

Francesca Pongiglione

**Information, Ignorance,
and Obligations to Know**

1. *Introduction: duties to know*

Reasonable persons are expected to acquire information about a situation before acting so that they are aware of the harm that may befall others as a consequence of their action (Hart 1968, 148). To take a simple example, when I back up to park my car, I should make sure nobody is standing behind it. Rosen has called such duties “procedural epistemic obligations,” defined as “the requirements to take certain steps to inform yourself about matters that might bear on the permissibility of your conduct” (Rosen 2004, 301). These obligations to know derive from our other moral obligations, such as the obligation to avoid causing harm to someone.

Our obligations to know about the effects of our actions have changed – and dramatically increased – during the last 150 years or so as a consequence of two circumstances: the progressive interconnection of human beings due to the global economy and the much higher volume of information now available in comparison to what was available to our ancestors. Only a few generations ago, when our actions were much less interconnected than they are now, it was easier to assess whether, by acting in a certain way, we were causing harm or not. The global economy has completely altered this scenario. Many actions we perform daily and consider harmless can in fact contribute to harming distant others. We are involved in many collective harms, from climate change to labor exploitation; consequently, decisions about what to eat or buy are rele-

vant to the lives of people near and far, both in space and in time. We are connected to distant others not only as contributing causes of certain harms but also in virtue of our capacity to bring about remedies for conditions of need that we might have not contributed to at all, but cannot ignore (Dennett 1986, 149). There are many conditions of need in the world, from wars to poverty, that call for our attention. Through various forms of civic engagement, or simply through our electoral choices, we can contribute to alleviating certain conditions of need.

Our duties to know have also increased in response to the current availability of information. As long ago as 1986 Dennett wrote that, thanks to information technology, there are now so many opportunities to know about the effects of our actions on other people and on the environment that the burden is almost unbearable. We cannot act as if this information were not available, and yet, if we really tried to acquire knowledge on all morally relevant issues, we would not have time to do much else beyond searching for and reading information (*ibidem*, 154). To a certain extent, he seems to long for the good old times, when we could ignore what was happening in distant countries to distant people and “plan and act with a clear conscience on the basis of a more limited, manageable stock of local knowledge” (*ibidem*, 144).

That was his feeling in 1986, with no internet, no smartphones, far fewer television channels, and limited access to international media. In 2021, the information environment seems richer than ever, and so is the apparent epistemic burden on our shoulders. So much information on morally relevant facts is now available, but it is not clear whether this means that we have a duty to know all these facts. Such an expectation clearly seems overly demanding: we lack both the time and the cognitive resources to process this tremendous amount of information – a conclusion shared by all scholars who have dealt with this issue (Dennett 1986; Guerrero 2007; Vanderheiden 2016; Bradford 2017; Hartford 2019). Even if we assume that once we know something, we will act appropriately (which I will assume here for the sake of my argument), the acquisition of this enormous amount of knowledge is itself a challenge that looks forbiddingly hard to meet. In addition, as Vanderheiden suggests, the challenge goes beyond learning facts that we know have moral implications – it includes the prior *recognition* that certain facts are morally relevant (Vanderheiden 2016, 305). However, we cannot simply and legitimately

ignore all these facts “by refusing either to hear or to believe” the way that we are connected to distant people (*ibidem*, 299). Our role as citizens in the globalized world requires us not to ignore the harm or good we may bring about with our actions. Thus, our obligations to know constitute a moral as well as a civic duty that, in the words of Vanderheiden, concerns “what we know as much as what we do” (*ibidem*, 298).

When we claim that someone “ought to know” something, we implicitly suggest that failing to know that something implies culpability. However, given the practical impossibility of knowing all the possible consequences of our actions, there must be limits beyond which our ignorance is no longer culpable. Vanderheiden argues that since the realm of what we could be required to know is so huge, the duties to know risk being overly demanding if ascribed solely to individuals. Therefore, he makes a distinction between individuals and collectives (such as states, but also firms) and proposes that the more demanding obligations to know be attributed only to collectives in virtue of their greater epistemic capacities, thus partially lifting the weight of epistemic duties from individuals’ shoulders (*ibidem*, 305-308). Hartford, aware of the same problem but aiming to define individuals’ obligations to know, tries to restrict them by exploring various attempts to escape what she calls “the dilemma of overdemandingness”. However, by her own admission, she ends up with obligations to know that are too slight, thus failing to solve the puzzle (Hartford 2019, 58-61). Bradford, as an alternative, proposes that the effort required of agents in terms of knowledge acquisition is proportional to what is at stake: if my ignorance will cause very serious harm, then my ignorance is blameworthy almost regardless of how much effort acquiring the relevant information would entail (Bradford 2017, 190-191).

The aim of this paper is to contribute further to circumscribing our duties to know and establishing under what circumstances individuals are culpable for their ignorance. It will consider two elements that could work as viable parameters for judging the culpability of ignorant agents: the *quality* of existing information which, it will be argued, is primary, and secondarily the *effort* necessary to acquire the knowledge. Though the amount of information available nowadays is indeed vast, its quality varies greatly from topic to topic, as does the effort needed to acquire it. At times the exercise of common epistemic virtues suffices to acquire correct information despite flaws in quality, at times it does not. There-

fore, our expectations regarding what individuals ought to know cannot be the same for all topics and for all individuals and certainly cannot go beyond the bounds of what only an expert can fully understand and correctly interpret. Thus, in contrast to previous work, this paper will emphasize that people are not all in the same epistemic position regarding the acquisition of knowledge of facts with moral implications, even if we restrict, as I will, the field to cognitively able citizens (not too young and not too old) of liberal democracies.

The paper will proceed as follows: section 2 motivates the focus on factual rather than moral knowledge and then specifies what kinds of ignorance it will consider, including so-called “deep ignorance,” which many scholars have excluded from blame. Section 3 explores the features of information that affect its quality and thus influence obligations to know. Section 4 considers the effort individuals put into the acquisition of information, claiming that when quality of information is very good and the effort required to acquire knowledge is therefore slight, the obligations to know are stronger than when quality of information is lower and the effort needed to acquire it is greater. Some conclusions regarding the grounds on which we assign blame will follow.

2. *Duties to know what, and for whom*

First, we need to clarify the nature of the duty to know. In this paper we consider it as a duty that derives exclusively from other moral obligations (such as not harming anyone, or maximizing the welfare of the people involved in an action, etc.). That is, we have an obligation to inform ourselves in all those contexts in which the possession of information can make the difference between harming someone, or not. As Holly Smith has noted, one could interpret the duty to acquire information as merely an epistemic duty to possess certain “intellectual goods” such as knowledge and true beliefs, or as the duty to “gather as much evidence as possible” - a duty that does not imply the existence of a parallel moral duty (Smith 2018, 93-95). This interpretation, however, does not address the moral consequences of a certain epistemic condition, so it cannot lead to the formation of a moral judgment of the ignorant agent, which is instead the focus of the present investigation.

Secondly, it is important to define *what* we want to argue that individuals are supposed to know. In this paper we concentrate on facts with implications for moral action – that is, facts the knowledge of which would force us to reconsider the way we behave (assuming that we share basic moral principles, such as doing no harm and providing help). This kind of knowledge is called *factual* since, unlike moral or normative knowledge, it does not concern values or moral norms, but rather certain circumstances that might make my action not permissible, if I was informed about them. Let us consider the following example, drawn from Guerrero, of factual knowledge with implications for moral action. Clint has two switches for turning on his kitchen's overhead light – one on the eastern side of the room, one on the western. Both switches work correctly, yet, through an obscure series of causal relations, if he turns on the eastern switch, someone in New York City will suffer a heart attack (Guerrero 2007, 74). Clint is not aware of this fact, but we can assume that if he were, being a morally sound person, he would modify his actions accordingly and refrain from using the eastern switch. Clint's (lack of) factual knowledge influences his decision concerning which switch to use, with clear moral implications.

Or, drawing from Hartford, let us consider Samuel,¹ who buys Bethal potatoes in South Africa in 1958. The farming of these potatoes involved brutal treatment of prison laborers, and the response to high demand was to expand the workforce by imprisoning more people. Thus, to buy Bethal potatoes meant to be involved in the perpetration of brutalities and injustice. Awareness of these facts was not widespread until 1959, when a potato boycott that received extensive media coverage brought the issue before the public (Hartford 2019, 49-50). Samuel, buying Bethal potatoes in 1958, is not aware of the circumstances of their production; if he had been, he would not have bought them. Samuel's (lack of) factual knowledge influences his decision whether or not to buy Bethal potatoes and thus clearly has moral implications.

The facts about Clint's switches and the potato farm laborers are not moral facts. We can therefore consider ignorance about them to be fac-

¹ The character of Samuel was originally proposed by Bradford, but the South African context was added by Hartford.

tual ignorance. Let us briefly consider what *moral* ignorance is, in order to appreciate the difference. A substantial amount of literature deals with morally ignorant agents and their potential culpability. Rosen gives two popular examples of moral ignorance. The first concerns a slaveholder in ancient times, who keeps slaves, treats them brutally and cruelly, and never questions this practice – all of which was then typical of most people, who did not see it as morally wrong (Rosen 2003, 64-65). The second example is about a sexist American father in 1952 who thinks that only his sons deserve to receive an education, while his daughters merely need to find a good husband, and who consequently denies them college (*ibidem*, 66-67). Both the ancient slaveholder's and the sexist father's beliefs are not based on facts, but rather on values, customs, and traditions they do not question. They are both morally ignorant. This paper is not interested in probing whether or not morally ignorant agents are culpable for their ignorance, although the debate on the topic is quite lively (see for example Fitzpatrick 2008 or Harman 2011 in response to Rosen, and Wieland 2015 in response to Harman). Rather, its aim is to explore the culpability associated with factual ignorance only, despite the awareness that the two can, at times, overlap, and that the line between moral and factual ignorance is in some cases rather blurred.

Let us now distinguish between different epistemic situations subjects can find themselves in regarding factual knowledge. People can be aware that some facts ought to be checked to verify possible moral implications of an action under consideration, but people can also lack that awareness. Let us consider Josh, who happens to hear that Amazon is involved in forms of labor exploitation but, for reasons not relevant here, fails to seek further information. If Josh knew about Amazon employees' working conditions, he would cancel his subscription immediately. But Josh fails to search for more information and so continues to buy items on Amazon, being ignorant of how its employees are treated but aware that some further inquiry might be needed. Mary, too, enjoys her shopping on Amazon, but, unlike Josh, she has never heard about possible abuses or violations of worker rights. Like Josh, had she known, she would have immediately canceled her subscription. But she does not even know there is something that ought to be checked. She, too, continues to buy items on Amazon, ignorant of being ignorant of how its employees are treated.

Josh and Mary are factually ignorant in two different ways. Josh's ignorance is what has been called 'affected' ignorance; Mary's ignorance has instead been called 'deep' ignorance (for this distinction, see for example Guerrero 2007, 95; Peels 2014, 485).² Both kinds of ignorance were originally described by Thomas Aquinas, who distinguished the ignorance of those who deliberately choose to remain ignorant (*affected* ignorance) from the ignorance of those who fail to realize that they should acquire knowledge on a certain topic (*deep* ignorance).^{3,4}

Let us begin with affected ignorance, the condition of an agent who is aware of not knowing certain facts. According to Moody-Adams, affected ignorance can at times involve "refusing to consider whether some practice in which one participates might be wrong" (Moody-Adams 1994, 296). For this reason, Wieland has called it also "strategic" ignorance – which reflects the convenience and self-protective nature of the choice to remain ignorant when one knows there are facts worth checking, such as the working conditions of those who produce goods we want to buy (Wieland 2017). Robichaud has illustrated strategic ignorance with the case of "Strat", who is building a house and deciding what materials to use and whether to employ expensive energy-efficient technologies. He has heard about climate change and could ask his climate-scientist neighbor more about it but chooses not to, as he prefers to remain ignorant and avoid worrying about his carbon footprint (Robichaud 2017, 1415).

Consider now deep ignorance, referring again to the examples of Clint the light switcher and Samuel the potato buyer. Clint is deeply ignorant, that is, he has no idea that he should investigate possible side effects of using one switch or the other. Samuel is also deeply ignorant about Bethal potatoes: not only does he have no idea of the conditions in which they are produced, but he also has no idea that it could be worth inves-

² Guerrero applies the concept of 'deep ignorance' to moral ignorance. It can, however, be applied to factual ignorance as well, which is what I am doing here.

³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, Q 6, art. 8.

⁴ These two epistemic statuses can also be described, following Rescher (2009, 3), as (1) lacking substantial knowledge of the relevant facts but possessing metaknowledge about one's own knowledge (Josh) and (2) lacking both substantial and metaknowledge (Mary).

tigating. He is just like you and me when we buy potatoes at the grocery store, not having heard of anything that might suggest that some inquiry on our part is in order.

Responsibility for deep ignorance is more difficult to establish. To be sure, if I am unaware of my ignorance of certain facts, there is apparently not much I can do to remedy that specific ignorance. To be deeply ignorant means, as Vanderheiden observed, to lack control over the ignorance itself, which makes the grounds for attributing blame more slippery (Vanderheiden 2016, 303-304). For this reason, many scholars have argued that deep ignorance is to be excused – especially scholars who support volitionist theories.

Volitionism considers agents culpable for their ignorance only if, at some point, they were aware they had a duty to acquire information on something and deliberately failed to do so, thus performing an akratic (i.e., knowingly wrong) act (Rosen 2004, 307). Zimmerman had previously adopted a similar view, claiming that negligent behavior implies acting with inadvertence, i.e., causing harm one did not think one would cause at the time of acting, yet having adverted to this possibility at an earlier time (Zimmerman 1986, 199-200). Agents are blameworthy for acting in ignorance of certain relevant facts only if at a previous time they had been conscious that they ought to have acquired the relevant information. Volitionism has been summarized in the claim that “blame requires choice” (Sverdlik 1993, 140). Like many other scholars, my view is that to adopt volitionism is to excuse many, if not most, cases of ignorance, and for this reason volitionism is to be rejected (see, for example, Peels 2011, 576; Sher 2009, 25-33). However tempting it might be to excuse deeply ignorant agents, if we did that we would, in effect, attribute obligations to know certain facts only to those who are already somewhat aware of them. This would mean exculpating agents whose ignorance is “so profound that it cannot recognize its own existence” (Vanderheiden 2016, 305), which, in my opinion, is not always justifiable.

Let us consider another important element in the attribution of moral blame to ignorant agents: *expectations*. According to Rosen, moral judgment of ignorant agents depends on what we can reasonably expect them to do about their ignorance. Indeed, if people are unaware of being ignorant, we cannot expect them to take steps to reduce an ignorance of which they are unaware (Rosen 2003, 63). For example, we cannot expect Clint to try to find

out whether turning on his switches causes someone to get hurt. However, there might be – and in fact, there are – reasonable expectations of knowledge even for deeply factually ignorant agents. Let us again consider the case of Samuel. Suppose now that, in 1960, Samuel is still ignorant of the (now well known) production circumstances of Bethal potatoes and buys them as if nothing had happened. He is still ignorant of being ignorant, just as he was in 1958. Yet, our moral judgment of him would probably not be as lenient as in 1958. Why? Because, since the availability of information on Bethal potato production has now changed, we now expect Samuel to have learned some of this information. Samuel's duties to know, in other words, have changed along with the availability of information.

The above example suggests that we can expect even deeply ignorant agents to know certain facts and that expectations in such cases are in the first place dependent on some features of existing information. Many scholars have so far focused on the way persons try to get information and the amount of effort involved in order to determine when their ignorance is culpable and when it is excusable (see for example Bradford 2017; Mason, Wilson 2017; Rescher 2009). We believe that individual effort, though essential, is secondary to the quality of the information. In other words, however virtuous we are, if existing information on a certain topic is not adequate, we could be blameless for not knowing. If, on the other hand, information meets a certain standard, then we can focus our attention on the type of person we are or ought to be and the effort we put into obtaining information.

3. *Quality of information: availability and accessibility*

The existence of information on possible harms people might help to cause by performing a certain action is a relevant factor in defining what they can be expected to know. It is, however, not enough for information merely to exist. To create expectations as to what people ought to know on a certain topic, information needs to meet certain standards. The analysis of these standards has gained attention only recently, and we believe that further refinement is needed.

Vandeheiden (2016) and Hartford (2019) have identified *availability* and *accessibility* of information as parameters in which to ground expectations

regarding obligations to know. The reasoning is quite intuitive: no one can be expected to know matters on which no information is available; neither can people be expected to know matters on which information is not easily accessible. Let us again consider Clint and suppose that not even those who built the kitchen are aware of the ‘side effects’ caused by the eastern switch. In such a case, information is not available. Or let us suppose that the mad inventor of the switches wrote down the causal connections leading to the heart attacks in New York but keeps his notebook in his safe. Or suppose that there is an operating manual in which everything is explained, and Clint owns it, but it is written in Japanese. Clint wanted to read it, but since he does not know Japanese and the switches (from his point of view) work quite intuitively, he gives up. In these cases, information is not easily accessible.

Information availability has so far been identified with the mere presence of information and has been associated primarily with the *quantity* of information available. Dennett, for example, implicitly suggests that it is the quantity of available information that made our duties to know increase disproportionately with the advent of information technologies (Dennett 1986, 144-145). Vanderheiden cautions that the mere availability of information does not say much about our obligations to be aware of it and “cannot in itself mark the boundary between excusable and culpable ignorance” (Vanderheiden 2016, 305). Nowadays, information is available on virtually all facts of moral relevance, but this cannot imply that we have obligations to know everything. According to Hartford, it is probably more important how accessible this available information is. More specifically, information is accessible if it can be obtained without special capacities or costs (including not only economic costs but also personal costs, such as the time needed to access it) and if there are no government-imposed limitations on the acquisition of information. According to this reasoning, illiterate or indigenous people, or those who live in countries where internet access is limited or the press is not free, having extremely restricted access to a wide spectrum of information, consequently have less stringent duties to know (Hartford 2019, 50).⁵

⁵ While Hartford suggests that, since accessibility of information is not the same for all agents, this affects the strength of their obligations to know,

Hartford rightly observes that it is the “facts about our epistemic situation” that determine our moral responsibility to know (*ibidem*). However, she considers a quite general epistemic situation in which most of us find ourselves: easy access to the internet with its enormous amount of readily available information. This epistemic situation, she claims, makes our obligations to know extremely demanding and leaves us unable to judge the culpability of other people’s ignorance. The problem, she observes, is that the realm of accessible information on morally relevant facts, even considering our capacities and resources, has never been so vast (Hartford 2019, 51). Contrary to this view, I argue that despite easy access to the internet and the amount of information available, our epistemic situation is not the same for all facts with moral implications and is not always a favorable one. There are instead significant variations in both the availability and the accessibility of such facts. These features vary to the point that people are in some cases culpably ignorant and in others excusably so. The present papers thus aims to deepen the analysis of how availability and accessibility of information influence our obligations to know.

Let us first reconsider the concept of information availability. It is true that nowadays information is abundant on virtually every topic. The problem is that a significant amount of misinformation is also now widespread, in the form of fake news or pseudoscience, especially (but not only) on the new media. This wrinkle has not gone completely unno-

Bradford refuses to consider the difficulty of obtaining information as an element that might mitigate blame accruing to agents for their ignorance. In fact, she remarks, we claim that something is difficult when it takes us a lot of effort, yet, for another person, the same activity might be almost effortless. Acquiring certain information might be difficult for a mentally disabled person but also for a simply lazy one: however, while we would excuse the first person for her resulting ignorance, we would not excuse the latter, since her ignorance is the result of indulging in an epistemic vice (Bradford 2017, 183-184). According to this view, no information is objectively difficult to obtain. However, these observations do not entail that we cannot mitigate blame for our ignorance by appeal to the difficulty of obtaining certain information (provided that we do not lack the necessary capacities). Rather, they simply reinforce the idea that obligations to know cannot be generalized and considered equal for all agents and for all topics.

ticed: Hartford acknowledges that the internet contains a good deal of misinformation that can exacerbate ignorance rather than eradicate it. However, she also believes that this ‘complication’ can be set aside by focusing instead on the “abundance of reliable, good-quality information within our epistemic situation” (Hartford 2019, 51n).

A closer look, however, reveals that access to reliable, high-quality information is significantly more restricted than Hartford suggests, and this, I argue, negatively affects the quality of the information and thus has implications for moral responsibility. Quality of information can be affected, I believe, by the following elements: *i.* the quantity (and quality) of misinformation or fake news; *ii.* the lack of easily accessible experts to consult with; *iii.* the difficulty of locating and distinguishing reliable sources of information; and *iv.* the level of awareness of certain facts in a given social context.

As concerns *i.*, there are cases in which correct information is so mixed up with misinformation that it can be challenging to distinguish between the two. For example, consider the case of misperceptions about migrants. According to recent surveys addressed to the Italian population, Italians overestimate both the total share of immigrants (Alesina, Miano and Stantcheva 2018), and the share of immigrants who are staying in Italy illegally, scoring above the EU average in the magnitude of misperception (Special Eurobarometer 469, 2018). Italians also overestimate migrants’ unemployment rate, thinking that over 40% of immigrants are unemployed, while a little less than 15% actually are; and immigrants’ dependency upon government aid, with around 18% of Italians who – mistakenly – think that immigrants get twice as much aid than native people (Alesina, Miano, Stantcheva 2018). Misperceptions concern also immigrants’ religious beliefs, with an underestimation of Christian migrants and an overestimation of Muslims (*ibidem*). Both politicians and partisan newspapers tend at times to spread alarming news about migratory phenomena, contributing to create false beliefs about migrants. However, obtaining correct information on the topic can be challenging, given the significant amount of severely biased information that circulates on the topic, due to its political sensitivity. It is not surprising, therefore, that false beliefs about migrants are so widespread.

The quality of information on a certain topic is also affected by the direct access to experts (*ii.*), that can be of help in making sense of the

conflicting information we might encounter. Consider a case in which expert opinion is easily accessible and identifiable: pediatric vaccines. You might happen to hear people claiming that common vaccines (like the one against measles) are linked to autism or to other conditions and, being a loving parent, want to make sure that you are not putting your child at risk. You can easily ask your pediatrician, who will inform you regarding the safety of common vaccines and the importance of getting vaccinated to protect both your child and the weakest members of society. However, there are cases in which it is difficult even to establish who the experts are. Suppose you wish to buy a mobile telephone and want to be sure you are not contributing to labor exploitation, as you have happened to hear that some brands manufacture their products in Southeast Asia under poor or even brutal working conditions. It might not be easy to get reliable, up-to-date information: you might encounter, in your inquiry, newspaper articles containing charges, then pledges from the firm involved that it is taking care of the situation, and so on.

While in the case of vaccines, despite the significant amount of fake news spread by the 'anti-vax' movement, you can easily consult an expert and thus be considered culpable if you prefer to give credit to hearsay or social network entries, in the mobile phone example it is more difficult to establish whether or not you are culpable for not knowing the working conditions of the employees who manufacture the products you want to buy. The difference in our moral judgment, I believe, reflects the difference in the quality of available information in the two cases.

The above examples show that there are cases where reliable information is indeed not easily accessible and where other 'meta-capacities' could be needed to acquire the relevant information, such as the ability to discern between reliable and unreliable sources of information and the ability even to locate possible sources. This brings us to *iii*. Depending on the topic, a good amount of expertise can be required to ascertain which sources are reliable and which are not. So, the problem is not only how much high-quality information exists on a topic but also how capable we are of recognizing it, given our capacities to judge the trustworthiness of the sources. When information on a certain issue is such that a layperson can, despite a good-faith attempt, fail to discern which information is correct or which source is trustworthy, the obligations to know facts related to that issue ought to be diminished accordingly. Thus, a

reliable investigative report on the working conditions of a certain firm's employees might be available online, but how is a layperson to understand that that is a good source while another article in an online magazine, which describes a different and more benign scenario, is not?

Finally, the level of social awareness of certain facts within one's social context (*iv.*) is also contributing to information accessibility.⁶ Some social contexts might feature awareness of certain morally relevant facts, thus raising expectations that shape the obligations to know such facts in those contexts but not necessarily in others. Thus Samuel, who lives in Bethal, is blameworthy for failing to know about the potatoes in 1960, as at that point everyone (*there*) knew. If, for example, this information did not cross regional borders, then we could not blame someone living in Cape Town for ignorance of it, let alone someone living in Morocco (where these potatoes might be imported).

This kind of social awareness is not necessarily limited to what is both known and happening within a given social environment. Some social contexts might be particularly sensitive to certain topics, and people belonging to those contexts might be expected to be aware of certain facts (which in other places are less well known) by virtue of an increased awareness within their social environment resulting in increased exposure to relevant information. In such cases, the likelihood of specific social norms arising in response to information is also higher, and thus ignorance of the relevant facts could be more blameworthy.

Consider the case of ozone depletion. In the mid-'80s, awareness of the ozone-depleting power of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) contained in spray cans and Styrofoam packaging was particularly high in California.

⁶ To some extent, this social awareness can be compared to what Dennett and Hartford have called 'common knowledge', which they describe as what has gained national or international attention, such as 'temporarily famous' scandals with a sensational component that draws the attention of the media (Dennett 1986, 146) at the expense of "the slow-burning suffering which is constant and therefore never 'new'" (Hartford 2019, 56-57). There is no need, I believe, to restrict common knowledge to either widely popular information or 'big' scandals. In fact, to restrict duties to know to this kind of knowledge is to misrepresent the duties themselves, which were originally conceived as a way for individuals to grasp their role as causal agents in harming others.

In San Francisco in 1987, a boycott of Styrofoam cups made with CFCs persuaded McDonald's to stop using them (Litfin 1994). People who lived in the area were certainly more exposed than most to relevant information about the effects of releasing CFCs into the atmosphere, so ignorance about it on their part was less excusable than ignorance on the part of people living in other countries who were far less exposed to that information. The point of considering this variable, however, is not to limit duties to know to facts that are commonly known within a given social context, but rather to increase such duties in those cases, thus lowering the chance of being excused for ignorance of them.⁷ The point is simply that the extent of one's obligations to know depends not merely on freedom of access to information but also on the social contexts in which one lives.

4. *The persons we ought to be*

The conclusion to be drawn from what has been said is not that obligations to know should be restricted to topics where no misinformation exists, where there are experts at one's disposal ready to clarify possible areas of doubt, where information is easily and readily accessible to everyone, and our social context is aware of it. Rather, I suggest the opposite: in these circumstances, ignorant agents are always culpable and

⁷ Hartford has argued that to focus on common knowledge is to "mistake what we already know with what we ought to know" (Hartford 2019). There something worth adding here about knowledge that is socially shared in a different sense. I believe that we indeed cannot legitimately assign to laypersons the burden of discovering the 'quiet tragedies' in the world – that appears too demanding by far. We could, perhaps, assign this duty exclusively to experts in specific fields, or to institutions, since they enjoy higher epistemic capacities. The active search, the 'investigation', at least, ought not to be asked of laypersons. This is so in consideration of another important point as well: a layperson would probably not be given enough credence, would not be regarded as an authoritative source. Not everyone can effectively bring certain facts to the public attention. Experts, people affiliated with institutions, and journalists engaged in investigative reports can gain the attention of the public in a way that is scarcely available to laypersons. Thus, a layperson's investigation would probably cost significant effort while obtaining meager results in terms of behavior change.

have no excuse for their ignorance. This moral judgment is grounded in the small amount of effort needed to acquire the relevant information. In such cases, those who are ignorant of being ignorant are equally culpable, as we can expect them to be just as aware of the relevant facts as everyone else.

It is quite apparent that information on most facts we are interested in does not fit the above 'best-case scenario' description. Let us consider again the elements we considered for evaluating the quality of information. At times, on certain topics, there is an abundance of fake or heavily biased news or misinformation. In such cases, the chances that individuals will encounter false information and thus form false beliefs is higher, and proportionally their culpability lower. At times reliable sources are difficult either to locate or to recognize: the effort, therefore, needed for the search of reliable information is greater, and the greater such effort is, the less we can expect individuals to perform it. At times, eventually, certain social contexts show scarce awareness of some facts, leading people to miss exposure to them. Those who are less exposed to relevant information are therefore less culpable for their ignorance. This does not, however, mean that ignorance in each of such cases is always excusable. It only means that the (individual) effort needed to compensate flaws in information is higher, and our expectations ought not be unreasonable. However, even in such cases we can legitimately have expectations. When information is flawed, however, expectations concern how we ought to be rather than what we ought to know. In such cases ignorance is not indiscriminately blameworthy; what should be considered is rather the process that led to it. So, what we will look at to evaluate an ignorant subject morally is the effort put into the acquisition of information, taking into account that different flaws in information require different levels of effort. Thus, ignorance can be considered blameless only when individuals try to the best of their ability to acquire knowledge about a certain topic, as they acknowledge the moral importance of possessing information about it, but fail because of some features of the existing information.

As an example of how this system for evaluating ignorance works, let us consider a paramount case in which our obligations to know should apply: climate change. In this case, the epistemic situation consists of a good deal of fake news and misinformation (see above) with the ad-

dition of politically biased information that tends to underestimate the issue. The access to sources of information is also perhaps not ideal. First, it is not common to acquire information directly from an expert. It is true that the United Nations has periodically disseminated reports about climate change (IPCC reports) available in many languages; yet laypersons might find this source less than fully accessible (because of overwhelming quantities of data, statistics, or details that could easily mislead a non-expert). However, there is quite good media coverage of climate change in the traditional media, and awareness about it is shared in most developed countries, to the point that very few cognitively able people are likely to be unaware of what it is or never to have heard about it. Furthermore, there is an official view on certain basic facts concerning climate change (such as its being anthropogenic and constituting a very serious threat to life on Earth) shared by scientists almost unanimously (Cook *et al.* 2016) that tends to be mirrored at least in the traditional media.

So, how would we consider someone who is ignorant about climate change? First, it is quite unlikely that a person living in the western world could be genuinely deeply ignorant about climate change, given its media coverage - affected ignorance is definitely predominant. In order to express a moral judgment regarding those who hold false beliefs about it, there are several contextual variables to take into account.

While it is true that the existence of anthropogenic climate change is not seriously debated in the scientific community, there is still ongoing debate regarding both the likelihood of various future scenarios resulting from climate change and the best strategies for dealing with the ultimate impact. The debate includes claims that mitigation is not convenient and that we should, rather, accept and adapt to whatever scenarios emerge – claims sometimes accompanied by a tendency to minimize the extent of the existing and expected impacts of climate change. This can contribute to spreading the false idea that climate change itself is under debate. To be sure, a lot of information on climate change can be easily found in all media formats, but so can a lot of misinformation. Furthermore, as was previously mentioned, some of this misinformation is quite well designed, so that only an expert could recognize it as pseudoscience rather than science. All things considered, we can claim that an epistemically responsible agent should be able to reach some

basic, correct conclusions about climate change. A responsible inquiry involves gathering evidence, consulting multiple sources, and displaying epistemic virtues such as reflecting critically on one's beliefs and being open to counterarguments and willing to change one's beliefs (Peels 2017, 2899; Montmarquet 1999, 845). The likelihood of ending up with false beliefs about climate change after this kind of inquiry seems perhaps not null, but certainly low.

However, even in this case, the moral evaluation of ignorant agents cannot be generalized. A responsible inquiry can be time-consuming, especially for people who are not used to running inquiries at all. We cannot neglect the costs of disentangling oneself from conflicting information: such costs differ from person to person. Thus, what we need to consider is what people do, to the best of their ability, in pursuit of information. Putting the maximum effort into the acquisition of knowledge suffices, we claim, to escape moral blame in all cases where information does not fit the "best-case scenario" depicted above. The maximum effort, however, should be individually conceived: that is, the maximum effort that that person can put into her search in that moment of her life, given her limited availability of time and her lack of expertise.

5. *Conclusions*

In this essay I have explored the obligations to know facts with moral implications for the way we behave, attempting to determine when ignorance of such facts can be excused and when it cannot. There is an enormous amount of information now easily available on the new media. Unlike other scholars, I have insisted that this circumstance does not fully determine our epistemic position with respect to those facts. The quality of information, it was argued, is an essential element in which we can ground obligations to know, and it can vary significantly from topic to topic. Furthermore, some morally relevant facts are indeed easily accessible, but others are less so in virtue of the expertise needed to unmask fake news, to evaluate the trustworthiness of information sources, and to locate the sources in the first place. In addition, in certain social contexts, a general awareness of certain facts can make them accessible to people who inhabit those contexts, while the same facts can in other

social contexts be unknown to the majority of people, diminishing the likelihood of social exposure to relevant information.

The main conclusion this paper aims to draw is that, when determining obligations to know, we cannot fail to notice how such duties are affected by the quality of information. When information falls below certain standards of availability and accessibility, agents are not culpable for not knowing it: when, on a given topic, misinformation is abundant, experts are not easily accessible, trustworthy sources are difficult to recognize and one's social context shows scarce awareness, individuals can be blameless for their ignorance. In contrast, when information on a given topic meets the standards of the best-case scenario described above, ignorance on that topic cannot be excused. For the realm of information that is situated between the threshold of excusability (too-low quality) and that of culpability (very high quality), which is the majority, moral judgment varies with both topic and individual and is grounded in the effort made by the individual to acquire relevant knowledge. In other words, where individuals perform an epistemically responsible inquiry and display certain epistemic virtues, they are not to be blamed if they reach false beliefs, as those are probably due to flaws in the information itself that that agent, in that context, harnessing the best of her capacities, could not overcome. When, on the contrary, individuals display epistemic vices and do not behave like conscientious agents, they can be blamed for their ignorance.

Finally, the difference between 'affected' and 'deep' ignorance has not proven to justify greater lenience in moral judgments of deeply ignorant agents under all circumstances. On the contrary, in some cases deeply ignorant agents emerged as even more culpable than affectedly ignorant ones, as they displayed more severe epistemic vices.

References

- Alesina A., Miano A., Stantcheva S. (2018), "Immigration and Redistribution", *Nber working paper series*, Working Paper 24733.
- Bradford G. (2017), "Hard to Know", in P. Robichaud, J.W. Wieland (eds), *Responsibility: The Epistemic Condition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 180-198.

- Cook J., Oreskes N., Doran P.T. *et al.* (2016), "Consensus on Consensus: A Synthesis of Consensus Estimates on Human-caused Global Warming", *Environmental Research Letters*, vol. 11, pp. 1-7.
- Dennett D. (1986), "Information, Technology, and the Virtues of Ignorance", *Daedalus*, vol. 115, n. 3, pp. 135-153.
- EC, Special Eurobarometer 469 (2018), *Integration of Immigrants in the European Union*.
- FitzPatrick W. (2008), "Moral Responsibility and Normative Ignorance: Answering a New Skeptical Challenge", *Ethics*, vol. 11, n. 4, pp. 589-613.
- Guerrero A. (2007), "Don't Know, Don't Kill: Moral Ignorance, Culpability and Caution", *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 136, n. 1, pp. 59-97.
- Harman E. (2011), "Does Moral Ignorance Exculpate?", *Ratio (new series)*, vol. XXIV, pp. 443-468.
- Hart H.L.A. (1968), *Punishment and Responsibility*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Hartford A. (2019), "How Much Should a Person Know? Moral Inquiry and Demandingness", *Moral Philosophy and Politics*, vol. 6, n. 1, pp. 41-63.
- Litfin K. (1994), *Ozone Discourses: Science and Politics in Global Environmental Cooperation*, New York, Columbia University Press.
- Mason E., Wilson A. (2017), "Vice, Blameworthiness, and Cultural Ignorance". in P. Robichaud, J.W. Wieland (eds), *Responsibility: the Epistemic Condition*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, pp. 82-100.
- Montmarquet J. (1999), "Zimmerman on Culpable Ignorance", *Ethics*, vol. 109, n. 4, pp. 842-845.
- Moody-Adams M. (1994), "Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance", *Ethics*, vol. 104, n. 2, pp. 291-309.
- Peels R. (2011), "Tracing Culpable Ignorance", *Logos and Episteme*, vol. 2, n. 4, pp. 575-582.
- (2014), "What Kind of Ignorance Excuses? Two Neglected Issues", *The Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 64, n. 256, pp. 478-496.
- (2017), "Responsible Belief and Epistemic Justification", *Synthese*, n. 194, pp. 2895-2915.
- Rescher N. (2009), *Ignorance. On the Wider Implications of Deficient Knowledge*, Pittsburgh, Pittsburgh University Press.
- Robichaud P. (2017), "Is Ignorance of Climate Change Culpable?", *Science Engineer Ethics*, n. 23, pp. 1409-1430.
- Rosen G. (2003), "Culpability and Ignorance", *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 103, n. 1, pp. 61-84.
- (2004), "Skepticism about Moral Responsibility", *Philosophical Perspectives*, n. 18, pp. 295-313.

- Sher G. (2009), *Who Knew? Responsibility without Awareness*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Smith H. (2018), *Making Morality Work*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.
- Sverdlik S. (1993), "Pure Negligence", *American Philosophical Quarterly*, vol. 30, n. 2, pp. 137-149.
- Vanderheiden S. (2016), "The Obligation to Know: Information and the Burdens of Citizenship", *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, vol. 19, n. 2, pp. 297-311.
- Wieland J.W. (2015), "What's Special about Moral Ignorance?", *Ratio (new series)*, vol. XXX, pp. 149-164.
- (2017), "Responsibility for Strategic Ignorance", *Synthese*, vol. 194, n. 11, pp. 4477-4497.
- Zimmerman M.J. (1986), "Negligence and Moral Responsibility", *Noûs*, vol. 20, n. 2, pp. 199-218.
- (1997), "Moral Responsibility and Ignorance", *Ethics*, vol. 107, pp. 410-427.

