

Willful Ignorance: A Perspective from Economics*

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Abstract

We discuss willful ignorance and information avoidance in prosocial decisions from the perspective of economic theory, i.e. based on the ideas of utility maximization and the instrumental value of information. We provide a definition of information avoidance, empirical evidence from a paradigmatic experiment, and discuss the motives behind the phenomenon. We discuss its relevance in applications and avenues for future research.

1 Introduction

Willful ignorance is the avoidance of information that might hurt oneself. It is a well-tested strategy to avoid legal culpability [29]. Yet even in relatively anonymous settings, there is mounting empirical evidence that people use willful ignorance to avoid being prosocial. Such behavior presents a puzzle. From a narrow rational perspective, having less information cannot make you better off. At the same time, all of us have looked the other way to excuse some of our behaviors, without experiencing this as self-defeating.

In this paper, we look at this paradox from the perspective of economic theory, i.e. utility maximization. We first outline a working definition of willful ignorance, or information avoidance. We discuss the results of an experimental paradigm based on Dana et al. [8], that investigates information avoidance according to this definition, and makes the paradox concrete. We then explain how one can interpret behavior in such experiments from the viewpoint of utility maximization, and what it suggests for the underlying psychology.

In the process, we consider some important questions about human altruism. First, we challenge an interpretation of willful ignorance as showing that people are fundamentally selfish. Second, we

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discuss the welfare consequences of forcing information on people. Finally, we look to the future of research on willful ignorance and ask what it would take to demonstrate its impact beyond the laboratory.

2 Defining willful ignorance

While classical economists considered a direct value of information or from beliefs [23], modern economics mostly considers the instrumental value of information [18]. From this vantage point, information can only have (weakly) positive value, and should be acquired whenever its benefits, measured by improved decision making, exceed the cost of acquisition. As an example, a consumer concerned with the environmental impact of a pair of jeans should gladly accept free information about their carbon footprint.

Thus, avoidance of such information is in need of explanation from an instrumental perspective. This suggests the following definition: a person is willfully ignorant if she decides not to acquire costless information that may change her decisions. This definition rules out information avoidance based on purely hedonistic motives, i.e. detached from any downstream decisions (contrast this to Wojtowicz et al. [34] in this issue). It should suit behavioral scientists who are concerned with the role of information in (active) decision-making.

3 Experimental paradigm

Dana et al. [8] introduced an experimental paradigm that generated interest in willful ignorance for prosocial decisions. Participants were anonymously paired and assigned to be a decision maker or a recipient. In the full information treatment, which functioned as a control, the decision maker (or “dictator”) chose between two options: A, yielding a payoff of \$6 for the decision maker and \$1 for the recipient, or B, yielding a payoff of \$5 for each participant. Broadly consistent with prior experiments on social preferences, 74% of dictators chose the more generous B option, even though the experiment was anonymous and the recipient could not punish.

The hidden information treatment, our focus here, is illustrated in Figure 1, taken from Dana et al. [8]. It faced participants with a similar choice where option A paid them \$6 and option B paid \$5. However, dictators did not know the consequences of choosing A or B for the recipient. They knew only that there was a 50% chance their payoffs were aligned with the recipient – A yielded the recipient a payoff of \$5, and option B a payoff of \$1 – and a 50% chance their payoffs were in conflict – option A paid the recipient \$1 and option B paid \$5. The dictators could choose

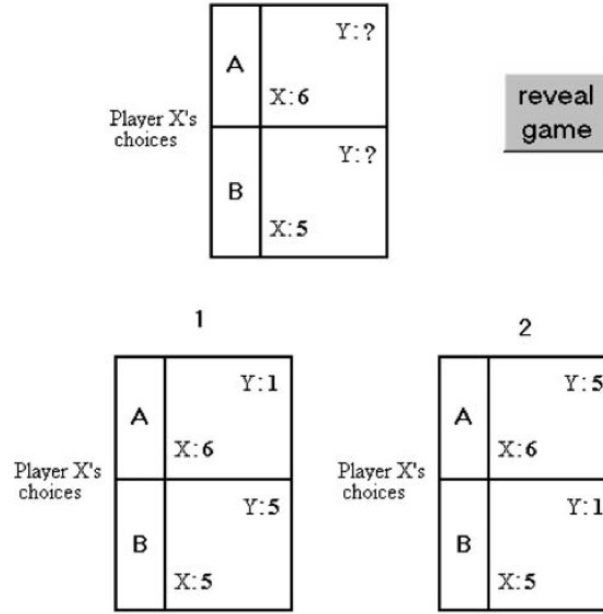


Fig. 2 Interface for hidden information treatment

Figure 1: The Hidden Information treatment in Dana et al. [8]. Initially, payoffs of the receiver are unknown. Dictators could choose between A or B, or reveal which of the games at the bottom of the screen was actually being played.

to privately reveal the payoffs by clicking a button that read “reveal payoffs,” but did not have to do so.

If dictators chose generously in the control condition due to a taste for fairness, they should have been interested in revealing: if payoffs were aligned, the A option would be good for both players. If payoffs were in conflict, they would know that option B paid both players \$5, which most dictators prefer in the control. Yet, 44% of dictators did not reveal and chose the personally beneficial option A. As a result, the fraction of altruistic choices dropped by almost half. This pattern clearly demonstrates “willful ignorance” as defined above, because some people who avoided information would have used it to change their decision from A to B, and information is free and easily accessible.

The experiment has sparked a large number of replications and variations. **Vu et al. [33] conducts a meta-study, and finds that pro-social behavior drops by about 16 percentage points in the Hidden Information condition compared to the control with full information, which is lower than in the original study, but still demonstrates the robustness of the phenomenon.

4 Interpreting information avoidance

The previous section exemplifies why willful ignorance poses an interesting challenge to economic modeling. Preferences defined on monetary payoffs alone cannot explain this behavior. Thus, the experiment falsifies many popular theories of fairness, inequality aversion or social value orientation in both psychology and economics, at least under standard notions of rationality.¹

Rationalizing willful ignorance. Some research suggests behavioral explanations for willful ignorance based on bounded rationality or inattention. Grossman [19] finds strong default effects, with greatly reduced ignorance if ignorance has to be actively chosen. Exley and Kessler [12] show substantial ignorance in a modified game with no self-interest, concluding that some, but not all, information avoidance is due to factors such as aversion to complex trade-offs, laziness or inattention [see also 25]. More generally, Koppel et al. [22] document widespread misunderstanding in economic games, including simple dictator games with full information.

However, many results speak against purely behavioral explanations. First, a substantial fraction explicitly values ignorance as they are willing to pay to *not* obtain information [21, 28, 11]. Second, most people are keen to reveal information about the game *after* they have already made a decision [19, 21], suggesting that they are not averse to additional information processing. Similarly, **Chen et al. [5] show that self-serving motives can sometimes lead to *more* information acquisition, as agents “fish for good news”.

Following such findings, the experimental economics literature has attempted to rationalize willful ignorance [32], such as through manipulating one’s beliefs about norms [30], resolving cognitive dissonance [24, 5], or identity considerations [27]. A particularly common interpretation of willful ignorance, suggested in Dana et al. [8], is the notion that it provides an “excuse”, or plausible deniability. Under this interpretation, previous experiments on social preferences that had symmetric information (like the control condition) overestimated preferences to be fair or generous. That is, many people gave not because they preferred fairness, but rather because they felt compelled in some way by the situation and would readily seek excuses to avoid this compulsion to give.

This interpretation raises the question of how ignorance can serve as an excuse if it is clear that one *could* have known them. Grossman and van der Weele [21] answer this question in the context of a Bayesian model of self-signaling. They show that even explicitly chosen ignorance can obfuscate the underlying trait of altruism, and that consequently, the hidden information condition

¹In particular, if utility is a function only of the payoffs in the game, subjects’ behavior violates the independence axiom, which underpins the theory of expected utility [15, 21].

reduces pressure for prosociality. The idea that ignorance is an “excuse” has also received empirical support by way of perceptions by other parties. Conditional on taking the selfish action, a dictator who chose to be ignorant is punished less [3, 6] and her action is viewed more positively [21] than a dictator who chooses with full knowledge of the adverse consequences.

The Hidden Information condition may also reduce the instrumental value of information. Note that the design introduces various sorts of ignorance: the decision maker does not learn the true payoff state if she does not click, and the recipient does not know whether the decision maker clicked. With these information asymmetries, the perception of there being any social norm may be lost. tho Pesch and Dana [31] provide suggestive evidence that when selfish motives cannot be clearly attributed, giving is reduced primarily because norms around giving are relaxed. **Fahrenwaldt et al. [14] advance a theory that explains reduced giving through changes in perceived norms. If norms collapse, willful ignorance may simply reflect that private information no longer has instrumental value.

Scratch an altruist? These interpretations touch on deep questions about human nature that have persisted across the social and natural sciences [see also 4]. Willful ignorance has sometimes been interpreted as evidence that humans are fundamentally selfish: just provide people with the most transparent excuse, and generosity will collapse. This seems to confirm the old adagium: Scratch an altruist and watch a hypocrite bleed.

We believe this interpretation is misleading for a number of reasons. First, it ignores the obvious point that about one third of the subjects in the experiment actually reveal information and subsequently give. The focus on information avoidance rather than seeking is facilitated by the design: the baseline condition informs everyone, leaving only scope to reduce information. An alternative benchmark would be that subjects have no information, which, given the design of the game, would lead virtually everyone to be selfish. In this case, the option to uncover hidden information would lead to an *increase* in prosocial behavior. Indeed, in a more symmetric setting, *Figuroa et al. [16] find that seeking to be convinced about donating to charity is at least as common as avoidance behavior.

Second, information avoiders are not just motivated by their own payoffs. If they were, they would not need an excuse to be selfish. If, instead, avoidance is driven by a weakening of social norms or self-image – as suggested above – the experiment shows the power of such motivations, even in an abstract lab setting with anonymous giving. Thus, even though the paradigm may not reveal the exact motivations for avoidance, they are likely to be deeply rooted in our social nature, and are hardly characteristic of a homo economicus.

Optimal avoidance. Willful ignorance is typically seen as an exclusively bad thing – after all, prosocial outcomes go down when there is an option to avoid information. We think this view is too narrow, as the experiment raises broader questions about giving and welfare. The experimental dictator game creates a social pressure to give, much like an encounter with a charitable solicitor on the street. DellaVigna et al. [9] study this kind of charitable appeal in the field, and find evidence that people expend effort to avoid being asked [see also 2, 13]. They estimate the cost of being asked to give, and conclude that to overcome those costs and yield positive overall value, charities must be quite efficient. From this perspective, situational “excuses” like willful ignorance can have positive social value because they allow insincere givers a way out. Rather than minimizing willful ignorance, one might ask how *much* ignorance, and by whom, is socially optimal.

5 Looking forward

What is needed to advance willful ignorance research? First, we suspect that while offering some fundamental insights into the nature of fairness concerns, the paradigmatic experimental setup sketched above may not be the best suited to understand the finer points of the underlying psychology. The between-subject nature of the design means that we do not know the counterfactual behavior for any given individual. Further, the binary nature of the decisions limits inferences to relatively coarse categories. Going forward, economists could benefit from psychological-style investigations that focus on mechanisms behind avoidance [20]. Psychologists, in turn, could benefit from economic-style experiments that carefully construct information and common knowledge, as these are building blocks for social norms and levers for manipulating norm change.

Second, willful ignorance research suffers from a lack of demonstrated economic relevance or real world impact. The literature is largely lab-based and focused on existence proofs. Quantifying the impact of ignorance in applications outside of the lab is more difficult. Some studies have found mixed evidence for willful ignorance with more real world framing and consumption choices in either lab or online environments [10, 7, 1, 26]. Freddi [17] uses observational data from online newspapers to suggest that people willfully avoid information about refugees. **Epperson and Gerster [11] show that people avoid information about meat production, which (temporarily) affects consumption at university canteens. More evidence of this type would be useful in expanding our understanding of the economic consequences of willful ignorance.

Finally, welfare remains an underexplored issue. Willful ignorance involves intrapersonal comparisons and conflicting motives. Much like research in intertemporal choice, these sort of multiple-selves problems do not lend themselves easily to welfare conclusions. Which self is right, the one

that behaves prosocially under full information, or the one that ignores information to behave selfishly? *Figuroa et al. [16] model giving as a self-control problem; such analogies might help elucidate the welfare effects of willful ignorance.

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Conflict of interest statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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