

Epistemologies of Ignorance

MA seminar

Monday 10:15 – 12:00, spring semester 2026

First session: 16.02.2026

Room: F001

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Course description

Ignorance is often treated as the mere absence of knowledge—an unfortunate state caused by a lack of education or research, yet ultimately unavoidable given the limits of human resources and capacities. Nobody can know everything, and philosophical work in epistemology and the philosophy of science has traditionally focused on what we *do* know and why.

This has changed in recent decades. Ignorance has become the subject of lively philosophical debate. One reason is the growing recognition that public ignorance on issues such as climate change is not an accidental phenomenon that can be remedied simply by providing more information. Instead, it is a complex political problem that requires a richer understanding of ignorance and its causes.

A second reason is the increasing awareness that ignorance can be a matter of injustice. Scholars in critical race studies and feminist epistemology have argued that ignorance can serve privileged groups to maintain unjust social structures. This again calls for a more careful engagement with the nature and workings of ignorance. The aim of this seminar is to provide space for such engagement. We will discuss key contributions within epistemology and the philosophy of science and reflect on the implications of these insights for contemporary societal, political, and scientific problems.

The seminar is structured in three parts. We begin by asking why philosophers should study ignorance (rather than knowledge) and what ignorance is. We will focus in

particular on arguments for understanding ignorance as a structural, societal phenomenon, as this approach will be central to the later parts of the seminar.

Weeks 4–7 will examine resources developed within social epistemology for understanding ignorance. Our main aim will be to reflect on the relationship between power and ignorance, and more broadly on how social location shapes what individuals know and do not know. We will discuss arguments from critical race theorists and feminist epistemologists that social privilege can render certain groups ignorant in specific ways, and we will ask when such ignorance should be considered pernicious, wilful, or culpable. We will also consider factors that influence who is perceived as ignorant and when biased perceptions of ignorance constitute forms of epistemic injustice.

Finally, the third part of the seminar shifts the focus to scientific knowledge production and ignorance. We will discuss when a lack of scientific knowledge or understanding becomes a matter of justice, paying particular attention to the role of science funding. We will read texts on the so-called “tobacco strategy,” which was used to create and maintain public ignorance about, for example, the harmful effects of smoking. Last but not least, we will reflect on cases in which scientific ignorance might be virtuous and should therefore be actively maintained.

Administration

All information about the course as well as digital versions of the required reading can be found on the ILIAS course page.

To gain 4 ECTS points (ungraded) for the course you are expected to:

- **Regularly attend** the seminar having read at least the text that is marked as key reading and
- Take on an **“expert” role for one session** of your choice. This involves reading both core and secondary reading, giving a 10-minutes presentation in class on key points of the secondary reading and come up with three discussion questions that seem most pertinent to you in light of core and secondary reading. We will assign the sessions during the first meeting.

If you want to receive 8 ECTS points (graded) you are expected to additionally write an essay (**“Seminararbeit”**) based on the literature discussed in the class. If you want to do so, you are required to meet with me at least once to discuss your topic of choice and receive approval. More information on expectations and format of the **“Seminararbeit”** will be provided in week 7.

Contact

Should there be any administrative issues or other problems I should know about, feel free to contact me at any point. This includes accessibility issues, concerns about the content of any of the sessions or specific needs that you might have. You can reach me via email, after class or, on most days, by coming to my office.

Intended Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, you should:

- be able to identify and compare different understandings of ignorance
- be able to explain and discuss the relation between ignorance, social positionality and power in light of the course's core readings
- be able to discuss when and why ignorance is harmful, harmless and virtuous in light of the course's core readings
- be able to discuss the role of scientific research in the production of ignorance in light of the course's core readings.

Semester Plan

<i>Week</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Preparation</i>
<i>Week 1 (16.02.)</i>	Introduction	No reading
Part 1: Studying ignorance <u>Key Questions:</u> Why should philosophers study ignorance? How is ignorance understood and conceptualised in the philosophical literature?		
<i>Week 2 (23.02.)</i>	Why and how to study ignorance	<p>Core reading: Alcoff, L. (2007). Epistemologies of ignorance: Three types. In <i>Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance</i>. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds.), SUNY Press, 39-50.</p> <p>And: Proctor, R. (2008). Agnotology: A Missing Term to Describe the Cultural Production of Ignorance (and Its Study). In <i>Agnotology</i>. Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger (eds.). Stanford University Press. 1-26.</p>
<i>Week 3 (02.03.)</i>	Defining ignorance	<p>Core reading: El Kassar, N. (2018). What Ignorance Really Is. Examining the Foundations of Epistemology of Ignorance, <i>Social Epistemology</i>, 32(5), 300-310.</p> <p>Secondary reading (optional): Peels, R. and Le Morvan, P. (2016). The Nature of Ignorance. Two Views. In <i>The Epistemic Dimension of Ignorance</i>. Peels, Rik, Blaauw, Martijn (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 12-33.</p>
Part 2: Ignorance, social epistemology and epistemic injustice		

Key Questions: In what way does social location influence knowledge, ignorance and the perception thereof? When does this constitute an epistemic injustice? What responsibilities do individual knowers have to address such injustices?

<p>Week 4 (09.03.)</p>	<p>Ignorance and race</p>	<p>Core reading: Mills, C. (2007). White Ignorance. In <i>Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance</i>. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds.), SUNY Press, 13-38.</p> <p>Secondary reading: Ortega, M. (2006). Being lovingly, knowingly ignorant: White feminism and women of colour. <i>Hypatia</i>, 21(3), 56-74.</p>
<p>Week 5 (16.03.)</p>	<p>Ignorance and epistemic injustice</p>	<p>Core reading: Dotson, K. (2011). Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing. <i>Hypatia</i>, 26(2), 236-257.</p> <p>And: Solnit, R. (2014). <i>Men explain things to me</i>. Haymarket books.</p> <p>Secondary reading: Fricker, M. (2007). Hermeneutical Injustice. In <i>Epistemic Injustice</i>. Oxford Scholarship Online.</p> <p>And: Pohlhaus, G. (2012). Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice: Toward a Theory of Willful Hermeneutical Ignorance. <i>Hypatia</i>, 27(4), 715-735.</p>
<p>Week 6 (23.03.)</p>	<p>Willful ignorance</p>	<p>Core reading: Lynch, K. (2016). Willful ignorance and self-deception. <i>Philosophical Studies</i>, 173(2), 505-523.</p> <p>Secondary reading: Williams, D. (2021). Motivated ignorance, rationality, and democratic politics. <i>Synthese</i>, 198, 7807-7827.</p>
<p>Week 7 (30.03.)</p>	<p>Epistemic responsibility and resistance</p> <p><i>Expectations for written examinations</i></p>	<p>Core reading: Medina, J. (2016). Ignorance and Racial Insensitivity. In <i>The Epistemic Dimensions of Ignorance</i>. R. Peels & M. Blaauw (eds.), Cambridge University Press, 178–201.</p> <p>Secondary reading: Townley, C. (2006). Toward a Reevaluation of Ignorance. <i>Hypatia</i>, 21(3). 37-55.</p>

Easter Vacation

Part 3: Ignorance, agnotology and science

Key Questions: When is a lack of scientific knowledge a matter of justice? When is scientific ignorance virtuous? How can ignorance be deliberately created and maintained?

<p>Week 8 (13.04.)</p>	<p>Ignorance and feminist philosophy of science</p>	<p>Core reading: Tuana, N. (2004). Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance. <i>Hypatia</i>, 19(1), 194–232.</p> <p>Secondary Reading: Kourany, J. (2018). Agnotology, Feminism, and Philosophy: Potentially the Closest of Allies. In <i>Bloomsbury Companion to Analytic Feminism</i>, P. Garavaso (ed.).</p>
<p>Week 9 (20.04.)</p>	<p>Virtuous ignorance and science</p>	<p>Core reading: Kourany, J. (2020). Might Scientific Ignorance Be Virtuous? The case of Cognitive Differences Research. In <i>Science and the Production of Ignorance</i>, M. Carrier and J. Kourany (eds.), 123-145.</p> <p>Secondary reading: Kukla, Q.R. (2025). Collaboration, epistemic skill, and suspension. <i>Philosophical Studies</i>.</p>
<p>Week 10 (27.04.) ONLINE</p>	<p>Industry-funded ignorance 1</p>	<p>Core reading: Pinto, M.F. (2017). To Know or Better Not To: Agnotology and the Social Construction of Ignorance in Commercially Driven Research. <i>Science & Technology Studies</i>, 30(2).</p> <p>Secondary reading: Michaels, D. (2008). Manufactured Uncertainty: Contested Science and the Protection of the Public’s Health and Environment. In <i>Agnotology</i>, Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger (eds.). Stanford University Press.</p>
<p>Week 11 (04.05.)</p>	<p>Industry-funded ignorance 2</p>	<p>Core reading: Christensen, J. (2008). Smoking out Objectivity: Journalistic Gears in the Agnogenesis Machine. In <i>Agnotology</i>, Robert Proctor and Londa L. Schiebinger (eds.). Stanford University Press.</p> <p>Secondary Reading: Elliott, K. (2015). Selective Ignorance in Environmental Research. In <i>Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies</i>, Matthias Gross and Linsey McGoey (eds.). Routledge International Handbooks.</p>
<p>Week 12 (11.05.)</p>	<p>Ignorance and philosophical practice</p>	<p>Core reading: Alcoff, L. M. (2017). Philosophy and philosophical practice: Eurocentrism as an epistemology of ignorance. In <i>The Routledge handbook of epistemic injustice</i>. Routledge, 397-408.</p> <p>Secondary Reading: Mills, C. W. (2005). “Ideal Theory” as Ideology. <i>Hypatia</i>, 20(3), 165–183.</p>

Week 13
(18.05.)

Open questions

Core reading: To be decided.

Possible topics: Ignorance and trust in science; distributive epistemic (in)justice; more on ignorance and epistemic injustice; ignorance and science funding, ignorance and epistemic bubbles...