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# What we would like to know and what we prefer not to know

## Contribution to the value of personal knowledge and ignorance

Co chcielibyśmy wiedzieć, a czego wolimy nie wiedzieć?  
Empiryczny przyczynek do wartości wiedzy i niewiedzy

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### STRESZCZENIE

Za pośrednictwem Internetu uzyskano odpowiedzi od 48 respondentów (24 kobiet, 24 mężczyzn) w wieku 21–72 lat, których poproszono o sformułowanie pytań trojakięgo rodzaju: 1) takich, na które chcieliby znać odpowiedź i mają nadzieję, że kiedyś ją uzyskają, 2) na które chcieliby znać odpowiedź, lecz uważają to za niemożliwe, 3) które są dla nich ważne, lecz na które wolą nie znać odpowiedzi. Uzyskane wypowiedzi (w formie pytań) przeanalizowano pod kątem dwóch kryteriów: 1) osobiste vs nieosobiste, oraz 2) perspektywy czasowej (dotyczące przyszłości, dotyczące przeszłości vs pytania „ponadczasowe”. Wśród młodszych respondentów (21–38 lat) przeważały pytania osobiste (52%), podczas gdy u starszych (46–72 lata) stanowiły one tylko 30% (chi-kwadrat = 10,8;  $p = 0,001$ ). Wśród pytań związanych z niechcianymi odpowiedziami – niezależnie od grupy wieku – dominowały pytania o charakterze osobistym (85%), a zarazem dotyczące przyszłości (81%). Podkreślić warto, że 45% niechcianych odpowiedzi dotyczyło okoliczności śmierci własnej lub osób bliskich. W nawiązaniu do rozpatrywanego problemu, autor sygnalizuje potrzebę skali umożliwiającej równoczesne porównywanie kosztów i profitów tej samej informacji w płaszczyźnie emocjonalnej, pragmatyczno-behawioralnej i poznawczej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** zamierzona niewiedza, nieodpowiedziane pytania, pytania niemożliwe do rozstrzygnięcia, „niechciane odpowiedzi”

### ABSTRACT

The article presents result of survey of 48 people (24 women, 24 men), aged 21 to 72 years, who were asked via email to formulate three types of questions: 1) questions whose answers they would like to know and hope to get in the future; 2) questions

whose answers they would like to know, but think this is impossible; 3) questions they regard as important to them, but whose answers they would prefer not to know. The responses received (in the form of questions) were further analyzed against two criteria: 1) personal versus impersonal; and 2) time perspective (future- or past-related, or "timeless"). Personal questions were more frequently (52%) asked by younger respondents (aged 21 to 38), while among older ones (aged 46 to 72) they made up for only 30% ( $\chi^2=10.8$ ;  $p=0.001$ ). Within the third set of questions with undesirable answers personal questions (85%) and questions related to the future were in majority, regardless of the age group. It should be emphasized that 45% of undesirable answers referred to the circumstances of one's own or closed ones' death. In relation to the problem examined here, the author indicates a need for a benchmark to simultaneously compare costs and benefits of the same information in the emotional, pragmatic and behavioral as well as cognitive levels.

**Keywords:** deliberate ignorance, unanswerable questions, unanswered questions, undesirable answers

## Introduction

The paper may be viewed as a modest contribution to the problem of knowledge and ignorance evaluation. Although recently the problem of information avoidance has become the subject of psychological studies, the inspiration for this research came from the author's interest in the limits of cognition. Some time ago, Willard van Quine (1976) suggested that the limits of knowledge may be considered in terms of unanswerable questions. Consequently, the limits of knowledge are no longer an epistemological question but also a psychological one. Therefore, we may try to examine what kind of questions bother "ordinary people".

From the psychological viewpoint, it may be assumed that individual cognitive limits are delineated by questions whose answers a person does not (yet) know. It may be compounded with the belief that getting the answer is just a matter of time or that the question under scrutiny will never be answered satisfactorily.

In the second half of the 20th century, due to radical constructivism in the social sciences and postmodern trends in philosophy, the concept of knowledge itself underwent considerable changes. As a result, knowledge is now associated to a lesser extent with

discovering truth, and is viewed more as an individualized construct used by a person as a device for ordering one's experience and anticipating future events (cf. Foerster, 1993, Glasersfeld, 1995/2013). With this in mind, let us consider the question: "Is knowledge, intrinsically, always something good, desirable and beneficial to its holder?"

In the search for the nature and value of knowledge at least one of four paths may be followed: 1) history of philosophy, in particular epistemology; 2) ideas and views of influential representatives of the science of science, i.e. Thomas Kuhn, Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend; 3) concepts and results of studies within psychology, especially within experimental cognitive and social psychology as well as clinical psychology; and 4) beliefs and opinions of ordinary people, i.e. folk psychology. The views of "people in the street", concerning not so much the abstract concept of knowledge as two states of mind, i.e. "to know" and "not to know", may be examined in an empirical way.

Is it better to know or not to know? The belief that knowledge is a value has been prevalent in the European culture, especially since the Enlightenment, which may suggest that the question posed is but a rhetorical one. But yet this belief is deeply rooted in the European tradition. In the first statement of his

*Metaphysics*, Aristotle claims: "All men by nature desire to know. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves and above all others the sense of sight" (Book I, part 1). Even more resounding is a compact phrase commonly attributed to Francis Bacon (1597): *knowledge is power*, or, to be more precise, *ipsa scientia potestas est*.<sup>1</sup> As a counterweight, an equally deep-rooted belief that "ignorance is bliss" may be mentioned. It is also commonly known that one may be "blissfully unaware", which proves beyond doubt that, after all, ignorance may have its advantages.

Moving on to psychology, the ambiguous contribution of Sigmund Freud to the problem of value and psychological consequences of knowing versus not knowing should be mentioned. On the one hand (to paraphrase the Viennese psychiatrist), the ability to forget traumatic events is an important characteristic of efficiently functioning memory (and, in a sense, the ego strength). And "not to remember" is like "not to know" (cf. Hertwig and Engel, 2016). On the other hand, it should be remembered that the psychoanalytic therapy aimed at recovering repressed memories and reintegrating the knowledge unit on the conscious level. Abraham Maslow took a more balanced view on this topic in his article under the expressive title *The need to know and the fear of knowing* (1963). Maslow's proposition is clear and as compelling as it was in his times – we seek knowledge to reduce our anxiety. However, in other circumstances, and for the same reasons, we often choose not to know.

The way psychologists think about the rationality of views, soundness of judgements and decisions taken by people, and in particular about consequences for their subjective well-being, has greatly evolved over time. It has turned out that positive illusions make our lives easier (Taylor, Brown 1988; Kofta, Szustrowa 1991/2001), and, as Dariusz

Doliński notices, also negative and pessimistic distortions may have positive consequences (Doliński, 2001). We may put forward a risky proposition, which half a century ago would be unacceptable for the objectively-oriented psychologists, that unbiased cognition of reality is impossible, and which of the biased interpretations prove more beneficial or adaptive depends on the context – on the goals pursued, action stage and significance of preferred consequences.

Over the past few years and despite the still present tendency to overestimate knowledge and information, a new field of study has emerged within psychology, focused on deliberate information avoidance. It transpired that people quite consistently avoid (often-times significant) information related to almost any sphere of life, such as one's health, finances, close interpersonal relations, religious and political beliefs, and many others (Melnyk, 2009; Golman, Hagman, and Loewestein, 2016). The authors of the article *Homo ignorans. Deliberately choosing not to know* (Hertwig, Engel, 2016) have recently put forth an extensive taxonomy of psychological situations where we deliberately (although for different reasons) choose not to know. They have distinguished six types of such situations. Two of them seem to play a particularly important role, i.e.: 1) "Emotion-regulation and regret-avoidance device"; and 2) "Impartiality and fairness device".

In the present pilot study we try to recognize where "ordinary people" place their ignorance and whether they strive to overcome it or just the opposite. Especially we try to determine what kind of knowledge (information) different respondents consider as inappropriate, unwanted or even disturbing. Shortly speaking, what they like to know and what they prefer not to know.

## Method, and research questions

**Method.** Respondents were asked via email to express their opinion on three points. They had to formulate three types of questions: 1)

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientia\\_potentia\\_est](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientia_potentia_est)

questions whose answer they do not know, even though they would like to, but they hope to get it in the future; 2) questions whose answer they do not know, and think this will never be possible; 3) questions they regard as important to them, but whose answer they would prefer not to know. The survey participants were close and distant friends of the author as well as friends of his acquaintances. The examined sample was therefore not a random, but the so-called convenient sample. About 50% of the feedback was gathered via email, while 8 people completed the survey during personal meetings. The survey was conducted in December 2014.

**Group characteristics.** The responses came from 48 people (24 men and 24 women), 80% of whom had higher education, and the remaining 20% – at least secondary one. The educational background as well as the type of job held varied to a significant degree. Around 45% of respondents lived in cities with a population of over 500,000 people, while the remaining 55% were residents of smaller towns or villages. The respondents were between the ages of 21 and 72 ( $M=44.2$  years,  $SD= 4.4$ ). A few members of the examined group took the survey very seriously, and wrote that the questions were difficult and had to be given a lot of thought. They also indicated that they would send their answers within a few days, which they eventually did.

**Problem and research questions.** The pilot survey fits well in the current trend of studies into active avoidance of (essential) information, but its main source of inspiration was the problem of cognitive limits and knowledge valuation in folk psychology. The subject was virtually untouched due to the lack of previous research. For that reason, the present study should be viewed as a pilot and exploratory exercise rather than a validation project. Instead of posing hypotheses, it focuses on research questions, such as:

- Are the questions bothering ordinary people personal or impersonal in their nature (that is abstract or linked to universal problems)?
- Which of the questions the respondents do not expect any answer to?
- Do the personal questions pertain mainly or exclusively to the future or also to the past?
- Are the future-related questions more frequently asked by younger people or are they age-independent?
- Are there any questions whose answer the respondents would choose not to know, and if so, what is their focus?

The beliefs and views of a group of adult, educated people on personal knowledge and ignorance are briefly presented in the empirical section of the paper. To be more precise, these are the questions whose answers they would like to know or they would prefer not to know.

## Results

The survey results were analyzed against two independent criteria (dimensions): 1) time perspective of the formulated questions (future- or past-related and “timeless”, i.e. time-independent); 2) personal vs impersonal (abstract) nature of the questions.

The idea to count separately the responses related to the first and the second question of the survey (“I do not know, but I hope to find out” and “I do not know and I will never find out”) was abandoned. It turned out that the survey group did not use the distinction, which, after all, proved to be more vague and problematic than originally expected. Overall, the participants found it difficult to determine whether the question asked belonged to the first or the second category. As one of the respondents noticed: *There is basically no difference between the questions, as you can never obtain the answer NOW (when it is most needed)*. Consequently, the responses to the first and the second question of the survey were included in a broader category “Questions whose answer the respondents would like to know”.

Responses to the third question (“Questions considered as important, but whose

**Table 1.** Questions whose answer the respondents would like to know, analyzed using two independent criteria: personal vs. impersonal as well as time perspective

Question category	Number of questions formulated by:				Total	
	Younger respondents (n = 24)		Older respondents (n = 24)			
	N	%	N	%	N	%
Personal	80	52%	29	30%	109	44%
Impersonal (universal)	73	48%	67	70%	140	56%
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>249</b>	<b>100%</b>
Future-related	49	32%	29	30%	78	31.5%
Past-related	19	12%	4	4%	23	9.0%
"Timeless questions"	85	56%	63	66%	148	59.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>153</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>249</b>	<b>101%</b>

answer you would prefer not to know") were examined in depth. Identical criteria were used for the analysis of this group of questions, i.e. personal vs. impersonal as well as time perspective. Since a great number of questions centered around the same subject, more detailed subcategories were identified, namely "circumstances of one's own death" vs. "circumstances of death of someone close".

Moreover, in relation to research question 4, the respondents were divided into "younger" and "older". The age of the respondents showed, naturally, but unintendedly, a bimodal distribution: half of the survey participants (n=24) fell in the age group of 21 to 38 years, while the second half – 46 to 72 years.

The breakdown into personal (for example: *Who am I going to spend the rest of my life with? What is my son going to be like when he grows up?*) and impersonal (*Will time travel ever be possible? Are there extraterrestrial civilizations? How to bypass Heisenberg's uncertainty principle?*) questions does not require any comment. Also the time perspective criterion seems to be self-explanatory. However, for illustrative purposes, it is worth mentioning a few questions. Past-related: *Why was my first daughter born with a birth defect? Was my husband cheating on me?* (several respondents

asked this question!), *Who were my ancestors?* And examples of "timeless" questions: *Can you change the DNA code with your thoughts? How to successfully treat alcohol addiction? Does God exist? What does the Guardian Angel think of me?*

When analyzing the results in Table 1, it should be noted that younger people asked far more questions than the older ones (153 : 96). Taking into consideration personal vs. impersonal dimension, younger respondents asked slightly more personal rather than impersonal questions, while impersonal questions were predominant in the group of older people (aged 46 to 72). The  $\chi^2$  test with Yates' correction confirmed the significance of differences with respect to the type of preferred questions among younger and older respondents ( $\chi^2 = 10.8$ ;  $p = 0.001$ ). In the context of time perspective, a slight shift towards timeless questions, at the expense of time-oriented questions, may be observed in the distribution of responses in both groups. The repeated chi-square test with Yates' correction (where the future- and past-related questions were initially treated as one category of "time-oriented" questions, while the other group were timeless questions) showed no significant difference in the result distribution.

**Table 2.** Questions whose answer the respondents would not like to know

Question category	Number of questions formulated by:				Total	
	Younger respondents ( <i>n</i> = 24)		Older respondents ( <i>n</i> = 24)			
	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%	<i>N</i>	%
Personal	36	86%	31	84%	67	85%
Impersonal (universal)	6	14%	6	16%	12	15%
Total	42	100%	37	100%	79	100%
Future-related	35	83%	29	78%	64	81%
Past-related	2	5%	3	8%	5	6%
"Timeless questions"	5	12%	5	14%	10	13%
Total	42	100%	37	100%	79	100%

Table 2 presents the distribution of responses (with account for the age group) for questions whose answer the respondents would not like to know.

It should be noted (Table 2) that this time (and in contrast to the questions whose answer the respondents wanted to know) personal questions are in majority – there are at least five times as many of them. On the other hand, when the time perspective criterion is applied, questions related to the future are clearly dominant; they account for 81% of all questions, whereas the number of timeless questions is reduced to 12%. It should also be stressed that this time the total number of all questions constitutes but a third of the questions with desirable answers (cf. Table 1). Repeated  $\chi^2$  tests showed no significant differences in the result distribution between the age groups.

The "personal questions" whose answers the respondents did not want to know were further analyzed (Table 2a).

It should be emphasized that 45% of all respondents (Table 2a) did not want to know the circumstances of one's own death or the death of (relatively less frequently) someone close.

It should be mentioned that we made also comparisons between group of men and women in respect to all previously proposed

categories but no significant differences were to be observed.

### Results summary

In spite of what may be expected, it is not easy to differentiate between the two types of ignorance, i.e. what we currently do not know (but we assume we will likely find out) and what we do not know and most probably will never do. The borderline between *ignoramus* and *ignorabimus* proves to be blurred.

Younger people (aged 21–38) were far more interested in questions of a personal nature (*chi-square* = 10.8; *p* = 0.001) compared to the older ones (aged 46–72). These questions accounted for 52% of all questions asked by younger respondents and 30% by the older participants.

The questions formulated may be divided into two categories: "time-oriented" and "timeless". Future-related questions, both on a personal or more universal plane (future of the world, humanity, etc.), are in majority in the time-oriented group. There were three times as many questions related to the future than past-related ones.

There are important matters which we want to remain oblivious to. This refers mainly to personal issues and in particular to the

**Table 2a.** Personal questions whose answer the respondents did not want to know

Question category	Number of questions formulated by:				Total	
	Younger respondents		Older respondents			
Personal questions:	N	%	N	%	N	%
Related to the circumstances of one's own death	11	33%	13	41%	24	37%
Rated to the circumstances of the death of someone close	3	9%	2	6%	5	8%
Other personal questions	19	58%	17	53%	36	55%
<b>Total</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>65</b>	<b>100%</b>

circumstances of our own or our closed ones' death. Almost half (45%) of unwanted answers focused on these subjects.

The overwhelming majority of important questions whose answer we prefer not to know related to the future (81%); only 6% centered on the past, and 13% were timeless questions.

## Discussion

Above all, the respondent's questions make us realize the relativity of the word "never". The second question of the survey uses the following wording: "whose answer would you like to know, but you think it will never be possible". One of the respondents (M, aged 62) answered confidently: *From the perspective of afterlife there are no such questions.* He then expanded on the thought: *I'm interested in questions concerning history – both world history as well as stories of individual people. During the earthly existence I will probably not get answers to all of them [...] but if my curiosity survives in afterlife, I am sure to find the answers to all of the questions I ask.* It should be noted that even if we put aside the part about afterlife, we are still left with the ambiguity of the word "never". To a great number of questions, both personal and impersonal, the answers

will come in time (during our lifetime). On the other hand, one may claim that future events are cognizable, but never to a satisfactory extent in any present, however understood. In other words, the future is cognizable (although within certain limits), but only when it becomes the present. Apparently, "never" has a dramatically different meaning for believers and non-believers.

Apart from the general tendencies outlined above, individual differences also come into play. And it would be surprising if that was not the case. Although 45% of respondents were reluctant to know the circumstances of their own or their closed ones' death, it should be underlined that they were not asked about this directly. That is why some of them wrote: "I cannot think of any such questions" or they were generally positive about any knowledge. It may be expected then that if the respondents had to answer a more precise question: "Would you like to know the circumstances of your own death?", the percentage of negative answers would be even higher. Incidentally, Hertwig and Engel (2016, p. 367) mentioned unpublished studies conducted in Germany on a sample group of 2,000 people where respondents were presented with different scenarios and asked whether they would like to know the answer to the same question or not.

It turned out that 90% of them did not want to know the exact date of their death.

As for the Polish respondents, it is worth mentioning that there were two exceptions. Two of the survey participants wanted to know the circumstances of their own or their closed ones' death (a man aged 67 and a woman aged 38). In the first case, the subject of the question was one's own death, in the second – time and circumstances of the death of one's parents. As can be seen, tolerance to information about unpleasant, sad or negative events differs among people. It is commonly known that people's tolerance to uncertainty varies (Sorrentino, Rooney, 2000). It is also a fact that one of the reasons why we avoid information is the regulation of emotion (Hertwig, Engel, 2016). It may be expected that there is a connection between avoidance of information related to unpleasant emotions and the stress-coping style. A hypothesis may be formulated that people who "concentrate on emotions" are more likely to avoid information laden with negative emotions compared to people with a contrasting stress-coping style, i.e. "task-oriented". Yet another hypothesis may be posed if we agree that the stress-coping strategies are somewhat an extension of one's defense mechanisms. People who have a "preference" for simple (less mature) defense mechanisms (such as repression or denial) are more likely to avoid negative information than people preferring more sophisticated mechanisms such as rationalization or compensation.

**To sum up**, what and when is it worth to know and what is it not worth to know? There has recently been an increasing number of studies relating to the relative new topic, especially to the desired (psychological or pro-social) consequences of a deliberate ignorance (Matthey, Regner, 2011; Kandul, Ritov, 2017). But there is still insufficient number of results for a synthesis. As for the further direction of studies, the following **conclusion** may be drawn up. Above all, a more-embracing approach is needed that would integrate different aspects of human condition, i.e. emotional, behavioral and cognitive, based

on mental profits and costs related to "know" and "not to know". The same information, analyzed from the pragmatic and behavioral perspective (to know how) may have unquestionable practical and instrumental benefits, while at the same time generate visible emotional costs and moderate cognitive cerebration. So, how to measure them? What would be the universal benchmark for comparing (including summation and deduction) behavioral, cognitive and emotional costs?

And one more remark yet. Unanswered questions, after we have faced it, are not clear signs of ignorance anymore, but rather a special kind of negative (meta)knowledge. When we know, what we do not know, we know more than before asking the question. So, we should not avoid questions. Besides, they are not so much dangerous as univocal units of information.

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