Ignorance as Affirmation: A Look at the Theoretical Challenges Surrounding the Positive Dimension of Ignorance

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Abstract

This paper is the second part of a trilogy on the concept of ignorance. It addresses the 'positive dimension': the belief that ignorance results from an external agent added to the subject (an influence, an indwelling, an intruding mechanism), rather than from a lack of knowledge. The paper first traces the historical development of this belief along three axes (erroneous thought, illness and behavioural disorder, and a veil over perception). It shows that, across different cultural and religious guises, these three axes perform one common function: they transfer the cause of error from the subject to the outside. The paper then examines this pattern across four spheres of consequence: the practical sphere (the closing off of self-correction), the social sphere (the need for an external specialist and institutional closure), the legal sphere (the question of responsibility, from Weyer to the insanity defence), and the philosophical sphere (the threat to free will and epistemic responsibility). The paper's central finding is this: unlike negative ignorance, which never reached a closed reference domain, positive ignorance, within the local domains of specific authorities, reached institutional closure only in its expressible form (mainly as illness, sometimes as a confessed belief), not in its genuine, cognitive sense. In its most precise sense, positive ignorance remained, like its negative counterpart, an open and contested domain. The decline of this pattern in the modern era resulted jointly from epistemic and institutional factors, but the decline was never complete: today's secular institutions (the ICD-11) reproduce the same pattern under a new ontology, and the structure of externalising the cause of error, even outside a religious framework, still lives on in forms such as 'algorithmic manipulation'.

Keywords: positive ignorance; indwelling; externalisation of the cause of error; institutional closure; expressibility; agnotology; insanity defence; epistemic responsibility

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Introduction

This paper is the second part of a trilogy that examines three main views of the concept of ignorance: the 'negative dimension', published earlier as an independent paper (Saadat, 2026); the 'positive dimension', the subject of the present paper; and 'complex ignorance', which will follow.

The first paper showed that, within the philosophical-rational tradition, negative ignorance never reached a 'closed reference domain'. This paper pursues the same question for the positive dimension.

In this paper's view, 'positive ignorance' is an understanding of ignorance in which ignorance results from something added to a person: an influence, an indwelling, an unwanted addition, or a mechanism that enters the cognitive system. This something was not present before; once it enters, it acts and produces 'ignorance' in the person. This definition is exactly the opposite of 'absence'.

To place this definition precisely alongside neighbouring types, we need two independent axes: first, whether the agent is present and active or merely absent; second, whether the agent is external or internal. Positive ignorance is exactly the case where both conditions hold together: an agent that is both present and active, and external. Cases that meet only one of these two conditions will appear as boundary cases, not at the heart of the discussion.

At this point, two ambiguities also need resolving:

First, the word hulul carries a specific meaning in the Persian and Arabic theological and mystical tradition (God's indwelling in a person, the accusation levelled at al-Hallaj). What this paper calls 'indwelling' has nothing to do with that tradition; it simply means the entry of an independent, foreign agent into the mind or body of the subject.

Second, we must distinguish 'affirmation' from several neighbouring concepts.

From views that treat ignorance as a virtue or an epistemic achievement (Socratic self-awareness, Nicholas of Cusa's learned ignorance): here nothing is added; these views merely take an evaluative stance towards absence.

From Proctor's agnotology and Mills's white ignorance, which result from deliberate human agency, not from the entry of an autonomous, independent mechanism.

From views that emphasise the influence of a whole society's historical and cultural conditions (Karl Mannheim), systemic authority (Antonio Gramsci), and the pressure of state propaganda on public opinion (Lippmann, 1922; Chomsky and Herman, 1988). These carry anthropological, sociological, religious, ethical, and political dimensions, and a heavy evaluative weight; they are therefore deliberately excluded from this paper's scope.

Beyond these, as noted above, several boundary cases also exist.

Islamic jahl murakkab, 'compound ignorance' (a false belief that arises from within the subject, closer to the Dunning-Kruger effect), and Vedantic avidya (in the reading dominant after Shankara, it is considered present and active, but since it is beginningless, it was never added from outside). We return to both below.

Another boundary case is 'soul loss' in shamanic traditions. In these traditions, illness is believed to result from a part of the soul being 'abducted': the mechanism is external (a foreign agent takes the soul), but the effect is subtractive, not additive, exactly the reverse of the core definition of affirmation. Despite its external mechanism, it is therefore closer in kind to negative ignorance.

This paper's aim is not merely to trace the history of the belief in affirmative ignorance. It asks what limitations and ambiguities this view of ignorance has had, throughout history, across four specific spheres: practical, social, legal, and philosophical. Finally, it asks what standing, weight, and value this view holds in the light of today's science and reasoning.

To examine this, the paper is organised into the following sections.

Section 1 traces the historical development of this belief along three axes (erroneous thought; illness and behavioural disorder; and a veil over perception), and shows that all three perform one common function: they transfer the cause of error from the subject to the outside.

Section 2 carries these same three axes into four spheres of consequence, and asks what this transfer produced in practice, in society, in law, and in philosophy.

Section 3 addresses the decline of this view in the modern era and its new, this time secular, institutional closure, and concludes by asking what remains of it today.

Section 4 responds to possible objections.

A conclusion follows at the end.

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1. The historical development of ignorance as affirmation, along three axes

Throughout history, whenever people have attributed their 'mental blindness', 'illness', or 'error' not to themselves but to an external agent, they have followed a similar method: they have transferred the cause of error from themselves, the subject, to the 'outside'. Across different cultural and religious guises, however, this transfer has taken three distinct forms, which we must distinguish.

Sometimes the claim is that the external agent directly plants a false belief or thought in the mind.

Sometimes the claim is that the same agent causes and gives rise to an illness or a disorder in behaviour and body.

And sometimes the claim is less explicit than either: the external agent plants nothing, but instead draws a veil over perception and prevents the subject from seeing reality.

This section also addresses two maximal forms of these patterns: cases whose claims were so radical that they could never become an institutional, enforceable practice.

1.1 Erroneous thought: the external agent plants a false belief

The first and perhaps most precise classical instance is the concept of ate, or 'mental blindness', in the works of Homer. In the Iliad, Agamemnon attributes his blindness and error not to himself but to the intervention of Zeus, Moira (fate), and the Erinyes; he believes that mental blindness, ate, was cast into him from outside (Iliad 19.86-94). The opening chapter of E. R. Dodds's classic study, The Greeks and the Irrational, also calls this phenomenon 'psychic intervention'. It should be noted, however, that the phrase 'cognitive error introduced from outside' is this paper's modern reading, not Dodds's or Homer's own term. More precisely, Dodds himself treats ate as a form of partial, temporary madness that, like any madness, is attributed to a 'daemonic' agent. On his own view, then, ate stands at the boundary between erroneous thought and a madness-like disorder, not simply within one of these two axes (Dodds, 1951; Finkelberg, 2020).

In the Zoroastrian tradition, this tension becomes more explicit. In the Gathas (Yasna 30.6), evil arises from 'choice', not 'imposition': the daevas 'chose the worst mind', rather than having it planted in them by an external agent. Contrary to what one might expect, the Gathas thus emphasise free will. Later, however, in the Younger Avesta (Yasht 19) and then in the Pahlavi texts, akem manah, 'evil mind', becomes the independent, personified daeva Akoman, who fights against Vohu Manah, 'good mind', and strives to plant a false thought in the mind, rather than merely causing physical illness (Yasht 19.46; Vendidad 19.4).

In the New Testament, Paul writes that 'the god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers' (2 Corinthians 4:4), a phrase that, at least in mainstream Christian interpretation, refers to Satan rather than the true God.

In the Buddhist tradition too, the army of Mara includes 'doubt': an instance in which inner mental defilements, cognitive states rather than illnesses, are personified as an invading force. This can be seen as an intermediate case, something between a purely figurative naming of inner mental states and a complete externalisation of their cause to a genuinely independent, external agent (Sutta Nipata, Padhana Sutta 3.2; Norman, 2001).

In early Christianity, Evagrius Ponticus, in his Praktikos (composed in the 380s and 390s CE), attributes eight logismoi, 'intrusive thoughts', to specific demons (Evagrius, Praktikos; Bamberger, 1981). This classification later fed, through John Cassian and Gregory the Great, into the Church's institutional 'Seven Deadly Sins' (Stewart, 2005; Bloomfield, 1952).

In the Islamic tradition too, several Quranic verses ascribe exactly this function to Satan.

In Surah al-Kahf, the forgetfulness of Moses's young companion (identified by commentators as Joshua son of Nun, who forgot to tell Moses that the fish had escaped) is attributed to Satan: 'None but Satan made me forget it' (18:63).

In Surah al-Mujadila, Satan gains mastery over a group and makes them forget the remembrance of God: 'Satan has overcome them and made them forget the remembrance of God' (58:19).

In Surah al-A'raf, Satan's 'touch' causes a loss of sight, which returns with remembrance: 'then at once they have insight' (7:201).

And Surah an-Nas speaks directly of 'the retreating whisperer', who whispers in people's breasts.

In all these instances, ignorance occurs as 'the presence of a cognitive invader', not merely as illness.

Within the same tradition, al-Ghazali, in the Ihya Ulum al-Din, discusses khawatir, 'passing thoughts', and lammat al-malak and lammat al-shaytan, 'the angel's touch and the devil's touch', citing a hadith from Ibn Mas'ud (Sunan al-Tirmidhi, 2988).

This view can be seen as a functional counterpart to Evagrius's logismoi: two independent traditions arrived at a similar structure, with no evidence of historical dependence between them.

The final piece of evidence lies within language itself. In Persian, divaneh, 'mad', derives from div, 'demon'. In Arabic, the root j-n-n means 'to cover' or 'to conceal', and jinn, junun ('madness'), janin ('foetus'), and janna ('paradise') all derive from this same root. Majnun, 'mad', likewise means someone whose reason has been covered. Here, ignorance appears as 'covering', not as absence.

These linguistic examples, however, have one exception. In Greek, by contrast, the word enthousiasmos, 'the god within', shows that the same structure, the entry of an external agent, could also be understood in an entirely positive light: poetic inspiration, prophetic madness, or the 'divine madness' that Plato, in the Phaedrus, calls 'inspiration' rather than 'error' (Ustinova, 2018). We return to this point below.

This exception is telling in itself. It shows that the negative evaluation of indwelling, as seen in divaneh and majnun, is not universal or intrinsic to the structure of 'the entry of an external agent'; rather, it is the product of cultural choice and judgement. This is exactly the distinction we noted in the introduction, when separating the 'virtue' family (Socrates, Cusa) from the 'affirmation' family: one and the same structure can receive two opposite evaluative judgements.

Taken together, this linguistic evidence shows that the structure of 'the entry of an external agent' has repeatedly, and in independent languages, become bound up with the experience of ignorance and mental disorder, although, as enthousiasmos shows, this bond was not universal or inherently

negative. In other words, the tradition of indwelling is not only about illness and wickedness. A significant portion of this evidence also makes a claim about 'the origin of false belief and cognitive blindness', which is exactly what this paper calls 'affirmation'.

It should be noted here, however, that not all errors of thought, even within these same traditions, were considered 'external'. Islamic jahl murakkab, 'compound ignorance', for instance, is a false belief, within the tradition of Islamic logic and theology, that blocks awareness of one's own ignorance, a mechanism similar to today's Dunning-Kruger effect. Unlike ate or Akoman, however, this ignorance arises 'from within the subject himself', not from the entry of an external agent.

This contrast clarifies the boundary of axis 1.1: only errors of thought with an external origin fall into the affirmative category.

1.2 Illness and disorder: the external agent disturbs body and behaviour

The earliest reference to this pattern appears to come from ancient Egypt, around the second millennium BCE. In Egyptian medico-magical texts, the Ebers Papyrus and the London Medical Papyrus, illnesses and behavioural or mental disorders were often attributed to the wrath of the gods or the influence of 'malevolent beings' (Ghalioungui, 1963; Borghouts, 1978).

In Mesopotamia and Babylon too, around the eleventh century BCE, Esagil-kin-apli, chief scholar at the court of King Adad-apla-iddina, edited and organised the diagnostic handbook SA.GIG. In it, every 'symptom of illness' or 'behavioural disorder' is attributed to the 'hand' of a specific god, ghost, or demon (Heeßel, 2000; Scurlock and Andersen, 2005). The precise extent of Esagil-kin-apli's role in compiling this text remains disputed, but SA.GIG can nonetheless be regarded as one of the earliest and most systematic known instances of this pattern, though not necessarily the very first.

The same pattern appears in the Indian tradition. In Ayurveda, especially the Charaka Samhita, bhutavidya, one of the eight official branches of this medical system, deals with diagnosing and treating disorders caused by invisible beings. Within this framework, the concept of 'external madness' (agantu unmada; Nidana-sthana 7, Chikitsa-sthana 9) refers precisely to what we today call 'possession' (Sharma, 1981-1994; Wujastyk, 2003).

Chinese medical tradition shows the same pattern, though with one important difference. The concept of xie qi, 'evil qi' (邪气), in the Huangdi Neijing, is chiefly a natural force, wind, cold, or damp, rather than a conscious being. Unschuld distinguishes between this 'medicine of systematic correspondence' and an older, fainter layer of 'demonological medicine' in ancient China (Unschuld, 1985).

In this sense, xie qi is a boundary case: an external agent that disturbs the body's balance, but not necessarily of the same kind as a demon or spirit.

In the Jewish tradition, this belief was not confined to antiquity. In the Old Testament, 'an evil spirit from the Lord' descends upon Saul (1 Samuel 16:14), and the Book of Daniel attributes Nebuchadnezzar's madness to divine intervention (Daniel 4).

From the sixteenth century onwards, moreover, in Ashkenazi and Kabbalistic Judaism, the concept of the dybbuk, the wandering spirit of a dead person that enters a living body, reproduced the same pattern in a later form (Chajes, 2003).

In the Islamic tradition, alongside the Quranic 'retreating whisperer', Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya later accepted, in Zad al-Ma'ad, the possibility of a jinn entering the body, and his teacher Ibn Taymiyyah, in the Majmu al-Fatawa, spoke of a 'consensus of the Sunni imams' on this belief, although he himself noted that some Mu'tazilites, including al-Jubba'i and Abu Bakr al-Razi, denied it.

In late medieval Europe, this pattern reached its peak influence in Kramer's Malleus Maleficarum (1486/1487), although its institutional standing was itself contested. The Cologne faculty of theology rejected it in its very first year, and the approval Kramer added to later printings was most likely forged. Kramer, however, was never punished by the Church, and the book, resting on an earlier papal bull that had granted general authority to investigate witchcraft rather than specifically endorsing this book, became one of the most influential witch-hunting manuals in Europe.

A clearer institutional example, from the same period but from elsewhere, comes when the Catholic Church, in 1614, formally compiled the chapter 'On the Exorcism of the Possessed' within the Rituale Romanum (Rituale Romanum, 1614), a document whose authenticity and official standing, unlike the Malleus Maleficarum, were never in dispute.

In the contemporary era, however, the World Health Organization's ICD-11 offers two independent diagnoses: 'trance disorder' (6B62) and 'possession trance disorder' (6B63). ICD-10 had the same distinction under F44.3, and DSM-5 also includes possession under Criterion A of dissociative identity disorder, as an experience that is 'described in some cultures as possession' (DSM-5, 2013; DSM-5-TR, 2022).

But why are these examples relevant to the discussion of 'ignorance' at all, rather than simply to the history of medicine?

The fact is that part of what these traditions call 'illness', fever, wounds, and purely bodily ailments, which are also common in SA.GIG, has nothing to do with ignorance and belongs purely to the history of medicine. Another part of this same axis, however, concerning madness, trance, and behavioural disorder, is bound up with 'the loss of the subject's judgement and discernment'. Divaneh, for instance, someone 'from div', is a person whose reason, not just whose body, has been affected. Majnun likewise is a person whose reason has been 'covered', not merely someone whose body has fallen ill. For this reason, though only for this part of the axis, not the whole of it, the prescribed treatment is never purely physical; it also involves restoring sound perception and judgement.

It is this link between illness and the loss of judgement that keeps this part of axis 1.2, not the whole axis, connected to this paper's subject of ignorance, despite its clinical appearance, although this link is weaker and more indirect than that of axis 1.1. We return to this point in section 2.2.

As we can see, then, in every case we have named, what became closed and formalised was chiefly the clinical dimension of this pattern, a symptom that could be seen, diagnosed, and inspected, not the 'purely cognitive claim' we saw earlier, in 1.1.

1.3 A veil over perception: something interposed between the subject and reality

This axis is fainter and less well documented than the previous two, and the source of the veil itself is not uniform within it. Sometimes, as with the Quranic ghishawah, it is said that an external agent, God, places the veil. Sometimes, as with the Quranic rayn or Paul's veil, it is the subject's own actions or condition that creates the veil. What brings these cases together, then, is not the external origin of the veil, since it is sometimes external and sometimes the subject's own doing,

but a shared function: in none of them is a belief planted, and in none does an illness arise; only reality is covered.

In the Vedanta tradition, the concept of avidya is at the centre of one of the oldest philosophical disputes in India: is ignorance simply 'the absence of knowledge' (jnana-abhava), or is it something 'positive' and 'of an existential nature' (bhavarupa)?

In post-Shankara Advaita, particularly in the Vivarana school, the second position, that avidya is genuinely positive and existential, was the dominant view; this can be regarded as the closest philosophical parallel to this paper's own thesis.

According to this school, this positive ignorance, bhavarupa, has two powers: avarana-shakti, 'the veiling power', which covers reality, and vikshepa-shakti, 'the projecting power', which displays the world of plurality in its place, although Ramanuja, from the rival school, argued at length against this claim of 'positive ontology'. From this paper's perspective, avidya, on this reading, remains a boundary case. On the one hand, since it has an existential, active nature, it is not purely negative. On the other hand, since it is considered 'beginningless' (anadi) and was never, at any moment, 'added' from outside, it is not affirmation in this paper's precise sense either. For this reason, it stands at the boundary between the two, not at the heart of either.

The ancient concept of 'covering ignorance' is, of course, not confined to Vedanta or to Eastern traditions. In the New Testament too, Paul speaks of a 'veil' that has fallen over the hearts of the people of Israel and prevents them from seeing the truth of the Gospel, a veil removed only through faith in Christ (2 Corinthians 3:14-16). The Quran likewise offers two expressions of the same kind: ghishawah, 'a covering', over the eyes of those whose hearts are sealed (2:7), and rayn, 'rust', which settles on the heart because of past deeds and prevents the truth from being seen (83:14).

1.4 Maximal forms

Among the ancient evidence and sources available on the pattern of ignorance as affirmation, two further cases do not fit within the three axes above; instead, they push these axes to their extreme.

The first case is Gnostic-Manichaean cosmology. In the first to third centuries CE, in many Gnostic texts, the Gospel of Truth among them, agnosia, 'ignorance', is regarded not as a 'state' within an individual, but as a 'cosmic force' that produced the material world itself (Jonas, 1958; Rudolph, 1983).

The Manichaeans likewise regarded ignorance as an active force that 'imprisons light in matter' (Lieu, 1992; Gardner and Lieu, 2004).

This view can be regarded as the most radical form of the pattern: here, ignorance is not merely 'present' but 'the founder of material existence'.

It is worth noting here that Manichaeism, unlike pure Gnostic cosmology, did become a real, organised institution, with a hierarchy of the 'Elect' and the 'Hearers', and survived for nearly a thousand years, from Rome to China. What became institutionalised, however, was never the cosmological claim itself, 'ignorance, the founder of existence'; it was the moral-practical classification of followers' conduct. The purely ontological claim, 'ignorance, the founder of existence', remained uninspectable even within a powerful institution.

The second case is of a different kind but equally maximal: the concept of the 'deceiving demon' in Descartes's thought. In the Meditations (1641), he supposes that a 'powerful and deceiving demon' may exist, who manipulates all his mental inputs to keep him in error. Unlike avidya or the retreating whisperer, this is no longer a matter of a 'specific false belief' or a 'local veil'; the

entire perceptual apparatus loses its validity. This is a radical scepticism that leaves no way at all to distinguish deception from reality.

The fact is, however, that neither of these two forms ever became an inspectable behavioural classification, though for two different reasons. Gnostic-Manichaean cosmology, despite the institutionalisation of its own rite, was too radical to be inspectable, and so never led to such a classification.

Descartes's hypothesis, likewise, never became the basis for a diagnosis, but not because it failed. It never became one because, from the outset, it was a thought experiment, not a claim anyone intended to institutionalise. This is itself evidence for a more general pattern: the more radical and general a claim, the less it can become an enforceable, inspectable practice, and at the furthest point of this spectrum, a claim is no longer, in kind, a belief capable of institutionalisation at all.

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2. Four spheres of consequence

The three axes we saw in the previous section, erroneous thought, illness and disorder, and a veil over perception, all perform one common function: they transfer the cause of error from the subject to the outside. This section asks what this transfer produced in practice, in society, in law, and in philosophy.

2.1 The practical sphere: the closing off of self-correction

When the cause of ignorance is considered external, the solution too often becomes external, but not always, and this very unevenness is itself telling.

In axis 1.2, illness, the solution is external almost without exception. This can be seen across the full range of evidence in that section: wherever a specific remedy was prescribed for an 'externally cast' symptom, SA.GIG, bhutavidya, the Roman Rite's exorcism, that remedy was always a form of external intervention, a priest, an exorcist, medicine, rather than education or self-reflection. The person has no need to revisit his own beliefs, because the error is not 'of his own kind'.

In axis 1.1, erroneous thought, the picture is more complex. The Quran considers tadhakkur, 'remembrance', the cure for temptation, a recollection arising from within the subject himself (7:201). Evagrius prescribes antirrhesis, an inner response to intrusive thoughts. Al-Ghazali points to contemplation. And the Buddha overcomes the army of Mara through his own insight, not through external intervention. In other words, even when the cause of error is considered external, its solution is not necessarily external.

This asymmetry anticipates a pattern we shall also see in section 2.2: the more a claim leans towards pure belief rather than illness, the greater the scope for the subject's own intervention. The practical consequence of this pattern is therefore not uniform. Depriving the subject of the path of self-directed learning and correction is more a feature of the clinical axis than of the cognitive one. Positive ignorance, in its clinical dimension, sets the subject aside from solving his own problem from the very start, unlike negative ignorance, whose solution, 'learn', was at least available to the subject. In its cognitive dimension, however, contrary to first impressions, the door to self-correction does not close completely.

2.2 The social sphere: the need for a specialist, and a finding about institutionalisation

Externalising the cause inevitably externalises the cure as well, and an external cure requires an external specialist: the Babylonian priest, the church exorcist, today's psychiatrist. This need builds a 'power structure': whoever makes the diagnosis gains 'authority' over whoever is diagnosed.

At this point we can ask which of these structures actually became a formal, institutionalised practice. A look at section 1 reveals a clear pattern: the successful institutional cases, SA.GIG, the Roman Rite, the ICD-11, were mostly of the illness/disorder type (1.2), not the erroneous-thought type (1.1). The reason for this, however, is not clinical status as such; it is something more general. An institution closes what can be drawn out of the subject and inspected, not necessarily a clinical symptom, but anything that is 'expressible' through confession, testimony, or an external sign. Abnormal behaviour is visible and reportable, but a 'false belief' too, once it is put into words, is equally inspectable. The Inquisition is a telling example: the Church, through a formal system of confession and testimony, institutionalised and made inspectable even heresy, a belief often attributed to Satan's temptation. Likewise, Evagrius's same eight logismoi, once they entered the Church's practice of confession and the enumeration of sins, turned from 'pure thought' into an 'expressible belief'.

The more precise criterion, then, is not 'clinical status' but 'expressibility'; illness was only the most common route to expressibility, not the only one. In practice, the institutionalisation of positive ignorance was achieved almost always at the price of making it expressible, whether through illness or through confession.

2.3 The legal sphere: responsibility, when the cause is external

Given the idea that 'Satan deceived me' or 'a jinn entered my body', what happens to the subject's moral and criminal responsibility? Unlike the other three spheres, this question is raised less directly in the evidence of section 1, but its trace can be followed through history.

Johann Weyer, in 1563, took exactly this line, distinguishing between 'the guilty witch, who had knowingly made a pact with the devil' and 'the melancholic old woman, deceived by the devil'. Here he tied 'the degree of responsibility' to 'the subject's degree of awareness and will', not simply to the presence of an external agent.

The Roman Rite followed the same logic, though for a different purpose. Its warning to the exorcist not to 'believe too readily', and to distinguish possession from illness, effectively built a threshold of caution before any action, whether medical or judicial.

This pattern continues directly into modern law, and its roots run deeper than the modern era. In Islamic jurisprudence, the principle raf al-qalam an al-majnun, 'the pen is lifted from the insane', centuries ago removed criminal responsibility from the majnun, often meaning someone possessed by a jinn. The link between 'an external agent and the removal of responsibility' is not, then, new in itself. What is new in modern law is a more precise standard, formulated by the M'Naghten rule (1843) within the common-law tradition: the subject must show that, at the moment of the act, because of mental illness, he 'did not know' what he was doing, or did not know that his act was wrong. This is an entirely cognitive standard, but one accepted only once it passes through 'the gateway of illness'. In other words, modern law, exactly as we saw in 2.2, accepts cognitive ignorance, but only in its 'most expressible' form, a certified clinical diagnosis. For this reason, the claim 'Satan planted a false belief within me' was never on its own a valid legal defence, whereas 'mental illness took away my will', once a specialist certified it, was taken seriously.

2.4 The philosophical sphere: positive ignorance and epistemic responsibility

The question is this: if my error results from an external agent, a demon, a temptation, a deceiving devil, then what role, exactly, does 'I' play in the formation of my beliefs? This question, which has so far remained in the paper's background, comes clearly to the surface in the two 'maximal forms' of section 1.4.

Augustine, reacting against Manichaeism, tried to regard evil not as an independent substance but as 'the absence of good' (Confessions VII.12-16), thereby rejecting the 'ontology of externalisation'. Yet the same Augustine, in the City of God (Books 8 to 10), still believed in the real influence of demons upon the mind. This duality shows that even a philosopher who consciously sought to abandon ontological externalisation could not fully relinquish 'causal externalisation', the mechanism of error. These were two levels of claim that coexisted within his thought, rather than one replacing the other.

This move of Augustine's is worth underlining, because it clarifies precisely the boundary between two dimensions of the trilogy.

Structurally, his 'absence of good' is nothing other than what the first paper of this trilogy called 'negative ignorance': evil as absence, not as presence. Augustine, in response to the Manichaeism in which he himself had lived for nine years (BeDuhn, 2010), moved from the affirmative pattern towards the negative one, but, as we have seen, this move was never complete. At the ontological level he moved towards the negative; at the level of the causal mechanism of error, the demons, he remained within the affirmative pattern. In this sense, Augustine lived both dimensions of the trilogy simultaneously, within a single mind.

Descartes pushes this tension to its furthest point. As a methodological device, within his larger project of overcoming a revived Pyrrhonian scepticism (mediated by Montaigne), he supposes that, if the deceiving demon is taken seriously, every perception becomes doubtful. For exactly this reason, Descartes's project was to find, through the cogito, a place this externalisation could no longer reach. This shows that positive ignorance, at least in one of its extreme formulations, places a heavy burden on free will and epistemic responsibility. The more external the cause of error is assumed to be, the smaller the subject's share in knowing himself becomes.

What is interesting here is that Descartes himself, in the Fourth Meditation, also takes the reverse path: there he attributes error not to an external demon but to 'the will outrunning the understanding', which is to say, he makes error entirely internal. This duality within Descartes's own work, the First Meditation's complete externalisation and the Fourth Meditation's complete internalisation, reproduces, within a single mind, exactly the spectrum this paper has sought to trace.

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3. Decline and re-closure: from epistemic and institutional factors to a new order

The previous section showed that externalising the cause of error had real consequences across all four spheres. This section asks how this pattern declined, and whether it really ended in pure dispersal.

3.1 Decline: two factors, not one

The decline of this pattern should not be reduced solely to a loss of institutional authority, since part of it was genuinely epistemic. This shift, however, was more subtle than a simple replacement of 'a demonic explanation by a natural one'.

Johann Weyer, a physician sceptical of witchcraft, did not, in 1563, in De praestigiis daemonum, deny the devil himself or the reality of possession; he merely distinguished between the guilty witch, who had made a conscious pact, and the melancholic old woman, deceived by the devil. In other words, he removed individual responsibility, not the external agent.

Edward Jordan, likewise, diagnosed the case of Mary Glover, in 1603, as 'suffocation of the mother', but this was itself an untested, humoral theory, based on the myth of the 'wandering womb', not a modern explanation. In the actual trial, his opinion was rejected and the accused was convicted. Rather than showing the triumph of naturalistic explanation, these two cases show that these rival explanations were, from the outset, weak and contested, yet their mere existence was enough to break the previous consensus.

Keith Thomas, in Religion and the Decline of Magic (1971), makes a more important point: the decline of magic in England began before effective technical and medical solutions arrived. This finding, contrary to the common assumption that germ theory later 'took the place of the disease-causing demon', shows that the decline was not, fundamentally, an epistemic defeat in the sense of 'a better explanation replacing it'. Something subtler happened: confidence in the earlier framework was lost before a convincing alternative was available.

Mesmer's personal reinterpretation is, on its own, another instance of the same epistemic factor, not an institutional one. In Munich, in 1775, he reinterpreted the exorcistic cures of Johann Joseph Gassner and named their cause 'animal magnetism' rather than a demon (Ellenberger, 1970). The real institutional factor came a few years later, from elsewhere: in 1784, by order of Louis XVI, two official royal commissions, one from the Academy of Sciences, with Benjamin Franklin and Antoine Lavoisier among its members, examined animal magnetism using one of the first controlled, blind experiments in the history of science, and formally rejected it. This was the first time a formal scientific institution, rather than an individual physician, tested and set aside such a claim. This transition, contrary to the simplified narrative, was not a clean break; modern 'dynamic psychiatry' itself grew out of animal magnetism and hypnotism, and from this perspective these fields are themselves heirs to the pattern of possession.

Charles Taylor explains the anthropological dimension of this transition. In his framework, the pre-modern 'porous self', open to spirits, gives way to the modern 'buffered self', which has a defined boundary and leaves no room for an external invader (Taylor, 2007, esp. pp. 27-41). This concept and formulation carries the decline from a purely institutional level to an anthropological one.

3.2 A new institutional closure: a secular order, the same pattern

The narrative of 'decline towards dispersal' is incomplete in two respects.

First, temporally: as we saw in section 1.2, a modern institution has once again closed the domain. The World Health Organization's ICD-11 has two independent diagnoses, trance disorder and possession trance disorder, the same distinction ICD-10 had under F44.3. This time the ontology is 'secular' rather than 'religious', but the finding of section 2.2 still holds here.

What was closed was the clinical dimension of the pattern, not its purely cognitive claim. DSM-5, in the same vein, classifies possession not as a 'cultural concept of distress', the list that includes cases such as ataque de nervios, but as a form of 'dissociative identity disorder' (DSM-5, 2013): still, that is, within the framework of a formal clinical diagnosis, not within the framework of a mere cultural belief.

Second, geographically: the very narrative of 'decline' is Eurocentric. The Catholic Church rewrote the rite of exorcism in 1999 and, in 2014, officially recognised the International Association of Exorcists, and Pentecostal 'deliverance ministry', the expulsion of evil spirits in charismatic Protestant churches, similar to Catholic exorcism, is expanding across the Global South (Meyer, 1999). The story of 'decline', then, must be understood more narrowly and stated more precisely: it is a decline within the formal knowledge sphere of industrial societies, not a global decline of the pattern itself.

The final point of this section, however, goes beyond this narrowing. The fact is that the pattern of externalisation, even within the formal knowledge sphere of industrial societies, never truly disappeared; it merely changed its guise. When we say that someone or something 'manipulated my mind's algorithm', that 'the media brainwashed me', or that 'disinformation built my belief', we are reproducing, under new names, exactly the structure we saw in section 1.1, an external agent planting a false belief. This is the same territory we set aside, in the introduction, as deliberate human agency rather than the unwanted entry of a mechanism, from this paper's main subject. It returns here only as an instance of the continuity of the same narrative pattern, not as a return to the main subject.

Caution is needed here, however. Unlike a demon or Satan, about whose real existence this paper passes no judgement, the real influence of algorithms and media propaganda on belief formation is itself a serious subject of empirical research in cognitive science and media studies, and part of it is confirmed by scientific evidence. This paper's point, then, is not that these new explanations are as baseless as the demon or Satan. The point is that the structure of justification, 'it is not my fault, an external agent shaped me', independent of whether any particular instance is true or false, is itself a stable pattern that this paper has traced through history. The cause may indeed be external, an algorithm may genuinely have an effect, but the fact that the cause is external takes nothing away from the responsibility to confront and correct it, which remains with the subject.

The point here is that this historical continuity shows that what this paper has examined is not merely a closed, finished chapter in the intellectual history of ignorance studies. It is a structure that returns, each time, in a fresh guise, a point to which we shall return in the paper's final assessment.

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4. Objections

This section addresses in advance some points a reader might raise as objections or criticisms.

First objection: This paper is about the history of religion and medicine, not the philosophy of ignorance.

The answer lies in the evidence of section 1.1 itself. What was gathered there was not merely a narrative of illness or sin. In every case, there was an explicit claim about the origin of a false belief: ate casting mental blindness, Akoman planting a false thought, a Quranic temptation driving the remembrance of truth from the heart, a god who, as Paul puts it, blinds the minds of unbelievers. This paper is silent on whether these instances of indwelling actually occur. Its claim is narrower and more precise: these traditions, in their own language and formulation, genuinely dealt with a cognitive question, not merely with the subject of illness or sin.

The same logic holds, though more weakly, for axis 1.2. As shown at the end of that section, in none of these traditions is illness a purely bodily disorder; everywhere it is bound up with the loss

of the subject's judgement and discernment, a link that keeps axis 1.2 too, though more indirectly than 1.1, connected to this paper's subject of ignorance.

Second objection: Does this paper revive Manichaeism?

No. The paper never affirms or denies the Manichaean ontological claim, that light and darkness are two independent, eternal substances; such a judgement is not the kind of question this paper asks. What section 1.4 showed is that this framework, regardless of whether its ontology is true or false, served an explanatory function. Manichaeism, contrary to first impressions, really did become a formal, organised institution. What became closed and inspectable within that institution, however, was the moral-practical classification of followers' conduct, not the purely ontological claim itself, 'ignorance, the founder of existence'. That claim remained uninspectable even within a powerful institution, in exactly the sense this paper has shown throughout: institutions close what can be drawn out of the subject and inspected, not any claim whatsoever, however formal and institutionalised the setting in which it arises.

Third objection: If some instances really were institutionalised, why are they no longer considered valid today?

This paper's answer is not wholly relativistic. We must distinguish between 'institutionalisation', a sociological concept, as shown in section 2.2, and 'validity', an epistemic concept. The decline of this pattern, as section 3.1 showed, resulted from two factors.

Part of the decline was a genuine epistemic defeat, Weyer and Jordan, whose explanations, though themselves weak and contested, were enough to break the previous consensus, and later germ theory. Part of it was simply a loss of institutional authority, without the rival framework necessarily having had epistemic superiority from the outset.

This distinction shows that the paper can say, without contradiction, both that 'this framework really was closed' and that 'its decline was, to some extent, though not entirely, justified'. And, as section 3.2 showed, even this decline was not absolute: the clinical dimension of the pattern, in secular form, remains institutionalised and established.

Fourth objection: Is this paper guilty of anachronism? In other words, does labelling texts such as the Iliad or the Gathas, which had no modern concept of 'cognition' or 'belief' at all, with modern concepts such as 'cognitive error' or 'false belief', in itself impose today's framework on the past?

This paper has observed this caution explicitly within section 1.1 itself, where it noted, regarding Dodds, that the phrase 'cognitive error introduced from outside' is this paper's modern reading, not Dodds's or Homer's own precise term. The paper does not claim that Homer or Zoroaster held a concept of 'cognition' in the sense of modern philosophy of mind. Its claim is that the structure of their narratives, an external agent planting something in the mind, is sufficiently 'isomorphic' with what we today call 'the production of a false belief' that the two can be gathered under one analytical category. This is what any historical-conceptual comparison must inevitably do, and it is not the same as claiming the two worldviews are fully equivalent.

Conclusion

The paper began with this question: did the positive dimension of ignorance, like its negative counterpart, meet an open, dispersed fate, or could it become a relatively closed, formal boundary? The answer, as the preceding sections have shown, is neither a simple 'yes' nor a simple 'no', but a distinction, and this very distinction constitutes the paper's central finding.

In every cultural guise in which it has appeared, whether as a genuine belief, the Babylonian demon, the Quranic jinn, or as a deliberate thought experiment, Descartes's deceiving demon, positive ignorance has performed one single function: it transferred the cause of error from the subject to the outside. In section 1, we saw this externalisation appear in three distinct forms, erroneous thought, illness, and a veil over perception, and, in two maximal forms, Gnosticism and Descartes's deceiving demon, reach a point no practical procedure could any longer accommodate. In section 2, this same externalisation had real, traceable consequences across four spheres: it closed off self-correction, built a social power structure, shaped the question of legal responsibility, and challenged philosophical free will.

The finding that sets this paper apart from the first one, however, emerged in section 2.2, and it is subtler than a simple difference between 'staying open' and 'becoming closed'. Negative ignorance, in its precise sense, never reached a closed reference domain, and not even a shadow of it became institutionalised, because absence cannot be confessed or testified to in court. Positive ignorance met a different fate: within the specific domains of particular authorities, the Babylonian priesthood, the Roman Church, today's World Health Organization, at least the shadow of this pattern, its clinical dimension, or sometimes a confessed belief itself, could become a formal, documented boundary.

This institutional victory, however, was conditional and incomplete: what was closed was always the pattern's clinical dimension, illness in most cases, but sometimes, as with the Inquisition, the belief itself, once it was put into words through confession, and never the purely cognitive dimension that no institution can inspect independently of the subject himself.

In its most precise and genuine sense, a claim about the origin of a false belief, positive ignorance, like its negative counterpart, remained an open and contested domain. Only its clinical shadow became institutionalised, behind the mask of a neighbouring concept's institutional success.

In the light of today's science and reasoning, then, two separate judgements must be made.

As a 'causal explanation' of ignorance and error, that a demon, Satan, or a spirit genuinely enters the mind and plants a false belief, this view is inconsistent with today's scientific evidence and must be set aside, exactly the path that began with the early doubts of Weyer and Jordan and that today's neuroscience and psychiatry have since completed.

As a 'stable psychosocial pattern' for confronting error, that is, the human tendency to find an external agent who bears responsibility for one's mental blindness or false belief, this view has not only failed to be set aside but, as section 3 has shown, remains active in wholly secular forms, algorithmic manipulation, media brainwashing. In this sense, positive ignorance is not a closed chapter of intellectual history; it is a structure that every generation rediscovers, in a fresh guise. From this perspective, it is true that we no longer believe in demons today, but we still hold the illusion that, if we find the cause of our error outside ourselves, we have also handed off, along with it, the responsibility for correcting it. Yes, the cause can be external, but correction is always our own task.

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