

## THE PHENOMENON OF «IGNORANCE» IN THE HISTORY OF WORLD PHILOSOPHY

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**Abstract.** This article thoroughly examines the concept of «ignorance» in the ethical philosophy of the prominent thinker of the Turkic world, Abu Nasr al-Farabi. In his «The Views of the Inhabitants of the Virtuous City», al-Farabi describes the ideal model of societal development, introducing the concept of the «Ignorant City» as its opposite. Through this concept, the philosopher warns that spiritual stagnation and intellectual weakness within society can lead to various negative phenomena and social crises. Furthermore, the article explores the concept of «ignorance» and the ethical theories in the works of ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, analyzing the philosophical similarities and differences between their views and al-Farabi's. The interconnectedness of Eastern and Western philosophical thought and its contemporary significance are also discussed.

The aim of the article is to analyze al-Farabi's concept of «ignorance» within his ethical framework, compare it with ancient philosophical doctrines, and highlight its importance for modern society.

**Keywords:** Al-Farabi, ignorance, philosophy, ethics.

### Introduction

In the works of ancient Greek philosophers, the role of moral values – particularly the concept of honor and shame (conscience) – in the relationship between the individual and society was highly emphasized. These philosophical perspectives form a foundation for exploring the spiritual and ethical questions that underpin human civilization. For instance, one of the core categories in Socrates' moral philosophy is honor. The thinker views honor as the starting point of a person's inner spiritual world and the source of all virtue. According to him, only by nurturing one's soul can a person attain true happiness and justice.

Socrates believed that a person who does not lose their inner conscience is morally the highest form of human being. He regarded honor as the foundation for building a

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society rooted in morality and justice. Moreover, he saw self-knowledge as the highest spiritual goal, leaving behind the profound idea: «Knowing oneself must become the highest aspiration of a human being» [1, p. 840]. These views continue to remain relevant in contemporary philosophical and moral thought.

Building upon these foundational ideas, this article examines the phenomenon of ignorance from a philosophical standpoint, exploring its influence on human nature, spirituality, and societal development within a historical-philosophical context.

### *Research Methodology*

The primary aim of this study is to analyze and compare philosophical perspectives on the phenomenon of ignorance as it has evolved throughout the history of philosophy, in order to determine its essence, its place within various historical and cultural contexts, and its spiritual and social implications. In this article, ignorance is not viewed merely as a personal lack of education or literacy, but more broadly as a multifaceted system of manifestations, such as spiritual impoverishment, cultural underdevelopment, social apathy, and ethical decay.

The following methodological approaches were employed in the research:

- Comparative philosophical analysis – Comparing the concepts of ignorance
- In ancient and modern philosophers to identify their similarities and differences;
- Historical-philosophical approach – Studying the transformation of the concept of ignorance across historical periods and tracking its evolutionary development;
- Textual-hermeneutic analysis – Interpreting the philosophical content in the works of thinkers such as Socrates, al-Farabi, Abai, Hegel, and others;
- Value-based assessment – Evaluating the consequences of ignorance and highlighting the significance of opposing concepts such as wisdom, knowledge, and virtue.

Through these methods, the research aims to demonstrate that ignorance is not just a lack of knowledge but also a symptom of the erosion of spiritual values and the breakdown of ethical norms in society.

Throughout the article, the works of al-Farabi are taken as a central framework, demonstrating that his opposition to ignorance and emphasis on intellectual and moral virtue are still highly relevant today. Furthermore, the philosophical harmony between Abai's moral teachings and Socratic ethics is presented with scholarly justification.

### *The Phenomenon of Ignorance*

The article describes how the theoretical concepts of ignorance have consistently been analyzed in conjunction with other ethical categories since ancient times. The opposition between ignorance and wisdom, immaturity and perfection has been explored in depth by philosophers from Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Modern Era. In Ancient Greece, the opposition between ignorance and wisdom was central to the work of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, and also found expression in religions like Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Confucianism. The Greek ideal of «eliminating ignorance and pursuing wisdom» laid the foundation for the philosophical traditions of Plato's ideas about the state, Aristotle's theories of potentiality and actuality, and

al-Farabi's notions of a virtuous city and happiness. A thorough analysis of ignorance also requires engaging with German classical philosophy, notably Kant and Hegel, who suggested that the lack of rational thought in society leads to ignorance.

The inscription at Apollo's temple, «Know thyself», serves as a symbolic beginning of the fight against ignorance. Socrates reinterpreted this Delphic maxim as a foundation for his ethics of «virtue as knowledge», stating, «There is only one good – knowledge, and one evil – ignorance». According to Socrates, knowing oneself and understanding one's moral essence is the precondition for a virtuous and happy life. He shifted the philosophical focus from nature to self-awareness, making a significant mark in the history of human thought.

Aristotle argued that humans occupy a special place in the hierarchy of life due to their reason. Without virtues like conscience and morality, a person may regress to the level of animals [2, p. 103]. He identified conscience, goodness, compassion, and justice as the guarantors of being truly human. The lack of these, or shamelessness, arises from ignorance and cunning. Aristotle believed a pure soul and noble conscience were the keys to human dignity.

These universal ideas also deeply influenced al-Farabi, whose works reflect deliberate alignment with the views of Plato and Aristotle. Their writings on state and law significantly shaped Farabi's political philosophy, including his classifications of government systems and his definition of the virtuous citizen.

Farabi was notably influenced by Aristotle's ideas on freedom and happiness. He also drew upon thinkers like Ammonius Saccas, Plotinus, Proclus, Porphyry, Themistius, and Iamblichus. Among them, Iamblichus, who lived in Syria in the 4th century, offered significant thoughts on ignorance and was both a critic and a student of Porphyry. Iamblichus contributed substantially to political philosophy, writing treatises on politics and ignorance, including «Letter on the Command», «Sopatros on Virtue», and «Letter to Macedonius», as analyzed by John F. Finamore and John Dillon. These works emphasize leadership, governance, and the consequences of ignorance in society.

Although Iamblichus lived in a different era than al-Farabi, their ideas on ignorance remain highly relevant today. While Plato divided political virtues into two categories and Porphyry into four, Iamblichus identified seven levels, particularly in the religious class, including paradigmatic intellectual, purificatory, political, ethical, and natural.

Themistius, born around 317 in Constantinople, was educated by his father and became one of the most respected philosophers of his time. He opened his own school and provided paraphrases of Aristotle's works, not just interpreting but rewriting them to clarify their meaning for students. His commentaries on «De Anima», physics, metaphysics, and logic demonstrate a unique approach that made philosophy accessible.

Themistius also viewed philosophy and rhetoric as cooperative disciplines, both aiming to guide citizens toward virtuous living. While some considered him a sophist, he preferred the title philosopher. He saw the Roman Empire as divinely instituted and viewed its leaders as having a special connection with God, advocating that political systems should mirror divine order.

Farabi's political philosophy reflects Neoplatonic theology, suggesting that the ideal ruler is a prophet. He emphasized political virtues such as wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice – qualities that echo the ideals of a self-sustaining, virtuous society.

Augustine of Hippo also treated conscience as a divine moral compass, writing that conscience governs behavior from within and is instilled by God [3, p. 118]. Conscience, for him, is the path to spiritual purification.

Roger Bacon, though of unclear origin, is believed to have been English and studied at Oxford and Paris. He identified the soul as a spiritual entity united with the body and distinguished between potential and active intellects. Bacon's views align with Aristotelian tradition but also echo Platonic themes, though differing in how the intellect engages with truth – not through recollection, but through natural inclination toward knowledge. He opposed Thomas Aquinas's theory of a single intellect shared by all humans, arguing instead for individual intellectual uniqueness.

For Bacon, intellectusagens (active intellect) is not part of human nature but acts upon the potential intellect (intellectuspossibilis). He cited Farabi and Avicenna to support this, asserting that the goal of philosophy is to attain knowledge and thus understand the Creator.

Aquinas, like Aristotle, saw the soul as the form of the body but also believed the soul is immortal and can exist without the body. He emphasized that through knowledge and virtue, the soul reaches perfection. The rational part of the soul is immortal, unlike the nutritive and sensitive parts that perish with the body [5, p. 592].

Aquinas rejected the idea that souls pre-existed their bodies. Instead, he believed God creates each soul at the moment of conception. This unique soul seeks perfection by overcoming material desires through intellect and moral virtue.

Philosophers who claimed, «Through our doctrines, we improve people», clearly placed wisdom as the highest value. For them, philosophy was a healer of the soul, just as medicine heals the body. Concepts like Plato's «pharmakon» illustrate how philosophy was meant to address existential, not just physical, ailments. A healthy soul, then, was a happy soul – whether that happiness was described as tranquility, wisdom, or justice.

«Understanding ignorance» could be seen as a method of expressing Socratic thought. Rousseau, in his Discourse on the Sciences and the Arts, used this concept independently from Socratic virtue. He referenced Socrates' Apology, expanding on the idea that ignorance can relate to virtue [6, pp. 67–73].

While both Rousseau and Socrates link ignorance to virtue, their interpretations differ. Thus, we must analyze their discussions under the common term «concept of ignorance». We begin with Rousseau's perspective and then move on to Socrates, distinguishing between the ideas of the historical Socrates and Plato's portrayal. The key Socratic claims are «virtue is knowledge» and «ignorance is vice». Rousseau, however, interprets this within a framework where nature gives virtue and ignorance serves as a pathway to wisdom.

Martin Luther, who sought to bridge religion and humanism, wrote: «Conscience is the foundation of humanity and the medium through which a person connects with God» [7, p. 82]. He viewed conscience as a spiritual value that judges human actions alongside God.

Renaissance thinkers made significant contributions in their efforts to fight ignorance, particularly through efforts to lift religious restrictions and promote humanistic development. This focus on education and the individual laid the groundwork for scientific advancement and technological innovation in Europe.

Erasmus of Rotterdam, a reformer, believed ignorance and foolishness could be more powerful than wisdom because emotions are deeply tied to the body. According to Erasmus, happiness does not lie in avoiding mistakes, but in learning through them. He saw nature – not divine miracles – as the source of guidance. Yet, nature itself is not fully comprehensible. Plants and animals obey instincts, whereas humans require spiritual freedom governed by reason.

Erasmus believed that life has two sides: death follows life, beauty coexists with ugliness, knowledge with ignorance [8, p. 42]. This duality was central to his worldview.

German classical philosophy – especially that of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and Feuerbach – left a lasting mark on history. These thinkers saw ignorance as the result of insufficient rational education and regarded critical thinking as the highest pursuit. Immanuel Kant, who placed critical thinking above all else in philosophy, directly associated human nature with rationality and logic. In his view, only logic, which synthesizes categories, brings knowledge full of wisdom about the world and accumulates this wisdom. He concluded that remaining bound by nature could lead to ignorance.

Turning to Hegel's views on the problem of investigation, the thinker believed that a person does not become a virtuous citizen merely by performing a single moral act. For that, moral actions must become a consistent trait of one's character. In short, according to Hegel, virtue begins where words and actions align, and where stability, patience, responsibility, and diligence intersect. These judgments and worldview stances closely align with the profound layers of al-Farabi's philosophy. It becomes evident that the harmony between the ideas of great thinkers is not disrupted by the differences in centuries or historical distance [9].

In his lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel referred to the Aristotelian school as Peripatetic, not because Aristotle purchased the Lyceum and taught there, but because the location was originally equipped for walking by Pericles, before becoming a school. Among the philosophers remembered for their resonant speeches in the history of philosophy, representatives of German classical philosophy hold a special place. After this period, the era of non-classical philosophy followed in the evolution of world philosophy. By the mid-20th century, it was replaced by the post-non-classical stage, and toward the end of that century and the beginning of the 21st, the era of postmodernism emerged, which began to summarize its thoughts on ignorance. Of course, the new generation of philosophers have critically assessed earlier ones, reshaping theories and methodologies. To ensure that our national philosophy is not left in their shadow, we must not forget the spiritual heritage and philosophical reflections of our own great thinkers.

### *Conclusion*

The concepts of honor and humanity, which stand in opposition to ignorance, held a special place in the worldview of the Kazakh philosopher Abai Qunanbaiuly. In his famous 29th Word, he states: «Many of our Kazakh proverbs are useful, but there are some that are not only useless but even incompatible with religious or human values». Among them is the saying: «If you are poor, don't worry about honor». Abai refutes

this by saying: «If this implies earning wealth through hardship and honest labor while working for others, then that's not a dishonorable act. To seek wealth honestly, without begging or deceiving others, is the act of an honorable person» [10, p. 89].

In Kazakh culture, a critical examination of the concept of ignorance played an important role in the works of historical figures like Shokan Ualikhanov and Ybyray Altynsarin, and in the philosophy of Abai. They emphasized the existence of spiritual forces in society that resist ignorance. The struggle against the phenomenon of ignorance in society and ethnic consciousness is clearly reflected in the life stances of these prominent Kazakh intellectuals. This was thoroughly studied in the works of Kazakh philosopher O.A. Segizbayev [11]. The critical description of ignorance is often found in the works of Kazakh enlighteners and in the political philosophy of the Alash figures at the beginning of the 20th century.

Abai explained ignorance primarily as a consequence of illiteracy, laziness, apathy, and carelessness. We can observe a strong alignment between Abai's views and the ideas of al-Farabi. O.A. Segizbayev's works stand out for their unique methodological approach to describing the phenomenon of ignorance in a philosophical context. His research demonstrates that the essence of humanistic values in society lies in the power to combat ignorance, a conclusion that reflects a deep understanding of knowledge.

According to the Russian synonyms dictionary, the concept of ignorance includes: illiteracy, laziness, backwardness, lack of education, incivility, primitiveness, rudeness, and indecency. In Kazakh understanding, ignorance is not only synonymous with being uneducated or illiterate. More importantly, it means the inability to understand the nation's centuries-old traditions, customs, ancestral roots, wise sayings, lifestyle, and societal norms. Therefore, people who grow up in foreign environments and don't understand or want to understand their native culture are also considered ignorant. Similarly, people who never leave their small communities and fail to understand others' ways of life can also fall into this category [12, p. 99].

Ignorance also encompasses lack of culture, darkness, sloppiness, incompetence, laziness, and passivity. One of its most dangerous manifestations is *mankurtism* – a state in which a person has no spiritual warmth and no respect for their people, language, culture, or religion. The ignorant person primarily seeks material gain. Abai said: «The wise do not rejoice in their deeds, while the ignorant do not grieve for a decaying nation». Ignorance is not an ancient, outdated phenomenon – it is a highly dangerous disease of modern times. Intellectuals around the world are trying to find solutions to overcome it. It appears at every level – from the individual to the state. Therefore, methodological analysis of the phenomenon is crucial [13, p. 24].

If there are effective ways to remain far from ignorance, then in this time of crossroads, our people should strive for them with determination, as it could become the starting point for solving many pressing issues. There are not many articles on ignorance in the mass media of our country. However, among those that stand out for their honesty and theoretical depth, the works of Garifolla Yesim on ignorance deserve recognition [14].

We learned that the concept of ignorance has two interconnected meanings: firstly, a lack of knowledge, and secondly, a root of immorality (corruption). Al-Farabi's concept of ignorance reflects this duality. Understanding the responsibility arising from



human nature and social essence requires identifying the intersection of philosophy and religion. A virtuous society does not form on its own; it is established through the unity of rationality and spirituality in actions.

From the description above, we can conclude that al-Farabi's intellectual legacy is one of rationality and spirituality that unites people and opens the way to the future. His philosophical tradition deserves to be viewed as a central part of constructive philosophical dialogue within a modern context, facing today's challenges and issues [14, pp. 23–24].

It is clear that the study and understanding of ignorance will continue. Human society still lives under the reign of power, and the full image of spiritual excellence in interpersonal relationships has yet to fully form. This spiritual immaturity continues to preserve ignorance in public life and shows its harmful effects. It is crucial to identify the deep contradictions of ignorance through philosophical inquiry and to uncover the sources of wisdom and intelligence in society that stand in contrast to it. Our country's spiritual orientation should move in this direction, advancing in a civilized and creative way – something we should remain hopeful about.

In world philosophy, the definitions of ignorance proposed by great philosophers generally coincide. They assert that ignorance is not merely a lack of knowledge about something, but a manifestation of inner conflict and aggression resulting from spiritual underdevelopment, which harms not only the ignorant person but also the surrounding social environment.

Ignorance is understood as the moral consequence of not knowing the spiritual laws of life. This article examines ignorance not just as a lack of education, but as a socially evident phenomenon intertwined with spiritual immaturity. The works of the world's great philosophers portray wisdom as a force that develops the harmony of the universe. Referring to examples like Rousseau and Socrates in his Apology, the article provides a summary of how the concept of ignorance has been defined by great thinkers.

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**Сырғакбаева А.С., Рушанова Н.Б., Мадалиева Ж.Қ.**

**Әлемдік философия тарихындағы «надандық» құбылысы**

*Аңдатпа.* Бұл мақалада түркі әлемінің көрнекті ойшылы Әбу Насыр әл-Фарабидің этикалық философиясындағы «надандық» ұғымы жан-жақты талданады. Әл-Фараби өзінің «Қайырымды қала тұрғындарының көзқарастары туралы» трактатында қоғам дамуының идеалды үлгісін сипаттай келе, оған қарсы мағынадағы «Надан қала» түсінігін



енгізеді. Бұл ұғым арқылы ойшыл қоғамдағы рухани тоқырау мен зияткерлік әлсіздік түрлі теріс құбылыстар мен әлеуметтік күйзелістерге жол ашатынын ескертеді. Сонымен қатар мақалада ежелгі грек философиясының өкілдері – Сократ, Платон және Аристотель еңбектеріндегі «надандық» ұғымының мәні мен этикалық тұжырымдары сараланып, олардың әл-Фараби көзқарастарымен философиялық үндестігі мен айырмашылықтары қарастырылады. Шығыс пен Батыс дүниетанымындағы этикалық ой-пікірлердің өзара байланысы мен заманауи маңызына назар аударылады. Мақаланың мақсаты – әл-Фарабидің этикалық көзқарасындағы «надандық» ұғымын талдау және оны антикалық философиялық ілімдермен салыстыра отырып, бүгінгі қоғам үшін маңызын айқындау.

**Түйін сөздер:** Әл-Фараби, надандық, философия, этика.

**Сыргакбаева А.С., Рушанова Н.Б., Мадалиева Ж.К.**  
**Феномен «невежества» в истории мировой философии**

**Аннотация.** В данной статье всесторонне рассматривается концепция «незнания» в этической философии выдающегося мыслителя тюркского мира Абу Насра аль-Фараби. В своем трактате «Взгляды жителей добродетельного города» аль-Фараби описывает идеальную модель развития общества, вводя противоположное по смыслу понятие «Незнание города». С помощью этой концепции философ предупреждает, что духовная стагнация и интеллектуальная слабость в обществе могут привести к различным негативным явлениям и социальным кризисам. В статье также анализируется значение понятия «незнания» и этические идеи в трудах древнегреческих философов – Сократа, Платона и Аристотеля, исследуются философские сходства и различия их взглядов с учением аль-Фараби. Рассматривается взаимосвязь восточной и западной философской мысли, а также ее современная значимость. Цель статьи – проанализировать концепцию «невежество» в этической философии аль-Фараби, сопоставить её с античными философскими учениями и выделить ее значение для современного общества.

**Ключевые слова:** Аль-Фараби, невежество, философия, этика.

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