



Willful Ignorance, Self-Deception, and the Motivation Condition– A Reply to M. Glowicki (2018)

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Abstract: Despite being given significant attention in the philosophical literature, the account of willful ignorance is still constantly debated upon. Philosophers such as Glowicki (2018) have debated that the inconvenience of knowing the proposition is not necessary for one to be willfully ignorant because of the instances of ‘praiseworthy willful ignorance’ that he proposes. In this article, I will argue that while this is true, her account is insufficient as though it need not be inconvenient, one must still have a motive to remain willfully ignorant of the proposition. With this, I will explain the importance of the motivation condition in the account of willful ignorance and how its necessity disproves Glowicki’s (2018) claim that there is a close relationship between willful ignorance and self-deception.

Key Words: epistemology; willful ignorance; praiseworthy willful ignorance; self-deception; motivation condition

1. INTRODUCTION

Consider this case of Glowicki (2018, p. 3-4). A parent receives an email from their child’s school regarding an influx of new students who are *deathly* allergic to peanuts. The parent glances at the email and perceives it as ‘spam’ and moves it to the trash folder. In the same week, the parent, later on, received a voicemail this time from the school saying that it concerns *all* students and is especially sensitive as it concerns students with allergies attending the school. The parent then clicks ‘next’ as they rationalize that ‘My kid doesn’t have allergies, so this voicemail doesn’t concern me.’ A month later, the parent receives a flyer from the school reading “Health Awareness: Parents, Please Read”. The parent then immediately throws the flyer, thinking, ‘Gosh! The precautions these schools have to take nowadays.’

The case mentioned presents a kind of ignorance that some philosophers refer to as “willful ignorance”. Willful Ignorance, in its broadest sense, may be defined as “ignorance that is due to one’s own will rather than to external barriers” (Wieland, 2016, p. 2).

Despite the significant attention given to the concept of ‘willful ignorance’, the necessary conditions of what makes a person willfully ignorant are still a blur. Glowicki (2018) had recently taken up this debate claiming that a doxastic attitude of suspicion is unnecessary in opposition to Lynch (2016), and she diverged from the feature that Wieland (2016) and Lynch (2016) both hold, which is ‘knowing p is inconvenient.’ With that, she creates an account of willful ignorance that proves the relation of willful ignorance and self-deception.

Though in my paper, I shall be arguing that a

motivation condition is necessary for willful ignorance when determining whether one is willfully ignorant. With this, I will be arguing that Glowicki’s (2018) account is too broad as it accounts for indifferent, stupid, apathetic, and with lack of curiosity subjects. Furthermore, I aim to prove that indifferent, stupid, or apathetic subjects and the like are not willfully ignorant, deeming Glowicki’s account as insufficient, and propose a more revised account focusing on the necessity of a motivation condition to suffice for that shortcoming. This account will then be used to disprove the relation of willful ignorance and self-deception.

2. Necessary Conditions of Willful Ignorance

A recent account by Madeline Glowicki (2018, p. 3) holds ‘suspicion’ being an unnecessary condition for willful ignorance, although Glowicki diverges on the clause that ‘ p is inconvenient for S ’. Glowicki argues for this by proposing an account of praiseworthy willful ignorance that oftentimes does not adhere to the inconvenience clause. Glowicki (2018, p. 5) states, “In instances of praiseworthy willful ignorance, S does not choose to remain ignorant because it is convenient to do so but because, for example, they believe it’s the right thing to do.”

Firstly, I agree with Glowicki (2018) that a condition of suspicion is not necessary. One may be willfully ignorant without suspecting p to be the case. What I argue matters here is, at the very least, S is aware and knows that p may be the case. Secondly, I agree with Glowicki (2018) that an inconvenience clause does not matter. In cases of praiseworthy willful ignorance, one may be willfully ignorant of p



not because knowledge of p is inconvenient for them, but because they think it is the right thing to do. While this is true, where I diverge from Glowicki's (2018) account is wherein S may or may not consider p to be normatively relevant as Glowicki claims. I diverge from this point because willful ignorance does not hold cases wherein the subject does not consider the proposition p to be normatively relevant. I will argue that S must have a motivation, and there is a need of a motive prong of wanting to *not* know p in order to be considered willfully ignorant so that it may not account for people who are lazy, apathetic, disinterested, and the like, towards knowing p , for if they are, then their ignorance is not exactly willful. I shall explain this further in the next sections of my paper.

3. Willful Ignorance and its relation to Self-Deception

Glowicki argues that knowing p need not be inconvenient for the subject because this only applies to instances of blameworthy willful ignorance. With this, Glowicki (2018, p. 5) holds the following account:

- i. S knows that proposition p might be the case;
- ii. proposition p is available;
- iii. knowledge of proposition p is normatively relevant;
- iv. S decides they wish to remain ignorant of proposition p , for some reason R ;
- v. S takes the appropriate steps, and is successful, in remaining ignorant of proposition p .

Glowicki claims that in some instances of willful ignorance, self-deception is involved. She argues that "blameworthy willful ignorance always involves some self-deception on the part of S , because S will always be self-deceptive concerning the normative relevance of p while praiseworthy willful ignorance never involves self-deception concerning the normative relevance of p " (2018, p. 20). She further explains this by utilizing two features found in paradigmatic cases of self-deception which are (2018, p. 21):

1. The subject encounters evidence indicating that some true proposition, p , is normatively relevant.
2. They strongly desire that p is not normatively relevant (i.e., normatively irrelevant).

Glowicki claims that in cases of blameworthy willful ignorance, the subject S exhibits behavior identical to self-deceived subjects wherein the subject S either encounters or knows that p is normatively relevant, yet they decide not to investigate on it

further as they falsely believe that p is not normatively relevant and does not concern them when it actually does.

4. Necessity of a Motivation Condition

I disagree with Glowicki's account because such an account is what I argue is insufficient and unclear. I claim that a condition of motivation is necessary in deducing whether one is willfully ignorant for if there is no motive prong, then lazy, apathetic, and disinterested people would be considered willfully ignorant, and because they are *not* willfully ignorant, there should be no absence of a motive prong. I will be proving this through the evidence that in willful ignorance, one must avoid knowledge of p , if one *is* fine with knowing p , then they are not willfully ignorant at all. Secondly, willful ignorance is about the deliberation of sustaining their ignorance, if the subject does not even consider themselves as ignorant, then they are not willfully ignorant at all.

These two characteristics are what I will argue that lazy, disinterested, and apathetic people may hold that contradicts their willful ignorance, (1) they are fine with knowing p , and (2) they oftentimes do not consider themselves as ignorant. Furthermore, if a subject *is* willfully ignorant, this entails that they wish to remain ignorant of the proposition. If they wish to remain ignorant of a proposition, then it means they do *not* want to know the proposition. So if a subject is willfully ignorant, then they must *not* want to know the proposition.

Let us take this example wherein the subject is apathetic towards knowing p . Suppose Frank has been a loyal buyer to a certain toothpaste brand. Later that year, Frank's mother found out that the toothpaste company has their products made in very detrimental slavery-like conditions. She read an article with the headline "Top Global Toothpaste Company Masks Unethical Labour Conditions". She sends this email to her son, Frank in hopes that he will stop buying from the company. Frank reads the headline of the email and assumes that the toothpaste company has unethical conditions, but something in the degree of contractualization of workers and not something as harsh as literal slavery-like conditions. Not long after, Frank, thinking he has something else better to do, does not read the article further and puts it in the trash folder. Frank's mother, not having received a reply, then emails him the same article every week, thinking that he has not read it, and Frank continues to ignore what is in the email simply because he is uninterested, thinking he has something else better to do. Though suppose his mother calls him on a weekend and decides to explain to him the contents of the article through call, and he chooses not to hang up because he has some time on his hands. He



then finds out about the truths of the toothpaste company without any remorse or inconvenience from finally knowing p .

It can be said that this case fulfills all the necessary conditions of Glowicki's account. It is also clear that Frank here chooses not to know p for whatever reason that he had, but what is not clear is whether his intentions of becoming ignorant was, in fact, *willful*. In respect to Glowicki's account, he would already be considered as someone 'willfully ignorant', but we cannot exactly say that Frank's ignorance *was* intended as (1) he did not mind finding out that p later on, and (2) he thinks that he already knows enough about p that makes him think it is unnecessary for him to find out more.

4.1 Attitude towards the proposition

Willful ignorance is about avoiding knowing a certain proposition; hence this avoidance of a fact or truth makes one as *willfully* ignorant. Though if a subject is fine with knowing p , then willful ignorance is not the case. One cannot be fine or open to knowing about the proposition and still be considered willfully ignorant for avoiding knowledge of it because then, it is not their ignorance they are being *willful* of, but then some other reason that is definitely not to sustain their ignorance. Let us take the example of Frank. What we can clearly infer from his situation is that he simply wanted to avoid wasting time. If anything, the only willfulness he has exhibited is his willfulness in making productive use of his time and not in sustaining his ignorance. To me, it seems counterintuitive to consider Frank as 'willfully ignorant' as per Glowicki's account, especially when this has not been his intention. Furthermore, if a subject is fine with knowing p , then we cannot exactly consider their actions as avoidance of knowing p , which willful ignorance is supposedly all about.

4.2 Awareness of the subject's ignorance

Glowicki agrees that one may be fully aware that they are willfully ignorant but the insufficiency in his account leaves a hole for subjects who do not even consider themselves as willfully ignorant. In Glowicki's account, Frank may already be considered as one who is willfully ignorant, but if asked if he was being willfully ignorant, it is possible that he would not say he is fully ignorant, for he already knows that the company has unethical labor conditions, and he thought to himself that is all that he needs to know to not buy from them. Though if a subject would not consider themselves as fully willfully ignorant, then it is wrong for us to even consider them as willfully ignorant at all. Willful ignorance is about one's decision to sustain their ignorance, but if they think that they are not so ignorant at all, then their action cannot be justified as to be exactly avoiding knowledge

of p .

This then creates a conflict within Glowicki's account as there is room for people to 'willfully avoid' p , as per Glowicki, yet at the same time have subjects who would not admit they are willfully ignorant. This attitude of the subject towards their ignorance undermines the whole willfulness of the action, hence making Glowicki's account insufficient.

I argue that it is very counterproductive to exclude one's intentions in determining whether one is willfully ignorant because this undermines the whole 'willfulness' in the action.

5. An Account of Willful Ignorance

Having explained the importance of the motivation condition in fulfilling this hole of determining one's willful ignorance, I suggest that the account of willful ignorance must be as follows:

- i. p is true;
- ii. p is readily available, and finding out p would not be exorbitantly demanding for S ;
- iii. S knows that p might be the case;
- iv. p is normatively relevant;
- v. S does an action u knowing that it keeps him ignorant of p ;
- vi. because S does *not* want to know p .

It is not enough that the subject subconsciously knows it keeps them ignorant, especially if it is not their intention to be. Furthermore, identifying one's motivation clears the whole purpose of the act. And as for the case of the parent, what can be inferred here is not exactly the parent 'wishing to sustain their ignorance of p ', but rather wishing to 'not waste valuable time'. This then undermines the *willfulness* to be ignorant in the situation as the parent does not deliberately try to sustain their ignorance, but they deliberately *try* not to waste time, having ignored the email only as a byproduct of that motivation. So, in this case, on my account, I would not call the parent willfully ignorant as motivation plays an important role in determining one's willfulness in their ignorance.

Now whether this could be closely linked to self-deception as Glowicki (2018) claims wherein in instances of blameworthy willful ignorance, S will always be self-deceptive concerning the normative relevance of p , I argue that these two are very distinct for the reason that if the subject considers p to be normatively irrelevant, then they would be indifferent towards knowing p or would lack the curiosity to do so, making no willful ignorance involved but merely self-deception. So on my account, it is impossible for one to consider p as normatively irrelevant and still be willfully ignorant.



2. CONCLUSIONS

I have proven that if there is no motivation clause in Glowicki’s account, then people who are lazy, apathetic, or disinterested may be considered as willfully ignorant. I had also proven that lazy, apathetic, or disinterested subjects may not be considered willfully ignorant because they are fine with knowing *p*, and they may not consider themselves willfully ignorant, which would then be contradictory in Glowicki’s account.

I had argued that it is impossible that *S* does not consider *p* as normatively irrelevant and simultaneously have the motivation to *not* want to know *p* while being self-deceived, for if *S* had been self-deceived into thinking *p* is normatively irrelevant, then their efforts to avoid *p* is not so that may continue to be ignorant of it, but simply because of other reasons such as they would not want to waste time or such, undermining their willfulness to be ignorant. Also, if *S* had been self-deceived of the normative relevance of *p*, then it is impossible for them to *not* want to know *p*, for if they do, then it is because they believe *p* indeed may be true and that it is normally relevant after all for them to *not* want to know it.

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