

Falsehoods and Ignorance: What's the Difference?

Ka Ya Lee

Harvard University

In her paper, “Agnotology and Policy Advocacy Groups,” Erin Scussel argues that U.S. policy advocacy groups, such as Citizens for Renewing America, manufacture deliberate falsehoods and advance ignorance.¹ For instance, these advocacy groups claim that public K-12 schools make white children feel ashamed of themselves (falsehoods) and advocate for eliminating race-related topics from social studies curricula, thereby creating ignorance for children. She characterizes this mechanism as agnosis, defined loosely as the fabricated “lack of, denial of, or indifference to knowledge,” and raises numerous examples to illustrate her point.²

Scussel’s case is detailed, well-researched, and compelling, but what stands out about her work is her presentation of the intimate link between and potential conflation of falsehoods and ignorance. Perhaps, her portrayal of falsehoods and ignorance as closely tied is unsurprising. I do agree with Scussel that falsehoods often create ignorance. What I wish to focus on, however, is the potential conflation of the two implied in her paper. For instance, when revisiting Proctor’s work, Scussel writes:

The tobacco industry represented scientific evidence as not being definitive proof that cigarettes cause cancer, and therefore the product was ‘innocent until proven guilty.’ Their narrative, marketed and distributed by successful, organized public relations campaigns, manufactured disinformation, and led consumers to retain *false beliefs, a.k.a. ignorance* [emphasis is mine].

The tacit equating of ignorance and false beliefs is observable in other statements of hers, such as “The nature of knowledge in this study is non-knowledge, or *ignorance*, meaning absence of true belief or *holding false beliefs* [emphasis is mine].

Another way to illustrate my point is to replace the word “ignorance” peppered in her paper with “falsehoods” or “false belief(s)” and see how the

meaning of her statements does not substantively change. Scussel, for example, notes, “determining intention is challenging because to claim a person or institution intentionally wanted to manufacture *ignorance* would require omni-present clairvoyance.” In this sentence, replacing the term “ignorance” does not meaningfully alter what she intends to say throughout the paper: these advocacy groups fabricate falsehoods, or *ignorance*. This deep linking of these two concepts seems so profound that, in her paper, they appear equivalent rather than different.

Is such equalizing permissible? I argue the following. First, conceptually, falsehoods and ignorance are and should remain distinct from one another on the grounds that there are cases in which 1) falsehoods produce knowledge or 2) non-falsehoods create ignorance. Second, ignorance is not always advanced by falsehoods. That is, falsehoods or false beliefs are not the only things that promote ignorance. Third, and relatedly, there are other—perhaps more pernicious—epistemic phenomena that promote ignorance: the absence of epistemic space and partial or incomplete truths.

Let us maintain Scussel’s definition of ignorance as the “absence of true belief or holding false beliefs” and further define falsehood as an untrue statement. On these definitions, non-ignorance would be the presence of true belief or knowledge, and non-falsehoods would be a statement that is either true or whose truth value cannot be confirmed. Table 1 shows examples of 1) non-falsehoods not creating ignorance, 2) falsehoods producing non-ignorance, 3) non-falsehoods promoting ignorance, and 4) falsehoods facilitating ignorance.

Scussel’s paper focuses only on the fourth category: falsehoods leading to ignorance. One example of the first case (non-falsehoods not creating ignorance) would be the true belief, “comprehensive sex ed decreases rates of teen pregnancy.” This statement is well-supported by existing relevant research and creates non-ignorance or, more straightforwardly, knowledge.

The second case may be counterintuitive, but it is also well-discussed in epistemology. Philosopher Catherine Elgin puts forth the notion of “felicitous falsehoods,” the kind of falsehoods incorporated in model and theory building that advances scientific knowledge or understanding.³ One such example would

be ideal gas law, which relies on a non-existent concept that is ideal gas. Elgin writes:

That there exists no ideal gas does not discredit the ideal gas law...The concept of an ideal gas involves sweeping simplifications. It construes its molecules as perfectly elastic spheres and characterizes their behavior only under idealized conditions...By paring away inessentials, the ideal gas law presents a fiction that cleanly exemplifies thermodynamically significant features...Not despite but because of its limitations, simplifications, and idealizations, the ideal gas law furthers the ends of the science.⁴

To wit, constructing a theory or model requires, to some extent, working with falsehoods, that is, simplified, *false* versions of reality such that the model accentuates a particularly salient aspect of the reality. Felicitous falsehoods are also inherent in social sciences. Regression models, for instance, are constructed to minimize the sum of the distance between each data point and the regression line. The goal of model building is not to account for every single data point but to construct a model that highlights a particular story, even at the expense of truthfully explaining everything in the data. In other words, not all falsehoods advance ignorance. On the contrary, some falsehoods indeed create knowledge.

Furthermore, ignorance is not always facilitated by falsehoods. In particular, I would like to address two kinds of non-falsehoods that produce ignorance: 1) absence of epistemic space and 2) half or incomplete truth. The first case is established by Miranda Fricker, who provides an example of hermeneutical injustice caused by the lack of epistemic space in which women talk to each other and make sense of their unnamed experiences, that is, sexual harassment.

The second case, I believe, is less discussed but more insidious: half-truths. Consider the following statements: a) on average, Black students score lower on standardized tests than their White peers, and b) on average, Asian American students perform better on standardized tests compared to their White peers. Both statements are factual and, thus, true. However, they merely

provide incomplete truths. When it comes to the first statement, what is missing is another set of facts, that the pervasive racism in society is the driver of the Black and White achievement gaps. The second statement, which is also true, also provides only half of the picture: it is true that Asian American students, on average, perform better on achievement tests, but they are also subject to anti-Asian racism in the education system.

The “half-true” nature of these statements creates ignorance in different ways. On one hand, the first statement perpetuates the false racist stereotypes against Black and Brown students that they are not hard-working enough. Thus, statement a) demonstrates a case of incomplete truth that directly produces ignorance. On the other hand, the half-true statement about Asian Americans often functions as a mask to the pernicious reality of racism in school, furthering ignorance about the state of anti-Asian exclusion in the American education system. In other words, unlike the half-truth that straightforwardly facilitates ignorance, the second kind promotes ignorance by hiding the other set of truths.

Finally, these ignorance-conducive half-truths may be more insidious than ignorance-creating falsehoods on the grounds that it seems more straightforward to identify falsehoods than half-truths. The “global warming hoax” claim is easy to combat with climate science, but what epistemic toolkits should we use to challenge half-truths? In the last part of her paper, Scussel offers a solution of admitting ignorance. If her vision of acknowledging ignorance is correct, then it seems to me that it is an effective tool for eradicating ignorance caused not only by falsehoods but also by non-falsehoods, such as half-truths. Finally, if agnotology is a study of information manipulation in general, there seems to be an entire pocket of epistemic phenomena currently missed: half-truths that produce ignorance.

In this response, I first pointed out the deep linkage and potential conflation between ignorance and falsehoods embedded in Scussel’s paper. Second, I presented the distinction between ignorance and falsehoods, walking through examples of 1) knowledge-conducive, “felicitous” falsehoods and 2) ignorance-producing non-falsehoods or half-truths. Scussel introduces agnotology by writing, “agnotology focuses on the ignorance-making strategies

of individuals or institutions who hold authority over the dissemination of information to the public.” If agnotology is not just about ignorance-making falsehoods but about ignorance-producing information exploitation in general, I believe that ignorance-creating non-falsehoods deserves as serious attention as ignorance-conductive falsehoods.

Table 1.

	Non-falsehoods	Falsehoods
Non-ignorance	1) “Comprehensive Sex ed decreases rates of teen pregnancy.”	2) scientific models (for example, ideal gas law)
Ignorance	3) a) “On average, Black students score lower on standardized tests than their white peers.” (true) b) on average, Asian American students perform better on standardized tests compared to their White peers.	4) “Schools are indoctrinating children with dangerous ideology.” (author’s claim)

REFERENCES

- 1 Erin Scussel, *Agnotology and Policy Advocacy Groups*. *Philosophy of Education Journal*. 80, no. 2, <https://doi.org/10.47927/80.2.195>.
- 2 Croissant, Jennifer L. “Agnotology: Ignorance and absence or towards a sociology of things that aren’t there.” *Social Epistemology* 28, no. 1 (2014): 4-25.
- 3 Elgin, Catherine Z. 1996. *Considered Judgment*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- 4 Elgin, *Considered Judgment*, 183.