

In Praise of the Mere Presence of Ignorance

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Abstract With regard to the theme “Reason in context,” the following stimulates a discussion on both Plato’s Socrates and the culpability of ignorance. By focusing on Plato’s *Lysis*, *Alcibiades I*, *Philebus*, and the *Laws*, I debunk the typical interpretation of Socratic moral intellectualism by evidencing that though there are various forms of ignorance in the Platonic dialogues, only one leads to shame-worthy error. Furthermore, in this endeavour to understand the “hierarchy” of ignorance in Plato, I take an unusual path and jump from Antiquity to the Renaissance by connecting Plato’s Socrates to Erasmus’s Folly. By comparing these characters I show how both only condemn *double ignorance*, i.e., ignorance of ignorance joined with the pretence to knowledge. Ultimately, by analyzing this particularly heinous form of ignorance, I question whether in all periods and circumstances feigned wisdom more than “mere ignorance” leads to shame and disrepute.

An Introduction to Ignorance

“For I never wear disguises, nor do I say one thing and think another. I always look exactly like what I am, so much so that I cannot be concealed even by those who most jealously arrogate to themselves the character and title of wise men strutting around ‘*like an ape in king’s clothes*’ or ‘*the ass in a lion’s skin*.’ However hard they try to hide it, the tips of their Midas-ears sooner or later slip out and betray them . . . now I ask you, since these wretches are most foolish, in fact, but try to pass themselves off as wisemen and deep philosophers, what more fitting title could we find for them than *foolosophers*.” Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, 13

In Erasmus’s *Praise of Folly*, Folly boasts that she alone speaks honestly about the human condition and the source of the good life. Ironically calling herself the only authentic sophist, she censures others who disguise themselves under the shroud of feigned wisdom. With a biting wit, she scolds philosophers and theologians alike, for though they know nothing at all, they pretend to know everything. Furthermore, Folly charismatically derides the masses of men who, due

to arrogance and self-love, hide behind the pretense of knowledge. The entirety of her monologue she ridicules arm-chair scholars and hypocritical clerics, rarely offering a kind word to anyone acclaimed for wisdom. For Erasmus's provocative spokeswoman only the man who never feigns knowledge can claim wisdom. Thus, somewhat out of character, Folly offers the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates a kind word and an exception from the category of *foolosopher* saying, "the man was not entirely stupid, since he refused to accept the title of wise man."¹ This back-handed compliment obviously refers to dialogues like the *Apology* where Plato's Socrates, like Folly, believed that feigned wisdom degrades its possessor and overshadows any wisdom or knowledge a person may actually possess. Amusingly then, Erasmus's brazen vixen and Plato's champion of virtue have something in common: abhorrence to pretence. Certainly, however, comparing an anthropomorphized character of human ignorance—Folly—with an ideal of human wisdom—Socrates—may seem odd at first glance. One may ask how Folly can side with the philosopher who spent his entire life demanding knowledge of virtue and happiness. As Socrates famously says in the *Euthydemus*, "only one thing is good, knowledge, and only one thing is bad, ignorance."² Due to this and similar condemnations of ignorance, Socrates seemingly sentences the masses of men to sin and discontent because most lack the requisite wisdom necessary for virtue and happiness. Yet, this typical understanding of Socratic philosophy, which is usually termed Socratic moral intellectualism, neglects the fact that there are obviously different forms of ignorance in the Platonic dialogues, with only one form denying virtue, a form that easily corresponds to Folly's *foolosophers*.

In the following essay I primarily examine those passages in the dialogues which evidence that, like Folly, Plato condemns ignorance not in its totality but only what, in the early dialogues, Socrates demarcates as the greatest ignorance, and, in the later dialogues, the Athenian Stranger definitively baptizes as double ignorance. It will be shown that the culpable characteristic of ignorance is not the lack of knowledge but the pretense to knowledge.³ Finally, I conclude by turning to a striking argument in the *Lysis* that describes how ignorance is present in all, without this mere presence condemning one to a life of vice and unhappiness. Rather, Socrates carefully argues that the way one responds to the mere presence of ignorance determines one's virtue and thereby shows how ignorance may, as Folly so provocatively insisted, be the source of the good life. Ultimately this approach hopes to put *ignorance in context* by evidencing that men only deny themselves virtue and happiness through the pursuits and attempts to hide what belongs to us all, the mere presence of ignorance.

II. Discovering the Culpability of *Double Ignorance* in Plato's Dialogues

To begin, we must consider the *Alcibiades I*⁴ and Socrates' description of the young man's inability to account for his professed knowledge as an ignorance that, far above other forms of ignorance, is profane. Due to the young man's arrogance, Socrates believes that he is "wedded to ignorance (ἀμαθία γὰρ συνοικεῖς)" that is "of the vilest kind (τῇ ἐσχάτῃ)."⁵ First, it should be noted that by using the

term τῇ ἐσχάτῃ, Socrates implies gradations or degrees of ignorance, ἀμαθία. Comparably, in the *Apology*, Socrates describes this form of pretentious ignorance as the most reprehensible (ἐπονείστος).⁶ In both the *Alcibiades I* and the *Apology* Socrates uses superlative forms to describe this ignorance and clearly identifies it, not with general ignorance, but the false conceit to knowledge. More importantly, a few lines before, Socrates separates knowledgeable or recognized ignorance from Alcibiades' ignorance, indicating that only "this ignorance of thinking one knows when one does not" leads to evil, explicitly concluding that the ignorance of ignorance "is a cause of evils, and is the discreditable sort of stupidity (Αὕτη ἄρα ἡ ἄγνοια τῶν κακῶν αἰτία καὶ ἡ ἐπονείδιστος ἀμαθία)" (118a4). Having employed examples of cooking and sailing, i.e., crafts in which most readily admit their ignorance, Socrates laments that in the cases of the "greatest matters," like justice, an area in which all conceitedly think themselves knowledgeable, this ignorance "is most injurious (κακουργωτάτη) and base (αἰσχίστη)" (118a9). To be clear, in this dialogue only in those areas where one pretends to know or naively believes one knows does ignorance become something shameful or, to use Socrates' vocabulary, wed itself to stupidity and evil. Furthermore, at no time in this context does Socrates condemn mere ignorance; throughout the entire dialogue he associates the act of "naming a time of ignorance" with the praiseworthy activities of learning (ἐμαθες) and discovery (ἐξηύρες).⁷

In this reproach of ignorance concerning the "greatest matters," Socrates directs us to how there can be positive demarcations or levels in a negative concept like ignorance. Prima facie, the discussion of Alcibiades' particularly heinous ignorance implies that ignorance can be ranked according to the content of knowledge lacked, i.e., ignorance of the virtues is more disreputable than ignorance of craft knowledge. Socrates, however, does not intend this. The ignorance of the virtues is not altogether reprehensible but only the recipe of 'ignorance and pretense' make the act vile. For example, imagine two ignorant men, one, perhaps on a sailboat, who pretends to know how to sail when he does not, and, another, say like Socrates, who admits that he does not know what justice is. Both men are equally ignorant of something. Most, in fact, would regard the content of the latter as more important, but certainly it will be the former who becomes the object of ridicule once, due to some ghastly steering, he sinks the boat to the bottom of the Mississippi. Here, the recognized ignorance of a moral virtue cannot be compared to the chicanery of those who feign knowledge and similarly, in this dialogue, Socrates implies that, regardless of the content, the act of pretending to know shrouds its possessor with shame more than mere not-knowing. In other words, sciolism, even in the seemingly benign case of sailing, overshadows the mere fact of ignorance. Yet, what of the case of the man who is ignorant of justice, a moral term, but pretends to have knowledge, and acts on the basis of this feigned wisdom? Isn't his false conceit more heinous than the false conceit of the man who pretends to know how to sail? Socrates, and later the Stranger in the *Statesman*, will clarify that this is the "greatest ignorance," i.e., ignorance of one's ignorance of the "greatest things," i.e., moral virtues, and is, therein, the capstone of all shame.⁸ Thus, we see here that in the hierarchy of ignorance we have "the greatest

ignorance of the greatest things,” “the greatest ignorance of non-moral things,” and finally mere ignorance of either moral or non-moral things. However, in the first two categories of “great ignorance,” shame clearly derives from conceit rather than a lack of knowing, while mere ignorance in both categories of moral and non-moral things has already been excused of fault. Thus, regardless of the content, ignorance’s reprehensibility and gradation is dependent on the inauthentic or authentic response to such not-knowing.⁹ For the sake of reference, this “hierarchy” of ignorance in the *Alcibiades I* may be summarized in the following chart, descending from the worst form of ignorance to the blameless form of ignorance:

C1: The Hierarchy of Ignorance in the <i>Alcibiades I</i>	
(1) The Greatest Ignorance	
(a) Unrecognized Ignorance of Moral Virtues	
(b) Unrecognized Ignorance of Non-Moral Issues	
(2) Recognized Ignorance	

Comparably, in several late dialogues Plato characterizes only those unaware of their ignorance as contemptuous and, like the *Alcibiades I*, assigns the cause of their grievousness not to their not-knowing, but their continuous projection of deluded self-images. In the *Sophist*, while discussing the purification of the soul, the Stranger argues that how a person is healed depends entirely upon which ignorance the man possesses, saying:

I at any rate think I do see one large and grievous kind of ignorance (ἀγνοίας), separate from the rest, and as weighty as all the other parts put together. . . . Thinking that one knows a thing when one does not know it. Through this, I believe, all the mistakes of the mind are caused in all of us . . . and furthermore to this kind of ignorance (τῆς ἀγνοίας) alone the name of stupidity (ἁμαθίαν) is given.¹⁰

To be sure the Eleatic Stranger, like Erasmus’s Folly, at the very least, regards stupidity not as nescience, a mere absence of knowledge, but as feigned wisdom and, furthermore, for Plato’s protagonist this pretense over general ignorance bears the responsibility for all cognitive mistakes. Similarly, during the arguments of the *Philebus*, Socrates, as he does in the *Apology*, associates the reprehensible ignorance with a lack of self-knowledge and excess. Separating the ridiculous from ignorance and stupidity, Socrates defines the ridiculous as “that part of vice in general which involves the opposite of the condition mentioned in the inscription at Delphi” (48c). After dividing this form of self-delusion into three categories, Socrates concentrates on the problem of excess. First, he states that men who do not know themselves, therein participating in the ridiculous, believe that they are wealthier than they are. Second, they also tend to believe they are more endowed with physical beauty than they are. Finally, the most abhorrent of the three, Socrates states, “by far the greatest

number . . . err in the third way, about the qualities of the soul, thinking that they excel in virtue when they do not" (49a). In accord with the *Alcibiades I*, Socrates declares that of all the virtues, wisdom is the one most people suppose they possess when they do not. For him, this absurd self-deception inevitably fills the masses with "strife (ἐρίδων) and false conceit of wisdom (δοξοσοφίας ἐστὶ ψευδοῦς)" (49a6) to the extent that the philosopher boldly declares it an "evil (κακὸν)" (49a8).¹¹ Furthermore, ignorance as excessiveness appears ridiculous in weak men and heinous in powerful men, as those who have political influence along with the ability to do as they please threaten to make their ignorance something truly dangerous, frightening (φοβεροῦς) and hateful (ἐχθροῦς).¹² The implications of these passages are given in the following chart:

C2: The Hierarchy of Ignorance in the *Philebus*

- (1) The Greatest Ignorance (specifically in relation to the self)
 - (a) False Conceit in the Strong (terrible)
 - i. Ignorance of Ignorance in Moral Categories
 - ii. Ignorance of Ignorance in Non Moral Categories
 - (b) False Conceit in the Weak (truly ridiculous)
 - i. Ignorance of Ignorance in Moral Categories
 - ii. Ignorance of Ignorance in Non Moral Categories
- (2) General (Possibly Recognized) Ignorance

Like C1, C2 evidences that the heinousness of ignorance arises not from nescience alone but from the combination of nescience with false conceit. This is explicitly shown by the fact that the content of disreputable conceits is not merely specific virtues, like wisdom, but also morally neutral conceits concerning one's wealth and beauty. Furthermore, for Socrates, men who possess the conceit to knowledge, i.e., men who believe they know when they do not, can, at times, simply be silly little men in the market place. For Socrates, there is something tragic in their possession of this ignorance but their conceit merely reduces others, who know better, to laughter.¹³ We see once again that the content of the knowledge lacked, say a moral virtue like justice, is wholly evil neither in those who admit ignorance nor in the weak. Believing one knows when one does not, even in a case like justice, poses no real threat to others in some contexts, but merely makes one ridiculous before others. What inevitably shames the latter though, i.e., makes him a joke, is the fact of his pretense or conceit, not his lack of knowing a moral term. To be sure, the weak and conceited are in a worse state than those who recognize ignorance but, as far as the *Philebus* implies, the ignorance of ignorance in the powerful, in those who plan to rule, is a form of self-deception that at no time should be mocked or ignored, for, above all other forms of ignorance, it threatens to injure others severely. The self-deception of the politically influential and powerful corrupts and damages states since it leads the majority of men to accept a rogue as their leader and also subjects

the ignorant, whether unrecognized or recognized, to the whims of a thoughtless man. Thus, a man with political power who does not know himself and is unaware of not knowing ultimately errs and condemns, not merely himself, but the entire state which he governs, each time he acts.

In the *Laws* the Athenian argues that only one form of ignorance leads to sin and culpable error. Echoing the *Philebus*, the Athenian says:

Nor would it be untrue to say that the third cause of sins (τῶν ἀμαρτημάτων) is ignorance (ἄγνοϊαν). This cause, however, the lawgiver would do well to subdivide into two, counting ignorance in its simple form to be the cause of minor sins, and its double form (τὸ δὲ διπλοῦν)—where the folly is due to the man being gripped not by ignorance only, but also by a conceit of wisdom (ὅταν ἀμαθαίνη τις μὴ μόνον ἀγνοίᾳ συνεχόμενος ἀλλὰ καὶ δόξῃ σοφίας), as though he had full knowledge of things he knows nothing about,—counting this to be the cause of great and brutal sins when it is joined with strength and might, but the cause of childish and senile sins when it is joined with weakness; and these last he will count as sins and he will ordain laws, as for sinners, but laws that will be, above all others, of the most mild and merciful kind.¹⁴

While maintaining that simple ignorance is innocuous, double ignorance becomes the source of heinous sins. Furthermore, like the *Philebus*, ignorance characterized by false conceit must be further divided because the powerful are more threatening and, thus, their transgressions merit a more severe punishment.¹⁵ Once again, the following chart summarizes the implications of the previous passage:

C3: The Hierarchy of Ignorance in the <i>Laws</i>		
Simple Ignorance	Unconcerned with Who Possesses this Form	Minor Sins (no punishment mentioned)
Double Ignorance (Ignorance of Ignorance Combined with conceit to wisdom)	The Strong The Weak	Great and Brutal Sins (severe punishment) Childish Sins (merciful punishment)

As can be observed, the Athenian Stranger is not in the least concerned with the state of simple ignorance, i.e., the state in which a man is ignorant but does not combine this ignorance with a conceit to wisdom. Unlike those who are in a state of double ignorance, the Athenian neither examines those who possess this ignorance nor does he care to mention what kind of punishment they deserve. He merely contrasts this simple ignorance with the brutality and stupidity of double ignorance.

In contrast to double ignorance's condemnation throughout the dialogues, descriptions of general ignorance are often not connected to error or evil. Continuing with the *Laws*, the Athenian repeatedly refers to ignorance's benign quality.¹⁶ As he says during a discussion concerning the ignorance of math and science:

Complete and absolute ignorance of them is never alarming, nor is it a very great evil (μέγιστον κακόν); much more mischievous is *over doing* (ἡ πολυπειρία) and *over learning* (πολυμαθία) combined with bad training (κακῆς ἀγωγῆς).¹⁷

During this discussion of mathematics, the Athenian employs the example of knowing the figures of line, shape and solid. All men pretend to know these things and, therein, it becomes disgraceful not to know them although "there is nothing very grand in knowing such things."¹⁸ Comparable to Socrates' condemnation of Alcibiades, the Athenian believes that ignorance of the *necessary things*, understood *not as the virtues* like justice but *as the things that we ought to know because we assert or imply we know them*, is more disgraceful than any other form of ignorance.¹⁹ Earlier, after questioning "what kind of ignorance would deserve to be called the greatest (τίς οὖν ἡ μέγιστη δικαίως ἂν λέγοιτο ἀμαθία ?)," the Athenian declares that the "extreme (τὴν ἐσχάτην) form of ignorance (ἀμαθίαν)" deserves this title because it sentences men to a state of obvious self-contradiction and discord²⁰ and, unfortunately, it also "corresponds to the mass of the populace in the State."²¹ Furthermore, the Athenian calls rational men without specific knowledge "wise, even if—as the saying goes—they neither spell nor swim" and surprisingly, despite their lack of training and expertise, he entrusts the care of the city to them.²² As for those who "puff themselves up with conceit"²³ and ignore or hide their ignorance, they may live a life "reputed to be wisdom (δοκοῦσα δὲ σοφία), but really, as we affirm, the height of ignorance (οὔσα ἀμαθία μέγιστη)."²⁴ In the end, for the Athenian, double ignorance leads to both excessive self-love and the hubris of the masses, which "brought the whole Greek world to ruin"²⁵ and, in accord with the *Sophist*, where double ignorance is the deformity of the soul, the Athenian demands that the purgation and purification of the city and its citizens be directed at this ignorance characterized by pretense and conceit.

III. Ignorance as Neither Good Nor Bad

As many passages seem to indicate, mere ignorance isolated from pretense is not an entirely reprehensible state. The ignorant may still be virtuous just so long as they never combine their folly with thinking they know when they do not. In fact, turning now to the *Lysis*, we shall examine how Socrates makes a profound declaration and commits himself to the view that ignorance in itself may be "neither good nor bad" (τῷ μῆτε ἀγαθῷ μῆτε κακῷ). During the examination of friendship Socrates claims that the quality of evil depends upon how a man responds to the presence of evil (κακοῦ παρουσίαν) and stipulates that the "neither good nor bad" can only be friends with the good prior to being "made evil by the evil which

it has.”²⁶ Vindicating this, the philosopher asks the nervous youth what would happen to his hair if someone tinged it with white lead²⁷ and argues, in response to his own question, that the actual color of the hair is essentially unaffected. Socrates observes that while the hair ostensibly changes color it is only the appearance of change as the hair, while possessing the presence of white, is not really white. He, in turn, contrasts this mere presence or appearance of whiteness with its complete embrace, describing how in old age the hair has “come to be of the same sort as that which is present—white through the presence of white (τότε ἐγένοντο οἷόνπερ τὸ παρόν, λευκοῦ παρουσίᾳ λευκαί).”²⁸ Due to this he asks:

So this is the question I have been trying to put to you—whether a thing that has something present with it is to be held of the same sort as that present thing; or is it only when that thing is present in a particular way, but otherwise not?²⁹

Socrates unpacks this question by explaining that “the neither good nor bad,” understood in this context to be the human being, despite having the presence of evil, has not yet become evil. While merely possessing the presence of evil, that presence can, if presented in a particular way, stimulate a desire for the good. In other words, for Socrates, the mere presence of evil within a person, i.e., the “neither good nor bad,” may not impinge on his or her character and may, in fact, have a positive effect on its possessor. In contrast, when the presence of evil is manifested in such a way as to deprive the “neither good nor bad” person of the desire for the good, it is no longer different from the thing merely present but, like the analogy of white lead on hair, has come to be like the mere presence and, so, can no longer be identified with the “neither good nor bad” but must be identified with the bad.³⁰

Strikingly, Socrates connects this somewhat ambiguous understanding of the presence of evil to the problem of ignorance and, in so doing, argues that ignorance may not necessarily make a human being bad. Foreshadowing Diotima’s remarkable speech in the *Symposium*, Socrates states that neither the wise, as already having obtained wisdom, nor those “who are in such ignorance (ἄγνοιαν) as to be bad,” can be called lovers of wisdom.³¹ In contrast to the wise and utterly stupid (ἄμαθῆ), there are those in a third group who “while possessing this bad thing, ignorance, are not yet made ignorant or stupid, but are still aware of not knowing the things they do not know.”³² Socrates concludes that only those in the third category, as neither good nor bad, are lovers of wisdom.³³

Paralleling the analogy of white lead on hair, Socrates distinguishes the mere presence of ignorance from the complete embrace of ignorance while asserting that this mere presence does not necessarily threaten a person’s nature; only when an agent makes himself like the thing he merely possesses does this mere presence become malignant. In this context, to liken oneself to ignorance is to ignore either consciously or unconsciously this mere presence of ignorance. In doing this, men irreparably discredit themselves and threaten to become evil. On the other hand, whenever the presence of ignorance is recognized by the agent, differentiating the possessor from

the thing presented, the agent abolishes the evil (το κακὸν ἀποληται) in him. This abolition, then, is the expulsion of one's likeness from the ignorance or the bad merely present. While still possessing the presence of ignorance the recognizer has neutralized ignorance's harmful potential by mediating this mere presence with an acknowledgement, a knowledge of its mere presence. Thus, the removal of evil is not the abolishment of ignorance in its totality, but only of that ignorance which threatens to be evil: the ignorance of ignorance exhibited in those who feign wisdom.³⁴ Here, Socrates shows that ignorance cannot be avoided, it may, in fact, always be present, but this presence does not obstruct one from searching for and inquiring after the good, i.e., the wisdom allowing for virtue and happiness. As Socrates concludes, "in the soul and the body and everywhere, just that which is neither bad nor good, but has the presence of bad (κακοῦ παρουσίαν) is thereby friend of the good."³⁵

In the *Lysis*, Socrates clearly and dramatically differentiates between those who recognize the fact of human ignorance in *any* category of knowledge whatsoever and those who do not. In fact, in this passage Socrates does not connect the mere presence of evil to the ignorance of virtues, but to ignoring all forms of ignorance immediately present in every context. It should be emphasized that in the above passages, ignorance and evil are not *developments* that tempt or pervert the "neither good nor evil" but are immediate *presences*, manifestations already and always present within both the "neither good nor evil" person and the "evil" person. Yet this mere presence can be manifested in different ways and, as in the *Alcibiades I*, how one responds to one's ignorance determines whether it may be regarded as shame-worthy or, to use the language of the *Lysis*, bad or evil. Thus, the hierarchy of ignorances may be amended to show explicitly the divide between recognized ignorance and the ignorance of ignorance.

C4: The Hierarchy of Ignorance in the <i>Lysis</i>	
1. Bad Ignorance	1. The Ignorance of Ignorance (In C1 "The Greatest Ignorance" in both moral and non-moral categories.)
2. Neither Good nor Bad Ignorance(Friend of the Good)	2. The Mere Presence of Ignorance
3. Good Ignorance	3. The Knowledgeable

Taking C1, C2, C3, and C4 together we discover that the only form of ignorance overtly denoted as morally bad is the (1) ignorance of ignorance, while (2) mere ignorance, or (3) recognized ignorance can lead to a friendship, a relation, with the good.

Particularly in the *Lysis* how a presence becomes manifest determines the mere presence's value as a disease or as a deficiency. To understand this distinction between

disease and deficiency, Socrates clarifies that the manifestation of evil or, as the previous passages implied, the ignorance of ignorance, is not what makes the “neither good nor bad” person seek out the good. As seen, this prospect would be impossible, for they would not recognize the need for the good or wisdom, because their ignorance is the ignorance of ignorance and would, therefore, not be “neither good nor bad” but “bad.” This state would be classified as a disease. As already mentioned, this is the state that an agent would need to abolish. In contrast, a deficiency is a lack in the “neither good nor bad,” i.e., the man who “has” ignorance but is not completely likened to it. It will be this lack that will stimulate the desire for the good. In this respect, the mere presence of ignorance is no longer comparable to a disease but is a morally neutral “deficiency” or lack in the soul of a man, the “neither good nor bad,” which inevitably stimulates the desire or friendship for the good or knowledge.³⁶ This desire, caused by lack or absence, is no longer a desire of utility, i.e., knowledge sought for the sake of something else, but a desire for something that “is its very own,” an object which, for some reason or another, is lacking or absent.³⁷ Gauging that his notion of lacking “one’s own” might seem obscure, Socrates compares this concept to the desire for health in the body, which regardless of its presence or absence is always desired as that which should be present and always remain so. For Socrates, this “always desired presence” becomes the desire for a thing which is, in some sense, already there or natural to it like health for the body. Thus knowledge, by comparison, becomes something intimate rather than transcendent, something natural rather than supplemental. Put otherwise, knowledge is “what is our very own.” Furthermore, those who desire knowledge and wish to keep it always cannot at any time disguise or neglect the presence of ignorance, since to do so would be to approach and approximate the bad. In contrast, the man who possesses the mere presence of ignorance, but suppresses this phenomenon, is likened to a man who refuses to acknowledge the fact of disease and illness, of the mere possibility of losing his health and, therefore, he does nothing to safeguard his body from such threats. In his day to day activities, he takes his health for granted and does not notice his cough. Unfortunately, he regards the simple malady only once it is too late, once it has consumed him and led to a debilitating illness. Before, it had merely been a benign threat or a possibility that, had he heeded it, should have led him to take measures preventing such a calamity.³⁸ Ultimately, Socrates’ argument in the *Lysis* stands in striking contrast to his so-called commitment to moral intellectualism, as it evidences that the mere presence of ignorance is not in itself heinous, but corresponds rather to how the possessor of ignorance responds or tends to the mere presence of ignorance.

IV. Conclusion: The Marriage of Folly and Sophia

Socrates’ argument in the *Lysis* foreshadows Folly’s bold claim: she alone causes the good life. Notably, though, this comparison of Folly and Socrates’ opinions on the importance of ignorance also directs us to the distinguishing feature between these two timeless characters: the difference between Socratic ignorance and Folly’s

emphasis on the “mere recognition” of ignorance. To understand the subtle divergence between Folly and Socrates think here of the fact that several times in the *Alcibiades I*, Alcibiades admits his ignorance³⁹ and once he even confesses, “Well, by Heavens, Socrates, I do not even know what I mean myself, and I fear that for some time past I have lived unaware in a disgraceful condition.”⁴⁰ Regardless of this declaration, Alcibiades continues, by his own confession in the *Symposium*, to lead a less than happy and virtuous life.⁴¹ Yet, to be sure, due to such avowals of not-knowing on Alcibiades’ part, Plato directs us toward understanding how, in contrast to Folly’s claims, at no time does the “mere recognition of ignorance” suffice for the good life. In fact, one must do more than simply shrug off conceit in identifying one’s ignorance and inconsistency. Rather, an acknowledgement of not-knowing, as the *Lysis* indicates, must be combined with an activity or work that creates a relationship, a friendship, with the wisdom or knowledge also concurrently present in all human beings. Put otherwise, Plato’s protagonist acknowledges more than ignorance since, via the work of ceaseless inquiry and examination, Socrates mediates between, as Diotima in the *Symposium* demands, both human Poverty and Plenty, not, as that upon which Folly myopically concentrates, mere human lack. Indeed, throughout all his dialogues Plato continually insists that Folly alone is not all that is required for human happiness. Rather, Folly must be wed to her antithesis: *Sophia*. Put less metaphorically, Socratic ignorance is more than a “mere” theoretical observation of not-knowing, because Socrates, via living the examined life, harmonizes his words of ignorance with his deeds of authentic inquiry. It is this harmony of words and deeds that allows the philosopher boldly to claim in the *Apology* that he is the “paradigm” for all human beings because, for Socrates and Plato alike, only to focus upon one’s ignorance, like Folly does or strong skeptics continue to do, is simply to advocate another affectation to wisdom. In the case of skeptics, individuals build a strange pretension to knowing the fact of human not-knowing, a pretension that denies or ignores the presence of and possibility for the good that all individuals possess and share within the resources of their soul.

In summary, assuredly for Socrates, true “folly,” i.e., the error and ignorance that threatens us all, is to develop conceits to knowing and to forget ignorance’s role in *discovering* the good. In this forgetting, we sentence ourselves to lives of discontent and vicissitude as we would never acknowledge our need for anything more, never acknowledge our lack and, thus, we would be our own adversaries by obstructing ourselves from the activities that actualize our love, our friendship, with wisdom. Yet, perhaps more importantly, we should keep in mind that to become doubly ignorant or to ignore the importance of admitting ignorance in all contexts, whether it be ignorance of mathematical properties like number, benign practicalities like how to steer a ship, or the ignorance of running a state, is also to be likened to Folly, who, regardless of her potential merit in recognizing the prominence of ignorance for the good life, reduces herself to an assuredly angry and jealous vixen who despises wisdom, i.e., that which like health to a body is “our very own.”

Notes

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1. Erasmus, *Praise of Folly*, trans. C. Miller (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 36.

2. Plato, *Euthydemus*; Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers* II.31.

3. See also S. R. Slings, *Plato's Apology of Socrates: A Literary and Philosophic Study with Running Commentary* (Leiden: Brill Publishing, 1994). Slings writes in his list of fundamental issues to the *Apology*: "There are three states of mind with regard to knowledge, (a) conceited ignorance (*amathia*) (b) consciousness of one's ignorance and striving for insight (*philosophia*), (c) perfect knowledge (*sophia, phronesis*) [. . .]." Cf. 63–65. Slings comments on the relevance of the *Laws*, IX 863c1–d4, and shows that Plato distinguishes between two fundamentally opposed forms of ignorance. Unfortunately, Slings does not offer more information on this subject, but moves quickly to the relevant material in the *Symposium* and the role of the *metaxu* for philosophy. Furthermore, as a quick review of the following passages will show, Plato never clearly identifies the grievous ignorance of conceit with either *amathia* or *agnoia* but uses them interchangeably.

4. The dating of this dialogue is unknown and its authorship has been much questioned in contemporary scholarship. In the Platonic tradition, however, it was often lauded as the best dialogue for beginners in philosophy. See Proclus, *Commentary on the Alcibiades I*, 11–12. For a comprehensive overview of the possible chronology and a concise dismissal of those who question the authenticity of this dialogue, see N. Denyer *Plato's Alcibiades*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 11–25. See also P. Clark "The Greater Alcibiades," *The Classical Quarterly* 5 (1955): 231–240. Clark argues that the first two-thirds of the dialogue were written by a pupil while the last third is unmistakably Platonic. For the classic argument against attributing this dialogue to Plato, see F. Schleiermacher, *Schleiermacher's Introduction to the Dialogues of Plato*, trans. William Dobson (New York: Arno Press, 1868/1973), 328–336. I will utilize the *Alcibiades I* regardless of its possible spuriousness, as I too believe that this dialogue, at the very least, offers a comprehensive introduction to Platonic thought. Thus I use it as the first text in this essay because it not only resembles the style of the various Socratic dialogues but also acts as a spring board for distinguishing two forms of ignorance throughout Plato's work. Moreover, if it was indeed written by a follower or imitator of Plato, it further shows that the distinction between various forms of ignorance was an overt Platonic theme that students understood readily and accepted as part of the Platonic legacy.

5. Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 118b4–7. All the translations of Plato's dialogues come from the Loeb Classical Library 12 volume edition *Plato*, ed. G. P. Goold (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914–1935). Where translations were obscure I referred to the *Complete Works of Plato*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1997). For the Greek I worked with John Burnet's *Platonis Opera* in 5 volumes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900–1907) reprinted in 1967 and available online at the Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG). If I change or adapt the Loeb translation I underline and add the Greek within the body of the quote.

6. Plato, *Apology*, 29b.

7. Cf. Plato, *Alcibiades I*, 106d6–e2.

8. Cf. Plato, *Statesman* 302b: “Many, to be sure, like ships that founder at sea, are destroyed, have been destroyed, and will be destroyed hereafter, through the worthlessness of their captains and crews who have the greatest ignorance of the greatest things, men who have no knowledge of statesmanship, but think they have in every respect most perfect knowledge of this above all other sciences.” Here, again, there is a clear indication that there are levels of ignorance and the greatest ignorance is pretense concerning the greatest things, in this case the knowledge of statesmanship. To be clear, though, the ignorance of the greatest things is not in itself bad, but combining this with the greatest ignorance is, namely, thinking one has perfect knowledge when one does not.

9. See also the *Protagoras* where Socrates situates the masses’ identity of pleasure with the good and the accepted idea of possible akratic actions as characteristic beliefs of the vilest form of ignorance. After a lengthy and somewhat contradictory discussion of the role of pleasure for the good, Socrates concludes that all error results from a defect of knowledge rather than the common description of “being overcome by pleasure.” For Socrates, to believe that one can be “overcome by pleasure” is “ignorance in the highest degree.” He tells the masses that they should be laughing not at him but at this particular form of ignorance identified with not realizing that all vice results from a lack of knowledge. As he claims, it is the specific ignorance of “supposing it [error] to be something else other than ignorance” and later refers to this ignorance as “yielding to oneself” rather than “mastering oneself.” To be clear, Socrates implies that ignorance in itself lacks the impact of the highest ignorance or the ignorance combined with “false opinions and being deceived by matters of importance.” Thus Socrates concedes, in contrast to the *Alcibiades I*, that although all forms of ignorance lead to error, the highest or most blameworthy form of ignorance arises from the conceit of knowledge. Conceit, in this case, is the affectation that error has more to do with being overcome by pleasure than a lack of knowledge.

10. Plato, *Sophist* 229c1–10.

11. To be sure, in this dialogue Socrates appears to explicitly identify general ignorance with an evil condition. Cf. 48c and 49d. Yet, these identifications occur just before and just after his discussion of the ridiculous, and grounds the discussion of the nature of intense or excessive pleasures, which for Socrates “holds sway over the foolish and dissolute even to the point of madness and makes them notorious” (45e). In this section, Socrates is discussing the kinds of pleasure in those who either live the life of self-restraint or the life of those who do not adhere to the “proverbial expression nothing too much.” For Socrates, the corresponding discussion of ignorance in this context only includes the ignorance of those who are swayed by excessiveness. He, however, does not discuss the ignorance and its characteristics in the men who lived the self-restrained life. To stress, the topic concerns only the excessive ignorance and foolishness in unrestrained men who give themselves up to the pursuit of pleasures. Cf. 47b.

12. Plato, *Philebus* 49c3.

13. Cf. Plato, *Philebus* 49e.

14. Plato, *Laws* 863b–d.

15. Thus we have an addendum to the ranking of ignorance: (1) double ignorance of moral virtues in the strong; (2) double ignorance of non-moral virtues in the strong; (3) double

ignorance of moral virtues in the weak; (4) double ignorance of non-moral virtues in the weak; and (5) mere ignorance which ultimately will be divided into (6) the mere recognition of ignorance and (7) recognition of ignorance combined with the work of examination.

16. Cf. 677a, where in the great myth of the flood and the account of the primitive forms of government, the Athenian goes to great lengths to commend the simple-minded men, who despite their ignorance, behave virtuously. Consider also his description of childish ignorance which deserves not punishment but instigates the necessity of the paternal lawgiver. These children and simple minded men are not condemned by the Athenian for their lack of knowledge but they rather actively participate in the good life. Even the lawgiver's ignorance lacks the connotation of heinousness when he says that men must excuse his inability to frame perfect laws concerning private interests. In this context his errors are pardonable even though these ordinances of the lawgiver were "laid down by him in ignorance." 926a

17. Plato, *Laws* 819a4–7.

18. *Ibid.*, 820b.

19. *Ibid.*, 819d.

20. *Ibid.*, 689a8. Specifically the Athenian addresses the contradictions associated with the feelings of pleasure and pain and seems to imply that the discord associated with these feelings is ultimately bound to the sin of ignorance. Cf. *Laws* 863a.

21. *Ibid.*, 689a1–10.

22. *Ibid.*, 689d3–8.

23. *Ibid.*, 649b4. This expression is used during the Athenian's defence of drunkenness. Arguing that like a man who prepares for battle by participating in the games, the Athenian thinks that drink helps prepare against licentiousness and arrogance in life. As he says, "we ought to be placed amongst these conditions which naturally tend to make us exceptionally confident and audacious when we are practicing how to be as free from shamelessness and excessive audacity . . . for the purpose, first, of providing a cheap and comparatively harmless test of these conditions, and, secondly, of affording practice in them . . . for consider: in the case of a man whose disposition is morose and savage (whence spring numberless iniquities), is it not more dangerous to test him by entering into money transactions with him, at one's own personal risk, than by associating with him with the help of Dionysus and festive insight?"

24. Plato, *Laws* 691a. For more allusions to the distinction between double and recognized ignorance see also, *Theaetetus* 177e; *Meno* 80d, 83aff, 95a; *Symposium* 204aff; *Timaeus* 86b. Also consider the *Phaedrus* 253d–e where Plato illustrates that our souls must fight conceit rather than ignorance in the myth of the charioteer. Describing the good horse as one that stands upright and has clean limbs with majestic features, this horse is not wise or virtuous but merely a "friend" of honor joined with temperance and modesty. In opposition the other horse is crooked, short and dark with bloodshot eyes and is not ignorant but a friend of insolence and pride. The importance of the distinction between double ignorance and other forms of ignorance is notably adopted by the later Neo-Platonist Proclus who asserts "For either we do know or we don't, and if we don't know, either we think we do or we don't. If we do know we possess knowledge; if we neither know nor think we do, simple ignorance; but if we don't and think we do, we are doubly ignorant." Proclus, *In I Alc.*, 201, 5–9, 2nd edition, trans. W. O'Neill (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971). Consider also the *Anonymous Prolegomena to the Philosophy of Plato*, trans. L. G. Westerink (Amsterdam: North

Holland Publishing, 1962), 211. The Anonymous Commentator writes, “Simple ignorance occurs when a man does not know a particular thing and knows that he does not know; double ignorance occurs when he does not know a thing and is not aware that he does not know.” However, the Anonymous Commentator also delineates other forms of ignorance while surprisingly identifying Socratic ignorance with twofold ignorance. Ultimately this distinction between forms of ignorance fully allows the philosopher to claim both ignorance and knowledge while amazingly avoiding all notions of irony. In contrast to this see Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

25. Plato, *Laws* 691a8. Cf. 731e–732a where the Athenian connects the excessive love of self to double ignorance saying, “and it is from this same sin that every man has derived the further notion that his own folly is wisdom; whence it come about that though we know practically nothing, we fancy that we know everything.” See also 647a, 716aff, 737aff and 886b.

26. Plato, *Lysis* 217b: Δῆλον δέ γε ὅτι πρὶν γενέσθαι αὐτὸ κακὸν ὑπὸ τοῦ κακοῦ οὐ ἔχει.

27. *Ibid.*, 217d–e.

28. *Ibid.*, 271e1–4.

29. *Ibid.*, 217e: Τοῦτο τοιούτων ἐρωτῶ νῦν δὴ, εἰ ὅ ἄν τι παρῇ, τοιούτων ἔσται τὸ ἔχον οἶον τὸ παρόν ἢ ἔάν μὲν κατὰ τινα τρόπον παρῇ, ἔσται, ἔάν δὲ μή, οὐ.

30. *Ibid.*, 217e–218a.

31. *Ibid.*, 218a4–7.

32. *Ibid.*, 2218a7–b3: λείπονται δὲ οἱ ἔχοντες μὲν τὸ κακὸν τοῦτο, τὴν ἄγνοιαν, μήπω δὲ ὑπὸ αὐτοῦ ὄντες ἀγνώμονες μηδὲ ἀμαθεῖς, ἀλλ’ ἔτι ἡγούμενοι μὴ εἰδέναι ἃ μὴ ἴσασι.

33. *Ibid.*, 218b3. Cf. *Symposium* 204a.

34. Cf. Plato, *Lysis* 219d–221b.

35. Plato, *Lysis* 218c.

36. *Ibid.*, 221e–222a.

37. For more information on the concept of “one’s own (οἰκεῖον)” or the “akin” and its connection to friendship and human desire in ancient Greece in general and the *Lysis* in particular, see F. Gonzalez, “Socrates on Loving One’s Own: A Traditional Conception of *Filia* Radically Transformed” *Classical Philology*, 95 2000:379–398.

38. See also Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a18–20 where he parallels the arguments of the *Lysis*.

39. Plato, *Alc. I.*, 119b, 119c, 127d, 135e

40. *Ibid.*, 127d.

41. Plato, *Symposium* 216b–c.

