



XXXI INTERNATIONAL PHILOSOPHY OLYMPIAD

Olympiade Internationale de Philosophie | Internationale Philosophie-Olympiade | Olimpiada Internacional de Filosofía

Winner of a **SILVER MEDAL** (essay by [MARTA DRELICHOWSKA](#), from Poland)

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<The truth, knowledge and willful ignorance>

Introduction

The author of the quote states that people should not feel ashamed of appreciating the truth, no matter its origin. For somebody who seeks the truth nothing is more important than that. Truth ennobles all the people who speak or convey it, so there is no shame in seeking it. The author asserts that no one is diminished by truth. He sees truth as an objective virtue, which value does not depend on its source. It is noble to seek the truth even if it comes from foreigners.

In this essay, I will explore the premises and consequences of Abu Yusuf Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi's statement to prove that his opinion is justified, yet slightly imprecise. While I agree with the principle of his statement, I have to point out that one has to accept the truth with all its consequences, otherwise he does not really acquire it, and that to know the truth does not always mean to wholly accept it.

I will start by drawing the distinction between the lack of knowledge and an active, willful ignorance. Then I will examine how does the truth affect our status. I will explore the topic of unpleasant, inconvenient or disappointing knowledge. Then I will focus on shame, learning from foreign groups and the consequences of that. Finally, I will conclude.

The lack of knowledge and willful ignorance

The author of the quotes states that "we ought not to be ashamed of appreciating the truth", which suggests that people are being shamed for that. Abu Yusuf Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi presents one of the possible reasons: sometimes the truth comes from distant people and foreign nations. They may not seem as a credible source. Moreover, if the truth not previously known comes from foreigners, it means that our nation had been wrong. What to do about that? Is that a reason to feel ashamed?

One cannot be blamed for not knowing information never presented to him, otherwise babies would be constantly blamed for their lack of knowledge. There is no shame in not being aware of certain facts. The attitude matters.

According to the quote's author, for the seeker of the truth nothing is more important than the truth. That suggest the existence of people who do not care about the truth – they do not seek it or do not consider it the highest value.



One who seeks the truth becomes ennobled, which means to seek the truth is morally good. What about the opposite? If somebody does not care about the truth and does not seek it, he stays as ignorant as he was before. Someone who avoids the truth or hides it in order to remain willfully ignorant is wrong. Given that the truth ennobles people, it can be said that the willfully ignorant person is immoral. That is something to be ashamed of.

There are many reasons to reject the truth even when one is certain it is the truth. According to the pragmatic definition of the truth, the truth is whatever produces the best outcome. A person who adopted this definition may be aware that in reality something looks one way, yet it is more effective to assume it looks the other. Then he may mislead others to make them think the way he wants to, for example by making false reports about the success of his initiative.

The quote's author, however, seems to adopt the classical definition of truth (a statement is true if it corresponds with the reality) and from his perspective the pragmatic truth is not the real truth. Sharing the pragmatic truth with others is wrong since it presents something false as the truth.

The possibility of being misled is also a reason why it is necessary to examine facts presented as true. While foreign cultures are a good source of the knowledge, not every source of information is equally credible. While a statement can be true regardless of its origin, it is important to verify information.

The status of a person after learning the truth and after accepting it

Abu Yusuf Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi states that the status of no one is diminished by the truth. Once people appreciate the truth, they are ennobled. But as I stated before to acquire and appreciate the truth does not mean only to know that certain facts are true. It also means to accept them as the truth and act accordingly. To acquire the truth is to accept it with its consequences. If one knows the truth but rejects it or its consequences, he does not really acquire the truth as he remains willfully ignorant.

There are also situations when the truth seemingly diminishes the status of a person. For example, when somebody does something illegal and his action is made publicly known. If the status of that person becomes heightened ("rather does the truth ennoble all"), it is not because the truth about him is now known. It must be because he accepts it and its consequences.

To illustrate, I will use a literary example. After killing two people, Raskolnikov, the main character of Dostoyevsky's "Crime and punishment" tries to cover the fact that he is a murderer. It makes him miserable and sick. He is constantly afraid that people may find out he is guilty. He becomes paranoid and every little thing seems to prove that people found out about his crime. Only when he accepts the truth (he is a murderer) and its consequences (he has to be punished), he is able to live without the fear. He can finally get some peace, even though he is imprisoned and has to work hard as a punishment.

The unpleasant knowledge

It can also happen that the knowledge had not been previously available to us is unpleasant and we would rather not know it. Should we seek it, risking disappointment? Does the inconvenient truth ennoble us as well?



Shelly Kagan introduces and illustrates the concept of an unexperienced harm by describing a deceived businessman who thought he had a good life – his company was very successful, his family loved him and people appreciated him. The man died content with his life, convinced that the reality looked the way he assumed. Unfortunately, his wife cheated on him, his kids pretended to love him in order to gain advantage by using his things, all the people that were nice to him did that only because sometimes he donated money. Moreover, the co-owner of the company drove it to the edge of bankruptcy, while hiding the evidence. The businessman knew nothing about it and given that he died, he will never find out. Shelly Kagan asks if anybody would want to live a life of the deceived businessman. While it might seem like a good life to the man living it, would it be better, if everything he thought was happening really did?

One can conclude that the absence of the truth is something that made life of the businessman objectively worse, even if he did not know about it. Thus, the presence of the truth would make his life better. That means inconvenient truth does indeed ennoble us and we should seek the truth, even if that may result in disappointment.

It is worth noting, however, that the deceived businessman is not guilty of making his own life worse. He was not able to predict the conspiracy around him and he did not have the tools to wholly uncover it. If he had any doubts, he should have resolved them by seeking the truth but from his perspective everything seemed sincere, reasonable and true. He cannot be blamed for his lack of knowledge.

Consequences

I proved that the consequences of the truth are not less important than the truth itself. I will now answer the question from the first paragraph: what should we do when we learn our nation is wrong?

By drawing the distinction between the lack of knowledge and willful ignorance, I proved that one cannot reject or ignore the truth as that would make him wrong. Hence, upon learning that we hold beliefs that differ from the beliefs of another group, we need to acknowledge and examine it. If we come to the conclusion that we are wrong, there is no shame in that, but we must adjust our views. If we adopt the classical definition of the truth as Abu Yusuf Yaqub ibn Ishaq al-Kindi did, learning the truth brings us closer to the understanding of the reality. That is a noble goal. Thus, accepting the truth ennoble us. If we as a nation accept a view that helps us understand the reality better, we become a better and more knowledgeable society. We can then pass that knowledge to help others.

However, to achieve that noble goal we must not be afraid to seek the truth, even when it may lead to disappointments. We must be open to learning, sharing our views with people different from us, and acknowledging that their perspective may differ from ours. There is no shame in being wrong if after being presented a correct stance, we change our minds.

Learning from other nations has a huge potential as their traditions are different from our and many of the assumptions we accept without thinking are absent in another cultures. International dialogue can help all the people understand the world better as it gives them a chance to question their beliefs and get rid of unjustified presumptions. This way everybody can get closer to the truth.

Conclusion



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One cannot be blamed for not knowing something if he was never presented with that information. It is necessary to admit the lack of knowledge to learn, so it is not shameful or wrong. Learning and appreciating the truth is not shameful as well. However, it is not the sole fact of knowing something is true that ennobles a person. The status of a person can be heightened only when he accepts the truth and its consequences and acts accordingly.

The truth in this quote was likely defined in the classical way, i. e. as a fact corresponding with reality. After assuming this definition, every knowledge we gain, even when it is disappointing, brings us closer to understanding the reality, which indeed a noble goal.

While it may seem like some true information may diminish the status of a person, accepting that information with their consequences eventually leads to ennoblement.

We must always examine if facts presented as true are really true, but if they are we must acknowledge them, even if they go against our beliefs.

Learning from the other nations is a great opportunity as the traditions and cultures differ and many beliefs that are obvious to us are not obvious to others. It is not shameful to learn from a distant nation, especially if their stance on reality describes it better than our assumption. Then we can share the knowledge we acquired and help other people learn. This way everybody will become more ennobled.