

BULLSHIT, POLITICS, AND IGNORANCE

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Slides available via the “Blog” section of my website

<https://neilbarton.net/blog/>



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Forskningsrådet

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- 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

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- 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.

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- **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**.¹

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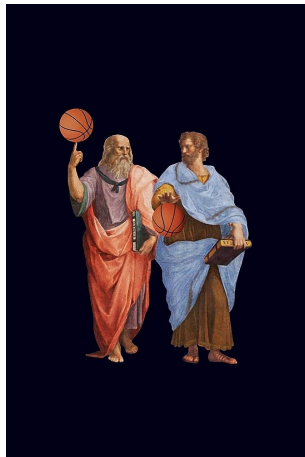
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- I'll mostly work with **knowledge-ignorance**.

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- 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.

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- 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).

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- 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 ’

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- Because of its difficult nature, we'll just highlight a couple of **overarching themes**.

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- e.g. Plausibly **we** know the outcome of most legal cases, without any **one** of us knowing.

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- 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!



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- Wide ranging interests, also on philosophy of **caring** and **importance**.

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- Cf. Paxman vs. Howard "Did you threaten to overrule him?" asked **12 times**.

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- There might not be any concrete **falsehoods** that can be pointed towards.

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- e.g. Is every even number greater than 2 the sum of two primes? (Goldbach's Conjecture)

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- e.g. Many **false beliefs** (especially ones **strongly held**)!

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- e.g. How can we effect a meaningful response to climate change?

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- e.g. Hypatia's ignorance about leptons and motor cars.

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- These attempt generate **opaque** ignorance (which can be hard to combat) by inculcating **false beliefs**.

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- 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.

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- **Advanced point.** The development of **relativistic** physics necessitated the development of two concepts of **mass** (classical mechanics has **just one**).

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- 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.

- **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.

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- See you then!