



ERROR, IGNORANCE, AND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

1 OF 2

The mind that is in error about a certain matter and the mind that is ignorant of it are both in want of knowledge, but they do not stand in the same relation to the knowledge that they lack. To be in error is to claim to know what one does not know. It is, therefore, an unacknowledged ignorance of the matter in question, combined with a false presumption. In contrast, ignorance is simply a privation of knowledge unaccompanied by any pretension to know. Hence, from the point of view of the teacher, as Socrates suggests, ignorance is preferable to error, and especially an acknowledged ignorance—an explicit recognition that one does not know.

The passages collected here ring all the changes on these states of mind and point out their implications not only for teaching and learning, but also for the development of knowledge itself. On any point in question, there can be a multiplicity of errors all opposed to a single truth; and the sources or causes of error are also multitudinous. Writers such as Descartes and Bacon, who are concerned with rules for the proper conduct of the mind's efforts in seeking knowledge, therefore undertake to specify the pitfalls and stumbling blocks that must be avoided in order to steer clear of error.

Error, manifesting the fallibility of the human mind, and ignorance, betokening its failure to know, enter into the consideration of the question concerning the limits of human knowledge, discussed in a number of the quotations assembled here. What is the line that divides the unknown from the unknowable? Is the unknowable unknowable in itself or only to us because of the weakness of our intellects? Can the mind establish for itself the boundaries of attainable knowledge, and safeguard itself against the illusory pursuit of the unknowable beyond those borders? To questions of this sort, the writers quoted offer an interesting diversity of answers.

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- 1 *Agamemnon*. Delusion is the elder daughter of Zeus, the accursed who deludes all; her feet are delicate and they step not on the firm earth, but she walks the air above men's heads and leads them astray.
Homer, *Iliad*, XIX, 91
 - 2 *Teiresias*. All men may err but error once committed, he's no fool nor yet unfortunate, who gives up his stiffness and cures the trouble he has fallen in. Stubbornness and stupidity are twins.
Sophocles, *Antigone*, 1023
 - 3 *Ajax*. Not knowing anything's the sweetest life—ignorance is an evil free from pain.
Sophocles, *Ajax*, 554
 - 4 *Diotima*. Herein is the evil of ignorance, that he who is neither good nor wise is nevertheless satisfied with himself: he has no desire for that of which he feels no want.
Plato, *Symposium*, 204A
 - 5 *Socrates*. Do you see, Meno, what advances he [the slave boy] has made in his power of recollection? He did not know at first, and he does not know now, what is the side of a figure of eight feet: but then he thought that he knew, and answered confidently as if he

knew, and had no difficulty; now he has a difficulty, and neither knows nor fancies that he knows.

Meno. True.

Soc. Is he not better off in knowing his ignorance?

Men. I think that he is.

Soc. If we have made him doubt, and given him the "torpedo's shock," have we done him any harm?

Men. I think not.

Soc. We have certainly, as would seem, assisted him in some degree to the discovery of the truth; and now he will wish to remedy his ignorance, but then he would have been ready to tell all the world again and again that the double space should have a double side.

Men. True.

Soc. But do you suppose that he would ever have enquired into or learned what he fancied that he knew, though he was really ignorant of it, until he had fallen into perplexity under the idea that he did not know, and had desired to know?

Men. I think not, Socrates.

Soc. Then he was the better for the torpedo's touch?

Men. I think so.

Plato, *Meno*, 84A

- 6 *Socrates.* I am going to explain to you why I have such an evil name. When I heard the answer, I said to myself, What can the god mean? and what is the interpretation of his riddle? for I know that I have no wisdom, small or great. What then can he mean when he says that I am the wisest of men? And yet he is a god, and cannot lie; that would be against his nature. After long consideration, I thought of a method of trying the question. I reflected that if I could only find a man wiser than myself, then I might go to the god with a refutation in my hand. I should say to him, "Here is a man who is wiser than I am; but you said that I was the wisest." Accordingly I went to one who had the reputation of wisdom, and observed him—his name I need not mention; he was a politician whom I selected for examination and the result was as follows: When I began to talk with him, I could not help thinking that he was not really wise, although he was thought wise by many, and still wiser by himself; and thereupon I tried to explain to him that he thought himself wise, but was not really wise; and the consequence was that he hated me, and his enmity was shared by several who were present and heard me. So I left him, saying to myself, as I went away: Well, although I do not suppose that either of us knows anything really beautiful and good, I am better off than he is,—for he knows nothing, and thinks that he knows; I neither know nor think that I know. In this latter particular, then, I seem to have slightly the advantage of him. Then I went to another who

had still higher pretensions to wisdom, and my conclusion was exactly the same. Whereupon I made another enemy of him, and of many others besides him.

Then I went to one man after another, being not unconscious of the enmity which I provoked, and I lamented and feared this: But necessity was laid upon me,—the word of God, I thought, ought to be considered first. And I said to myself, Go I must to all who appear to know, and find out the meaning of the oracle. And I swear to you, Athenians, by the dog I swear!—for I must tell you the truth—the result of my mission was just this: I found that the men most in repute were all but the most foolish; and that others less esteemed were really wiser and better. I will tell you the tale of my wanderings and of the "Herculean" labours, as I may call them, which I endured only to find at last the oracle irrefutable. After the politicians, I went to the poets; tragic, dithyrambic, and all sorts. And there, I said to myself, you will be instantly detected; now you will find out that you are more ignorant than they are. Accordingly, I took them some of the most elaborate passages in their own writings, and asked what was the meaning of them—thinking that they would teach me something. Will you believe me? I am almost ashamed to confess the truth, but I must say that there is hardly a person present who would not have talked better about their poetry than they did themselves. Then I knew that not by wisdom do poets write poetry, but by a sort of genius and inspiration; they are like diviners or soothsayers who also say many fine things, but do not understand the meaning of them. The poets appeared to me to be much in the same case; and I further observed that upon the strength of their poetry they believed themselves to be the wisest of men in other things in which they were not wise. So I departed, conceiving myself to be superior to them for the same reason that I was superior to the politicians.

At last I went to the artisans, for I was conscious that I knew nothing at all, as I may say, and I was sure that they knew many fine things; and here I was not mistaken, for they did know many things of which I was ignorant, and in this they certainly were wiser than I was. But I observed that even the good artisans fell into the same error as the poets;—because they were good workmen they thought that they also knew all sorts of high matters, and this defect in them overshadowed their wisdom; and therefore I asked myself on behalf of the oracle, whether I would like to be as I was, neither having their knowledge nor their ignorance, or like them in both; and I made answer to myself and to the oracle that I was better off as I was.

Plato, *Apology*, 21A

- 7 Ignorance—defined not as the negation of knowledge but as a positive state of mind—is error produced by inference.

Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, 79^b23

- 8 The very limit of human blindness is to glory in being blind.

Augustine, *Confessions*, III, 3

- 9 It is clear that as regards its proper object the intellect is always true; and hence it is never deceived of itself, but whatever deception occurs must be ascribed to some lower power, such as the imagination or the like. Hence we see that when the natural power of judgment is free we are not deceived by such images, but only when it is not free, as is the case in sleep.

Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, 94, 4

- 10 O Juvenal, how truly thou didst say,
The people never know for what they seek,
For what they want seems right in every way,
And clouds of error ever render weak
Their judgments, in what'er they do or speak.

Chaucer, *Troilus and Cressida*, IV, 29

- 11 O January, what might it now avail
Could your eyes see as far as ships can sail?
For it's as pleasant, blind, deceived to be
As be deceived while yet a man may see.
Lo, Argus, who was called the hundred-eyed,
No matter how he peered and watched and pried,
He was deceived; and God knows others too
Who think, and firmly, that it is not so.
Oblivion is peace; I say no more.

Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales*: Merchant's Tale

- 12 It may be said with some plausibility that there is an abecedarian ignorance that comes before knowledge, and another, doctoral ignorance that comes after knowledge: an ignorance that knowledge creates and engenders, just as it undoes and destroys the first.

Montaigne, *Essays*, I, 54, Of Vain Subtleties

- 13 Do you want a man to be healthy, do you want him disciplined and firmly and securely poised? Wrap him in darkness, idleness, and dullness. We must become like the animals in order to become wise, and be blinded in order to be guided.

Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 12,
Apology for Raymond Sebond

- 14 As by simplicity life becomes pleasanter, so also does it become better and more innocent, as I was starting to say a while back. The simple and ignorant, says Saint Paul, raise themselves to heaven, and take possession of it; and we, with all our learning, plunge ourselves into the infernal abyss.

Montaigne, *Essays*, II, 12,
Apology for Raymond Sebond

- 15 Many abuses are engendered in the world, or, to put it more boldly, all the abuses in the world are engendered, by our being taught to be afraid of professing our ignorance and our being bound to accept everything that we cannot refute.

Montaigne, *Essays*, III, II, Of Cripples

- 16 Anyone who wants to be cured of ignorance must confess it. . . . Wonder is the foundation of all philosophy, inquiry its progress, ignorance its end. I'll go further: There is a certain strong and generous ignorance that concedes nothing to knowledge in honor and courage, an ignorance that requires no less knowledge to conceive it than does knowledge.

Montaigne, *Essays*, III, II, Of Cripples

- 17 The human soul uses reason, sees many things, investigates many more; but, however well equipped, it gets light and the beginnings of knowledge from the outer senses, as from beyond a barrier—hence the very many ignorances and foolishnesses whereby our judgments and our life actions are confused, so that few or none do rightly and duly order their, acts.

William Gilbert, *On the Loadstone*, V, 12

18 Messala. O hateful error, melancholy's child,
Why dost thou show to the apt thoughts of men
The things that are not? O error, soon conceived,
Thou never comest unto a happy birth,
But kill'st the mother that engender'd thee!

Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, V, iii, 67

- 19 Four species of idols beset the human mind, to which (for distinction's sake) we have assigned names, calling the first idols of the tribe, the second idols of the den, the third idols of the market, the fourth idols of the theatre.

The formation of notions and axioms on the foundation of true induction is the only fitting remedy by which we can ward off and expel these idols. It is, however, of great service to point them out; for the doctrine of idols bears the same relation to the interpretation of nature as that of the confutation of sophisms does to common logic.

The idols of the tribe are inherent in human nature and the very tribe or race of man; for man's sense is falsely asserted to be the standard of things; on the contrary, all the perceptions both of the senses and the mind bear reference to man and not to the universe, and the human mind resembles those uneven mirrors which impart their own properties to different objects, from which rays are emitted and distort and disfigure them.

The idols of the den are those of each individual; for everybody (in addition to the errors common to the race of man) has his own individual den or cavern, which intercepts and corrupts the light of nature, either from his own peculiar and singular disposition, or from his education and intercourse with others, or from his reading, and the authority acquired by those whom he reverences and admires, or from the different impressions produced on the mind, as it happens to be preoccupied and predisposed, or equable and tranquil, and the like; so that the spirit of man (according to its several dispositions), is variable, confused, and, as it were, actuated by chance; and Heraclitus said well that men search for knowledge in lesser worlds, and not in the greater or common world.

There are also idols formed by the reciprocal intercourse and society of man with man, which we call idols of the market, from the commerce and association of men with each other; for men converse by means of language, but words are formed at the will of the generality, and there arises from a bad and unapt formation of words a wonderful obstruction to the mind. Nor can the definitions and explanations with which learned men are wont to guard and protect themselves in some instances afford a complete remedy; words still manifestly force the understanding, throw everything into confusion, and lead mankind into vain and innumerable controversies and fallacies.

Lastly, there are idols which have crept into men's minds from the various dogmas of peculiar systems of philosophy, and also from the perverted rules of demonstration, and these we denominate idols of the theatre: for we regard all the systems of philosophy hitherto received or imagined, as so many plays brought out and performed, creating fictitious and theatrical worlds.

Bacon, *Novum Organum*, I, 39-44

- 20 The power of will which I have received from God is not of itself the source of my errors—for it is very ample and very perfect of its kind—any more than is the power of understanding; for since I understand nothing but by the power which God has given me for understanding, there is no doubt that all that I understand, I understand as I ought, and it is not possible that I err in this. Whence then come my errors? They come from the sole fact that since the will is much wider in its range and compass than the understand-

ing, I do not restrain it within the same bounds, but extend it also to things which I do not understand: and as the will is of itself indifferent to these, it easily falls into error and sin, and chooses the evil for the good, or the false for the true.

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, IV

- 21 I . . . perceive that God could easily have created me so that I never should err, although I still remained free, and endowed with a limited knowledge, viz., by giving to my understanding a clear and distinct intelligence of all things as to which I should ever have to deliberate; or simply by His engraving deeply in my memory the resolution never to form a judgment on anything without having a clear and distinct understanding of it, so that I could never forget it. And it is easy for me to understand that, in so far as I consider myself alone, and as if there were only myself in the world, I should have been much more perfect than I am, if God had created me so that I could never err. Nevertheless I cannot deny that in some sense it is a greater perfection in the whole universe that certain parts should not be exempt from error as others are than that all parts should be exactly similar. And I have no right to complain if God, having placed me in the world, has not called upon me to play a part that excels all others in distinction and perfection.

Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, IV

- 22 When a man reckons without the use of words, which may be done in particular things, as when upon the sight of any one thing, we conjecture what was likely to have preceded, or is likely to follow upon it; if that which he thought likely to follow follows not, or that which he thought likely to have preceded it hath not preceded it, this is called *error*; to which even the most prudent men are subject. But when we reason in words of general signification, and fall upon a general inference which is false; though it be commonly called error, it is indeed an *absurdly*, or senseless speech. For error is but a deception, in presuming that somewhat is past, or to come; of which, though it were not past, or not to come, yet there was no impossibility discoverable. But when we make a general assertion, unless it be a true one, the possibility of it is inconceivable. And words whereby we conceive nothing but the sound are those we call absurd, insignificant, and *nonsense*. And therefore if a man should talk to me of a *round quadrangle*; or accidents of bread in cheese; or *immaterial substances*; or of a *free subject*; a *free will*; or any *free* but free from being hindered by opposition; I should not say he were in an error, but that his words were without meaning; that is to say, absurd.

I have said before . . . that a man did excel all other animals in this faculty, that when he conceived anything whatsoever, he was apt to enquire the consequences of it, and what effects he could do with

it. And now I add this other degree of the same excellence, that he can by words reduce the consequences he finds to general rules, called *theorems*, or *aphorisms*; that is, he can reason, or reckon, not only in number, but in all other things whereof one may be added unto or subtracted from another.

But this privilege is allayed by another; and that is by the privilege of absurdity, to which no living creature is subject, but men only. And of men, those are of all most subject to it that profess philosophy. For it is most true that Cicero saith of them somewhere; that there can be nothing so absurd but may be found in the books of philosophers. And the reason is manifest. For there is not one of them that begins his ratiocination from the definitions or explications of the names they are to use; which is a method that hath been used only in geometry, which conclusions have thereby been made indisputable.

Hobbes, *Leviathan*, I, 5

- 23 The chief malady of man is restless curiosity about things which he cannot understand; and it is not so bad for him to be in error as to be curious to no purpose.

Pascal, *Pensies*, I, 18

- 24 Man is only a subject full of error, natural and ineffaceable, without grace. Nothing shows him the truth. Everything deceives him. These two sources of truth, reason and the senses, besides being both wanting in sincerity, deceive each other in turn. The senses mislead the Reason with false appearances, and receive from Reason in their turn the same trickery which they apply to her; Reason has her revenge. The passions of the soul trouble the senses, and make false impressions upon them. They rival each other in falsehood and deception.

Pascal, *Pensies*, II, 83

- 25 *Satan*. One fatal Tree there stands of Knowledge call'd,
Forbidden them to taste: Knowledge forbidd'n?
Suspicious, reasonless. Why should thir Lord
Envie them that? can it be sin to know,
Can it be death? and do they onely stand
By Ignorance, is that thir happie state,
The proof of thir obedience and thir faith?

Milton, *Paradise Lost*, IV, 514

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