

[“Don’t pay any attention to the critics—Don’t even ignore them.”](#) ~ Samuel Goldwyn

When I first started exploring ignorance and related topics, it occurred to me that not-knowing has a passive and an active voice. To be ignorant of something is the passive voice—Ignorance is a state. Ignoring something is an action. I want to explore various aspects of ignoring in this and perhaps some subsequent posts.

To begin, ignoring attracts a moral charge that ignorance usually doesn’t. For instance, innocence can be construed as a special case of ignorance. Innocents don’t ignore corrupting information; they’re just unaware of its existence. Lots of communications to people who are ignoring something or someone are chastisements. Ignoring is akin to commission, whereas being ignorant is more like omission. Ignoring has an element of will or choice about it that being ignorant does not. So people are more likely to ascribe a moral status to an act of ignoring than to a state of ignorance.

For instance, reader response to a recent “Courier Mail” story on [April 11](#) whose main point was “Three men have been rescued after they drove around Road Closed signs and into floodwaters in central Queensland” was uncharitable, to say the least. Comments and letters to the editor expressed desires for the men to be named, shamed, fined and otherwise punished for wasting taxpayers’ money and needlessly imperiling the rescuers.

Criminal negligence cases often make it clear that while the law may regard ignorance as scant excuse, ignoring is even worse. Ignoring imputes culpability straightaway. [Halah Touryalai’s blog on Forbes in March](#): “Irving Picard, the Trustee seeking to reclaim billions for Madoff’s victims, claims Merrill Lynch International was creating and selling products tied to Madoff feeder funds even though it was aware of possible fraud within Bernard L. Madoff Investment Securities.”

Despite the clear distinction between ignorance and ignoring, people can and do confuse the two. Andrew Rotherham’s [May 12 blog at Time](#) accuses American educators and policy-makers of ignoring the burgeoning crisis regarding educational outcomes for Hispanic schoolchildren. But it isn’t clear whether the educators are aware of this problem (and ignoring it) or not (and therefore ignorant about it). There are so many festering and looming crises to keep track of these days that various sectors of the public regularly get caned for “ignoring” crises when in all likelihood they are just ignorant of them.

In a more straightforward case, the Sydney Herald Sun’s [March 1 headline](#), “One-in-four girls ignoring cervical cancer vaccine,” simply has got it wrong. The actual message in the article is not that schoolgirls in question are *ignoring* the vaccine, but that they’re *ignorant of it* and also of the cancer itself.

Communicators of all stripes take note: The distinction between *ignoring* and *ignorance* is important and worth preserving. Let us not tolerate, on our watch, a linguistically criminal slide into the elision of that distinction through misuse or mental laziness.

Because it is an act and therefore can be intentional, ignoring has uses as a social or psychological tactic that ignorance never can have. There is a plethora of self-help remedies out there which, when you scratch the surface, boil down to tactical or even strategic ignoring. I’ll mention just two examples of such injunctions: “Don’t sweat the small stuff” and “live in the present.”

The first admonishes us to discount the “small stuff” to some extent, presumably so we can pay attention to the “big stuff” (whatever that may be). This simple notion has spawned several self-help bestsellers. The second urges us to disregard the past and future and focus attention on the here-and-how instead. This advice has been reinvented many times, in my short lifetime I’ve seen it crop up all the way from the erstwhile hippie sensibilities embodied in slogans such as “be here now” to the present-day therapeutic cottage industry of “mindfulness.”

Even prescriptions for rational decision-making contain injunctions to ignore certain things. Avoiding the “sunk cost fallacy” is one example. Money, time, or other irrecoverable resources that already have been spent in pursuing a goal should not be considered along with future potential costs in deciding whether to persist in pursuing the goal. There’s a nice treatment of this on the [less wrong](#) site. The [Mind Your Decisions](#) blog also presents a few typical examples of the sunk cost fallacy in everyday life. The main point here is that a rational decisional framework prescribes ignoring sunk costs.

Once we shift attention from ignoring things to ignoring people, the landscape becomes even more interesting. Ignoring people, it would seem, occupies important places in commonsense psychology. The earliest parental advice I received regarding what to do about bullies was to ignore them. My parents meant well, and it turned out that this worked in a few instances. But some bullies required standing up to.

For those of us who aren’t sure how to go about it, there are even [instructions](#) and [guides](#) on how to ignore people.

Ignoring people also gets some airplay as part of a strategy or at least a [tactic](#). For instance, how should parents deal with disrespectful behavior from their children? Well, [one](#) parenting site says not to ignore such behavior. [Another](#) admonishes you to ignore it. Commonsense psychology can be self-contradicting. It’s good old commonsense psychology that tells us “opposites attract” and yet “birds of a feather flock together,” “look before you leap” but “(s)he who hesitates is lost,” “many hands make light the work” but “too many cooks spoil the broth,” and so on.

Given that ignoring has a moral valence, what kinds of justifications are there for ignoring people? There are earnest discussion threads on such moral quandaries as [ignoring people who are nice to you](#). In this thread, by the way, many of the contributors conclude that it’s OK to do so, especially if the nice person has traits that they can’t abide.

Some social norms or relationships entail ignoring behaviors or avoiding communication with certain people. One of the clearest examples of this is the kin-avoidance rules in some Australian Indigenous cultures. An instance is the ban on speaking with or even being in close proximity to one’s mother-in-law. The Central Land Council [site](#) describes the rule thus: “This relationship requires a social distance, such that they may not be able to be in the same room or car.”

Some religious communities such as the Amish have institutionalized shunning as a means of social control. As Wenger ([1953](#)) describes it, “The customary practice includes refusal to eat at the same table, even within the family, the refusal of ordinary social intercourse, the refusal to work together in farming operations, etc.” So, shunning entails

ignoring. Wenger's article also details some of the early religious debates over when and to what extent shunning should be imposed.

Ostracism has a powerful impact because it feels like rejection. Social psychologist [Kipling Williams](#) has studied the effects of ostracism for a number of years now, and without any apparent trace of irony remarks that it was "ignored by social scientists for 100 years." Among his ingenious experiments is one demonstrating that people feel the pain of rejection when they're ignored by a cartoon character on a computer screen. Williams goes as far as to characterize ostracism as an "invisible form of bullying."

So, for an interesting contrast between the various moral and practical justifications you can find for ignoring others, try a search on the phrase "ignoring me." There, you'll find a world of agony. This is another example to add to my earlier post about lies and secrecy, where we seem to forget about the Golden Rule. We lie to others but hate being lied to. We also are willing to ignore others but hate being ignored in turn. Well, perhaps unless you're being ignored by your mother-in-law.