

Dissecting Intentional Ignorance

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April 8th, 2016—It was just one of many nights that tore my hopes apart: my hope of not being immediately labelled “nerd” because I was born and raised in a Vietnamese family; my hope of not receiving “Ni hao” when people meet me for the first time; my hope that people will understand that it’s okay for my sister to not be good at math and instead be more keen towards sports like running; my hopes of overcoming inequality, prejudice, and stereotypes.

A white male friend and I were discussing the role race plays in college admissions. He expressed anger when mentioning how he thought college policies benefit minorities. “Colleges will always take a minority over a white person,” he said. “They should take the best candidate, regardless of race.”

I did not agree. As an Asian international student, I understand that there are regulations supporting and showing preferential treatment towards minorities. However, I believe there are reasons for them. I tried to explain the intention behind those policies: the endeavour to maintain a diverse academic environment, the concept of achievement and opportunity gaps limiting the minority’s access to good education, as well as to bridge the admission/graduation gap between white people and minorities shown in numerous statistics.

Nonetheless, my classmate truly disappointed me. It wasn’t because of our differences in beliefs, but rather the disrespectful and indifferent attitude. While I was attempting my best to give an explanation, he continued to repeat his previous statements of how unfair the system was. Disregarding everything I said, he kept on saying “this is so stupid, talking about all this shit makes me angry.” I took the conversation very seriously, but somehow an honest dialogue about the struggles of minorities was considered “shit.” What frustrated me even more was the fact that, while I gave my insights in a polite manner—attempting to find mutual ground and put myself in his shoes -- despite all the facts I said, he simply turned a blind eye. This sort of behavior is what I consider “intentional ignorance.” My friend was intellectually aware of the struggle of minorities and the concept of an opportunity gap, but he chose to ignore them.

My definition of “intentional ignorance” is the decision of an individual to ignore facts that they know are true or circumstances that they know exist. I believe it ultimately stems from fear. Some people are afraid of confronting the truth. Some people have a hard time dealing with being wrong. Some people are afraid of changes in perspectives. In cases of social justice matters, I believe their denial is out of fear of hurting their ego. For a more privileged or powerful party, accepting that they have more systemic benefits can be a challenging process because they might feel as though their achievements are undermined. For a less powerful party, facing the reality that they receive less rights and are seen as “lesser” can be overwhelming. These people wear blinders because they want to ignore the dark or ugly parts of life that may be outside of their immediate control.

Regardless of the reasons people give for intentional ignorance, their decision to do so impedes growth. First, it prevents awareness and a certain level of intellectual complexity. Ignorance sets us back and stops us from surpassing our knowledge boundaries. A fixed mindset that does not attempt to reach for developments will just stay where it is. The social systems of society are structured with a puzzling level of intricacy and demand a lot of emotional as well as intellectual strength to be truly comprehended. Nonetheless, it is worth the effort and the emotional challenges to understand. Furthermore, choosing intentional ignorance places an obstacle in the way of developing meaningful relationships. Building sincere relationships requires deep connections and empathy, which aren't always easily formed. If we stop turning a blind eye to the feelings and experiences of others, we might discover something about them--a notion, a meaningful experience, a belief—that we empathize with. The process of tolerating parts of each other requires us to first acknowledge the existence of these parts. Acceptance is how we can reach true empathy. Finally, intentional ignorance hinders our progress towards a just and equal society. It aggravates significant issues such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, Islamophobia, etc because there is a huge chasm among various levels of depth in understanding them. One's resolution to intentional ignorance often precipitates unintentional feelings of marginalization, frustration, and ultimately, division. As Aleister Crowley once said, "The sin which is unpardonable is knowingly and wilfully to reject truth, to fear knowledge lest that knowledge pander not to thy prejudices."