

Willful Ignorance and Self-Deception

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Abstract

Willful ignorance is an important concept in criminal law and jurisprudence, though it has not received much discussion in philosophy. When it is mentioned, however, it is regularly assumed to be a kind of self-deception. In this article I will argue that self-deception and willful ignorance are distinct psychological kinds. First, some examples of willful ignorance are presented and discussed, and an analysis of the phenomenon is developed. Then it is shown that current theories of self-deception give no support to the idea that willful ignorance is a kind of self-deception. Afterwards an independent argument is adduced for excluding willful ignorance from this category. The crucial differences between the two phenomena are explored, as are the reasons why they are so easily conflated.

1. Introduction: Some Examples of Willful Ignorance

Consider the following well-known passage from the memoirs of the high-ranking Nazi, Albert Speer. Here Speer recounts an occasion where his trusted friend and colleague, Karl Hanke, after visiting a concentration camp (probably Auschwitz), reportedly advised him never to accept an invitation to inspect one under any circumstances:

I did not query him, I did not query Himmler, I did not query Hitler, I did not speak with personal friends. I did not investigate – for I did not want to know what was happening there ... During those few seconds, while Hanke was warning me, the whole responsibility had become a reality again ... For from that moment on, I was inescapably contaminated morally; from fear of discovering something which might have made me

turn from my course, I had closed my eyes. This deliberate blindness outweighs whatever good I may have done or tried to do in the last period of the war ... Because I failed at that time, I still feel, to this day, responsible for Auschwitz in a wholly personal sense (Speer 1970, p. 376).

It is disputed that Speer knew only as much as he was letting on in this passage, but let's take him at his word for argument's sake. What Speer seemingly wants us to think is that although Hanke's remarks revealed to him that awful things were going on at the camps, they did not disclose exactly *how* awful they were. In particular, they did not reveal to him that the worst was true: that they were extermination facilities (Speer always denied having known about the Final Solution, though let's suppose he heard rumours about it or heard it being discussed at senior level). So Speer couldn't tell for sure that this was true on the basis of that and perhaps other evidence, since Hanke, a 'man of sympathy' (Ibid.), could have advised him similarly had he just witnessed awful living conditions of detainees let's say. But he also didn't want to discover that they were extermination facilities if they were (he then would have had to question 'his course'), so he refrained from inquiring further. Thus he ended up not knowing for sure but nevertheless suspecting that atrocities were occurring at the camps. Or so he'd have us believe.¹

Let me present a similar, invented example of less moral gravity. Consider Burke, who believes he is in good health, but who one day develops some abnormal physical symptoms. He knows that these symptoms can be caused by condition A, which is harmless, or by condition B, a mostly fatal disease. So his having these symptoms would normally justify a visit to the doctor, though condition B is incurable. Let's also suppose that these developments are not innocent at all. However, Burke doesn't go, because he'd rather not know that he has condition B if he does.

These are two cases of what we would call *willful ignorance* (also called 'willful blindness'). Indeed, the Speer passage has become a stock example of this, frequently cited to illustrate it. Willful ignorance is an important concept in jurisprudence and has received significant attention by legal thinkers (whose thoughts I draw on in this article). It has received less attention in mainstream philosophy, but when it does get mentioned it is regularly assumed, without much ado, to be either identical to self-deception or more usually, to be a kind of self-

¹ It is uncontroversial that he at least knew about the terrible conditions of slave labourers at the munitions factories under his direct command, for which he was sentenced to 20 years in prison.

deception. Kathie Jenni, for instance, thinks that the Speer passage illustrates self-deception (2003, p. 283). The psychologist Albert Bandura would agree, who says that ‘[i]n genuine self-deception people avoid doing things that they have an inkling might reveal what they do not want to know’ (2001, p. 16). So would Nancy Tuana, for whom ‘willful ignorance is a systematic process of self-deception, a willful embrace of ignorance’ (2006, p. 11). D. H. Jones is also in this camp, who writes that ‘[t]he most prevalent form of self-deception ... is purposeful evasion of unwanted truths or information ... If successful, [this] results in a state of willful ignorance which allows the person to avoid subjective distress.’ (2001, p. 782; also see Archer 2013, p. 272; Burrell and Hauerwas 1974, pp. 107-108; Martin 1986, p. 7). I have also noted this tendency from conversations with colleagues; the idea that willful ignorance is a kind of self-deception seems to have *prima facie* plausibility. The relation between these two things needs to be examined more carefully however, and here I will attempt to disentangle willful ignorance from the category of self-deception, arguing that these are distinct psychological kinds. The tendency to conflate these phenomena will persist unless appropriate analytic work is done.

The issue has importance for a number of reasons. First, the task of distinguishing self-deception from a kindred phenomenon such as willful ignorance can only help improve our understanding of each. Even if we already feel that the two phenomena are distinct, the exercise is of value in clarifying their conceptual boundaries. Furthermore, failure to distinguish these phenomena may encourage us to treat them as having the same moral status, something which I believe would be a mistake. Distinguishing them puts us in a position to ask whether Speer, for instance, would have been more or less blameworthy for being self-deceived about the reality of the Final Solution, than for being willfully ignorant of it. This should help make our faculties of moral judgment more acute. Willful ignorance, moreover, is liable to be confused with other phenomena besides self-deception (one recent book on the topic (Heffernan 2012) discusses various psychological curiosities under that heading). Getting a better handle on this notion is therefore desirable.

Before we can investigate the relationship between willful ignorance and self-deception, an analysis of the less-discussed former concept will be attempted. This analysis adopts some of Douglas Husak’s insights into willful ignorance, though it adds to them by emphasising the ‘normativity’ of willful ignorance, and by clarifying the doxastic state of the willfully ignorant subject. This analysis will then enable us to compare the phenomenon with self-deception as it is

understood in contemporary philosophical theory. Here I will try to show that none of the main theories of self-deception give direct support to the idea that willful ignorance is self-deception. Afterwards, an argument is given for thinking that willful ignorance is not self-deception which is independent from those theories. As a result we will see that willful ignorance is different from self-deception in many ways: it involves, among other things, a different range of doxastic states, a different relation to evidence, different behaviour, and a different degree of culpability.

2. An Analysis of Willful Ignorance

As I've said, the concept of willful ignorance is important in criminal law (see Charlow 1992), where defendants often seek to avoid penalties by pleading ignorant to the fact that they were doing something criminal, an ignorance they may have engineered for the purpose of avoiding sanction. Indeed, it has been claimed that the term was coined in the 19th century law courts (Heffernan 2012, p. 2). The analysis of willful ignorance which follows² is intended to do justice to the phenomenon as discussed in legal contexts, though we will aspire to a greater level of precision or comprehensiveness compared to legal definitions, consonant with our philosophical aim of understanding the phenomenon *in toto* rather than in a manner sufficient for legal purposes.

Willful ignorance and culpable ignorance: We should first distinguish willful ignorance from the related concept of *culpable ignorance*. Holly Smith (1983) illustrates this with the case a doctor who administers a procedure to a premature baby having respiratory problems. The procedure has a serious side-effect and damages the baby's eyesight, a result which could have been averted by slightly modifying the procedure. All of this the doctor would have known had he kept abreast of current medical knowledge by reading the latest issue of his medical journal, as he's supposed to do. His ignorance here Smith describes as culpable ignorance.

This case, as well as the others Smith uses to illustrate culpable ignorance, differs markedly from exemplars of willful ignorance in that the ignorance in these cases is *not wanted or intended*, indeed, not *willed*, while in willful ignorance it is. The doctor did not want to be

² I am not one to assume that necessary and sufficient conditions can be given for every non-primitive concept. But the only way to find out whether a concept is definable in this way is to make an attempt at it.

ignorant of any side-effects associated with this medical procedure, or of any other medical facts for that matter. When he decided to do other things rather than read the medical journal, he did not do them with the intention of remaining ignorant of any medical facts. Speer, however, *did* want to be ignorant of the fact he was ignorant of. He may have done things (refused invitations to inspect the camps for instance), or omitted to do things, precisely with the intention of maintaining this ignorance. The doctor is guilty of negligence, but Speer was not guilty of mere negligence.

Granted, in a purely de-compositional or literal sense, willful ignorance is a type of culpable ignorance, in the straightforward sense that Speer, for instance, was both *ignorant* of the realities at Auschwitz, and *responsible* (culpable) for that ignorance. However, it may be advisable to exclude willful ignorance for the category of culpable ignorance, as Husak does for instance (2010, p. 210), as is our prerogative if this is a term of art. Doing so may increase our vocabulary's descriptive power, by allowing easy reference to two importantly different things.

With that said, let's try to discern the features which make a case one of willful ignorance. We can start with the truism that in willful ignorance, there is a truth which the subject, *S*, is willfully ignorant *of* (one can only be ignorant of truths). We may call this true proposition '*p*'. In the Speer case, *p* could be 'inmates are being systematically murdered in the camps' or something vaguer like 'egregious crimes are being committed in the camps'. Let's first try to establish what doxastic attitudes a willfully ignorant subject can have towards this truth.

The doxastic attitude of the willfully ignorant: I assumed that a natural way to interpret the Speer case was to interpret him as having the *suspicion*, based on Hanke's warning and other background knowledge, that *p*. I take it to be uncontroversial that in willful ignorance, the doxastic attitude of *S* towards *p* can be a suspicion (Husak 2010, p. 208). I won't object to anyone who wants to understand a suspicion as being or involving a kind of belief, like a belief that *p* might be true.

But could *S* have something *stronger* than this? Indeed, Husak has claimed that in some cases, the willfully ignorant can have strong enough evidence for *p* to *know* that *p* (2010, p. 215). Perhaps *S* then just pretends not to know this. However, recall that knowledge and ignorance are contraries. Thus, if Speer really knew that *p*, he can't be described as having been willfully *ignorant* of *p*. But could he at least have *believed* that *p*, having some evidence for that truth, but

of a sort inadequate for knowledge? It may seem that this would allow us to maintain that he was ignorant of p , since if being ignorant of something simply means not knowing it, and if Speer only believed but did not know that p , then he was, strictly speaking, ignorant that p . However, believing truly that p is so close a condition to knowing that p that we would surely balk at describing Speer as having been ignorant of p , if he had the true belief that p (see Peels 2010, p. 60). Thus I suggest that to be willfully ignorant of p , one cannot have anything stronger than a suspicion that p .

But could he have something *weaker* than a suspicion that p ? Specifically, could Speer have believed that the camps were *not* extermination camps, and this still be a case of willful ignorance? Could we suppose that he assumed Hanke got unsettled by something much less abominable, something morally tolerable in the circumstances to Speer? This also seems unsatisfactory, for although we could now describe him as being ignorant (not knowing) that p if he genuinely thought that not- p , we couldn't describe this as *willful* ignorance. Calling his ignorance 'willful' implies that he *chose* to be ignorant by *avoiding finding out* whether p . But Speer wouldn't count as having avoided finding out whether p if he felt confident that not- p already. Saying that someone avoided finding out whether p entails that 1) she did not know whether p , 2) she was aware of that fact about herself (she didn't mistakenly *think* she knew whether p), and 3) she deliberately kept things that way.

So someone who is willfully ignorant of p must not have a doxastic attitude weaker or stronger than a suspicion that p (note that this still leaves room for a range of cases, since suspicion comes in degrees: one can have a strong suspicion, or a weak suspicion, etc.). He must neither know/believe that p nor believe that not- p . Only by supposing as much can we respect both the 'willful' and 'ignorance' parts of 'willful ignorance'. The ignorance in willful ignorance is an unusual kind of ignorance. It cannot involve the subject being oblivious to the truth, or disbelieving it, as in normal cases of ignorance. S must at least have an inkling of the truth. But he must not know or believe the truth, lest we lose the right to call him ignorant.

The justification of the suspicion: Must the suspicion in willful ignorance be properly supported by evidence or not? Suppose that Burke frequents a fortune-teller. On one visit, the charlatan tells Burke to expect health problems. Burke happens to be a hypochondriac, and recently read an alarming article about condition B. He is of the age typical for contracting it. He thinks that he may be feeling a bit under the weather. The suspicion that he may have condition

B grows in him. In fact, he does have condition B, though that had nothing to do with his feeling or thinking that he feels ill (that was brought on by his worrying). The condition hasn't given rise to any symptoms yet, though a blood test would confirm its existence. He avoids the doctor, in fear of discovering that he has this incurable disease.

Intuition doesn't vouch for the idea that Burke is willfully ignorant of having condition B here. The reason, I suggest, is that we would not expect anyone to get checked out on the basis of the factors which led to Burke's suspicion. He has no proper reason to be suspicious, though he might think he has. As Husak writes:

... willful ignorance should not be extended to those with unfounded suspicions, that is, to persons suffering from paranoia or other delusions; the suspicion must be restricted to those who have good, objective reasons for their suspicion. Ideally, willfully ignorant agents are suspicious because the evidence demands it (2010, pp. 208-209).

What we have established so far, then, is that to be willfully ignorant of some truth p , S must have a *warranted suspicion* that p . (However, if one feels no reluctance to call Burke willfully ignorant in the above case, it may at least be noted that this would be an unusual one. At least in typical cases of willful ignorance, the subject's suspicion is based on proper evidence.)

A demandingness restriction: In willful ignorance, it should be possible for the subject to find out the truth. But more than that, doing so should not make excessive demands of him (Husak 2010, p. 209). We would not call someone willfully ignorant if finding out the truth would require incurring or risking exorbitant costs (at what point the costs become exorbitant will depend on the context, and will vary with things like the gravity of the situation). For instance, if getting tested for condition B would require Burke spending all his savings (suppose he's poor and lacks health insurance), then we wouldn't accuse him of willful ignorance, even if we believed that he still wouldn't get checked out if he could afford to. Reasonable means for finding out the truth should be available. Clearly it would not have been so difficult for Speer to find out the truth for instance, given his senior position in the *Reich*.

There may be another, related restriction here which Husak doesn't mention. Suppose Farrell is picking out a toothbrush in the supermarket. Farrell thinks that many corporations are villainous, and shouldn't be supported. The thought occurs to him, 'perhaps the makers of this

toothbrush are part of a nasty corporation'. Suppose they are, something Farrell could easily find out by doing some research on the internet. However, Farrell doesn't investigate the toothbrush-makers before deciding to buy the product. Is he, like Speer, willfully ignorant that he is supporting a nasty organisation? In this case, it would not take strenuous efforts for Farrell to find out about the toothbrush-makers. But note that if Farrell has a duty to investigate the makers of this product, then he has a duty to investigate the makers of the many other products he buys. This *would* be quite onerous, and would possibly be unreasonable to expect of a modern consumer like Farrell. Thus there may be a demandingness restriction relating not just to actions, but also to something like act-types or Kantian maxims of action.

The normativity of willful ignorance: It is clear enough that all truths which one could discover but which one doesn't want to know are not ones which one could be willfully ignorant of. One couldn't be described as willfully ignorant for failing to learn trivial truths which one isn't bothered learning for instance. So what is the class of truths which one can be willfully ignorant of? Is it the class of truths which are of significance for the subject? I would like to make another suggestion. I suggest that they are truths that the subject *should* know, from some perspective at least. There should be at least a *pro tanto* reason for *S* to find out the truth.³

The following case may suggest this. Suppose that Jones' daughter was murdered by a sadistic serial killer, who is being prosecuted for the crime. Jones decides not to attend court when harrowing information about the crime is being presented. The knowledge of these details would break him. Is Jones willfully ignorant of what his daughter suffered?

Certainly the relevant truth here is not a trivial one for Jones. But it seems wrong to call Jones willfully ignorant here in light of the strongly *pejorative* tone which, to my ear, that expression has. To call him that would be to imply that he *shouldn't* be ignorant of these details, but nobody would insist on that. For *S* to be willfully ignorant that *p*, there should be a normative demand of some kind for *S* to know that *p*; it should be right, proper, correct, his duty, etc., for him to find that out, or arguably so.

It may be questioned whether our reluctance to call Jones willfully ignorant has to do with semantics or pragmatics. From the latter perspective, it is literally true that Jones is willfully

³ I say '*pro tanto*' because in the Burke case, Burke may be entitled to remain ignorant of the meaning of his symptoms if that's what he wants. We might still want to call him willfully ignorant however, since it's at least arguable that he should find out (so he can begin putting his affairs in order perhaps). There are considerations weighing in favour of that.

ignorant of the details of his daughter's murder, but it is just socially inappropriate to say this, because of connotations of cowardice or moral weakness associated with that term perhaps.

I think that it is more likely that we are looking at a semantic feature here. The normative or pejorative character of 'willful ignorance' seems to be derived straight from the term 'willful'. In its primary use this adjective modifies nouns denoting acts or act-types which are in some way bad or norm-transgressing. Thus we speak of willful cruelty, willful disobedience, willful neglect, willful obfuscation, but never of willful kindness, willful conscientiousness, willful generosity, etc. (it behaves similarly to 'wanton' in this respect). We can conclude from this that the term isn't simply a synonym for 'intentional' or 'deliberate', but means something in the region of 'done in knowing disregard for what is right, decent, proper, sensible, wise, the preferences of others, etc.', or 'done with awareness of, and indifference to, the improper character of the act'. The ignorance in willful ignorance is an improper ignorance. Yet this claim is in need of qualification. As the Burke case may illustrate, a person may be entitled, and have his own good reasons, for being willfully ignorant. Burke may be entitled to not see the doctor if he so wishes. But he should be criticisable in some manner for not doing this if an attribution of willful ignorance is to stick.⁴

Motivation condition: Husak states that in willful ignorance, the subject must have some motivation or incentive to fail to learn the facts: 'His failure to gain more information cannot be due to mere laziness, stupidity, or the absence of curiosity' (2010, p. 209). To bring this out, imagine again the case of Burke, with the addition that Burke suffers from a deep depression which has robbed him of the ability to take an interest in anything. He sees the symptoms, suspects it might be serious, but doesn't go to the doctor, not because he fears finding out that he has condition B, but because he doesn't care whether he does or not. It seems that we would not accuse him of willful ignorance in these circumstances, since, debilitated with apathy, he cannot be described as *avoiding* the doctor in not seeing her (if his wife found his symptoms, and insisted that he see the doctor, he could not be bothered resisting her either). The willfully ignorant must *not want* to find out whether *p*, for whatever reason.

⁴ Deborah Hellman acknowledges a use of 'willful blindness' which implies that the willfully blind are blameworthy. She also says that 'we could use the term "willful blindness" to refer to being deliberately ignorant in a more general sense' (2009, p. 302). We could, but I believe that this would distort the ordinary meaning of 'willful'.

The Analysis: Putting these points together, we arrive at the following analysis of willful ignorance. A subject, S , is willfully ignorant of p if and only if:

- 1) p is true.
- 2) S has a warranted suspicion that p .
- 3) There are some actions, v , such that were S to do them, he would find out whether p , or there are some actions, u , such that were S not to do them, he would find out whether p , and S knows this.⁵
- 4) Neither doing v nor not doing u would be exorbitantly demanding for S , and also, v and u are not instances of act types that it would be exorbitantly demanding for S to consistently do/not do.
- 5) S avoids v ing, or S does u , because he does not want to know that p .
- 6) S should know that p , or it is arguable that he should.

I hope that this analysis is reasonably accurate, and that it at least captures the paradigm cases of willful ignorance. With this on hand, we can now proceed to examine the relationship between willful ignorance and self-deception.

3. Willful Ignorance and Current Theories of Self-Deception.

As I've said, many thinkers who have discussed willful ignorance have assumed that it's a kind of self-deception. One way to support this idea would be to show that the phenomenon meets the conditions for self-deception given in currently popular accounts of it. At least this would persuade those who advocate any of these accounts.

Philosophical analysis of a phenomenon is challenging enough at the best of times, but it becomes all the more difficult when there is disagreement over what the paradigm cases are. Such is the situation, unfortunately, with regard to self-deception. However, thankfully there are some features that are generally recognised to be present in paradigmatic self-deception (note that by restricting our concern here to *paradigmatic* self-deception, we are excluding 'twisted

⁵ I add the second disjunct since in certain cases S would find out whether p if she were to allow things to take their normal course, and in such cases remaining ignorant would require positive action rather than omission.

self-deception', which is usually regarded as a non-paradigmatic variation (e.g., Archer 2013, p. 269)). These are:

- 1) The subject encounters evidence indicating that some true proposition, p , is true.
- 2) She strongly desires that p is not true.

So according to (1) and (2), in paradigmatic self-deception the subject encounters *unwelcome* evidence, indicating that p .⁶ Some hold that this point is important for distinguishing self-deception from wishful thinking (Lynch 2013, p. 1338; Szabados 1973). Beyond that, disagreement persists, particularly with regard to the subject's epistemic/doxastic relation to the truth. Approaches can be sorted into three categories. First, there are *unwarranted belief accounts* (e.g., Mele 1997), which hold that the subject ends up believing that not- p , against the thrust of the evidence, after treating that evidence unjustly. The subject ends up mistakenly and without proper evidential warrant believing that not- p (though not necessarily wholeheartedly; she may be nagged with doubts). On the opposing side, there are *implicit knowledge accounts* (e.g., Bach 1981), which hold that the subject does not believe that not- p , but recognises the truth that p . However, this knowledge is shunned, ignored, or kept out of mind, and the subject acts in various ways as if she believes that not- p , though other behaviour may betray the knowledge that p . Then there are *intermediate accounts*. This includes the view that tries to have it both ways, supposing that the subject both believes that p and believes that not- p (e.g., Davidson 1986/2004), though the popularity of this view has waned. The view that it is indeterminate what the subject believes (e.g., Funkhouser 2009) could be considered an 'intermediate' one also. (Note that there may be significant differences between theories internal to these approaches, but these may be ignored for present purposes).

⁶ It might be said that self-deception could sometimes involve avoiding unwelcome evidence while searching for welcome evidence, and that here no unwelcome evidence may be encountered, since the subject steers clear of it. However, it seems to me that if someone is to be properly described as *avoiding* unwelcome evidence, then she must be aware of a threat or at least of a potential threat (as if she thinks 'don't look there, it may be bad news'). But then she must have some reason to think there could be a potential threat there. Whatever gave her this reason, then, we can think of as the 'unwelcome evidence which she has encountered'. But this may only be evidence that it *may* be true that p . Furthermore, some might want to add that as well as desiring that p , S strongly desires *to believe* that p is true. However, this is not common to all theoretical approaches. Mele (1997), for instance, seems to think that the outwardly-directed desire that not- p is capable by itself of generating the biases which he thinks are involved in self-deception, as he doesn't invoke the inwardly-directed desire to believe that not- p as an explanatory factor.

Both in willful ignorance and in self-deception so understood, there is some truth, p , which the subject is willfully ignorant or self-deceived in relation to.⁷ This much at least is common between them. But does willful ignorance fit into any of these three moulds? Let us consider them one by one.

Unwarranted belief accounts may be considered first. In standard unwarranted belief accounts, the self-deceiver believes without proper evidential warrant the falsehood that not- p . So perhaps this means that this approach would exclude willful ignorance from the category of self-deception, since as we saw, to be willfully ignorant of the truth that p one must not disbelieve it. One must *suspect* that it's true.

This is not an argument I wish to make. Though *some* cases of self-deception may involve believing without warrant that not- p , I have argued elsewhere that unwarranted belief theorists should expand their view of the sorts of doxastic states that may be involved in self-deception to make better sense of the phenomenon (Lynch 2012). Specifically, we should accept that sometimes self-deception can involve having an unwarranted degree of confidence in not- p , where this could fall short of believing that not- p . Similarly, Sophie Archer (2013) has recently argued that self-deception may involve a range of states besides outright belief, such as suspicion. I agree: if your evidence is such that you should believe or feel certain that p , but you end up only suspecting that p (because of motivationally biased reasoning), then we can rightfully say you are self-deceived. Self-deception may involve a variety of doxastic states: believing that not- p , feeling fairly confident that not- p , believing it's possible that not- p , believing there's a 50% chance that not- p , suspecting that p , believing that it's unlikely that p , etc.⁸ What's important is the existence of a *discrepancy*: a discrepancy between what the subject's doxastic state *is*, and what it *should be* given her evidence. So on a modified 'unwarranted belief' approach – let's call it an 'unwarranted doxastic attitude approach' – self-deceivers can suspect the truth, just as in willful ignorance. We can't distinguish them on this

⁷ In self-deception, the proposition one is self-deceived about may not be true (Lynch 2010), but these are untypical cases and may be ignored for present purposes.

⁸ Archer, it seems to me, takes a similar position, but calls her view 'non-doxasticism' about self-deception because it rejects ascribing to the self-deceiver the outright belief that p or that not- p . I would avoid that terminology, as I don't see why suspicions etc. shouldn't be regarded as doxastic states, or as part of a family of doxastic phenomena. Indeed, Archer herself suggests that suspecting that p involves believing that it may be true that p (2013: 273). That would be one reason to think of suspicion as a doxastic phenomenon. I would also claim that *some* cases of straight self-deception may involve believing outright the falsehood that not- p .

point. (Though there is this difference between them at least: on this approach it's *possible* for self-deceivers to believe outright the falsehood that not- p , but this is not possible for a willfully ignorant subject, as our analysis showed. Hence there is a different range of possible doxastic states associated with each phenomenon).

Nevertheless, other features of this approach serve to exclude willful ignorance from the category of self-deception. Consider the point that self-deceivers, on this understanding, have a doxastic attitude which is *unwarranted by their evidence*, or that they *fail to have the attitude which their evidence warrants*. It is on this point that the willfully ignorant can be distinguished from the self-deceived so understood, since the attitude of the former – the suspicion that p – need not be unwarranted. On the contrary, the willfully ignorant subject's suspicion will be correctly inferred from proper evidence, as it was in the two examples discussed (this is either a necessary truth, or a truth about typical cases). There being a discrepancy between the attitude one has and the attitude one should have going on one's evidence is not part of the concept of willful ignorance.⁹

A further major difference between these two phenomena is that in paradigmatic self-deception so understood, the doxastic state is *not intentionally brought about or maintained*, while in willful ignorance it is. Most philosophers now agree that where the state of being self-deceived involves having a mistaken belief, unwarranted by one's evidence, self-deceivers don't intentionally make themselves have this (at least typically). To suppose otherwise is to court paradox. Contrariwise, in willful ignorance the relevant doxastic condition – that of being ignorant (while suspecting) that p – is intended or 'willed'.¹⁰ The willfully ignorant have chosen to remain ignorant of some fact ('Unintentional willful ignorance' is an oxymoron). For instance, Speer may have diverted a conversation from the topic of the camps *with the intention of maintaining his ignorance* of what was happening there, just as Burke avoided the doctor with the intention of remaining ignorant of the meaning of his symptoms. Indeed, the willfully ignorant are often very crafty and calculating in their motivations for maintaining their ignorance, as when someone deliberately avoids exposing himself to evidence of his complicity

⁹ This feature of self-deception is perhaps the main reason why with the self-deceiver, we can generally say 'he's being irrational'. It seems that we cannot always say this of the willfully ignorant (e.g., see the case of the corporate boss below). It's lacking this feature is perhaps the main reason for this.

¹⁰ S 's suspicion that p , of course, is not intentionally brought about. But S is willfully ignorant only insofar as he chooses to remain with that suspicion. He deliberately avoids confirming it.

in a criminal enterprise so as to be able to truthfully deny knowledge of wrongdoing in court if wrongdoing is discovered (see Charlow 1992). The fact that willful ignorance is intentional, while self-deception so understood is not, is significant since it means that different levels of culpability may attach to each. As Charlow says, ‘more purposeful conduct is usually more morally blameworthy’ (1992, p. 1399). People are praised and blamed more for things that they intentionally bring about compared with things that they unintentionally bring about.¹¹ (Of course, people can be blameworthy for the latter too, as in negligence, though the former usually attracts harsher blame).

A related point is that it is quite possible to be fully aware that one is willfully ignorant of something (consider again the Burke case). However, it is not possible to be fully aware that one is self-deceived about something. To become fully aware of one’s self-deception (which would involve becoming aware that one’s belief is false/unwarranted) is to dispel it. This difference is another good reason for associating higher levels of culpability with willful ignorance over self-deception.

But what sort of culpability should we associate with self-deception then? Though I cannot properly defend this view here (as it would require defending a positive theory of how people end up self-deceived), it could be the sort of culpability we associate with *negligence*. A number of thinkers have suggested that self-deception involves negligence (e.g., Bach 1981, p. 368; Szabados 1974, pp. 32-34). It may involve, for instance, neglecting to guard against the influence of one’s emotions, neglecting to give proper consideration to evidence, neglecting to search for evidence even-handedly, or neglecting to consider possible weaknesses with one’s rationalisations, all of which may involve failing to adhere to norms which one would ordinarily endorse. This is an attractive thought; it resonates with the idea that our attitude towards self-deceivers is often a kind of contempt tempered with pity, or a mixture of censure and sympathy, which are natural feelings to have towards someone whose negligence caused some unhappy result (e.g., a careless driver who causes a serious accident). The ignorance of the willfully ignorant is not due to negligence however, since they are intentionally and knowingly keeping themselves in their ignorant state.

¹¹ Legal thinkers seem to agree that the culpability associated with willful ignorance can vary depending on the person’s motive. Speer, for instance, might have avoided finding out about what was happening at the camps due to moral cowardice, or due to strategic cunning, anticipating possible criminal trials. See (Charlow 1992) and (Luban 1999).

Implicit knowledge accounts offer us no reason for thinking that willful ignorance is self-deception either. These accounts attribute knowledge of the unwelcome truth to the self-deceiver, knowledge which is unconscious, suppressed, or ignored. However, to be properly described as being *ignorant* of a truth, one must not know it. It could be replied that having *unconscious* knowledge of this truth may be compatible with being ignorant of it (that might depend on how deeply unconscious the knowledge was). But even if that were so, attributing such unconscious knowledge to the willfully ignorant is gratuitous; it fulfils no explanatory need. Certainly we don't need to posit such unconscious knowledge to explain how/why *S* avoids exposing himself to evidence for *p*, as is evident from reflecting on the cases of Speer and Burke. The fact that they suspect that *p*, but would rather not know that *p*, is all we need mention to explain that.

Intermediate accounts do not provide a mould which willful ignorance can fit into either. There is no reason at all to attribute the beliefs that *p* and that not-*p* to the willfully ignorant. Neither is there reason to adopt the pessimistic position that there is no determinate answer to the question: 'What is the doxastic attitude of the willfully ignorant subject towards *p*?' We have said that the willfully ignorant subject suspects that *p*, which supplies a determinate answer to this question. These intermediate views are generally motivated by the idea that in self-deception the subject displays some behaviour suggesting that she believes that *p*, and other behaviour suggesting that she believes that not-*p* (Lynch 2012, pp. 435-436). But the willfully ignorant don't, or need not, behave in any such ways.

We have looked at the three dominant approaches to understanding self-deception, and have seen that ideas specific to each rule out subsuming willful ignorance into that category, on those understandings. It would be even more significant, however, if features which these theories have *in common* also rule this out. Let us look into this.

What the three approaches have in common can also be considered. I mentioned two ideas which all three approaches to understanding paradigmatic self-deception accept. Let us take the second one first. This was the idea that in paradigmatic self-deception, where *p* is the truth which *S* is self-deceived about, this truth is unwelcome; *S* desires that not-*p*. Is willful ignorance similar in this regard? That is to say, where *p* is the truth which *S* is willfully ignorant of, does *S* desire that not-*p*? In our two examples, this holds true. Speer, if we take him at his word, desired that it wasn't true that atrocities were occurring at the camps (he implies that this

would have weighed on his conscience), and Burke desired that it wasn't true that he had condition B. But this does not seem to be a necessary feature of willful ignorance. Consider a corporate or political boss who puts pressure on his subordinates to achieve certain results, where there is an unspoken understanding that if the law is to be broken to achieve them he does not want to know about it, to give him 'deniability' (see Luban 1999). Suppose that he is aware that his putting this pressure on them could lead them to break the law, and suppose also that the law is broken to achieve these results. Does the boss desire that not- p , where p represents the truth that the law has been broken? It seems quite possible that he could not care less whether p or not- p ; he just wants the results to be achieved. Yet he is willfully ignorant of the truth that p .¹²

Nevertheless, it is possible that typically in willful ignorance S desires that not- p , just like in paradigmatic self-deception. I will not insist on distinguishing these phenomena on this point. However, on the first point of agreement between the three approaches, they can be distinguished more successfully.

The idea here was that in self-deception the subject *encounters* evidence indicating that p is true. However, in willful ignorance, though such unwelcome evidence exists or potentially exists, the subject has avoided exposing himself to it. Such strong evidence has *not* been encountered. The subject doesn't know of its existence, though he suspects that it exists. Burke, for instance, would be told he has condition B if he was examined by the doctor, but he has avoided seeing the doctor. He has not encountered that testimonial evidence. Granted, the willfully ignorant subject has encountered some evidence bearing on the truth of p . But this can only be evidence indicating that p *may* be true, not that it *is* true. This difference is quite important: it is the reason why we associate different *behaviours* with these phenomena, partly making them different 'psychological kinds'. Willful ignorance is a matter of steering clear of evidence. Self-deception, however, is a matter of maintaining a belief in the face of contrary evidence. Self-deceivers have met with the unwelcome evidence and thus it is *too late* for them to avoid it. It is because self-deceivers encounter the unwelcome evidence that we associate behaviours such as being hypercritical, rationalising, and explaining evidence away with self-deception: these are efforts to undermine evidence/considerations which one already knows

¹² Is it possible for someone to be self-deceived in believing that not- p who has no preference regarding whether p ? This suggestion is an interesting one and deserves more attention than I can give it here. But it seems true that any such case would not accord with the descriptions people give of *paradigmatic* self-deception.

about.¹³ (I have argued elsewhere that efforts to avoid evidence one already knows about can't be successful (Lynch 2014)).

We can now conclude that the thesis that willful ignorance is a kind of self-deception cannot be supported by showing that willful ignorance meets the conditions for self-deception given in contemporary accounts. However, this is not conclusive proof that willful ignorance isn't self-deception. Though it is likely that one of these three approaches to understanding self-deception is correct, many advocates of these approaches only intend for them to capture the *paradigm cases*. This may allow for the possibility that willful ignorance is a non-paradigmatic kind of self-deception. Indeed, this is probably what some supporters of the idea that willful ignorance is a kind of self-deception had in mind. A further argument is therefore needed if we are to discount willful ignorance as being self-deception, preferably one which doesn't presuppose the truth of any of the above views on self-deception.

4. Willful Ignorance and Other-Deception

Self-deception is a kind of deception. The other kind is so-called other-deception, where someone/something is deceived by someone/something else.¹⁴ Given that these together constitute a broader kind, some appropriate similarities must exist between these phenomena to tie them together as species of the one genus, and make it intelligible why they share this common title. This is not to say that there must be an 'essence' of deception: some feature or features which all and only cases of deception have in common, which make them cases of deception. Nor is it to say that self-deception must be, to use Mele's phrase, the 'intrapersonal analogue of ordinary interpersonal deception' (1997, p. 91). It is just to say that there must be some notable qualitative overlap between cases covered by the concept. As Patrick Gardiner puts it, when we examine genuine instances of self-deception, 'we shall (I suspect) find analogies and similarities with cases of deception proper that are sufficient to make the reflexive extension of the concept appear, within limits, reasonably appropriate' (1969-70, p. 243).

¹³ Note, however, that the difference between the phenomena in this respect is quite subtle. For self-deception can also develop from an encounter with evidence which only indicates that *p may* be true. This could happen if one tried to explain away that evidence and ended up believing that *p* is *not* true. Thus a case of willful ignorance could segue into self-deception. I discuss this possibility in the concluding section.

¹⁴ Thus other-deception is a broader category than interpersonal deception. The 'other' can be a creature or an inanimate thing, not just a person.

In my view the first approach to understanding self-deception – the unwarranted belief/doxastic attitude approach – best preserves the analogy between self-deception and other-deception. When we say that someone was deceived by something else, be it by another person (e.g., a fraudster), a creature (e.g., a camouflaged insect) or just by the way something looks (e.g., the Sun, which looks ‘deceptively’ closer to us than it is), we imply that he/she was *caused to have a mistaken belief* by this.¹⁵ And according to this approach, when we say that someone is *self-deceived*, we also imply that he has a mistaken belief¹⁶, or at least an unwarranted degree of confidence in a falsehood (Lynch 2012), though here he caused himself to have it (though not necessarily intentionally).

Indeed, it is not clear at all why the concept of deception would have been given this reflexive extension if self-deception was what implicit knowledge accounts take it to be. For what similarity does self-deception have to other-deception on that view? One advocate (or ex-advocate) of the implicit knowledge approach has admitted that on this view there is ‘no parallel’ between self-deception and other-deception (Funkhouser 2005, p. 304¹⁷). I would not be as nonchalant about this as Funkhouser, since it would mean that there is no explanation for why self-deception and other-deception belong to the one kind. Elsewhere I have argued that, insofar as we have a name for it, the phenomenon characterised in implicit knowledge accounts is best regarded as a kind of escapism (Lynch 2012). Intermediate accounts suffer from different problems, which we needn’t look into here.

Similarly, if willful ignorance is a kind of self-deception, then it is a kind of deception, and there should be some noteworthy similarities between this and what Gardiner called ‘deception proper’. But what are they? Are the willfully ignorant similar to the deceived, or to deceivers? The salient characteristic of the deceived is that they were caused to have a false belief. The willfully ignorant don’t have a false belief, or if they do that is accidental to their being willfully ignorant. The salient characteristic of deceivers is that they cause someone to believe falsely. The willfully ignorant have not done this (to others or to themselves), or if they have this is also accidental to their being willfully ignorant. We might point out that both the

¹⁵ Chisholm and Feehan have included causally contributing to someone continuing to have a false belief as a kind of deception (1977, p. 144). They do not provide any examples to support this claim. I do not think this is the no-brainer they assume it is, and their account of deception is in general far too broad, but I will suspend judgement on this point here.

¹⁶ There are exceptions to this, which can be ignored for present purposes. See (Lynch 2010).

¹⁷ Funkhouser’s view of self-deception has since changed to an intermediate view (Funkhouser 2009).

willfully ignorant and those deceived by others are ignorant of some truth (though ignorant in quite different ways, with the former necessarily suspecting the truth). But this is not enough. After all, the uninformed, the stupid, the stubborn, and the closed-minded are ignorant of truths also, but that doesn't make them deceived. Our judgments on whether something belongs to a kind or not often depends on whether we can recognise notable similarities between it and the exemplars of the kind we are familiar with, but the requisite similarities seem absent here.

But perhaps the understanding of deception I am drawing on is incorrect. Perhaps to deceive someone it is not necessary to cause them to have a false belief, since causing them *not to have a true belief* is also deception. This view has been defended by Michael P. Lynch, who maintains that 'X deceives Y with regard to f only if X willfully causes Y to fail to believe what is true with regard to f', or 'to deceive is to prevent someone from grasping what is true about something' (2009, p. 191). If this understanding is correct, the willfully ignorant *would* be similar to the deceived, since they have willfully prevented themselves from grasping a truth. So it would be explicable how willful ignorance could be a kind of deception after all.

This analysis of deception is unsatisfactory however. It would imply that lots of cases exemplify deception which don't seem to be this at all. Consider the end of the Vietnam War, when the US embassy was abandoned as the communists moved on Saigon. Presumably the embassy staff shredded or burned any sensitive documents before abandoning the embassy. Thus they prevented the communists from acquiring certain information, from 'grasping what is true about something'. But this was hardly an act of deception. Or suppose that Jones has a birthmark on his neck that he's embarrassed about. He always wears long-necked shirts and tops which cover it. He deliberately prevents people from knowing that he has a birth-mark. But hiding his birth-mark is not, in itself, an act of deception. Apparently, Lynch's analysis is too broad. Merely preventing someone from having a true belief is not deception. More is required, and my suggestion is that you must cause someone to have a *false* belief, or cause their confidence in a falsehood to increase.

But what about this case?¹⁸ Suppose that Sophie is selling a property, and she suspects that a field at the back of it is contaminated and a serious health hazard. She takes some prospective buyers to view the property. She makes sure that they don't investigate the field and keeps the conversation on other issues, but she tells them no lies. They end up buying the

¹⁸ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this example.

property. Has she deceived them? This looks a lot more like a case of deception. But the reason we think this is that it's plausible that the buyers have a *false belief* about the property. They are not simply agnostic about whether the area is an environmental hazard; they tacitly assume that it isn't, because it was Sophie's legal or at least moral duty to disclose any such facts, and they trusted her. We should be aware that deception, understood as involving the causing of false belief, can occur in subtle ways, as when you lead someone to assume something false without telling any untruths. In summary then, deception seems to involve the causing of false belief, or at least instilling some confidence in a falsehood. But since having a false belief, or causing a false belief, is not part of the willfully ignorant condition, it doesn't look like willful ignorance is a kind of deception.

5. Conclusion

Why the chronic tendency to conflate these phenomena? There may be a number of reasons for this. First, they are kindred phenomena. They are (typically) different ways that people react when faced with an uncomfortable truth or the prospect of one. Moreover, it can often be difficult to see which notion applies in a particular case, or when groups are faced with an uncomfortable truth, these different notions may apply to different individuals. There can also be borderline cases between them or mixed cases. For instance, it could happen that Burke, willfully ignorant but suspecting he has condition B, strives to keep this thought out of his mind, and to pretend as if nothing's wrong. Such a case would be a mixture of willful ignorance and self-deception according to the implicit knowledge account.

Furthermore, one may often facilitate and lead to the other. Consider Speer again. Here we can easily add more details to the story to make it a case of self-deception (on the unwarranted belief account). Suppose that he didn't simply avoid acting on his suspicions, but *acted to undermine* those suspicions, managing to convince himself that there is *no need* to investigate the matter since there is nothing to worry about. Perhaps he looked for evidence of a tendency in Hanke to be oversensitive or easily shocked, or to over-react/over-exaggerate. Perhaps he reasoned that if he did see something terrible, it must have been an isolated incident and surely not part of official policy. Thus he allays his worries that he is complicit in evil. These would be examples of rationalising, re-interpreting, or explaining away evidence: classic self-

deceptive behaviours. He would then have progressed from being willfully ignorant to being self-deceived in relation to the truth, from having a legitimate suspicion which he deliberately fails to act upon, to having a mistaken belief unsupported by his evidence. So any disagreement about whether the Speer case exemplifies willful ignorance or self-deception could be due to its being under-described: we can elaborate it further in different ways to make it exemplify either.

I would like to end with a concise summary of the differences between willful ignorance and (paradigmatic) self-deception. But what these differences are obviously depends on what one's conception of self-deception is. I have distinguished between three different views here. However, for advocates of the unwarranted belief/doxastic attitude approach like myself, we could list them as follows:

- 1) Willful ignorance is always intentional, while self-deception typically is not.
- 2) The willfully ignorant can be fully aware that they are willfully ignorant, but self-deceivers can't be fully aware that they are self-deceived.
- 3) Because of (1) and (2), the levels of culpability associated with willful ignorance and self-deception differ: willful ignorance is generally more culpable.¹⁹
- 4) Willful ignorance and self-deception are associated with different ranges of doxastic states. Willful ignorance involves suspecting that p . Self-deception can involve suspecting that p too, but it can also involve believing that not- p , unlike willful ignorance.
- 5) Willful ignorance does not essentially involve having a false or unwarranted belief/doxastic state, while self-deception does.
- 6) Willful ignorance only involves encountering evidence which indicates that p may be true. Self-deception, however, can involve encountering stronger evidence, indicating that p is true.
- 7) Different behaviours are associated with each. Key self-deceptive behaviours include efforts to undermine and disarm threatening evidence (rationalisation, explaining

¹⁹ Of course, it may be worse to deceive yourself about a very serious matter than to be willfully ignorant about a less serious matter. And sometimes a person may be entitled to be willfully ignorant (and incidentally, sometimes self-deception is not deserving of censure; see (Szabados 1974)). But willful ignorance is more purposive and deliberate than self-deception. And it seems to me that we would think less of Speer for having been willfully ignorant of the Final Solution than for having deceived himself into thinking that the Final Solution was not happening.

evidence away, being hypercritical towards it). Willful ignorance is more about avoiding potential evidence.

These significant differences surely indicate that we are dealing with distinct psychological kinds. It would be a pity to obscure these differences by treating willful ignorance as a kind of self-deception.

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