

Agnotology and the Paradox of Relevance

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Abstract

The issues of waste and wastefulness are part of a larger, paradoxical conflict between concepts of relevance and irrelevance. What is wasted is irrelevant and what is kept is relevant. The same conflict manifests in economic discourse as we buy what is relevant and we ignore what is irrelevant to our needs in the market place. In socio-political discourse, we organize ourselves around causes and concerns which we determine to be relevant while others see our beloved issues and concerns as irrelevant. This paper views relevance as an economic paradox because we desire to expand our horizons of relevance and we desire to convince others to join us in our perceptions of relevance, but we also continually come up short. We want more relevance but we exhaust ourselves in its acquisition. This is because the relevance/irrelevance dichotomy leads us to a false power dynamic where the successful hold larger spheres of relevance while the poor busy themselves in the irrelevant. This paper proposes that Agnotology (Proctor and Schiebinger, 2008) may offer us an alternative *counter-epistemology* from which to view our role within the paradox of relevance. The idea is that we need to transcend our normative theory of knowledge (knowledge is power, etc.) and look instead at a theory of ignorance. This idea is connected to the larger concepts of, metaphysics, dualism, uncertainty, and epistemology. The conclusion is that, if our theory of ignorance grows from principles of non-dualistic non-attachment and radical practical humanism (Roy, 1947), we may

be able to solve some of our inner and outer conflicts well enough to create a more effective conversation with those we would otherwise exclude. This can in turn lead us to more effective action around issues of waste and wastefulness.

Every day we make decisions about what is relevant and what is irrelevant. Relevance and irrelevance are value judgements we each award to ideas, to information of all sorts, to people, and to the objects surrounding us. Ideas are deemed to be relevant or irrelevant to the issue at hand in whatever form of social discourse we happen to be engaged in. Information is either helpful to our needs or it is irrelevant and therefore excluded. Objects are either relevant to our needs, or they are irrelevant.

Many of us are concerned to expand our horizons of relevance. We want to enlarge the boundaries of relevance to include more of the material we have previously excluded. This is a personal choice. We have the option of determining that this or that item, previously consigned to irrelevance, is now relevant. In economics and marketing this is a very valuable choice. We call it the *“buy decision.”* Countless books, seminars, classes, and whole degree programs offer to guide us toward understanding the exact mechanics by which purchase choices are made.

In the world of social and political issues and causes needing our support, great energy is being expended in an effort to get us to pay attention to one issue or another. We want other people to join us in our decisions as to relevance and irrelevance. We want people to join

our cause and to validate our beliefs. We want people to find the same things relevant that we find relevant. We want to agree about what matters and what does not matter.

In political discourse today around the world, we see increasing hostility and social fragmentation as one group refuses to listen to the other group. One issue matters a lot to one group of people while the same issue is irrelevant to another group. Activists concerned with the issues related to waste practices, waste management, and care for the environment are often caught up in the conflict between relevance and irrelevance. As activist organizations seek to “speak truth to power,”¹ their message is often dismissed as irrelevant. The result is that crucial environmental issues are often ignored by whole nations because they lack the political will to implement policies of environmental regulation.

In terms of practical, material waste and discard studies,² the problem of relevance becomes clear if we take a close look at what is being thrown away, what is being kept, what is being reused, resold, refurbished, up cycled, or recycled. These words all describe ways we encounter waste with respect to its relevance or irrelevance. If our lens broadens so as to see material waste with greater relevance, we will seek to do something productive with what is wasted and we will waste less. If we do the opposite, and narrow our perspectives of relevance to exclude material waste, we will see more material being deposited in landfills or simply discarded by the wayside.

Decisions about relevance and irrelevance appear to be idiosyncratic in nature. If we look a little deeper though, we will see that the

¹ The phrase “speak truth to power” originated with the Religious Society of Friends. See <http://www.quaker.org/sttp.html>

² See <https://discardstudies.com/>

relevance/irrelevance decision is not totally idiosyncratic. We make these decisions both individually and relationally. Relationships play a key role in motivating and directing our decisions about relevance.

With questions of waste and waste management, our relationships within our culture have great impact on our perceptions of the relevance of material waste. Relevance belongs to culture because our culture and the realities of life within our culture guide us as we determine which objects, beliefs, practices, or events we will connect with and pay attention to and which we will ignore.

The following informal comparison of two scenes from Google Street View and a Google image search shows a distinct cultural difference in attitudes toward the relevance of litter. One image is taken from Oslo Norway and the other is a well circulated image from the Agbogbloshie area of Accra, Ghana. Note that these images also capture a distinct economic dichotomy as one culture can afford the luxury of cleaning and maintaining its streets and the other is so preoccupied with issues of daily survival that issues of waste management are irrelevant. Trash is relevant in one place but not another.



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³ Google Street of Oslo Norway. Retrieved at:

https://www.google.com/maps/place/Oslo,+Norway/@59.9344776,10.7709818,3a,75y,269.45h,87.46t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1s80BMc-aU6O_Mpxh-6OomLA!2e0!6s%2F%2Fgeo1.ggpht.com%2Fcb%3Fpanoid%3D80BMc-aU6O_Mpxh-6OomLA%26output%3Dthumbnail%26cb_client%3Dmaps_sv.tactile.gps%26thumb%3D2%26w%3D203%26h%3D100%26yaw%3D335.85767%26pitch%3D0%26thumbfov%3D100!7i13312!8i6656!4m5!3m4!1s0x46416e61f267f039:0x7e92605fd3231e9a!8m2!3d59.9138688!4d10.7522454



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The influence of our culture/economy is hard to avoid when it comes to the relevance or irrelevance of waste management. If we make a decision to expand the boundaries of our attention, we will quickly confront the limits of our resources. Our attention is a precious commodity precisely because it is a limited resource. The attention we pay to our material surroundings is a vital resource needing to be conserved and expended wisely. This is because to pay attention requires energy. We only have so much of it and we need to be wise in how we use it. While the universe of items worthy of our attention might be infinite, our ability to *pay attention*, like our ability to *pay anything* is limited.

⁴ Photo by Andrew McConnell, "Rubbish Dump 2.1" taken near the Agbogbloshie waste dump, Accra, Ghana. Retrieved at: <http://andrewmcconnell.photoshelter.com/gallery/G0000oLuiBLHismM>

Our lived experience is shaped by the choices we make as to how we pay out the treasure of relevance. This is another way of saying that our success or failure in life in traditional hierarchies of power is determined by our ability to pay attention properly. If we pay attention to the right things we do well. If we pay attention to the wrong things we risk missing something important and suffering the consequences.

We can see the paradox of relevance and irrelevance when we realize that relevance is both a treasure and a curse. Relevance is a treasure because we want people to buy the ideas we buy and to value what we value and to pay attention to what we pay attention to. Few things are as valuable for us as being able to share relevance with others. We can view the whole universe of human relationships as an exercise in relevance. We love those who share our vision of what truly matters and what does not matter. We tend to dislike those who do not value what we value and do not believe what we believe. What separates us from “*the other*” is the set of things, (objects, beliefs, practices, events, etc.) we regard as relevant and irrelevant. Relevance is a blessing because it connects us to others and it is a curse because it separates us from others.

To work around this paradox, we should critically question the value judgements and philosophical presuppositions we bring to this conversation. Is more relevance better than less relevance? If this is our belief, we are making an assumption that it is better for us to expand our awareness and worse if we ignore more things. For example, if we choose to drastically increase the list of items we ignore, we will rapidly become ignorant. Note that these two words, ignore and ignorant, share the same root. Likewise, wisdom is assumed to be the product of paying more attention to more things, reading more

books, listening to more ideas, meeting more people, etc. This is a value judgement because increasing our awareness requires a more functional brain, or at least a brain that is more adapted to a given flow of information. Increasing relevance also requires us to have more time, more energy, and more money to use our better adapted brains. This leads us to see the rich smart people as the best among us and it leads us to ignore the wisdom of those we see as poor and foolish. This in turn makes us subscribers to a false social/economic/cultural doctrine of superiority. We become elitist snobs because we own the luxury and the privilege of caring so much about so many things.

From the perspective of the politically elite, or the political “establishment,” we are facing a painful lesson on the global stage because we have ignored the “ignorant” for far too long. In political conversations in several countries, those who were previously ignored have organized to speak with a loud voice and to call for a different agenda of relevance. This new agenda takes the form of rigorous nationalism, anti-globalization, isolationism, religious fundamentalism, and in some cases outright persecution of those whose priorities are different, or “other.”⁵ This has in turn created a crisis in global politics where old ideas, assumptions, and methodologies are being thrown out as irrelevant.

This is where agnotology emerges as a potential response to a world polarized by questions of relevance (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). Agnotology is the study of, or theory of ignorance or mindlessness. Its basic premise is that our traditional approaches to questions of

⁵ The administration of President Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines, the Brexit vote, and the successful campaign of Donald Trump all provide examples of grassroots movements organized by people who have previously felt they were consigned to irrelevance by established political norms.

relevance/irrelevance, or knowledge/ignorance have been epistemological in nature. We have historically approached these questions from an unwritten perspective that is guided by a common theory of knowledge. This approach has brought with it the unstated and unproven assumption that knowledge in all its forms is superior to ignorance in all its forms.

Our assumptions about the dichotomies of truth vs. falsehood, or knowledge vs. ignorance are firmly entrenched within the Western traditions of essentialism. This concept reaches back from Hegel to Aristotle and Plato. It has also been shaped in popular thought by the Scholasticism of Dante, Aquinas, and Augustine. The basic idea here is that our universe is constructed around a polarity of supreme good and supreme evil. The closer we are to the ideal of supreme good, the better, the more prosperous, and the more successful we will be. The more distant we are from the ideals of the supreme good, the more sinful, fallen, impoverished, enslaved, and miserable our lives will be.

Another ancient metaphysical concept connected to the idealism is historicism. This approach assumes that states, civilizations, kingdoms, or empires rise and fall over time according to a prescribed set of metaphysical laws. The idea is that societies and civilizations must follow these predetermined, essential laws. A classic example of this concept would be the Marxist ideal of the inevitable rise of the working class and the inevitable collapse of capitalism. Another example of the same set of metaphysical principles would be an assortment of religious ideals stating that nations will succeed or fail over time if and only if they please the Almighty according to the commandments contained in whatever set of scriptures a given culture might choose to apply.

An alternative to this age old doctrine of essentialism, and its related and equally irrational notion of historicism was presented by Karl Popper in his monumental book The Open Society and Its Enemies. (1945) Popper attacked the Hegelian, Aristotelian, Platonic ideas of essentialism and historicism and replaced them with ideas of scientific rationalism. Using Poppers principles of scientific rationalism in the social sciences, we can see that nations meet with success or failure not by virtue of some overarching set of metaphysical principles, but by their ability or inability to solve specific problems in a timely and effective manner.

If we were to set aside the doctrinal precepts of essentialism and historicism, we might be able to look beyond the cosmology of supreme good vs. supreme evil, or supreme wisdom vs. supreme ignorance and gain a little perspective on the problems we are encountering as we seek to promote our own social, political, or environmental agendas. If we look specifically at environmentalism, we can see that the issues at hand involve the struggle to communicate relevance as “we” see what ought to be regarded as relevant as opposed to irrelevant in social discourse.

Our shift away from conventional dualistic-essentialist modalities has a solid philosophical foundation of its own. In the postmodern world, we are free to look critically at epistemology and at the hierarchical binary oppositions any epistemology will bring forth⁶ The process philosophy of Whitehead is helpful here, especially Whitehead's idea of the actual occasion as a moment in reality from which everything that exists becomes something else in a continual process of relationship with all

⁶ I have made extensive use of the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy available at: www.plato.stanford.edu This is an excellent tool for the non-specialist to gain familiarity with historic central tenants of philosophy.

other surrounding entities. This is Whitehead's philosophy of organism. Jacques Derrida pushed this concept further with his work on hierarchical binary opposition. Derrida developed these ideas in his concept of "*differance*" by suggesting that meaning is deferred. This means we can't always find meaning in the absolute and perfect sense we would want it because the force which differentiates elements, objects, events, etc. from one another always engenders binary opposition and hierarchy. Binary opposition (duality) and hierarchy will in turn detract from the meaning we seek. This suggests that the harder we try to establish meaning in an absolute sense, the more we lose meaning because we get stuck on our own absolutes. Bertrand Russell's theory of neutral monism is also helpful here. In neutral monism, Russell bridges the age old dualistic split between idealism and physicalism. Russell posits a universe where the basic stuff of reality is both abstract/ideal and physical matter. If reality is both abstract and physical in an organic sense, without differentiation, our experiences, perceptions, and opinions might be less fixed and absolute.

The thesis of this essay is to suggest that, if we are a little less absolute in our thinking, we might be a little less defensive in our discourse with those who hold ideas in conflict with ours. If we are less defensive, we might in turn be more effective in communicating the values we have discovered in our own cultural lived experience.

One problem with traditional epistemology is that any theory of knowledge must face the stark reality of the qualitative difference between knowledge and ignorance. In certain clear cut, quantitative fields of inquiry, we have "*best practices*" which are statistically verified in order to determine what works well and what does not work in everyday practice. In other, more abstract, more intuitive applications

traditional epistemological formulations become profoundly dualistic and hierarchical. Unfortunately, very little remains absolutely certain. Even quantitative problems and solutions can be called into question in the light of various theories of uncertainty. Here we can use Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem and Tarski's Undefinability Theorem as examples. This leads us to the conclusion that our older notions of epistemological verifiability, or epistemological certainty may be called into question. We must face the possibility that we do not always know what we think we know.

The concept of agnotology has been mentioned in "Discard Studies"⁷, a web based information hub devoted to questions of sustainability, ecology, wastefulness, and marginalization. This emerging discipline helps us to see the relationships between the ways we mindlessly waste resources and the ways we marginalize human beings. Wasteful economic practices, practices that poison and pollute the environment, and practices that marginalize human beings are all connected. As a discipline, discard studies critically traces these connections. This discipline requires us to look at what we have been refusing to look at. It requires us to question the foundations by which we determine relevance and irrelevance.⁸

Agnotology is a way of establishing a counter-epistemology that seeks to understand our failure to know and our failure to care about the things we think should be relevant but are not relevant in the larger power-economy of social discourse. Just as relevance is a paradox, so also is ignorance. In traditional value systems, ignorance is evil but we

⁷ See: <https://discardstudies.com/?s=agnotology>

⁸ In addition to compiling the Discard Studies website, Max Liboiron has contributed greatly to the whole emerging discipline. See: <https://maxliboiron.com/publications/>

also know that ignorance is peace and ignorance is bliss. Apathy is necessary for pathos to exist. Ignorance is as essential a part of the human condition as is knowledge. In a counter-epistemology, both knowing and not knowing hold the same value. The same thing can be said for caring and not caring.

Relevance is a personal decision and a relational/cultural decision. So also is knowledge. Knowledge is something we must choose to accept or reject, both individually and culturally. We choose what we care about and we choose what we learn. The ability to choose freely is a fundamental human right. Our objective should not be to change the person who does not care or to inform the person who does not know. Instead, we should accept them. If our attitude is one of non-dualistic non-attachment, we will be free to accept the people who do not care and who do not know. We will be free to accept those who are not paying attention to our cause or accepting our values. The effectiveness of this approach becomes apparent when we see that acceptance leads to community and community leads us to relationship and then on to civil discourse. Education and social transformation are not about making someone do something we want them to do from our presumption of moral superiority. Growing in knowledge and being transformed in social priorities are positive treasures of human development but it all starts with relationship. If there is no relationship, there is no learning and there is no transformation.

If our social and educational philosophies are to be guided by agnotology and by non-dualistic non-attachment, we must address certain ethical concerns. Pellizzoni (2016) offers an excellent critique of the ethical limitations of “new materialism” as non-dualistic modalities encounter the ambiguities of rapid and sometimes poorly guided

technological innovations. While understanding the weaknesses of conventional Cartesian dualism, Pellizzoni reaches back to the negative dialectic of Theodor Adorno. Both Pellizzoni and Adorno have contributed greatly to the ideas presented here, namely that ethics and social theory within the contexts of both modernity and postmodern STS (Science, Technology, and Society) must be observed through the lens of uncertainty rather than any uncomplicated doctrine of absolute certainty, idealism, or moral superiority. This is potentially game changing in the context of our present confusion between social science and social activism.

The field of ethics, like epistemology is inherently dualistic and hierarchical. Our ethics guide us to notions of better and worse, good, and evil, savage and civilized. These are all inescapable realities of the human experience. Binary dualism is an aspect of our shared reality. Our brains are bicameral; our perceptions of the world are completely guided by sense-dichotomy. Everything we perceive is differentiated by light and dark, hot and cold, sound and quiet, stillness and motion, etc. Our continual experiences of Yin and Yang are not easily transcended.

Does waste matter? Does our non-dualistic approach support attitudes of complacency? Do our efforts at environmental sustainability mean anything in the long run? The answer offered here is both yes and no. We need to critically examine two conflicting truths and two falsehoods. The truths and the falsehoods reside within the overlapping spheres of our culture and our individuality. Individually, the choice is ours to make if we will care or not care. Culturally though, the choice has largely been made for us. For example, if we go to Norway to throw trash in the streets, the rule of law and social convention will soon persuade us that it might be good to take a

different course of action. If, on the other hand, we go to Agbogbloshie in Ghana to initiate an anti-litter campaign, we will likely run into a completely different set of cultural realities.

- **Truth #1: We have the absolute freedom to choose what we will care about and what we will ignore.**
- **Truth #2: Truth #1 is largely determined for us by our culture.**
- **Falsehood #1: The limits of certainty make it impossible for us to know what is right and what is wrong with respect to environmental policy.**
- **Falsehood #2: Our culture knows the best thing to do.**

The point is that our ethics need to evolve beyond conventional epistemological, hierarchical and institutional prescriptions of right and wrong. If our ethics begin from an *agnotological* standpoint, that is from the standpoint of *not knowing*, as opposed to knowing, we might find ourselves able to thread the course of conflicting paradox. Starting from the point of what we do not know, and what we do not understand, we may be able to find our way to effective action.

A way to action may be found if we base our motivations on the principles of practical radical humanism. As a potential solution, humanism M. N. Roy (1947) offers us the chance to validate one another regardless of our perceptions of the relative rightness or the wrongness of our points of view. Practical humanism suggests that the immediate, tangible here-and-now needs of human beings must take priority in our more idealistic efforts to improve the effectiveness of the institutions in which we serve. Radical humanism suggests that the needs of ordinary people must take priority over any idealistic, religious, nationalistic, racial, ethnic, or tribal considerations.

Our approach to the struggle over the paradox of relevance should begin with a form of mindfulness that grows from non-duality and non-attachment. The point is not to attack ignorance or to broadcast our concepts of relevance louder than anyone else. The point is to calmly witness both knowledge/relevance and ignorance/irrelevance through *“the windows of our eyes”* (Ram Dass and Gorham, 1986). We should seek to witness these processes without striving to change them.

A mindfulness approach begins with the concept that all things are equally relevant and equally irrelevant. Everything matters and it all also does not matter. It all belongs to us and none of it belongs to us. We can approach the great questions of life and death from the perspective of being equally brilliant and equally ignorant.

Each of us chooses our perception from moment to moment and our perceptions should not be subjected to the value judgements of some morally superior force. Whenever we feel called to promote that idea, or that item or that cause we think should be relevant, we might begin by asking a few essential questions. What if no one cares about this idea? What if no one reads this essay? What if this item goes unappreciated and is determined to be and to remain irrelevant? What if this precious idea of mine simply did not exist? What then? What if we simply let it go?

What happens next is a profound quiet, a peace that passes all understanding⁹. The amazing truth is that our connections to each other are built in this quiet, this space between all our causes and all our ideals. Within this quiet space, relationships can be built through

⁹ These words are borrowed from Philippians 4:7, a text which, while distinctly dualistic, sexist, and culturally fixed is also useful in approaches to non-duality

the sharing of our common humanity. If we put to rest all our noisy clamoring for “our thing” to become relevant, we might find that by learning to care about those who do not care we can build a foundation upon which caring will grow. We might find that by knowing those who know so little, we can become more effective teachers of relevance. If we care about the careless and if we know the ignorant with an open heart, we might find an open door that will lead to a new way of caring and a new way of knowing.

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