

## The Unbelievable Truth and the Dilemmas of Ignorance

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A very popular error: having the courage of one's convictions; rather it is a matter of having the courage for an attack on one's convictions!!!

—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*

What shape can resistance take if one's relationship to the dynamics of power and knowledge seem to work in one's favor? And how does the form of ignorance structuring white epistemology complicate the case of antiracist white agency, simultaneously bound, as it seems to be, by its own self-interested deception and the attempt to undo the normalizing power that structures its own knowing? These questions became central to a class discussing Peggy McIntosh's claim that white privilege is like an invisible knapsack providing whites with myriad forms of unjustifiable social, political, and psychological advantages.<sup>1</sup> A debate began about the extent to which whites really are ignorant of their privileges. A young white woman suggested that whites are more aware of their privileges than McIntosh's argument allowed for. A young black woman retorted, "White people who grew up in the lily white suburbs are not consciously reaping rewards from their privilege; how are they supposed to know about it when they've never been exposed?" The white woman indignantly replied, "ask any white person if they want to be black, what do you think they would say?" As Megan Boler might ask, what are the affective investments in each conviction?<sup>2</sup> Was the white student performing a false sense of superiority even as she tried to dismantle it by posing the question? Was the black student potentially threatened by the notion that whites are at least in part conscious of the fact that whiteness functions as property?<sup>3</sup> Which kinds of ignorance were necessary to structure students' self-understandings and which need to be challenged?

This essay examines some tensions behind our encounter with knowledge and considers the contradictory role ignorance can play in locating (responsible) agency. I suggest that social justice education has yet to grapple seriously with the disarming possibilities of ignorance: at once a defense against difficult knowledge and an intriguing entry into new understandings of responsible agency. Perhaps the development of a taxonomy of forms of willful ignorance — from Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Charles Mills — and the various defense mechanisms used in the inevitable encounter with what Deborah Britzman calls "difficult knowledge" can help "pry apart the conditions of learning from that which conditions the desire to learn and the desire to ignore."<sup>4</sup> Part of "working through" the anxieties that knowledge can create is to study what students and educators are inclined to disregard, forget, ignore. If we want to uncover our own affective attachments to various forms of ignorance or mechanisms of defense, Britzman reminds us, we need to have the "courage to explore the multi-dimensions of our desires and confront truths about ourselves and our world that can be very difficult

to admit.”<sup>5</sup> In this essay, I develop a taxonomy of ignorance to examine how ignorance structures knowledge in general, self-knowledge, and social knowledge.

Reevaluating ignorance as neither a simple nor innocent lack of knowledge but as an active force of both psychic and social consequence might help us to engage the resistance with which we are often met when dealing with difficult subjects like racism, sexism, or heterosexism in educational settings. Nietzsche demonstrates that ignorance works in two distinct but linked ways; it is at once a desirable instinct of self-preservation as well as a strategy of power and domination.<sup>6</sup> Freud contends that ignorance holds the knowledge of what we cannot bear to know; it is one of our most important teachers, but ignorance here does not come without a cost because defense mechanisms do not come without consequence.<sup>7</sup> Mills politicizes the insights of Nietzsche and Freud by considering the ethical and political consequences of dynamics of power and ignorance as they operate in different subject positions, and shows how forms of ignorance have been socially sanctioned, creating a “racialized moral psychology,” that allows whites to act in racist ways while thinking of themselves as acting morally.<sup>8</sup> Ignorance as a socially sanctioned effect of power has become a problem of “white moral cognitive dysfunction,” that requires not merely admitting the ugly truth about the past as it plays out in the present, but understanding that our cognizing has been distorted in ways that need to be theorized.

These insights help to formulate an antiracist/antibias pedagogy that grapples with the contradictory role ignorance plays in locating responsible agency. A new learning disposition can be constructed that begins the process of working through our encounters with difficult knowledge.<sup>9</sup> An antibias critical pedagogy has to reckon with what Jacques Lacan calls “the passion for ignorance,”<sup>10</sup> and cultivate the conditions for learning (unlearning and relearning). The common sense understanding that learning is a progression from ignorance to knowledge is challenged as we think of responsible agency as a balancing act between the desire to know and the desire to remain ignorant.

#### THE WILL TO IGNORANCE

Nietzsche views knowledge as “an invention that masks the basest instincts, interests, desires, and fears,” arising not from some natural faculty but as the “contingent, temporary, and malicious products of deceitful wills, striving for advantage, fighting for survival and engaged in a ceaseless effort to forcefully impose their will on each other.”<sup>11</sup> Knowledge, he emphasizes, arises out of struggle and becomes a weapon in the ongoing battle for domination, linked not to pleasure in flourishing, but rather to constant striving and conquest. For Nietzsche, the will to knowledge arises out of an even more powerful will, the will to ignorance.

Highlighting the affective force behind our relationship to truth, ignorance functions in at least two distinct but linked ways for Nietzsche. It is at once a desirable ontological necessity as well as a hidden motivation behind the development of science, knowledge, and religion, which function as strategies of power, providing us with a cherished false sense of security and stability, rather than furnishing us with

the capacities to think critically and embrace uncertainty. In the first passage of *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche is critical of the normative philosophical quest for truth. Emphasizing that truth and knowledge are motivated, he asks: “*What* in us really wants truth?” Asserting that the endeavor toward truth has remained valued rather than questioned, he queries: “Suppose we want truth: *why not rather untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance?*” (*BGE*, 1, emphasis in original). Nietzsche emphasizes how the will to truth is motivated by a passionate desire to remain ignorant; he urges us to “recognize untruth as a condition of life,” for it is the “falsest judgments” that are the “most indispensable for us”; “without the fictions of logic...with out a constant falsification of the world by means of numbers, man could not live — renouncing false judgments would mean renouncing life and a denial of life” (*BGE*, 4). We do not will the truth because we cannot live with it.

Nietzsche does not put truth into question, but the will to truth. But just what does he mean by *the will to*, and why is it more important than that which is willed? I see in Nietzsche’s view of the will a foreshadowing of psychoanalytic views of desire, both of which help uncover the psychic dimensions behind relationships to truth, knowledge, and the other. The will for Nietzsche is the motivating force behind perception and action; it is elusive, contradictory, and unconsciously habitual, and it confounds our relationship to the truth. Nietzsche asserts that the will exists as consolidated only as a word; it is above all “something complicated, a plurality of sensations, namely, the sensation of the state ‘*away from which*,’ the sensation of the state ‘*towards which*,’ and the sensations of this ‘*from*’ and ‘*towards*’ themselves...but it is more than just sensations, it is a complex of sensation and thought...but above all it is an affect” (*BGE*, 19, emphasis in original). The will propels us into action but, he warns, we deceive ourselves when we think we are its commanding officer. We need to recognize the play of forces at work in willing, and be willing to dwell in the contradictions.

Nietzsche provides a picture of the necessity and desirability of ignorance, but he makes an even stronger claim about its hidden motivational force as a strategy of power when he claims, “I do not believe that a drive to knowledge is the father of philosophy; but rather that another drive has, here as elsewhere, employed understanding (and misunderstanding) as a mere instrument” (*BGE*, 6). Stressing that ignorance is vital to survival and that relations of power inform relations to truth, Nietzsche asserts that there are fundamental qualities in humanity that make our pursuit of knowledge serve an even deeper project of self-protective ignorance.<sup>12</sup> Knowledge and scientific progress themselves are motivated by the instinct of self-preservation played out as domination, the dynamics of which will be spelled out in more detail in Mills’s work. But key to understanding the dilemmas of ignorance is Nietzsche’s concern with affective investment in seeking knowledge and not wanting to know at the level of the individual; he shows how knowledge and truth are instruments designed to keep us happily oblivious to that which we can not bear to know. For Nietzsche, we need to recognize that in order to understand truth or knowledge we must first unmask the will to ignorance that motivates them. He writes:

from the beginning we have contrived to retain our ignorance in order to enjoy an almost inconceivable freedom, lack of scruple and caution, heartiness, and gaiety of life — in order to enjoy life! And only on this now solid, granite foundation of ignorance could knowledge rise so far — the will to knowledge on the foundation of a far more powerful will: the will to ignorance, to the uncertain, to the untrue! (*BGE*, 24)

Nietzsche's conception of the will to ignorance complicates attempts to locate responsible agency, by recognizing the desire for ignorance as both a strategy of power and resistance. This will is a strategy of power in so far as it is the motivating force behind the will to knowledge, which seeks not enlightenment or liberation but certainty and control, and it is a strategy of resistance in so far as it enables subjects to defend against realities that are inimical to their vitality. One of the dilemmas of ignorance then lies in recognizing that the subject finds itself deceived by truth and knowledge, on the one hand, and by its own propensity towards self-deception and preservation on the other. Nietzsche, though, fails to differentiate between subject positions and the ethical and political consequences of, say, a privileged person's will to ignorance as desire to maintain unjustified power and privilege, and a marginalized person's use of strategic ignorance as resistance to power.<sup>13</sup> Can we better understand the debate in the opening example by seeing different subject positions as constituted by willful and/or strategic ignorance? Understanding the varieties of ignorance can give us insight into how we construct (racial) knowledge.

I turn now to Freud's elaboration of an individual's propensity towards ignorance through defense mechanisms, but he, like Nietzsche, does not provide an ethical account of the differences between subject positions. I then deploy Mills to fill in these social justice-related gaps, arguing that working through ignorance requires working through both the personal and political levels, but that the useful strategies for this depend on one's position in the relations of power.

#### DEFENDING AGAINST DIFFICULT KNOWLEDGE

The unconscious is knowledge that cannot tolerate one's knowing what one knows.

— Jacques Lacan, cited in Shoshana Felman, *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight: Psychoanalysis in Contemporary Culture*

Nietzsche contends that ignorance is both a desirable and foundational instinct of self-preservation. While ignorance functions instinctively for self-preservation for Freud as well, its desirability becomes complicated, as its success often exacts a high price on the subject's overall well-being. Freud's crucial insight for our present purposes is that ignorance is not passive, empty, or innocent. His discussion of psychic defense mechanisms shows that ignorance has something to teach us since it is an active form of resistance to difficult knowledge, knowledge that upsets the foundational assumptions of the subject who encounters it. Psychoanalytic theory shows that ignorance cannot be simply opposed to knowledge; in the words of Shoshana Felman, "it is itself a radical condition, an integral part of the very structure of knowledge," modifying our understanding of what it means to know and not to know.<sup>14</sup>

Defense is the attempt to rid oneself of a reality that one finds threatening, unbearable, or in some way anxiety inducing. The idea of defense, then, Alan Bass

argues, also implies an ethical stance, for “if psychopathology implies a defense against some intolerable reality, then the reversal of it implies regaining contact with that reality.”<sup>15</sup> Defense mechanisms include everyday methods besides repression, wherein an ego defends itself against an unwanted or disconcerting internal reality (which may or may not result in neurosis or perversion); with disavowal, for example, an ego defends against an unwanted or disturbing external reality. Freud examined disavowal in detail in “Fetishism,” noting the fetishist holds two incompatible positions at the same time: he “simultaneously disavows and acknowledges” a disturbing reality (namely, according to Freud, feminine castration). Although Freud’s preoccupation with castration anxiety is problematic, his insight that desire confounds our relation to truth and others is pedagogically very significant. We can reject Freud’s masculinist discourse and still examine the dynamics he uncovered, suggesting that what is disavowed is sexual difference,<sup>16</sup> heterophobia,<sup>17</sup> or uncertainty. As we saw with Nietzsche, the subject is divided, residing in the simultaneous drive toward and away from truth.

In disavowal two contradictory positions are held together without any awareness of a contradiction. A classroom example of this occurred recently when preservice teachers agreed that due to programs like affirmative action racism was no longer a social problem and then in the next instant proclaimed that racism will always exist simply because it always has existed. The disturbing reality or idea that is being defended against, I suggest, is that all of us are in some way complicit for ongoing racial injustice. While they registered after class discussion that racism is indeed still a social problem, they continue to disavow responsibility for having to grapple with it because they dismiss it as simply a problem that has always existed and will always exist.

Freud himself, of course, failed to account for anyone outside of the white bourgeoisie.<sup>18</sup> Still, his theory of defense can help explain how well-intentioned, good citizens fail to acknowledge or actively struggle against ongoing injustice that is perpetuated in their names. Freud’s theory of defense, like Nietzsche’s will to ignorance, calls for a rethinking of the grounds of knowledge and subjectivity and reevaluating ignorance as constitutive of both knowledge and agency. As Felman explains, “if ignorance is to be equated with the a-totality of the unconscious, it can be said to be a kind of forgetting — of forgetfulness; while learning is obviously, among other things, remembering and memorizing, ignorance is linked to what is not remembered, what will not be memorized.”<sup>19</sup> She argues that what will not be memorized is “tied up with repression, with the imperative to forget — the imperative to exclude from consciousness, to not admit to knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> Ignorance, then, is not merely, a passive state of absence or a simple lack of information; we need to recognize its role as an active refusal of information.

Such insight can be crucial to creating antibias critical pedagogies, as we see that teaching has to deal not only with “lack of knowledge but with resistance to knowledge.” As Lacan suggests, we might understand ignorance as a passion, so that an analytically informed pedagogy will need to reckon with “the passion for ignorance.” Felman claims that “the truly revolutionary insight — the truly

revolutionary pedagogy discovered by Freud — consists in showing the ways in which, however irreducible, ignorance itself can teach us something — become itself instructive.”<sup>21</sup> Felman encourages educators to ask: “where does what I read or what I see resist my understanding? Where is the ignorance — the resistance to knowledge — located? What can I learn from the locus of that ignorance? How can I turn ignorance into an instrument of teaching/learning?” Such questions might help us to make ignorance instructive and transformative rather than that which condemns us to living in a world of mass “cognitive dysfunction” and socially sanctioned forms of self-deception.

#### COGNITIVE DYSFUNCTION AND DIS-ALIENATION

The most violent element in society is ignorance.

—Emma Goldman, *Anarchism and Other Essays*

While neither Freud nor Nietzsche articulated the ethical or political differences in modes of willful or strategic ignorance, Mills exposes the inequities of our actual social and political system to help us to see through the theories and moral justifications offered in defense of them. By showing how there is a violence inscribed in the certainties of legal and moral authority, Mills politicizes the conception of ignorance as a defense mechanism and focuses on how ignorance has become socially sanctioned as a strategy of power, making the problem with ignorance one that lies outside the realm of individual motivation alone. Mills problematizes philosophical theories of justice that hinge on the conception of the social contract, usually thought to have moral and political implications, rather than epistemological ones.

Mills argues that the social contract might better be conceived of as a racial contract, given that historically it only applied to whites, and that philosophical reflections on justice have glossed over the significance of this fact. Arguing that the racial contract requires a hidden epistemology, Mills suggests that it prescribes an “epistemology of ignorance,” that plays out in contemporary times as “a particular pattern of localized and global *cognitive dysfunctions* (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that Whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made.”<sup>22</sup>

William Pinar, for example, argues that the disavowal of the impact of the South’s history of slavery on contemporary society is accompanied by distortions of many kinds, political, social, racial, and psychological. Defense, we are reminded, is never without a remainder. Pinar suggests that “the deposit remaining today in mass culture is a lingering sense of moral superiority and self-righteousness” in the North, whereas in the South, there “remains a defensiveness regarding race, including a denial of guilt and responsibility for enslavement and consequent segregation, prejudice, and violence.”<sup>23</sup> Southern whites and blacks, he argues, must reexperience and work through the past to renegotiate its terms; until that process is undertaken and accomplished, personality distortions — “a persisting sense of defeat in southern blacks and a sense of false superiority in southern whites.”<sup>24</sup> Applying psychoanalytic insight to both cultural and individual phenomena can help

us begin to acknowledge and actively grapple with forms of injustice that continue to be disavowed.

Arguing that cultivating ignorance is part of what is required to achieve whiteness successfully, Mills emphasizes that it is a “cognitive model that precludes self-transparency and genuine understanding of social realities.” He unmasks the significant extent to which many whites live in an “invented delusional world, a racial fantasy land.” Because “white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race are among the most pervasive mental phenomena of the past few hundred years, a cognitive and moral economy psychically required for conquest, colonization, enslavement” emerged, and these phenomena are not innocent or accidental but prescribed by the terms of the racial contract, which “requires a certain schedule of structured blindness and opacities in order to establish and maintain the white polity.”<sup>25</sup>

Demonstrating the way in which denials and distortions operate at cultural levels with adverse effects for some individuals and unjustifiable privileges for others, Mills reminds us that James Baldwin long ago illuminated that white supremacy forced U.S. citizens into rationalizations so fantastic that they approached the pathological, “generating a tortured ignorance so structured that one cannot raise certain issues with Whites because even if I should speak, no one would believe me and paradoxically, they would not believe me precisely because they would know that what I said was true.” Mills emphasizes that for contemporary whites, evasion and self-deception have become epistemic norms; whites live in a cult of forgetfulness, where the “stubborn racist has made a choice not to admit certain uncomfortable truths about his group and chooses not to challenge certain uncomfortable falsehoods about other people, and since he has made this choice, he will resist whatever threatens it.” But the trouble is, and here is where I see the necessity for developing better taxonomies of ignorance, almost no one will admit to or see themselves as having consciously made this choice. And can we say a choice has been made when the ignorance is socially sanctioned and institutionalized? Though Mills does not utilize the concept of disavowal, I think it can help us explain the evasions that maintain institutionalized injustices, as it allows for a more nuanced sense of agency wherein subjects on either side of privileged/marginalized divides are potentially unwittingly dwelling in the contradictory space of knowing and not knowing that their actions, thoughts, and social positioning implicates them in injustice. The operations of ignorance and resistance are more complicated than his argument allows, as demonstrated by the student dialogue introduced at the start of this essay. Importantly, however, Mills notes that the more the racist “plays the game of evasion, the more estranged he will make himself from his ‘inferiors’ and the more he will sink into the world that is required to maintain this system.” This condition of alienation, from the other and from oneself, might be thought of as the remainder of the disavowal, or one of the costs of evasion.<sup>26</sup>

Distinguishing between subject positions, Mills argues that for whites, the racial contract “requires evasion and denial of the realities of race,” whereas the

epistemology of "victims" is unsurprisingly focused on these realities themselves. And yet for both, there is an internal battle to be fought before advancing to the foreground of external combat. For the "victims" of the racial contract, we could say that a form of strategic ignorance needs to be employed, where "one has to overcome the internalization of sub-personhood prescribed by the racial contract and recognize one's own humanity as resisting the official category of despised aboriginal, colonial ward, slave." One has to learn the basic self-respect that can casually be assumed by whites, who, in contrast, need to renounce their affective investments in false superiority and innocence. Mills emphasizes the personal struggle is linked with an epistemic dimension, a much needed "cognitive resistance to the racially mystificatory aspects of white theory." We must, he says, learn to develop our cognitive powers, create new concepts and modes of exploration, and oppose the epistemic hegemony of conceptual frameworks designed in part to thwart and suppress the exploration of such matters. We need to recognize that we have been trained not to see the realities that we should see.<sup>27</sup>

Perhaps renouncing our pedagogical investment in certainty<sup>28</sup> is one way to begin to locate responsible agency as residing in the contradictory space between the desire to know and the desire to ignore. Recognizing our propensity to defend against difficult knowledge might allow for power relations in the classroom to become dynamic rather than oppressive. Teachers and learners might become willing to put themselves in question, via the encounter with knowledge and others, to actively grapple with defense mechanisms and begin the process of working through them. As Britzman suggests, "the capacity to tolerate the detours of learning, perceiving, and interpreting—without mobilizing one's own defenses may be one of the most demanding experiences for any teacher," or student.<sup>29</sup> I believe this taxonomy of ignorance shows that the active interplay of ignorance and knowledge structures any encounter with difference. We need to create a pedagogical space of dynamic uncertainty wherein the interplay between knowledge and affective investments in forms of ignorance can be explored. As noted in the introductory quotation, then, responsible agency is not just about having the courage of one's convictions, but the courage to interrogate the mechanisms through which those convictions become evident to oneself.

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1. Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences Through Work in Women's Studies," in *Gender Basics: Feminist Perspectives on Women and Men*, ed. Anne Minas (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1993).

2. Megan Boler, *Feeling Power: Emotions and Education* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

3. Cheryl Harris, "Whiteness as Property," in *Identities: Race, Class, Gender, and Nationalities*, eds. Linda Alcoff and Eduardo Mendieta (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2003).

4. Deborah Britzman, *Lost Subjects Contested Objects: Toward A Psychoanalytic Inquiry of Learning*. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), xxxviii.

5. *Ibid.*, xxxviii.

6. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1968). This work will be cited as *BGE* in the text for all subsequent references.



7. Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, vol. 2 (New York: International Universities Press, 1966).
8. Charles Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997).
9. Deborah Britzman, *After Education: Anna Freud, Melanie Klein, and Psychoanalytic Histories of Learning* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003).
10. Shoshana Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education: Teaching Terminable and Interminable," *Yale French Studies* 63 (1982): 21–44.
11. Paul Rabinow, *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth (Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984)*, vol. 1 (New York: The New Press, 1994), xiv.
12. Joshua Landy, "Nietzsche, Proust, and Will To Ignorance," *Philosophy and Literature* 26, no. 1 (2002): 1–23.
13. See Vivian May, "Trauma in Paradise: Willful and Strategic Ignorance in *Cereus Blooms at Night*," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 107–35. In her distinction, willful ignorance refers to "carefully crafted methods of not-knowing that are a means of perpetuating privilege and domination," and strategic ignorance is characterized as a strategy by those who are marginalized as "an agreement not to know the world as you've been taught or encouraged to so that you can survive, challenge dominant norms and expectations and can expose the false moralizing and patent lies of the oppressor."
14. Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education," 29.
15. Alan Bass, "Sigmund Freud: The Question of a Weltanschauung and of Defense," in *Psychoanalytic Versions of the Human Condition*, eds. Paul Marcus and Alan Rosenberg (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 426.
16. Alan Bass, *Difference and Disavowal: The Trauma of Eros* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).
17. Albert Memmi uses this phrase in *Racism*, trans. Steve Martinot (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), to highlight how difference can be disquieting, and how fear and its repudiation operate in relations of privilege and oppression.
18. See Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967). Fanon argues that the family as theorized by Freud did not exist in the Antilles, rendering the Oedipus Complex irrelevant for those outside of the white bourgeoisie.
19. Felman, "Psychoanalysis and Education," 29.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*, 30.
22. Mills, *Racial Contract*, 18 (emphasis added).
23. Pinar, "Curriculum as Social Psychoanalysis," 169.
24. *Ibid.*, 177.
25. Mills, *Racial Contract*, 18–9.
26. *Ibid.*, 97–8.
27. *Ibid.*, 109, 118, and 119.
28. Cris Mayo, "Certain Privilege: Rethinking White Agency," in *Philosophy of Education 2004*, ed. Chris Higgins (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2005).
29. Britzman, *After Education*, 79.