

# Obscurantism

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

October 3, 2025

## RECOMMENDED CITATION

mohammad looti (2025). *Obscurantism*. PSYCHOLOGICAL SCALES. Retrieved from <https://scales.arabpsychology.com/?p=33215>

## Obscurantism

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Philosophy, Epistemology, Rhetoric, Political Science

### 1. Core Definition

**Obscurantism**, at its essence, refers to the deliberate practice of preventing facts or clear understanding from being known. This is achieved through the presentation of information that is intentionally unclear, vague, or overly complex, often with the specific aim of impeding deeper inquiry, critical analysis, or comprehensive public comprehension. The motivation behind such actions typically involves a desire to maintain a particular status quo, evade accountability, or protect specific interests by keeping the audience uninformed or confused. It fundamentally represents an active resistance to intellectual transparency and the free flow of knowledge.

The concept transcends mere withholding of information; it involves a strategic manipulation of discourse to cloud rather than clarify. Instead of outright lying, obscurantism thrives on ambiguity, abstraction, and jargon that obfuscates the core issue, thereby preventing the public or specific stakeholders from asking incisive questions or forming well-informed opinions. This deliberate act of intellectual dimming serves as a powerful tool for those who wish to avoid scrutiny or delay action, by creating an environment where clarity is elusive and understanding is difficult to achieve, thus ensuring that detailed questions remain unasked and deeper insights remain undeveloped.

Historically, especially during the Enlightenment period, the term "obscurantist" was specifically employed to label individuals or institutions who actively opposed intellectual enlightenment and the spread of rational thought. These opponents resisted the dissemination of knowledge, critical reason, and scientific discovery, often in favor of maintaining traditional dogmas, superstitions, or established power structures. Their practices aimed to keep populations in ignorance, thereby preserving their own authority or the prevailing societal norms against the tide of emerging rationalism and scientific inquiry.

### 2. Etymology and Historical Development

The term "obscurantism" originates from the Latin "obscurans," which means "darkening" or "rendering obscure." Its semantic roots firmly connect it to the act of making something difficult to see or understand. While the practice of clouding information or resisting knowledge is likely as old as human society itself, the formal conceptualization and widespread use of the term gained significant traction during the 18th-century Enlightenment. This era, characterized by a fervent belief in reason, science, and individual liberty, naturally brought the antithesis of these ideals into sharp relief, providing a clear linguistic framework to describe those who sought to impede intellectual progress.

During the Enlightenment, philosophers and thinkers explicitly defined "obscurantist" as a pejorative term for anyone who actively fought against the spread of intellectual light. They saw obscurantism as a primary impediment to societal advancement, a force that perpetuated ignorance, superstition, and irrationality. This intellectual battle was often waged against entrenched religious authorities, monarchical regimes, and other institutions that benefited from a less informed populace. Figures like Voltaire and Diderot, champions of reason and open inquiry, frequently critiqued obscurantist tendencies in their efforts to promote intellectual freedom and critical thought.

Following the Enlightenment, the concept of obscurantism continued to evolve, finding application in various contexts beyond purely philosophical or religious debates. In the 19th and 20th centuries, it began to be used in political discourse to describe tactics employed by governments or political factions to manipulate public opinion, suppress dissent, or avoid accountability through disinformation or the deliberate complication of issues. Its application broadened to encompass any systematic attempt to prevent the public from fully grasping complex realities, whether in science, economics, or public policy, always retaining its core meaning of intentional intellectual dimming.

### 3. Key Characteristics

A primary characteristic of obscurantism is its **intentionality**. It is not merely a failure to communicate clearly or an accidental oversight; rather, it is a deliberate and strategic choice to prevent facts from becoming known or to hinder genuine understanding. This intention underpins all manifestations of obscurantism, distinguishing it from simple incompetence or poor communication. The goal is to manage perception and control narrative by ensuring that precise, verifiable details remain elusive, thereby limiting the audience's capacity for informed judgment and critical response.

Another defining feature is the use of **unclear or evasive language**. This can manifest as vague generalities, euphemisms, overly technical jargon used out of context, or convoluted sentence structures that obscure the core message. Instead of providing concrete data, specific actions, or measurable outcomes, obscurantist communication relies on abstract statements, broad assurances, and imprecise terminology. The aim is to create an illusion of addressing an issue without actually committing to specifics, leaving ample room for later reinterpretation or denial, and effectively stymieing any follow-up questions that demand clarity.

Furthermore, obscurantism often involves the strategic invocation of **complexity or secrecy**. By presenting an issue as too intricate for the average person to comprehend, or by labeling it as sensitive, confidential, or "top secret," proponents of obscurantism create barriers to inquiry. This tactic discourages further investigation by implying that understanding requires specialized

knowledge or access that is not publicly available, thus justifying the lack of transparency. The resulting informational vacuum allows those in power to operate with less scrutiny and fewer challenges to their decisions or narratives, effectively maintaining control over the flow and interpretation of critical information.

#### 4. Manifestations and Examples

One vivid manifestation of obscurantism can be observed in political discourse, particularly during press conferences or public addresses where accountability is sought. For instance, as described in the source content, a politician might vaguely state that "the issue is under control and we are doing everything in our power to resolve it." Such a statement, while appearing reassuring on the surface, provides absolutely no verifiable information. It fails to specify the nature of the "issue," the precise steps being taken, the timeline for resolution, or the metrics by which "control" is measured. This deliberate imprecision serves to placate the public without offering any actionable details, thereby preventing deeper questions about the actual state of affairs or the efficacy of government actions.

Similarly, the invocation of "top secret" classifications or "national security" concerns can be another powerful tool for obscurantism. While legitimate instances of secrecy are necessary for national defense or sensitive operations, these classifications can also be deliberately overused or misapplied to shield information from public scrutiny. When details are withheld under the guise of secrecy without sufficient justification, it prevents citizens and oversight bodies from understanding critical decisions, their implications, or potential missteps. This tactic effectively closes off avenues for public debate and democratic accountability, enabling those in power to act without external checks.

Beyond politics, obscurantism can appear in various other domains. In corporate communications, companies facing controversies might issue verbose, jargon-laden press releases that obscure rather than clarify their actions, aiming to overwhelm stakeholders with technicalities while avoiding genuine transparency. In academic or scientific contexts, an individual might deliberately employ overly complex language or convoluted arguments to mask a lack of substantive content or to create an aura of intellectual superiority, thereby discouraging critical engagement with their work. In each case, the underlying intent is to prevent a clear, critical understanding by presenting information in a deliberately opaque manner.

#### 5. Significance and Impact

The significance of obscurantism lies in its profound impact on public discourse, critical thinking, and the functioning of democratic societies. When information is consistently obscured, citizens are deprived of the necessary foundation to make informed decisions, whether at the ballot box, in

policy debates, or in their daily lives. This erosion of clarity undermines the very premise of an informed populace, which is crucial for a healthy democracy where accountability and transparency are paramount. Over time, a public accustomed to vague or misleading communication may become disillusioned, apathetic, or more susceptible to manipulation.

Furthermore, obscurantism can serve as a powerful mechanism for maintaining existing power structures and hindering societal progress. By keeping the public unaware of critical details, those in positions of authority can avoid scrutiny, deflect criticism, and perpetuate policies or practices that benefit a select few. It can stifle innovation and genuine problem-solving, as a lack of clear information prevents the identification of root causes and the development of effective, transparent solutions. The deliberate obfuscation of facts can delay necessary reforms or adjustments, preserving the status quo even when it is demonstrably detrimental to the broader public interest.

The long-term impact of widespread obscurantism can include a decline in trust in institutions, a rise in cynicism, and an overall degradation of the quality of public debate. When truth is consistently obscured, it becomes challenging for individuals to discern reliable information from deliberate misinformation, potentially leading to increased polarization and a weakening of shared understanding. Ultimately, by impeding genuine knowledge and clarity, obscurantism poses a direct threat to the intellectual freedom, rational inquiry, and democratic accountability that are foundational to open and progressive societies.

## 6. Debates and Criticisms

The practice of obscurantism is primarily met with strong criticism, particularly from advocates of transparency, intellectual freedom, and democratic accountability. Critics argue that any deliberate effort to prevent public understanding or to withhold essential facts is inherently unethical and detrimental to societal well-being. They contend that an informed citizenry is the cornerstone of a healthy democracy, and therefore, any tactic that undermines this fundamental principle is an attack on the integrity of public life and the capacity for collective self-governance. The ethical dimension revolves around the right of individuals to access accurate information necessary for making personal and civic choices.

However, debates surrounding obscurantism sometimes touch upon the nuanced question of necessary secrecy versus deliberate obfuscation. Proponents of certain forms of limited information access might argue that in specific, rare circumstances--such as matters of national security, highly sensitive diplomatic negotiations, or proprietary corporate information--a degree of controlled communication or even secrecy might be justified to prevent harm or maintain strategic advantage. The critical distinction, critics argue, lies in the intent and the scope: legitimate secrecy is narrowly defined and serves a clear, justifiable public interest, whereas obscurantism broadly and intentionally clouds information to avoid accountability or manipulate public perception without

a compelling, transparent rationale.

A central criticism of obscurantism is its potential to foster an environment of distrust and cynicism. When public figures, institutions, or media repeatedly engage in vague or evasive communication, it erodes public confidence and makes it harder for individuals to believe any official statements, even those that are truthful. This erosion of trust can lead to significant societal challenges, including political apathy, a rise in conspiracy theories, and a fragmented understanding of reality, all of which weaken the collective capacity to address complex problems. Therefore, despite any potential short-term gains for those employing it, obscurantism is widely viewed as a destructive force that degrades the intellectual and moral fabric of society.

## 7. Further Reading

[Obscurantism - Wikipedia](#)

[Philosophy - Wikipedia](#)

[Epistemology - Wikipedia](#)

[Rhetoric - Wikipedia](#)

[Political Science - Wikipedia](#)

[Age of Enlightenment - Wikipedia](#)

[Public discourse - Wikipedia](#)

[Critical thinking - Wikipedia](#)