Feigning Ignorance: A Question about a Performance

Ramin Saadat
Independent Researcher; Founder, British Institute for Ignorance Studies (BIIS) (biis.uk)

AI Use Disclosure

The original manuscript was written in Farsi (Persian) by the author. The English version was produced through AI-assisted translation and adaptation using Claude (Anthropic). The author reviewed and edited the English text against the Farsi original to check that the theoretical and conceptual content is faithfully conveyed, and remains solely responsible for its accuracy. The Farsi manuscript is available from the author upon request.

Abstract

Sometimes a person presents knowledge as ignorance. This article asks how we can tell that someone has pretended not to know. We define feigned ignorance as the deliberate display of a lack of knowledge or understanding of something specific, by an actor who has that knowledge or understanding. We separate it from seven neighbouring behaviours, from feigned incompetence and feigned folly to concealment and the production of ignorance in another person. We then assess eight cases by the type of source that supports each, from the narrative of Frederick Douglass to the examinations of Elizabeth Young, Brutus and Socrates. One case is documented by the actor's own account and one is probable. Scott supplies a theoretical framework but no specific case. The other five are borderline, contested or fictional. We suggest that the nature of the historical record explains this pattern better than the rarity of the phenomenon does. A successful performance leaves no trace, and what reaches us is mostly masks that have slipped. The frequency of feigned ignorance therefore cannot be measured, and our claim stays limited: the same outward behaviour can arise from different mental states. We propose three criteria for judging probability. We leave six questions open: the function of the performance, its audience, its cost, its effect on the actor over time, how it is valued, and how it differs across cultures.

Keywords: feigned ignorance; ignorance studies; agnotology; feigned incompetence; everyday resistance; record bias

---

Introduction

Everyday experience suggests that we sometimes hide what we know and display ignorance instead. Consider an employee who has seen a colleague report something wrongly. When the

manager asks, ‘Does anyone know where this error came from?’, the employee answers, ‘I have no idea’, although they do know. Or consider a buyer who knows the real price of an item but tells the seller, ‘I don’t understand these things’, in the hope that the price will fall.

In both scenes someone who knows pretends not to know. One does so to protect themselves, the other to gain an advantage.

Yet not every performed ignorance comes from fear or profit. Someone who has already heard a piece of news may say ‘Really? I hadn’t heard’ when a friend tells it with delight. That person wants neither to defend themselves nor to gain materially. They want to avoid spoiling the friend’s pleasure. A father who knows the answer to his child’s maths problem may say, ‘I don’t know, you tell me’. He displays ignorance so that the child reaches the answer unaided and grows in the process.

These behaviours are very familiar, but we may seldom have asked why people pretend not to know in such cases, and what the pretence does.

The question ‘why?’ has two layers. First, how do we know that someone has pretended? Only after that can we ask what the performance is for. This article deals mostly with the first layer. It leaves the second, intention and function, to the section on open questions, where we offer provisional hypotheses.

The phenomenon can also be traced across languages, many of which have settled expressions for it. Persian has *khod rā be nafhamī zadan* (‘to pass oneself off as uncomprehending’) and *tajāhol*; English has ‘play dumb’; Turkish has *bilmezlikten gelmek*. Arabic and Persian rhetoric also has a figure called *tajāhul al-ʿārif* (‘feigned ignorance of the one who knows’), in which the speaker, for rhetorical effect, presents something known as if it were unknown.

Related ideas appear in the work of philosophers and social theorists. In his essay ‘Of Simulation and Dissimulation’ (1625), for example, Francis Bacon distinguishes three degrees. The first is *closeness*, in which a person gives no clue about themselves. The second is *dissimulation*, in which a person leaves signs suggesting that they are not what they are. The third is *simulation*, in which a person knowingly and openly pretends to be what they are not. In our view, feigned ignorance combines two of these degrees. It displays ignorance (simulation), because the actor plays the part of the ignorant person openly and does not merely leave signs. It also hides knowledge (closeness).

To know which cases belong to our subject, we first need to state what we mean by ‘feigned ignorance’ in this article. We mean the deliberate display of a lack of knowledge or understanding of something specific, by an actor who has that knowledge or understanding, in order to influence the belief, behaviour or judgement of an audience about what the actor knows.

This definition has four conditions:

(1) the actor really knows;

(2) the display is deliberate;

(3) there is a gap between the actor's real epistemic state and the state that the actor presents;

(4) the display aims to influence the belief, behaviour or judgement of an 'audience' about what the actor knows.

Here the 'audience' is the person for whom the performance is staged. The definition does not require the deception to succeed. A performance may be exposed and the audience may see through it, and it is still feigned ignorance, because the actor staged it deliberately and with that aim. A performance that is never meant to deceive, because its audience treats it as a convention (such as the tales of Mulla Nasruddin), comes close to the definition. We treat it as borderline (section 2).

The definition also separates feigned ignorance from 'strategic ignorance'. According to the abstracts of the scholars who work on it (Bailey, 2007; McGoey, 2012), in that concept a person really avoids knowing, or benefits from what is not known. In feigned ignorance the actor knows and displays not knowing. The boundary overlaps, however, and section 1.6 examines it.

The examples at the start of this introduction show how wide the phenomenon is. They do not mark the limits of our study. We concentrate on performances staged in an 'unequal situation', that is, before someone who can harm the actor or demand something from them, because our documented cases come from such situations. This choice has a cost: we do not know whether similar performances occur as often in equal situations.

When we put historical cases of such situations side by side, we see that a performance in an unequal situation can cover several different things. Some people display ignorance, some incompetence, some folly or madness, and some pretend to hold a belief that they do not hold. This variety is not a weakness of the article. It shows that the simple view, which treats all of these as one thing, is incomplete. Section 1 separates them.

Our method is simple. We impose no theoretical classification on the cases, because our evidence is too thin for that. We arrange the cases by who or what attests the gap between knowing and performing (section 2).

What we will find is this. Of the eight cases, one is documented by the actor's own account and one is probable. Scott supplies a theoretical framework but no specific case. The other five are borderline, contested or fictional. In our view this pattern comes at least partly from the nature of the phenomenon, and not only from weak searching (section 3).

The article has four sections:

1. Definition and boundaries

2. Cases

3. What the record says and what it does not say

4. Open questions

A conclusion and a bibliography follow.

---

1. Definition and boundaries

In the introduction we defined feigned ignorance as the deliberate display of a lack of knowledge or understanding of something specific, by someone who has that knowledge or understanding. A definition is useful only if it lets us accept or reject a case. Several behaviours look like feigned ignorance and still fall outside the definition. This section marks the boundary against seven of them, so that in section 2 we know which cases to accept and which to reject.

The paragraphs below describe each behaviour with an example, and Table 1 at the end of the section sets them side by side. Cases that lie near these boundaries, such as Brutus, Amleth, Douglass and Young, appear in section 2.

1.1. Feigned incompetence

The closest relative of feigned ignorance is ‘feigned incompetence’: someone who does not want to do a task says ‘I can’t’ instead of ‘I won’t’. In *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), James Scott writes about the ‘everyday weapons’ of subordinate groups, that is, forms of resistance that proceed without announcement or open confrontation with power. He cites a report from India (Scott, 1985, p. 33) in which subordinates, ‘intentionally or unconsciously’, feign illness, ignorance or incapacity and so exasperate their masters. On the everyday resistance of Black workers in the United States, see Kelley (1994). On enslaved women in the plantation South, see Camp (2004). In sociology, McLuhan (2020) has studied a nearby phenomenon, the deliberate concealment of ability, under the name ‘cloak of incompetence’.

We think the two behaviours differ in one respect: what can test the claim. ‘I can’t’ concerns ability, and ability usually leaves an outward trace, such as a comparison with the person’s earlier work or with the work of peers. ‘I don’t know’ concerns awareness, which perhaps only the actor has, and most ways of testing the claim lie in the actor’s hands. Testing is still not impossible. An interrogator can ask the same question in another way, or check the answer against another source.

1.2. Feigned folly and madness

Sometimes a person feigns not ignorance of something specific but stupidity or madness in general. Old narratives show the motive: the madman is exempt from answering and from harm. According to Plutarch (*Solon* 8), for example, the Athenians had made it a capital offence to propose retaking Salamis. Solon got round the law by feigning madness and reciting verse in the agora. In 1 Samuel 21, David takes refuge with Achish, king of Gath, and escapes danger by presenting himself as mad.

What all these cases display is a general incapacity of mind, not ignorance of something specific. Someone who feigns madness does not say 'I don't know this'. They pretend 'I have no reason'. We therefore leave these cases outside our definition.

The boundary is porous. A person who looks foolish may in practice also display ignorance of specific things. We treat such cases as borderline (section 2).

1.3. Concealment and feigned loyalty

In this group the actor does not pretend to be ignorant. The actor claims and displays a belief that they do not hold. They hide their real belief and pretend to believe something else, usually what power demands. The resemblance to feigned ignorance is that a gap opens between the inner state and the performance. But what is hidden is a belief, not knowledge, and what is performed is 'I accept', not 'I don't know'.

Arthur de Gobineau, the French writer, described *ketman* in Iran and Central Asia in *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale* (1865). Miłosz, in *The Captive Mind* (1953), borrows the word from him and treats Ketman as a strategy of intellectuals under communist regimes. *Ketman* (hiding one's belief) and *taqiyya* (caution in declaring one's belief, especially in Shiʿi jurisprudence) belong to the same family but are not the same.

Other related cases exist. They include the Spanish *conversos*, those Jews recently converted to Christianity who secretly kept to their former faith; the 'Nicodemism' of sixteenth-century Europe, the outward conformity of supporters of religious reform with the Catholic Church (Ginzburg, 1970); 'living within a lie', which Havel describes in 'The Power of the Powerless' (Havel, 1985); and the 'as if' behaviour in Syria that Wedeen (1999) has studied. Kuran (1995) also introduced the concept of 'preference falsification', in which a person, under social pressure, misrepresents their private preference in public. This too concerns preference, not knowledge. In all these cases the performance is 'acceptance', not 'ignorance', so they fall outside our definition.

1.4. Open refusal

Sometimes the actor does not say 'I don't know'. The actor says openly, 'I will not say'. This person does not display ignorance and does not create a hidden gap between knowing and

performing, because the audience knows that the actor is keeping something back. Frederick Douglass approaches this manner in describing his escape from slavery. So does Elizabeth Young in her examination, at least on one of the readings set out in section 2.2.

1.5. Sincere valuing of ignorance

Someone who praises ignorance or undervalues knowledge may be sincere. In that case the person displays nothing. What they say and what they believe are the same, and the gap that our definition requires does not appear.

Hofstadter (1963), in *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*, defines anti-intellectualism as resentment and suspicion of the life of the mind and of those who are thought to represent it, together with a tendency to undervalue that life. Older traditions also contain sincere praise of ignorance. Chapters 19 and 20 of the *Daodejing*, for example, praise the abandonment of cleverness, and the speaker calls himself someone with a fool's heart (chapter numbering differs between translations). But open anti-intellectualism is not always sincere. A person who is educated and plays simple to win the sympathy of ordinary people may be close to feigned ignorance. The boundary is therefore drawn by the actor's sincerity, not by the position itself.

1.6. Avoidance of knowing

In another case the actor really 'does not want to know' and deliberately dodges knowing, for example in order not to become responsible for something. Here the ignorance is real, not performed. Condition (1) of the definition, that the actor really knows, does not hold. Bailey (2007) and McGoey (2012) call this phenomenon 'strategic ignorance'. We should say that we have seen only the abstracts of their work. According to those abstracts, the concept covers the ignorance of the privileged and of organisations, and sometimes the use of ignorance by subordinates and in secrecy. Its boundary with feigned ignorance therefore overlaps. If a subordinate feigns ignorance and the case is called 'strategic', the same case falls under both concepts. We must test this overlap against the full texts.

1.7. Production of ignorance in another

So far we have discussed an actor who displays their own ignorance or does not. Sometimes the actor does the reverse and produces ignorance in another person. A report by Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty shows that after the Warsaw Pact invasion in August 1968, Věra Roubalová and her friends took down street signs to make orientation in Prague hard for the Soviet-led forces (Foltynova, 2018). Here nobody displays their own ignorance. Real ignorance is created in the occupier.

In feigned ignorance the actor performs something. In the production of ignorance the actor removes something from reach. The term 'agnotology' covers this distinction (Proctor and

Schiebinger, 2008), because it treats ignorance not only as a gap in knowledge but as something that is made. One point needs care here. Proctor and Schiebinger write mainly about 'ignorance made by power'. Our extension is that the maker can sometimes be weak.

Table 1 sets these boundaries side by side.

Table 1. What feigned ignorance is not

Behaviour	Why it is not feigned ignorance	Example
Feigned incompetence	What is displayed is a lack of ability, not a lack of knowledge; ability usually leaves an outward trace	The Indian report in Scott (1985); the 'cloak of incompetence' (McLuhan, 2020)
Feigned folly and madness	What is displayed is a general incapacity of mind, not the lack of knowledge or understanding of something specific	Brutus, Amleth, Solon, David
Concealment and feigned loyalty	What is hidden is a belief, not knowledge; the performance is 'I accept', not 'I don't know'	Ketman, taqiyya, conversos, Nicodemism
Open refusal	The actor says openly that they will not say; the gap is not hidden	Douglass (chapter 11); Young (only on the second reading, 2.2)
Sincere valuing of ignorance	What the actor says and what they believe are the same	Anti-intellectualism (Hofstadter, 1963); the Daodejing
Avoidance of knowing	The ignorance is real, not performed; the actor evades knowing	Strategic ignorance (Bailey, 2007; McGoey, 2012; overlapping boundary)
Production of ignorance in another	The actor removes something from the audience's reach instead of displaying their own ignorance	Prague street signs, 1968

---

2. Cases

Section 1 marked the boundary of the definition and said which behaviours are not feigned ignorance. We now turn to cases that each report, in some way, a pretence of not knowing, and we ask whether our definition accepts, rejects or holds them at the boundary. Some cases named briefly in section 1 (Brutus, Amleth, Douglass and Young) appear here in detail, and further cases are added. As we said in the introduction, we should not expect them all to be clear and uniform. Most are borderline, and section 3 examines why. Our question is how we know that someone has pretended not to know. We therefore arrange the cases by who attests the gap between knowing and performing:

first, the actor (Douglass);

a document that shows an inconsistency (Young);

a researcher who identifies the phenomenon (Scott);

a narrator who later speaks of intention (Brutus and Amleth);

the convention of a genre (Mulla Nasruddin, fools, Švejk);

a social norm (omertà);

and finally, a case in which no source is decisive (Socrates).

This order is not an order of reliability. It is an order of 'who says it is feigned'. Each case ends with two points: what kind of source supports it, and what the source does not show. Table 2 at the end sets all the cases side by side.

2.1. Douglass and the two Irishmen

Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery and later became a writer and abolitionist. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (Douglass, 1845), chapter 7, he writes of a day in Baltimore when he was unloading a heavy cargo with two Irishmen. When they learned that he was a slave, they told him to run to the North, where he would find friends and be free. Douglass writes that he pretended to take no interest in what they said and 'treated them as if I did not understand them', because he feared that they were deceivers. The two men were not his masters. They were ordinary men who, in an unequal system, might have given him away.

Source: the first-person account of the actor, written after the event and published for a public purpose (the antislavery cause). *What it does not show:* how often he did this, whether it was habitual for him, whether the two men were really deceived, and whether his experience stands for that of other enslaved people.

In chapter 11 of the same book Douglass does something else. About how he escaped he writes, 'I must leave unexplained', and he gives the reason: he does not want to inform the cruel slaveholder about escape routes. This is not feigned ignorance, for two reasons. Douglass announces openly that he will not say, so this is an open refusal. And what he wants to do to the slaveholder is not to display his own ignorance but to keep the slaveholder in real ignorance. We met both boundaries in section 1 (1.4 and 1.7).

2.2. Elizabeth Young and her examiners

In England under Queen Mary (around 1558), Elizabeth Young was examined for bringing in and distributing banned books. John Foxe recorded the questions and answers in *Acts and Monuments* (Foxe, 1576). When the examiner wants to teach her the oath, she says, 'I do not understand it, and therefore I will not learn it'. Yet in the same examinations she quotes Christ's words on oaths, cites Paul on speaking in an unknown tongue and recites her creed in full.

On the marriage of priests she says that she has not come to argue about such things, because she is not a theologian. When she speaks about the sacrament of the Eucharist, the chancellor replies that she is not ashamed to take refuge, from the very start, in the 'highest mystery' of the faith. It seems that the examiner has noticed the inconsistency. When the chief priest asks her to call herself 'a foolish, ignorant woman', she answers, 'I was never wise', and at once states her beliefs. And when they ask why she did not say this in the morning, she answers, 'You had not asked me such a question'. In the end she is released on two sureties. Three readings are possible here:

First, she deliberately hides her knowledge and displays ignorance.

Second, she does not accept the validity of the question, and 'I don't know' means for her 'I do not accept this in this court'. She also refuses openly twice ('I will not learn it', 'I have not come to argue').

Third, knowing Christ's words on oaths is not the same as knowing the meaning of the oath that this examiner wants.

The text itself does not decide. Foxe does not say that her ignorance was a pretence, and he attributes her release to the grace of God. The examiners in the text do not say that it was a performance either. According to the abstract of Geng's study (2012), Young argued from the Bible, so she was not illiterate. That excludes only real ignorance and does not decide among the three readings. The editors of the University of Victoria edition of her text see her plain and innocent tone as a device to deceive her examiners, which is close to the first reading. But that is their interpretation, not a document.

Source: the record, by a sympathetic commentator and for his own purposes, of an examination; nobody in the text states the intention. *What it does not show:* that Young was deceiving and not refusing, that her release was the result of a mask, and that Foxe's record was unaffected by his own purposes.

2.3. Scott: a theoretical framework, not a case

In *Weapons of the Weak* (1985), James Scott studies the everyday resistance of peasants. The book rests on fieldwork in a rice-growing village in Malaysia (Sedaka). In the preface he lists the 'ordinary weapons' of relatively powerless groups, including foot-dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, feigned ignorance and sabotage (Scott, 1985, p. xvi). In his words, these forms of struggle usually require little coordination or planning and avoid direct confrontation with authority.

A report closer to our subject is also in the book. Scott cites Harper's study of lifelong servants in an Indian village with a caste system. They could, 'intentionally or unconsciously', feign illness, ignorance or incapacity and so exasperate their masters. But this passive resistance reinforced the masters' stereotype of subordinates and gave the servants

little practical remedy (Scott, 1985, p. 33). The passage says ‘intentionally or unconsciously’, so it does not distinguish between deliberate performance and unconscious behaviour. For our definition, which requires deliberateness, that is an important limit.

Source: a researcher who identifies the phenomenon within a framework of everyday resistance. The Indian report is second-hand (Harper, as cited by Scott). As far as we searched the online text of the book, it reports no documented case from the village of Sedaka under the name ‘feigned ignorance’. *What it does not show:* a specific instance with a date and a name, frequency, a separation of deliberate from unconscious behaviour, and whether the behaviour is equally common in other groups.

2.4. Brutus and Amleth

According to Livy, Lucius Junius Brutus, nephew of Tarquin the Proud, the last king of Rome, deliberately made himself look stupid after the king killed his brother. He accepted the nickname ‘dullard’ (*brutus*) in order to stay safe from the king’s harm. Machiavelli, in the *Discourses* (III.2), calls the same strategy, ‘feigning madness at the right time’, a very wise act. In the *Gesta Danorum* of Saxo Grammaticus (c. 1200), Amleth feigns stupidity and madness after his uncle has killed his father. The account shows that the pattern existed in the Danish tradition before Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

Two points follow. First, both cases fake stupidity or madness, not ignorance of something specific, so by the boundary drawn in 1.2 they are borderline. Second, the claim that it was a pretence comes from the narrator. In Livy’s account, those who call Brutus ‘dullard’ are deceived. The statement that this was a mask is the voice of the narrator, centuries after the event, about a half-legendary past.

Source: a later narrator who claims access to the actor’s intention. *What it does not show:* that the event happened, that feigning stupidity can count as feigning ignorance, and that the strategy worked this way in the real world.

2.5. Folklore and literature: Mulla Nasruddin, fools and Švejk

Mulla Nasruddin is a character who appears in countless oral and written tales from Anatolia to Iran and Central Asia. He sometimes feigns simplicity and draws from it a sharp critique of judges and rulers. In these tales the listener knows that a mask is in play, and the listener completes the ‘exposure’. The ruler inside the tale may be deceived, but the listener of the tale is not. What works here is a convention agreed between narrator and listener.

In European courts people usually distinguished two kinds of fool: the ‘natural fool’, who was really feeble-minded or intellectually disabled, and the ‘artificial fool’, the professional jester who played the part of folly.

Lerner (2009), in *Playing the Fool*, studies six writers (More, Bacon, Burton, Bayle, Franklin and Gibbon) who adopted the role of the fool to provoke the powerful to rethink. He does not hide the danger of this, perhaps because he knew that such writings could lead to censorship. These writers feigned folly (through jokes and indirect speech), not necessarily ignorance.

In Hašek's *The Good Soldier Švejk*, the medical board declares Švejk an idiot, and nobody can say whether his stupidity is real or feigned. This is fictional evidence, not a historical document. The problem of unprovability is precisely the subject of the novel, and Scott too calls one form of everyday resistance 'Schweikian' (Scott, 1985). This case, like that of Brutus, concerns stupidity and not ignorance of something specific.

Source: folklore with variable versions, narrator and date; a recognised social role; a novel. *What it does not show:* any specific historical event, the intention of a real individual, and the deception of the audience, since in these cases the audience knows.

2.6. Omertà in Sicily

In Sicily and southern Italy there is a word that comes up often in discussions of the Mafia: *omertà*. Jane Schneider and Peter Schneider (2024) translate it as 'silence before the law'. According to Paoli (cited in Schneider and Schneider, 2024, p. 182), the core of *omertà* is that you do not cooperate with state officials and do not go to them to solve your own problems.

But this silence was not limited to members of the Mafia. Ordinary people also observed it. In their fieldwork in the 1960s in Sicily, the two anthropologists repeatedly heard ordinary people say a sentence: '*Unn' sacciu niente, ne oggi ne ieri*', that is, 'I know nothing about it, and I never did'. Blok (1974, cited in Schneider and Schneider, 2024, pp. 184–185) also says that this sentence is more than the report of a fact. Saying it is an act in itself, and it tells everyone what to do.

According to the Schneiders, fear and protection were two sides of one coin in this society, and withdrawing from conflict was a socially accepted course, even for schoolchildren, and cost no friend or reputation (Schneider and Schneider, 2024, pp. 181–185). The chapter does not call this 'feigned ignorance'. The label is ours.

In our view the same phrase can be both the shelter of ordinary people from the Mafia and the Mafia's tool against the state. In both, a norm has replaced individual intention: everyone knows that 'I don't know' means 'I'm not telling'. For this reason the case is close to open refusal (1.4), set in the form of a ritual formula. It shows that feigned ignorance is not inherently resistance, and that its meaning comes from the actor's position. This is an interpretation drawn from one case, not the result of studying several.

Source: a scholarly historical-anthropological chapter, second-hand. *What it does not show:* specific individual cases, and whether the speaker 'knew' (they may really not have known).

2.7. Socrates: a contested case

On the common view, Socrates is a case of feigned ignorance. In the *Euthyphro* (Plato, 1997, 5a–5b) he asks Euthyphro to become his teacher, and in the *Republic* (Plato, 1997, 337a) Thrasymachus accuses him of 'habitual irony'. Aristotle (2019, *Nicomachean Ethics* IV.7) calls this behaviour 'self-understatement' and counts it, though it is milder than boasting, as a kind of untruthfulness. Vlastos (1987), however, speaks of 'complex irony'. When Socrates says that he does not know, in one sense (certain knowledge) he is telling the truth, and in another sense (knowledge that comes from testing by argument) he is not, and no deception is involved. Because both readings, the traditional one and Vlastos's, are taken seriously in the literature, we treat Socrates neither as a positive case nor as a negative one.

Source: a philosophical text with two serious readings, one of which is in Plato's own text (Thrasymachus). *What it does not show:* which reading is correct. Socrates returns in section 3, because he is a clear example of unprovability.

Table 2 gives an overview of these cases.

Table 2. Cases, type of source and assessment

Case	Type of source	Assessment
Douglass, chapter 7	First-person account, after the event	Documented (one case)
Elizabeth Young	Record by a sympathetic commentator; intention not stated	Probable, uncertain
Scott	Research framework; the Indian report is second-hand	No specific case documented
Brutus and Amleth	Later narrator; folly, not ignorance	Borderline
Mulla Nasruddin and fools	Folklore and social role; the audience knows	Borderline (no deception)
Švejk	Novel	Fictional
Omertà	Social norm; second-hand scholarship	Borderline (a norm, not an individual performance)
Socrates	Two serious readings	Contested

The 'assessment' column is ours and is not an ordinal scale. It only says what limit each case has in meeting the definition.

'Documented' means that we have a direct document from the actor saying that they pretended (Douglass).

'Probable' means that the interpretation fits the text but other readings are possible, and nobody in the text states the intention (Young).

'No specific case documented' means that the source identifies the phenomenon but gives no case with a name and a date (Scott).

‘Borderline’ means that the case breaks one of the conditions of the definition, or that we do not know whether it does. The reason differs each time. In Brutus and Amleth, folly is displayed, not ignorance of something specific. In Mulla Nasruddin and the fools, the audience knows the performance from the start and there is no deception. In *omertà*, a social norm takes the place of an individual performance. ‘Fictional’ means that the text is imaginary and not a historical document (Švejk). ‘Contested’ means that two serious readings exist for the same evidence (Socrates).

Table 2 does not give a uniform picture, and most cases are far from certain. Why is this so, and what does the pattern say, and not say, about the phenomenon itself? That is the question of section 3.

---

3. What the record says and what it does not say

Section 2 gave eight cases, most of them far from certain. This section does two things. First, it asks what the pattern shows. In our view it comes more from the nature of the record than from the rarity of the phenomenon, and the claim that can be drawn from it must stay limited (3.1). Second, it says what limits our evidence and method have, so that readers know how far to trust each conclusion (3.2).

3.1. Why most cases are borderline

Table 2 has one documented case and one probable case. Scott gives a framework but no specific case, and the other five cases are borderline, contested or fictional. In our view this is not an accident. Suppose someone wanted to estimate the frequency of theft only from the files of arrested thieves. The successful thief is in no file. Feigned ignorance is partly like this. A case that enters the record has usually come by one of these routes:

the actor later removes the mask (Douglass);

a document exposes an inconsistency (Young);

a narrator removes the mask for us (Livy, Saxo);

the genre announces the mask in advance (Mulla Nasruddin);

or a social norm tells everyone about it (*omertà*).

A successful feigned ignorance that escapes by none of these routes hardly leaves a trace that distinguishes it from real ignorance, because the performance is built so that the audience cannot tell it from real ignorance. (A conventional performance that the audience knows from the start is excluded from this rule.) Our historical record is therefore biased towards masks that have been removed, and from it we cannot estimate the frequency of the phenomenon. The absence of a trace is not a sign that the phenomenon is absent.

Our claim must stay limited. We do not say that hidden mental states cannot be known. Douglass shows that an actor can report such a performance openly. Young shows that an apparent inconsistency is not enough to prove one. The more exact claim is this: the same outward behaviour can arise from different mental states and intentions. This holds for any single observation, and Socrates is an example, with two serious readings of the same evidence.

This does not contradict assessing probability from a body of evidence. A historian cannot prove any single 'I don't know', but can judge its probability from independent evidence, from a change of behaviour with the audience, and from the benefit of the performance.

This method fits Carlo Ginzburg's 'evidential paradigm' (Ginzburg, 1979): we move from 'scattered clues' to intention, not from direct proof. We propose three criteria (a method of our own):

(1) evidence, independent of the actor's own statement, that the actor had the knowledge;

(2) a change of behaviour with the audience, that is, the ignorance appears only before a particular audience;

(3) a specific benefit. Benefit alone is not proof, because someone who is really ignorant may also benefit by chance.

These criteria are for when another person wants to attribute intention to an actor. When the actor reports it, as Douglass does, the report is evidence of another kind: direct, but written after the event and for a purpose of the actor's own. Such a report does not replace the criteria. It only shows that an actor can report the performance openly.

We rated Young 'probable' for this reason. In the same examinations she shows knowledge that she denies elsewhere (1), and her release was a specific benefit (3). But criterion (2) is unclear in her case.

Unprovability has not prevented criminalisation. At least, lawmakers have sometimes targeted similar performances. In 1449 (1450 in today's calendar) the Scottish Parliament passed an act on 'sorners and beggars'. 'Sorners' were people who extorted food and lodging from others by pressure. According to secondary sources, the act also targeted vagrants who made themselves out to be fools without being 'bards' (poets). The act concerns feigned folly, not ignorance, so it is borderline, and we cite it only for this point: criminalising such a category was possible. We have not seen the text of the act or its punishments, and we do not know how the offence was proved or enforced in practice.

3.2. Limitations

What we have said rests on evidence that has limits of its own, and readers should know them.

First, part of the evidence comes from secondary sources.

We have not read the original text of Plutarch (on Solon) for direct quotation, nor Harper, who is cited through Scott.

We have seen Bailey, McGoey, McLuhan, Geng, Lerner, Yovel, Zerubavel and Taussig only at the level of abstracts or publishers' descriptions. We take Nirenberg's critique of Yovel, and the debate among Elkins, Genovese and Blassingame, from reports.

We cite Kelley, Camp, Hofstadter, Kuran, Wedeen, Havel, Ginzburg, Miłosz, Dunbar, Orwell and Goffman only as references.

We take the classical texts (Livy, Machiavelli, Saxo, Plato, Aristotle) from translations and general knowledge.

We have not seen the text of the 1449 act in its original source. We take the pair 'natural fool' and 'artificial fool' from general literature and have not checked its original source.

We have not checked the details of Vlastos's argument (1987) against the article itself, only against two secondary sources.

Second, our quotations from Foxe (from the 1576 edition in TAMO; we have not seen the 1570 edition), from Schneider and Schneider (the open-access chapter) and from Douglass (chapters 7 and 11 in online editions) come from the texts themselves. The page numbers for Scott have not yet been matched with the printed edition.

Third, our focus is on 'unequal situations', and we do not know how often this behaviour occurs in equal situations. We also gathered the cases through guided search and prior knowledge, not through a systematic search of databases. The absence of a type of case here is therefore not a sign that it certainly does not exist.

Fourth, the following are our own proposals and have no source: the four-condition definition, the three criteria in 3.1, the distinction of an 'outward trace' between incompetence and feigned ignorance in 1.1, the label 'feigned ignorance' for *omertà*, the assessments in Table 2, and the hypotheses of section 4. We leave other cases to later research.

Finally, most of our cases are European or American. Other cultures may have other forms of feigned ignorance that we have not seen, and other cultures may see the cases we gave in another way. Everything we have said therefore concerns this set of cases, not all cultures.

---

4. Open questions

The earlier sections asked how we can tell that someone has feigned ignorance. If we assume that sometimes we can, other questions arise: what is this performance for, who is its audience, what does it cost, and how do we judge it? This study has answered none of them. They are hypotheses or questions, and beside each we state what evidence we have for it.

4.1. Six questions

Function. In the two best-documented cases, Douglass and (with doubt) Young, the performance is defensive. The audience can do harm, the actor wants to escape danger, and the sentence 'I didn't understand' is always at hand. But the everyday examples in the introduction suggest that the functions are wider than this. The buyer feigns ignorance for gain, the friend does so in order not to spoil a friend's joy, and the father does so in order that the child reaches the answer unaided. These are everyday experiences, not historical evidence, and they happen in situations that we have not studied. Does feigned ignorance have other functions too, for example revealing the other party's ignorance, getting information from them (in interrogation or negotiation), or preparing the ground for a later action?

The cases that come to mind, Socrates, Brutus and Amleth, are all borderline or contested (Table 2). By section 1.2, Brutus and Amleth do not display ignorance of something specific at all. These functions are hard to identify from outward behaviour, because intention cannot be seen and may change over time. *Status of the evidence:* for the defensive function we have two cases. For other functions we have no clear evidence.

Audience. The audience may believe the performance or may know that it is a performance. Knowing is not necessarily complicity: the audience may know and be unable or unwilling to act. In the tales of Mulla Nasruddin too, the listener inside the tale and the reader outside it do not stand in the same place. If the audience recognises the performance, whether after it or from the start, is it still feigned ignorance?

The answer depends on two cases. If the performance is staged and the audience later recognises it, then by our definition it is still feigned ignorance, because the definition is satisfied by the intention to influence and does not require successful deception. But if the performance is conventional from the start and both parties know it, as in the tales of Mulla Nasruddin, we have counted it as borderline (Table 2). These answers are definitional, not empirical. A performance that both parties recognise may have a very different function from one that aims to deceive. *Status of the evidence:* this is a conceptual possibility, and we have no documented case for it.

Cost. A performance may carry a cost. The first cost is the confirmation of a stereotype. Someone who displays more ignorance than they have strengthens a picture that is common about their group. In the historiography of American slavery there is a debate about 'Sambo', the stereotype of the simple and docile slave. Elkins (1959) saw it as the result of a system that produced a childlike personality. Genovese separates role from personality (Genovese, 1974). Blassingame, on the basis of the accounts of enslaved people themselves, treats it as a role played for the white audience (Blassingame, 1972).

Sambo is a neighbour of feigned ignorance, not feigned ignorance itself, because simplicity and childlikeness are general incapacities, which we excluded in 1.2. But the logic of cost is the same. Our hypothesis is that the gain here is individual and the loss collective. The person who escapes work by this performance gains, but the stereotype that the audience believes remains on the whole group.

The second cost is the loss of credibility of honest speech. Someone who has displayed ignorance many times may find that, when they later say something seriously, the listener takes that too for a performance. The first cost depends on the performance being believed. The second, by contrast, depends on its being recognised.

Status of the evidence: the Sambo debate is not direct evidence, because it concerns a neighbouring phenomenon. For the second cost, and for the hypothesis of individual gain and collective loss, we have brought no evidence.

Long-term performance. Does long-term performance affect the actor? Three possible effects need to be separated. First, the performance may change the actor's habits or self-image: someone who has played the ignorant for years may come to see themselves in that way. Second, it may weaken the knowledge itself: knowledge that stays hidden and unused for years may gradually disappear. Third, it may end in real ignorance.

Literature has expressed this idea in metaphor. Dunbar (1895), in the poem 'We Wear the Mask', speaks of a mask that hides suffering behind a smile. Orwell (1936), in 'Shooting an Elephant', writes that the face of someone who wears a mask gradually comes to fit it. Neither concerns ignorance, and both are literary, not empirical evidence.

Scott (1985, p. 33), in the Harper passage, speaks of a role that is sometimes played 'unconsciously'. This shows only that the role becomes habitual, not that knowledge is lost.

On slavery, Elkins takes the role as far as personality, and Blassingame disagrees with him.

On the *conversos*, the Spanish Jews who had to become Christians and some of whom secretly stayed loyal to their former faith, the theory of 'split identity' (Yovel, 2009) is seriously criticised (Nirenberg, 2009).

Perhaps the sociology of identity could offer support, with concepts such as *passing* (hiding an identity) and *covering* (playing it down) in Goffman (1963), and so could the psychology of role-playing. We have not examined this.

Status of the evidence: for the first effect there is nearby evidence, but all of it concerns the concealment of belief and identity, not ignorance, and all of it is contested. For the second and third effects we have no evidence. We raise this question only as a possibility.

Valuation. An act that is praised in one place may be punishable in another. Today we praise Douglass, and the Scottish act of 1449 (section 3.1) is an example of criminalisation. This raises the possibility that the evaluation depends on the audience and the power relation, not on the ignorance itself. But two cases from two periods and two situations are not enough for this claim. *Status of the evidence:* this is a hypothesis that rests only on these two cases.

Cultural comparison. As we said earlier, most of our cases are European or American. Islamic and Persian cultures have at least three nearby concepts. *Taqiyya* and *ketman* concern hiding belief in the face of danger, not displaying ignorance. *Tajāhul al-ʿārif* is a rhetorical figure in which the speaker pretends not to know something that they know, and the listener knows that it is a performance, which links it to the question of the audience. Their relation to our definition needs comparative study. *Status of the evidence:* we have not yet studied this.

Another important point is that feigned ignorance is not always linked to power. In everyday life, groups sometimes do not speak of what everyone knows. This ‘conspiracy of silence’ (Zerubavel, 2006) or ‘public secret’ (Taussig, 1999) has a function in coexistence. These are close to feigned ignorance in our sense but are not exactly the same: the actor does not necessarily pretend not to know, but only does not speak. We cannot always draw the boundary between the two from outside.

4.2. Possible research steps

These are proposals, and none has been carried out. Each might confirm or reject a hypothesis:

(a) The examinations of heretics under Mary I (1553–1558): was ‘I don’t know’ a known defensive tactic? If it was, the Young case might become stronger. If it was not, it might turn out to be a device that the examiner also knew, which brings up the question of the audience.

(b) Narratives and memoirs of enslaved Americans: is the Douglass episode a single case or a pattern among many?

(c) Fieldwork of the kind that Scott did: can it yield specific instances of feigned ignorance, and not of general incapacity? This depends on the availability of field notes.

(d) The history of the Greek word *eirōneia* (the root of ‘irony’): did ancient writers regard Socrates’ self-understatement as deception or not?

(e) Documented examples of non-defensive uses, such as interrogation and negotiation, which would answer the question of function.

All these steps begin from a record that has survived, and, as we saw in 3.1, that record is selective. Any research of this kind can make the existing cases clearer or weaker, but it cannot find a case that left no trace.

Conclusion

The article began with a question: when someone says ‘I don’t know’, how can we tell that they are telling the truth? Our first achievement was to draw boundaries. Many behaviours that at first sight are easily attributed to feigned ignorance are something else. They are incompetence or folly, concealment of belief or open refusal, or the making of ignorance in another person. When we set these aside, what remains is a small set that is hard to grasp.

Of the eight cases in this set, one is documented by the actor’s own account (Douglass) and one is probable (Young). Scott supplies a theoretical framework but no specific case. The other five are borderline, contested or fictional. We should not take this as a sign that the phenomenon is rare. Someone who displays not knowing well leaves no sign that separates the performance from real ignorance, and what reaches history is mostly masks that have fallen. Two people can say the same sentence, one knowing and the other not, and no single observation separates them. So the record prevents us from counting, but not from assessing. For each case we can ask whether there is evidence independent of the actor’s statement, whether their behaviour differs with another audience, and whether the performance brings a specific benefit. These criteria do not give a verdict. They raise or lower the probability.

What we do not know is more than what we know. The function of the performance, the role of the audience, the cost the actor pays, the effect of the performance on the actor, and its valuation in different cultures all remain open. Our study rests on secondary sources and on cases that are mostly European and American. Its definition and criteria are our own proposals. And equal situations, such as the friend who has heard the news and the father who knows the answer, were not studied.

In this light, in the everyday examples of the employee and the buyer from the introduction, a firm verdict on whether someone really does not know or is pretending may go beyond the available evidence. But we can ask whether there is a sign elsewhere that they know, whether their behaviour differs with another audience, and what benefit this ‘I don’t know’ brings them.

Ignorance is not always a deficit; sometimes it is a cover, and behind it stands someone who knows. And the most successful feigned ignorances are probably those we will never recognise.

Bibliography

Aristotle (2019) *Nicomachean Ethics*, IV.7. Translated by T. Irwin. 3rd edn. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Bacon, F. (1625) 'Of simulation and dissimulation', in *Essays*.

Bailey, A. (2007) 'Strategic ignorance', in Sullivan, S. and Tuana, N. (eds) *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Albany: SUNY Press, pp. 77–94.

The Bible, 1 Samuel 21.

Blassingame, J.W. (1972) *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Camp, S.M.H. (2004) *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

Daodejing (Laozi) (1963) *Tao Te Ching*, chs 19–20. Translated by D.C. Lau. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Douglass, F. (1845) *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, chs 7 and 11. Boston: Anti-Slavery Office.

Dunbar, P.L. (1895) 'We wear the mask', in *Majors and Minors*; repr. in *Lyrics of Lowly Life* (1896).

Elkins, S.M. (1959) *Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional and Intellectual Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Foltynova, K. (2018) 'The invasion of Czechoslovakia through women's eyes', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 20 August.

Foxe, J. (1576) *Acts and Monuments*, Book 12, in *The Unabridged Acts and Monuments Online (TAMO)*. Sheffield: Digital Humanities Institute, University of Sheffield. Available at: https://www.dhi.ac.uk/foxe/

Genovese, E.D. (1974) *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Pantheon.

Geng, P. (2012) 'Before the right to remain silent: the examinations of Anne Askew and Elizabeth Young', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 43(3), pp. 667–679.

Ginzburg, C. (1970) *Il nicodemismo: simulazione e dissimulazione religiosa nell'Europa del '500*. Turin: Einaudi.

Ginzburg, C. (1979) 'Spie: radici di un paradigma indiziario', in Gargani, A. (ed.) *Crisi della ragione*. Turin: Einaudi.

Gobineau, A. de (1865) *Les religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale*. Paris: Didier.

Goffman, E. (1963) *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Hašek, J. (1973) *The Good Soldier Švejk and His Fortunes in the World War*. Translated by C. Parrott. London: Penguin. (Original: *Osudy dobrého vojáka Švejka za světové války*, 1921–1923.)

Havel, V. (1985) *The Power of the Powerless*. Edited by J. Keane. London: Hutchinson. (Original: *Moc bezmocných*, 1978.)

Hofstadter, R. (1963) *Anti-intellectualism in American Life*. New York: Knopf.

Kelley, R.D.G. (1994) *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class*. New York: Free Press.

Kuran, T. (1995) *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Lerner, R. (2009) *Playing the Fool: Subversive Laughter in Troubled Times*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Livy (1919) *Ab Urbe Condita*, I.56. Translated by B.O. Foster. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Machiavelli, N. (1996) *Discourses on Livy*, III.2. Translated by H.C. Mansfield and N. Tarcov. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

McGoey, L. (2012) 'Strategic unknowns: towards a sociology of ignorance', *Economy and Society*, 41(1), pp. 1–16.

McLuhan, A. (2020) 'Adopting a cloak of incompetence: impression management techniques for feigning lesser selves', *Sociological Theory*, 38(2), pp. 122–141. doi:10.1177/0735275120926222.

Miłosz, C. (1953) *The Captive Mind*. Translated by J. Zielonko. London: Secker and Warburg.

Nirenberg, D. (2009) 'Unrenounceable core', *London Review of Books*, 31(14).

Orwell, G. (1936) 'Shooting an elephant', *New Writing*.

Plato (1997) *Euthyphro* 5a–b and *Republic* I, 337a, in Cooper, J.M. (ed.) *Complete Works*. Indianapolis: Hackett.

Plutarch (1914) *Solon* 8, in *Lives*, vol. I. Translated by B. Perrin. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Proctor, R. and Schiebinger, L. (eds) (2008) *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Saxo Grammaticus (2015) *Gesta Danorum*, Books III–IV. Edited by K. Friis-Jensen; translated by P. Fisher. Oxford Medieval Texts. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schneider, J. and Schneider, P. (2024) 'Omertà: violence and cultural practices', ch. 9 in Heywood, P. (ed.) *New Anthropologies of Italy: Politics, History and Culture*. New York: Berghahn Books, pp. 181–197. doi:10.3167/9781805395850.

Scott, J.C. (1985) *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Sorners and Beggars Act (1449) *Records of the Parliaments of Scotland to 1707*. Available at: https://www.rps.ac.uk

Taussig, M. (1999) *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Vlastos, G. (1987) 'Socratic irony', *Classical Quarterly*, 37(1), pp. 79–96; repr. in *Socrates, Ironist and Moral Philosopher* (1991). Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wedeen, L. (1999) *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Yovel, Y. (2009) *The Other Within: The Marranos: Split Identity and Emerging Modernity*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Zerubavel, E. (2006) *The Elephant in the Room: Silence and Denial in Everyday Life*. New York: Oxford University Press.
