Ignorance Is No Excuse  
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Discussion: Terminology
- In a group, discuss questions 1 and 2 (thesis and terminology).

Discussion: The Argument
Jenni argues that ‘vices of inattention’:
1. make it difficult or impossible for us to prevent harm which we ought to prevent or make efforts to mitigate, and for which we are therefore responsible;
2. undermine our capacity to choose and judge autonomously;
3. prevent us from achieving and exercising certain virtues;
4. undermine integrity in the sense of ‘integrity’ which requires an integrated and coherent self.

A significant portion of Jenni’s argument is structured as a series of sub-arguments corresponding to each of these 4 points.

• Please discuss the sub-argument assigned to your group.

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What is Jenni’s sub-argument?
- A sub-argument is an argument which is also part of a larger argument e.g. a sub-argument might have as its conclusion a claim which is then used by in the overall argument as a premise in support of a further conclusion. The conclusion of a sub-argument is a sub-conclusion of the overall argument.

• Clarify the sub-conclusion.
- The sub-conclusion is the claim that the sub-argument is trying to persuade you of.

• What are the premises of this sub-argument?
- Premises are claims which an argument relies on i.e. the points it starts from.

• What role does this sub-argument play in Jenni’s overall argument for her main conclusion?

Discussion: Evaluation
- In a group, please discuss question 4. Is Jenni’s argument a good one?

- Is the argument valid?
- An argument is valid if, and only if, the conclusion follows logically from the premises so that the premises could not possibly be true without the conclusion being true as well.

- Is the argument sound?
- An argument is sound if, and only if, two conditions are satisfied. First, the argument must be valid. Second, all of the premises must be true. It follows that the conclusion of a sound argument is true.

Reflection
- Is the consumption of meat, for example, culpable to the degree that Jenni claims? Are meat-eaters personally responsible for the abuses of factory farming?

- What would it mean to follow Jenni’s advice concerning duties of attentiveness? Is this advice realistic? If not, what follows?

- Is eating meat, buying cheap clothes, failing to protest government policy etc. more vicious — at least in some ways — than standing by in Nazi Germany?

- Are the vices of inattention discussed by Jenni ‘deadly’ in Taylor’s sense (2006)? If not, is that a problem for Taylor? Why or why not?

Lynch argues that Jenni, along with other philosophers, conflates importantly distinct phenom-
...I must have had the feeling that it was no affair of mine when I heard the people around me declaring an open season on Jews, Freemasons, Social Democrats, or Jehovah’s Witnesses. I thought I was not implicated if I myself did not take part.

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On November 1... I passed by the still smoldering ruins of the Berlin synagogues. ... Most of all I was troubled by the political revival of the ‘gutter’. The smashed panes of shop windows offended my sense of middle-class order.

I did not see that more was being smashed than glass ... Did I sense, at least for a moment, that something was beginning which would end with the annihilation of one whole group of our nation? Did I sense that this outburst of hoodlumism was changing my moral substance? I do not know.

I accepted what had happened rather indifferently. Some phrases of Hitler’s, to the effect that he had not wanted these excesses, contributed to this attitude. 

... Hitler’s hatred for the Jews seemed to me so much a matter of course that I gave it no serious thought.

... Political events did not concern me. ... I felt that there was no need for me to take any political positions at all.

... I have been repeatedly asked ... what I actually knew of the persecution, the deportation, and the annihilation of the Jews; what I should have known and what conclusions I ought to have drawn. ...

It is true that as a favorite and later as one of Hitler’s most influential ministers I was isolated. It is also true that the habit of thinking within the limits of my own field provided me, both as architect and as Armaments Minister, with many opportunities for evasion. It is true that I did not know what was really beginning on November 9, 1938, and what ended in Auschwitz and Maidanek. But in the final analysis I myself determined the degree of my isolation, the extremity of my evasions, and the extent of my ignorance.

Whether I knew or did not know, or how much or how little I knew, is totally unimportant when I consider what horrors I ought to have known about and what conclusions would have been the natural ones to draw from the little I did know. Those who ask me are fundamentally expecting me to offer justifications. But I have none. No apologies are possible.


Figure 1: Does ignorance exculpate? When is ignorance culpable? Is culpable ignorance less culpable than knowledge of evils about which one does nothing?
... I failed to read the physiognomy of the regime mirrored in the faces of those prisoners — the regime whose existence I was so obsessively trying to prolong.... I did not see any moral ground outside the system where I should have taken my stand. 

One day, some time in the summer of 1944, my friend Karl Hanke, the Gauleiter of Lower Silesia, came to me. In early years, he had told me a great deal about the Polish and French campaigns, had spoken of the dead and wounded, the pain and agonies, and in talking about these things had shown himself a man of sympathy and directness. This time, sitting in the green leather easy chair in my office, he seemed confused and spoke faltering, with many breaks. He advised me never to accept an invitation to inspect a concentration camp in Upper Silesia. Never, under any circumstances. He had seen something there which he was not permitted to describe and moreover could not describe.

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. Hanke must have been speaking of Auschwitz. During those few seconds, while Hanke was warning me, the whole responsibility had become a reality again. Those seconds were uppermost in my mind when I stated to the international court at the Nuremberg Trial that as an important member of the leadership of the Reich, I had to share the total responsibility for all that happened. 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. Those activities shrink to nothing in the face of it. Because I failed at that time, I still feel, to this day, responsible for Auschwitz in a wholly personal sense.

Speer (1970, 505–506)

Figure 2: Assuming he is telling the truth, is Speer responsible for Auschwitz?
ena by subsuming ‘wilful ignorance’ under ‘self-deception’ (forthcoming). On Lynch’s view, there are important differences between wilful ignorance and (the various kinds of) self-deception. Lynch discusses a number of differences which depend partly on one’s understanding of self-deception.

- In particular, he argues that wilful ignorance is, well, wilful. That is, it is intentional. In contrast, Lynch argues, self-deception is typically not intentional. We do not usually set out to deceive ourselves.

- Moreover, in order to be self-deceived, one must lack awareness, to some extent, of the fact. I cannot be consciously and fully aware that I am self-deceived else I would not have successfully deceived myself. So even if self-deception is initially intentional, it cannot go on being intentional once in place. On the other hand, wilful ignorance is, Lynch argues, consistent with full awareness of that fact.

- Wilful ignorance is ignorance: Speer may have suspected what was happening to the Jews but, if he knew, then he couldn’t have remained ignorant (1970). But self-deception arguably involves more than mere ignorance: it arguably requires false belief. If Speer, having learnt the truth about Auschwitz, had convinced himself that the Jews were being well-treated or that prisoners in the camps had been justly convicted of genuine crimes, then he would have been self-deceived rather than wilfully ignorant. This is why not accepting an invitation to inspect a camp in Upper Silesia is so important, of course: had Speer accepted such an invitation, he could no longer have chosen to remain ignorant.

Lynch argues that (other things being equal) ‘wilful ignorance is generally more culpable’ than self-deception because it is necessarily intentional and compatible with full awareness (forthcoming, §5).

...it seems to me that we would think less of Speer for having been wilfully ignorant of the Final Solution than for having deceived himself into thinking that the Final Solution was not happening. (Lynch forthcoming, §5 fn. 19)

- Is Lynch right? Is wilful ignorance generally worse than self-deception? If we take Speer at his word and assume that he suspected, but deliberately remained ignorant of, what was happening, is he more blameworthy than if he had persuaded himself that the Reich was not pursuing genocide? (See Figures 1 and 2.)

- Lynch does suggest that we may sometimes be perfectly entitled to remain wilfully ignorant. For example, if somebody just doesn’t want to know whether she has a terrible disease or not, she may have a perfect right to remain ignorant by e.g. failing to see a doctor. In the past, people could choose to remain ignorant in other cases e.g. of the risks of a medical procedure. Now, that is not possible: in order to receive treatment, you must give informed consent and that means that the risks must be explained to you. Does this constitute moral progress?

References