kinds better, we can better understand how to **combat them**.
- **Question.** What kinds of **ignorance** (and maybe even **humbug/bullshit**) are there in your fields?
- I'll be back in session 9. (What is the place of mind in nature?)
- See you then!