

*phenomena*

**PHILOSOPHY  
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# PHAINOMENA

Revija za fenomenologijo in hermenevtiko  
Journal of Phenomenology and Hermeneutics

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Andrzej Wierciński & Andrej Božič (eds.):

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## PHAINOMENA

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# EDUCATION AND ACTIVE IGNORANCE

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*Abstract*

While traditional pedagogy presupposed that subjects naturally desire to know, some authors pointed out that “active ignorance” should be taken into account when pondering different educational strategies. Indeed, it often happens that skepticism, doubt, inaction, or refusal to change is not a consequence of a lack of knowledge but of avoidance of it. Active ignorance can be detected in diverse fields, which points to the fact that the phenomenon is widespread. As the paper shows, active ignorance

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can further be understood as an umbrella term that covers several categories of phenomena: avoidance of truth, doubting the obvious, and repression. The cause of active ignorance can be detected in conservative function, since it serves to provide the subject with coherence by filtering out information that could dissolve or fragment the individual. In educational sciences, Plato's insight from the allegory of the cave should be taken into account, pointing out that prisoners will not be willing to accept the liberated messenger's news if it turns out to be unsettling with deconstruction of their established value-systems. The safe return to the cave is sooner to be found in the educator's effort of providing adequate contexts for "souls" to uncover the truth for themselves, thus understanding education as "an art of the speediest and most effective shifting or conversion of the soul."

*Keywords:* active ignorance, education, pedagogy, the allegory of the cave.

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### **Izobraževanje in hotena nevednost**

#### *Povzetek*

260

Medtem ko tradicionalna pedagogika predpostavlja, da ljudje po naravi stremijo k vednosti, nekateri avtorji izpostavljajo, da bi pri razmišljanju o različnih vzgojno-izobraževalnih strategijah morali upoštevati »hoteno nevednost«. Zdi se namreč, da so skepticizem, dvomi, nedejavnost in upor spremembam posledica izogibanja vednosti, ne pa nepoznavanja tematik. Hotena nevednost se lahko zazna na različnih področjih, kar nakazuje razširjenost pojava. Kot skuša pokazati članek, lahko hoteno nevednost nadalje razumemo kot družinski pojem, ki pokriva več kategorij pojavov: izogibanje resnici, dvomljenje v očitno in potlačenje. Vzrok hotene nevednosti lahko označimo kot konzervativno funkcijo, saj služi temu, da pomaga subjektu ohranjati koherenco s filtriranjem tistih informacij, ki bi lahko razrušile posameznika. V edukacijskih vedah bi zato morali slediti Platonovemu uvidu iz prispodobe o votlini, ki izpostavlja, da jetniki ne bodo hoteli sprejeti novic osvobojenca, če se bo zanje izkazalo, da so vznemirjujoče zaradi dekonstrukcije utečenih vrednostih sistemov. Varen povratek v votlino gre prej iskati v učiteljevem naporu zagotavljanja ustreznega konteksta za duše, ki potem same zase odkrivajo resnico, kar pomeni, da moramo razumeti vzgojo oziroma izobraževanje kot »veščino zaobrnitve«.

*Ključne besede:* hotena nevednost, izobraževanje, vzgoja, pedagogika, prispodoba o votlini.

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**Instead of an introduction: to see, or not to see, that is the question...**

Πάντες ἄνθρωποι τοῦ εἰδέναι ὀρέγονται φύσει. – “All men naturally desire to know.” The famous first sentence of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* [980a22] declares what remains a widely shared tacit assumption in pedagogy and educational sciences. For Aristotle, our natural propensity for knowing stems from the delight we take in our senses, which are the basis out of which our knowledge stems, a starting point for its generation through memory and later experience. Indeed, Aristotle claims that the love and attachment we show towards the sense of sight most vividly underlines this point, since for him our ability to see overshadows all the remaining perceptive faculties in its contribution to the production of knowledge. This exclusive emphasis on sight and its consequent epistemological domination in the Western philosophical canon is perhaps something that could be successfully and interestingly deconstructed with the help of Jacques Derrida’s philosophy. Here, however, I want to pursue a different line of thought, and show why the assumption that human beings are spontaneously inclined to gain knowledge can be regarded as only one side of the pedagogical coin. Indeed, I want to claim that our attitude towards knowledge is much more ambivalent than what pedagogy and educational science often suppose with their almost exclusive emphasis on our inclination to know. That this emphasis is indeed widespread in pedagogy can be, for instance, detected in a paper by Michalinos Zembylas on Deleuzo-Guattarian pedagogy of desire that refers to Erica McWilliam: “The forces of *desire*—both the desire to teach and the desire to learn—are central in teaching and learning and can lead to rewarding or malevolent pedagogical encounters.” (Zembylas 2007, 331) To put it briefly: in the present paper, I will claim that emphasis on desire to know in pedagogy neglects another important factor in education that I will together with Shoshana Felman call “active ignorance” (Felman 1982). Indeed, my main line of argument is that in practically every pedagogical or educational endeavor active ignorance is an equally—or at least similarly—important factor as the desire to know.

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This idea has important consequences for our understanding of the process and aim of education: it shows us that the lack of knowledge is not a “simple

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lack,” an ignorance that is characterized only by an absence of something positive, namely knowledge. On the contrary, the seeming “lack” of knowledge has, so to speak, its own agency and thus becomes a player in its own right, or *active* ignorance. Ignorance is thus not simple darkness, the absence of light (knowledge), but an element with its own agenda. Still in other words: the desire to know has to be paired with an equally potent and powerful desire, namely the desire not to know, to remain ignorant in the face of (most commonly threatening) knowledge. Lastly, our propensity to avoid knowledge poses serious issues for all “enlightenment” oriented educational efforts that aim at dispelling ignorance by spreading knowledge. Namely, the main defect of theories like Information Deficit Model (IDM; cf. Norgaard 2011, 67–68), claiming that lack of adequate information is the main cause for our ignorance and lack of appropriate action, is that they neglect the autonomous activity of ignorance and thus direct their educational efforts at wrong issues, as I will briefly try to demonstrate below.

262 In what follows, I will first try to expose some blatant examples of active ignorance, trying to categorize them into three groups, and then turn to the explanation of possible causes or base for this phenomenon or group of phenomena. At the end of the paper, I will try to underline some consequences of active ignorance for education, drawing from Plato’s illuminating insights from the allegory of the cave. There, I will also point to some paradoxes of the very concept of “active ignorance” and try to hint at the solutions of these aporias. First, however, I want to return to the Aristotle’s point that “we take delight” in our senses, foremost the sense of sight, and that this underlines his idea that we naturally desire to know. Here, namely, one can easily point to the other obvious side of our attitude towards the senses, especially the sight—the closing or covering of our eyes when we precisely *do not enjoy* what we see. Indeed, it does often happen that we do not take delight in what our senses want to convey to us thus shunning them either partially or entirely. The famous Japanese composition of three wise monkeys—Mizaru, Kikazaru, and Iwazaru—, or at least the European interpretation of them as the “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil,” is perhaps the most widely known expression of this fact. Derrida, again, seems to be a promising avenue in further researching this point from a hermeneutical-deconstructionist point of view. As he tries

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to show in his *Memoirs of the Blind*, the “destiny of the eye” is not at all seeing but weeping. The veiling of sight is namely unveiling for a deeper essence of the eye:

For at the very moment they veil sight, tears would unveil what is proper to the eye. And what they cause to surge out of forgetfulness, there where the gaze or look looks after it, keeps it in reserve, would be nothing less than aletheia, the truth of the eyes, whose ultimate destination they would thereby reveal: to have imploration rather than vision in sight, to address prayer, love, joy, or sadness rather than a look or gaze. Even before it illuminates, revelation is the moment of the “tears of joy.” (Derrida 1993, 125)

Leaving this point aside for potential later inquiries, I do want to point out at the end of this introductory passage that the prime epistemological or alethiological problem—to paraphrase Hamlet—is not only to see, but also (what) not to see. That is, if we take seriously the problem of avoiding the truth as a factor in epistemology, then the question of active ignorance becomes practically as important as the more traditional gnoseological problems.

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### **Active ignorance in practice**

My attention was first drawn to active ignorance or “denialism” (as I was prone to call the phenomenon earlier) when I was working in the field of environmental ethics. The phenomenon that started to occupy my mind in the late first decade of our millennium was actually quite simple: why are we so prone to be skeptical about anthropogenic degradation of the environment if empirical evidence is not only so overwhelmingly clear but also readily available, generally not more than two clicks away? Gradually, as I became acquainted with social, psychological, and anthropological research in the field, I found enough evidence to dismiss what is known as the “Information Deficit Model” (IDM). The latter, according to Kari Norgaard, holds that lack of information is a limiting factor in public nonresponse to the climate change issues. In short, the IDM holds that “if people only knew the facts,” they would

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act differently.” (Norgaard 2011, 64) However, a key problem with this and related models is that “they do not account for the behavior of significant number of people who *do* know about global warming, believe it is happening, and express concern about it.” (Norgaard 2011, 67; italics in original) Indeed, as researchers from other fields have noticed, psychological mechanisms such as cognitive dissonance (as proposed by Leon Festinger in 1957) have to be taken into account when pondering the gap between attitudes and behavior in climate change mitigation (Stoll-Kleemann, O’Riordan and Jaeger 2001). As it turned out, my research (Grušovnik 2012) showed that we are often prone to avoid the truth and unwilling to accept the facts about anthropogenic environmental degradation because doing so would endanger our selves, our identities constructed around our activities that are damaging for the natural world. Thus, in order to protect our current existence, we rather choose to avoid the truth than to engage in painful, fragile, and disorienting process of assuming new identities. The main point about environmental education that can be drawn from this analysis was the idea that scaring people with apocalyptic scenarios if they do not change their habits will simply lead to more denial and less action. Indeed, the only viable environmental educational design seemed to be the one that is based on gradual switching of identities by substituting personally important activities that have significant impact on the environment for greener ones.

A similar idea in relation to denialism and education was recently proposed by me and my colleague in connection with animal ethics and meat eating (cf. Spannring and Grušovnik 2018). As a number of authors has shown, industrial meat production is enabled by systematic denial of harsh realities of the slaughtering process and is protected by psychological mechanisms of “denial, avoidance, routinization, justification, objectification, de-individualization, dichotomization, rationalization, and dissociation” (Joy 2010, 19). It thus seems that skepticism regarding the existence of animal pain is not a genuine doubt about the existence of a certain “thing,” but sooner a version of “other minds skepticism” which can, through the lenses of Stanley Cavell’s reading of philosophical and literary classics, be seen as the avoidance of (moral) responsibility. To put it simply: instead of accepting the moral burden of causing animals pain and suffering, people are inclined to doubt the very

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existence of these “mental phenomena” in animals (cf. Grušovnik 2018), or simply disregard and deny harsh realities of the slaughtering process.

There are, of course, numerous other cases of avoidance of truth besides issues related with environmental and animal ethics. One such is the phenomenon of forgetting traumatic events, e.g., in sexual assault victims. Yet another one is connected with concentration camps and harsh realities of survival in these dehumanizing conditions. As Varlam Shalamov often points out in his short stories about concentration camps in Soviet Union’s Kolyma region, it was vital to “forget” in order to survive those camps. Indeed, one surgeon was able to remember all the names of his patients as well as colleagues except for the most gruesome event in his career—the steamboat KIM with three thousand frozen prisoners and their rotting bodies. Referring to Anatole France’s *The Procurator of Judea*, Shalamov is quick to point out how Pontius Pilatus is unable to remember Christ. Much like Shalamov, Karl Steiner in his monumental *7000 Days in Siberia* speaks about the inability of concentration camp prisoners to acknowledge that Stalin knew about the horrific conditions they had to put up with. Indeed, several of them were convinced that the horrible conditions in concentration camps were the consequence of the Leader’s ignorance, of his not knowing what was going on “behind his back,” and thus some even asked the guards for pen and paper in order to send the dictator a letter about the reality he purportedly missed. Again, it seems that avoiding the truth or the obvious was easier than face the absolutely inhumane reality one had to face. 265

I will stop here in listing all the examples of active ignorance where avoidance of truth in one or the other way plays an important role. Instead, I would like to briefly classify these phenomena and propose a heuristic categorization of the different cases of active ignorance. First, I think we can identify active ignorance in the sense of “*the avoidance of truth*.” The cases I have in mind here are the ones where a person anticipates (either consciously or unconsciously) that the truth might be unpleasant and thus avoids it. What is specific for this case, is that the person here *sensu stricto* does not know the truth but only anticipates it. One case of this could be one’s refusal to look at the consequences of an accident or—to offer a simpler example—to avoid reading the contents of a ready-made fast food meal. Here, the person does not know the truth; the only thing the person knows is that the truth will not be pleasant and thus tries

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to avoid it. The second group of cases could perhaps be called “*doubting the obvious*.” In these cases, the person does know the truth but finds it unpleasant, and thus tries to become skeptical about it and doubt what is in front of their eyes. The most famous case of doubting the obvious is perhaps the fox and the sour grapes fable. Skepticism regarding other minds or the existence of animal pain could be another similar example, but more mundane examples include a variety of renaming strategies or euphemizations. One such example are Slovenian politicians that renamed the barbed wire as “a technical obstacle” (Miheljak 2015). The third set of cases of active ignorance could be “*repression*.” Such cases would include the above-mentioned surgeon from Shalamov’s short story “The Procurator of Judaea” (resembling France’s narrative) that forgets about the incident. Other such examples could include various traumas, from sexual abuse to warfare incidents. In such cases, it is not uncommon that a person develops a bodily symptom, as exposed by Robert S. Scaer in his *The Body Bears the Burden* (2001). Indeed, those examples are commonly called “dissociative amnesias” in psychological literature and describe the process of

266 a person’s dissociation from the sense impressions that are so disturbing that threaten the breakdown of personality (for an interesting passage on memory and dissociations, linked to traumatic events, especially child abuse, see Scaer 2001, 100–102). There might, of course, be more phenomena related to active or willful ignorance, although it is sometimes difficult to treat certain kinds of ignorance as “willful:” for instance, some people might not know that they are perfectly familiar with Satie’s *Trois Gymnopédies* because they are missing the crucial information, namely the title of the tune that they often murmur; but this, however, is hardly an *active* ignorance, a willful ignoring of the piece of truth (for a detailed exploration of these and other cases of ignorance I would recommend reading Daniel DeNicola’s *Understanding Ignorance*, 2017).

With this much being said about some hopefully quite vivid examples of active ignorance, I will now turn to the exploration of the possible causes of our avoidance of knowledge, our doubting of the obvious, and our repression—the three main groups of the phenomena I tried to provisionally define above.

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## Causes of active ignorance

As we have already seen in the case of dissociative amnesia, the cause of the active ignoring of sense impressions and memories is, quite literally, the survival of the subject, in the sense of her not “falling apart.” Indeed, we have seen in Shalamov’s stories that forgetfulness was the only way to survive the harsh reality. In a similar vein Margaret Heffernan starts her book on *Willful Blindness* by reporting the experience of Philip Zimbardo, a psychologist from New York:

When the psychologist Philip Zimbardo was five years old, double pneumonia and whooping cough landed him in New York’s Willard Parker Hospital.

“Kids,” he said, “were dying all over. And every morning you’d wake up and ask, ‘Where did Charlie go?’ And the nurses would all say, ‘He went home.’ And we’d say, ‘Oh, that’s great, he went home!’ But we all knew the kids who ‘went home’ were dead. But there’s the thing: the only way to be hopeful was to deny the reality.” (Heffernan 2011, 1)

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It thus seems that active ignorance is in fact a survival mechanism and that its main function is *conservative*, namely retaining the *status quo* (not changing the individual or the circumstances, or surviving the circumstances and not succumbing to them) as long as possible. In certain cases, this, of course, can be beneficial; in others (like in climate change denial) it can be catastrophic. But the main point to be reiterated here is the fact that active ignorance helps us retain our own congruity. Indeed, this is also one of the first principles of the aforementioned theory of cognitive dissonance developed by Leon Festinger in the 1950s. As Festinger succinctly noted, individuals are always motivated to eliminate cognitive conflict, namely conflicting thoughts, attitudes, or behaviors, and if changing the behavior is too complicated, costly, or impossible (if, for instance, it happened in the past), the person will be motivated to change the perception of that behavior. Thus, someone who believes that a/ “long life is desirable” and b/ “smoking causes cancer,” and c/ smokes, might indeed not quit smoking in order to bring about consonance,

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but change one of the other two convictions (e.g., denying b/: “My grand dad was eighty five and he smoked two packs a day!” or a/: “YOLO – you only live once!”), or add another one that brings about congruity (e.g., inserting d/: “It would be too complicated to quit now since I have a lot of deadlines to catch and smoking helps me stay concentrated and get things done.”). The main cause of active ignorance can thus be detected in preserving the individual’s consistency and even helping us to survive amidst impossible conditions that call for dissociations.

268 A compelling illustration of this point in connection with intellectual elites and their social and political life comes from the Polish writer Czeslaw Milosz. In his essay on “The Pill of Murti-Bing,” which is a part of the collection *The Captive Mind*, Milosz comments on Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz’s novel *Insatiability*, featuring brutal descriptions of decadence and a looming threat of an invasion by an “eastern” army. In the novel, which to a certain extent foretells later Soviet domination of Poland, occupied intellectuals are offered the so-called “Murti-Bing pills,” which make them “impervious to any metaphysical concerns.” (Milosz 1981, 5–6) The pill helps to ignore harsh realities faced by the intellectual elites and Milosz’s main point is that:

People in the West are often inclined to consider the lot of converted countries in terms of might and coercion. That is wrong. There is an internal longing for harmony and happiness that lies deeper than ordinary fear or the desire to escape misery or physical destruction [...] And Murti-Bing is more tempting to an intellectual than to a peasant or laborer. For the intellectual, the New Faith is a candle that he circles like a moth. In the end, he throws himself into the flame for the glory of mankind. We must not treat this desire for self-immolation lightly. Blood flowed freely in Europe during the religious wars, and he who joins the New Faith today is paying off debt to that European tradition. We are concerned here with questions more significant than mere force. (Milosz 1981, 6)

To sum up, it is precisely our longing for harmony, for consistence, for consonance that compels us to ignore those bits and pieces of reality that do

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not fit into our neat picture of ourselves and threaten to disclose the harsh contradictions of life. Indeed, it seems that this is what lies behind the so-called “just world hypothesis,” according to which people interpret social injustice as a consequence of someone’s own fault and not, for example, accident or unfortunate circumstance (for more about this see Melvin J. Lerner’s instructive book *The Belief in a Just World – A Fundamental Delusion*, 1980). Furthermore, it seems that for Milosz it is precisely the intellectual that is at greatest risk since for her it is vital that she feels herself included into a “greater picture.” Similar to Erich Fromm’s ideas expressed in *Escape from Freedom*, Milosz thus claims that “to belong to the masses is the great longing of the ‘alienated’ intellectual” (Milosz 1981, 8).

However, maybe the main cause of active ignorance, which I found in our drive to preserve coherence in an otherwise non-coherent world, can be further broken down or at least be illustrated with additional, even more nuanced examples. Thus, for Stanley Cavell, for instance, avoidance of knowledge—or skepticism—usually comes about because of our premonitions of finitude and contingency that we want to avoid. Skepticism thus turns out to be a transposition of existential anxiety onto an epistemological level, since this is what Cavell has “throughout kept arriving at as the cause of skepticism—the attempt to convert the human condition, the condition of humanity, into an intellectual difficulty, a riddle” (Cavell 1979, 493). The idea is actually the expounded and expanded insight of Nietzsche, from his *On the Genealogy of Morals*, where the German philosopher says that we have invented “life as a riddle, life as an epistemological problem” (Nietzsche 2006, 44), in order to cope with the senselessness of suffering. Indeed, the idea that skepticism is active ignorance of an unpleasant truth can already be found in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel remarks in the “Introduction” to *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, namely in the idea that our skepticism in the sense of fear of error might turn out to be the error itself (Hegel 1977, 47). That our denial of burdensome reality can be paired with the primal denial of death—of our finitude—is also of course widely present in Freud and psychoanalysis in general: “The need to deny death or at least to blunt consciousness of it is shared by everyone. We could not live with a persistent awareness of death. To do so would prevent all future-directed action.” (Wangh 1989, 7)

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Before concluding with this section that wanted to analyze the primary cause(s) of active ignorance in (mainly) conservative function of preserving the subject's coherence and identity (of which avoidance of premonitions of finitude and contingency are a special case), I have to point to an interesting hypothesis proposed by Robert Trivers in his book *The Folly of Fools* (Trivers 2011) about the main function of self-deception. Trivers as an evolutionary biologist that tries to explain human social behavior as a consequence of natural selection claims that the function of self-deception has to be found in our ability to better deceive others. Namely, for Trivers "self-deception evolves in the service of deception—the better to fool others." (Trivers 2011, 4). According to this theory, deception is constant in the natural world: viruses want to "trick" immune systems, moths want to hide with the help of mimicry and melt with the background, etc. Thus, co-evolutionary struggle emerges between the deceiver and the deceived, since the deceived are getting better and better at detecting deception, thus forcing the deceivers to improve on their techniques. Since humans are cognitive beings, deception in our species moves on to an intellectual level. Lying thus becomes the prevalent type of deception and humans consequently specialize in detecting liars (therefore it is, for instance, quite easy to detect a lying child) *and* in lying more efficiently. Since one of the greatest dangers of being detected whilst lying is giving up cues (focusing too hard on what you will say, raising the pitch of one's voice, etc.) it is, of course, best not to give them up. This, however, is easier to achieve if one *believes* one's own lie—thus self-deception helps us avoid giving up lying cues and perform better at deceiving others. Active ignorance in the form of self-deception in this case is thus in service of deception. While Trivers' story might sound quite exotic to a humanist or philosopher, it is perhaps worth noting that a somewhat similar case of active ignorance—the Stockholm syndrome in which a victim forces herself to believe in the good cause of her abductor—also got an evolutionary explanation. Indeed, being loyal to one's primary group, if that group is under attack, can turn out to be devastating for survival: the best strategy is simply to adapt and to accept new conquerors as new, and better rulers (cf. Cantor and Price 2007). To put it simply: victims of an abusive or kidnapping figure either in society or in family had greater chances of survival if they sided with the bully than if they—being physically

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weaker and dependent—wanted to stand their ground (and thus being most likely killed or at least injured).

### **Instead of a conclusion: towards a safe return into the cave**

When pondering the first mention and analysis of active ignorance one should perhaps look to Plato. Indeed, his *allegory of the cave* is perhaps the first and the most illustrious example of active ignorance. The phenomenon can be detected at the point of the return of the liberated individual back into the cave. While one would presume that the prisoners in the cave will be happy to hear that there is another, richer world out there to be experienced, the contrary is the case: if they could get their hands on the messenger, they would kill him:

And consider this also, said I. If such a one should go down again and take his old place would he not get his eyes full of darkness, thus suddenly coming out of the sunlight?

He would indeed.

Now if he should be required to contend with these perpetual prisoners in ‘evaluating’ these shadows while his vision was still dim and before his eyes were accustomed to the dark—and this time required for habituation would not be very short—would he not provoke laughter, and would it not be said of him that he had returned from his journey aloft with his eyes ruined and that it was not worth while even to attempt the ascent? And if it were possible to lay hands on and to kill the man who tried to release them and lead them up, would they not kill him?

They certainly would, he said. [Rep. 516e-517a]

Now, of course, one can ask why exactly this would be the case? The answer is, at least indirectly, provided by Plato himself: the messenger with his message threatens to undermine the value-system of the inhabitants of the cave, he most definitively questions their ability in judging the reality and thus also diminishes the worth of their “honors and commendations” for “the man who is quickest to make out the shadows as they pass” [Rep. 516e]. In other words, the liberated individual with his message about another, truer world brings

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dissonance and incongruence in the world of prisoners and thus—if we bear in mind that preservation of the coherence was in previous section determined as the prime cause for active ignorance—it is only natural that avoidance of truth will surge among the cave-dwellers.

This Plato's point of prisoners' lynching the messenger wanting to bring enlightenment to the people or at least save them before the imminent trouble was memorably portrayed by Henrik Ibsen in his *The Enemy of The People*. There, Dr. Thomas Stockmann, a popular citizen of a coastal town in southern Norway, discovers that waste products from the town's tannery are polluting the water supply. However, the public is unwilling to lend an ear to Dr. Stockmann because the closure of the facilities would imply lesser economic progress. Finally, Thomas is proclaimed *folkefiende*, "enemy of the people." Here, then, we have another case of active ignorance, this time in an explicitly sociopolitical context, connected with the environment. But let us ask now, what are the pedagogical implications of this point—of active ignorance and the refusal to acknowledge the truth.

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As I have already pointed out above while mentioning environmental education in the face of environmental denial, one lesson to be learned from the analysis of active ignorance is that only underlining facts will not suffice, since the facts are precisely what is *not missing*, but is instead actively ignored. More facts will only mean more ignorance and they are not likely to bring about change. Instead, the transformation—what every true education should be—can be brought about by gradual change, taking into account the existential dimensions—or causes—of ignorance. These, as we have seen, are connected with preserving the subject's integrity. In other words: before radically changing or transforming citizens, the educational praxis has to be able to offer them a relatively safe existentialist haven in which transformative process can be brought about. By this I mean that in the process of transformation the people—or "students"—should not be left alone in (re)constructing their identities while their older selves are being deconstructed and replaced. The process of education as transformation should help students to assume new, meaningful selves or identities. Indeed, perhaps the greatest task of the educator here—or the liberated messenger in Plato's allegory of the cave—is to help students in their search for the (re)subjectivation. Even though, of course, no one can tread

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this path instead of somebody else—each person has to construct her or his own identity—, the hand can be extended and meaningful experience can be shared by the educator to the student that is—together with the educator—undergoing the transformation. This is, as a matter of fact, something that already Plato spotted in the *allegory of the cave* in the *Republic* when he said that the true business of education is not the transmission of knowledge (which the Sophists have assumed) but assisting students so that they can come to know the reality for themselves:

Then, if this is true, our view of these matters must be this, that education is not in reality what some people proclaim it to be in their professions. What they aver is that they can put true knowledge into a soul that does not possess it, as if they were inserting vision into blind eyes.

They do indeed, he said.

But our present argument indicates, said I, that the true analogy for this indwelling power in the soul and the instrument whereby each of us apprehends is that of an eye that could not be converted to the light from the darkness except by turning the whole body. Even so this organ of knowledge must be turned around from the world of becoming together with the entire soul, like the scene-shifting periactus in the theater, until the soul is able to endure the contemplation of essence and the brightest region of being. And this, we say, is the good, do we not? [Rep. 518b-c]

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One could thus say that for Plato knowing can only happen in the context to which “the soul” is habituated—and so the task of the educator becomes preparing this context and offering assistance to students when habituating to the framework that is necessary to bring about the transformation. Perhaps this is the only way how to return safely to the cave with some hopes of waking up our neighbor-prisoners. The education then ceases to be mere implantation of knowledge and becomes “an art of the speediest and most effective shifting or conversion of the soul, not an art of producing vision in it, but on the assumption that it possesses vision but does not rightly direct it and does not look where it should, an art of bringing this about.” [Rep. 518d]

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This idea, however, differs greatly from many prevailing ideas in current educational sciences and pedagogy, where emphasis on desire to know and transmission model of teaching and learning is prevalent. As we have seen, these models and suppositions do not take into account the fact that subjects are primarily motivated to preserve their selves and cognitive constellations—what I want to call “psychostasis”—, and that they find it hard to implement transformative change because of the threat of facing the groundlessness of one’s existence. Indeed, individuals are not empty dishes, ready to be filled up with knowledge by their teachers, as perhaps Paolo Freire would say about the prevalent “banking model” of education, where students are considered to be mere containers for depositing knowledge. On the contrary, we are human beings that foremost want to preserve our identity, that are intrinsically motivated to avoid cognitive conflict and to avoid information that might expose contingency and finitude of our everyday lives.

274 This being said, there is still one issue that remains as of yet unaddressed in the present paper—namely, that of the paradoxical nature of “active ignorance.” As Alfred Mele points out in the context of self-deception, the puzzle is twofold: first, we have a “static puzzle” where it seems that a self-deceived person has to simultaneously believe that something is and isn’t true. For instance, if one is convinced that there is no God and yet thinks that religious belief is beneficial, then perhaps such a person could be inclined to convince herself that God exists. But this would entail that the person simultaneously believes that God does and does not exist, which is of course contradictory. The second puzzle is “dynamic”—convincing oneself that God exists would entail knowing in advance that you want to trick yourself into believing something you do not believe. However, it seems that this is equally impossible: knowing that you want to trick yourself into believing something you don’t believe destroys the trick. Mele thus says that “if self-deceivers intentionally deceive themselves, one wonders what prevents the guiding intention from undermining its own effective functioning.” (Mele 2001, 8) Very similar puzzles can, of course, be detected in the concept of “active ignorance”—namely, how can one try not to know what one knows? The answers to these puzzles were traditionally the following: a/ one could claim that the person does not, in fact, simultaneously believe that something is and isn’t true. Indeed, beliefs that  $p$  and  $\sim p$  occur

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*at different times.* Let's take the above example: if I decide to start believing in God, then it is not necessary that I simultaneously hold two contradictory beliefs that  $p$  and  $\sim p$ , namely that God exists and does not exist. On the contrary, I could have the belief that  $p$  (God does not exist) in January 2018 (at  $t_1$ ) and the belief that  $\sim p$  (God does exist) only later, when I successfully "deceived" myself at  $t_2$  (in, let's say, January 2019). However, as it can be quickly seen, not all cases of self-deception have such time span at their disposal. If we take the beliefs of Soviet prisoners, the belief that Stalin is a good leader despite awful circumstances in the camps, then there is no such time delay between the beliefs that the revolutionary leadership is good and bad simultaneously. The same, of course, goes for all cases of dissociative amnesia. That's why some theoreticians proposed the strategy b/, claiming that the subject should be split into different psychic regions—now it would be perfectly possible to imagine that one psychic region (perhaps the conscious I) believes that  $p$  while the other (perhaps the unconscious Id) believes that  $\sim p$ . However, such explanation seemingly comes at a cost: it postulates what Mele calls "mental exotica" (Mele 2001, 4), namely, split selves and different regions of personality that do not know each other. There is, according to him, another more convenient way how to explain these phenomena, namely the "deflationary" view. According to this view, our attempt at explaining phenomena related to self-deception relies too heavily on the model of ordinary deception where one person deceives another. In order to better understand such phenomena, one should attempt to describe them not on the basis of interpersonal deception but as phenomena that are not necessarily voluntary and intentional in the way lying to another person is (Mele 2001, 10; 17). Let this illustration of different strategies of explaining seeming puzzles related to active ignorance suffice for the present purpose; hopefully it demonstrates that the puzzles that we anticipate when we hear the phrase "active ignorance" are not necessarily paradoxes at all, and that phenomena related to active ignorance remain potent factors that significantly determine the outcomes of educational efforts. Indeed, it seems hard to neglect these when pondering the aims and strategies of contemporary pedagogy.

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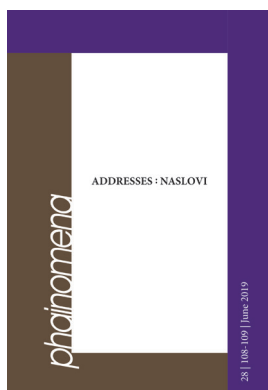
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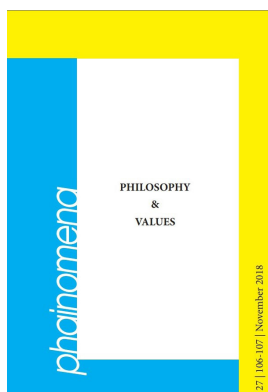
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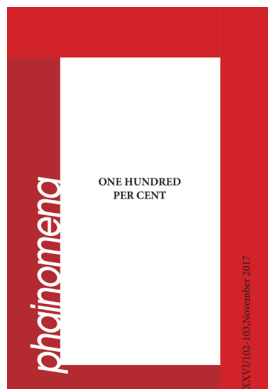
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