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## ERROR, IGNORANCE, AND THE LIMITS OF HUMAN KNOWLEDGE

2 OF 2

- 26 Many errors, of a truth, consist merely in the application of the wrong names to things. For if a man says that the lines which are drawn from the centre of the circle to the circumference are not equal, he understands by the circle, at all events for the time, something else than mathematicians understand by it. So when men make errors in calculation, the numbers which are in their minds are not those which are upon the paper. As far as their mind is concerned there is no error, although it seems as if there were, because we think that the numbers in their minds are those which are upon the paper. If we did not think so, we should not believe them to be in error. . . . This is the source from which so many controversies arise—that men either do not properly explain their own thoughts, or do not properly interpret those of other people; for, in truth, when they most contradict one another, they either think the same things

or something different, so that those things which they suppose to be errors and absurdities in another person are not so.

Spinoza, *Ethics*, II, Prop. 47, Schol.

- 27 There is not so contemptible a plant or animal, that does not confound the most enlarged understanding. Though the familiar use of things about us take off our wonder, yet it cures not our ignorance.

Locke, *Concerning Human Understanding*,  
Bk. III, VI, 9

- 28 Heav'n from all creatures hides the book of Fate,  
All but the page prescrib'd, their present state;  
From brutes what men, from men what spirits know:  
Or who could suffer Being here below?  
The lamb thy riot dooms to bleed to-day,  
Had he thy Reason, would he skip and play?  
Pleas'd to the last, he crops the flow'ry food,  
And licks the hand just rais'd to shed his blood.  
Oh blindness to the future! kindly giv'n,  
That each may fill the circle mark'd by Heav'n;  
Who sees with equal eye, as God of all,  
A hero perish, or a sparrow fall,  
Atoms or systems into ruin hurl'd,  
And now a bubble burst, and now a world.

Pope, *Essay on Man*, Epistle I, 77

- 29 We may discover the reason why no philosopher, who is rational and modest, has ever pretended to assign the ultimate cause of any natural operation, or to show distinctly the action of that power, which produces any single effect In the universe. It is confessed, that the utmost effort of human reason is to reduce the principles, productive of natural phenomena, to a greater simplicity, and to resolve the many particular effects into a few general causes, by means of reasonings from analogy, experience, and observation. But as t(P the causes of these general causes, we should in vain attempt their discovery; nor shall we ever be able to satisfy ourselves, by any particular explication of them. These ultimate springs and principles are totally shut up from human curiosity and enquiry. Elasticity, gravity, cohesion of parts, communication of motion by impulse; these are probably the ultimate causes and principles which we shall ever discover in nature; and we may esteem ourselves sufficiently happy, if, by accurate enquiry and reasoning, we can trace up the particular phenomena to, or near to, these general principles.

Hume, *Concerning Human Understanding*, IV, 26

- 30 To each his suffrings: all are men,  
 Condemn'd alike to groan;  
 The tender for another's pain,  
 Th' unfeeling for his own.  
 Yet ah! why should they know their fate?  
 Since sorrow never comes too late,  
 And happiness too swiftly flies.  
 Thought would destroy their paradise.  
 No more; where ignorance is bliss,  
 'Tis folly to be wise.

Gray, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College*

- 31 Now if you will venture to go along with me, and look down into the bottom of this matter, it will be found that the cause of obscurity and confusion, in the mind of a man, is threefold.

Dull organs, dear Sir, in the first place. Secondly, slight and transient impressions made by the objects, when the said organs are not dull. And thirdly, a memory like unto a sieve, not able to retain what it has received. . . .

Now you must understand that not one of these was the true cause of the confusion in my uncle Toby's discourse; and it is for that very reason I enlarge upon them so long, after the manner of great physiologists—to shew the world, what it did *not* arise from.

What it did arise from, I have hinted above, and a fertile source of obscurity It is,—and ever will be,—and that is the unsteady uses of words, which have perplexed the clearest and most exalted understandings.

Sterne, *Tristram Shandy*, II, 2

- 32 How is reason so precious a gift that we would not lose it for anything in the world? and how has this reason served only to make us the most unhappy of all beings?

Whence comes it that loving truth passionately, we are always betrayed to the most gross impostures?

Why is life still loved by this crowd of Indians deceived and enslaved by the bonzes, crushed by a Tartar's descendants, overburdened with work, groaning in want, assailed by disease, exposed to every scourge?

Whence comes evil, and why does evil exist?

O atoms of a day! O my companions in infinite littleness, born like me to suffer everything and to be ignorant of everything, are there enough madmen among you to believe that they know all these things? No, there are not; no, at the bottom of your hearts you feel your nonentity as I render justice to mine. But you are arrogant enough to want people to embrace your vain systems; un-

able to be tyrants over our bodies, you claim to be tyrants over our souls.

Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*  
Ignorance

- 33 Ignorance is mere privation, by which nothing can be produced: it is a vacuity in which the soul sits motionless and torpid for want of attraction; and, without knowing why, we always rejoice when we learn, and grieve when we forget.

Johnson, *Rasselas*, XI

- 34 A lady once asked him [Johnson] how he came to define *Pastern* the *knee* of a horse: instead of making an elaborate defence, as she expected, he at once answered, "Ignorance, Madam, pure ignorance."

Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (1755)

- 35 Johnson. Mankind have a great aversion to intellectual labour; but even supposing knowledge to be easily attainable, more people would be content to be ignorant than would take even a little trouble to acquire it.

Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (1763)

- 36 Thus, Sir, I have disposed of this falsehood. But falsehood has a perennial spring.

Burke, *Speech on American Taxation* (1774)

- 37 The consciousness of ignorance—unless this ignorance is recognized to be absolutely necessary—ought, instead of forming the conclusion of my inquiries, to be the strongest motive to the pursuit of them. All ignorance is either *ignorance* of things or of the limits of knowledge. If my ignorance is accidental and not necessary, it must incite me, in the first case, to a *dogmatical* inquiry regarding the objects of which I am ignorant; in the second, to a critical investigation into the bounds of all possible knowledge. But that my ignorance is absolutely necessary and unavoidable, and that it consequently absolves from the duty of all further investigation, is a fact which cannot be made out upon empirical grounds—from *observation*—but upon critical grounds alone, that is, by a thoroughgoing *investigation* into the primary sources of cognition. It follows that the determination of the bounds of reason can be made only on *a priori* grounds; while the empirical limitation of reason, which is merely an indeterminate cognition of an ignorance that can never be completely removed, can take place only *a posteriori*. In other words, our empirical knowledge is limited by that which yet remains for us to know.

Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*,  
Transcendental Method

- 38 It is . . . quite certain that we can never get a sufficient knowledge of organized beings and their inner possibility, much less get an explanation of them, by looking merely to mechanical principles of nature. Indeed, so certain is it, that we may confidently assert that it is absurd for men even to entertain any thought of so doing or to hope that maybe another Newton may some day arise, to make intelligible to us even the genesis of but a blade of grass from natural laws that no design has ordered. Such insight we must absolutely deny to mankind.

Kant, *Critique of Teleological  
Judgement*, 75

- 39 So numerous indeed and so powerful are the causes which serve to give a false bias to the judgment, that we, upon many occasions, see wise and good men on the wrong as well as on the right side of questions of the first in magnitude to society. This circumstance, if duty attended to, would furnish a lesson of moderation to those who are ever so much persuaded of their being in the right in any controversy. And a further reason for caution, in this respect, might be drawn from the reflection that we are not always sure that those who advocate the truth are influenced by purer principles than their antagonists. Ambition, avarice, personal animosity, party opposition, and many other motives not more laudable than these, are apt to operate as well upon those who support as those who oppose the right side of a question.

Hamilton, *Federalist* 1

- 40 Though it cannot be pretended that the principles of moral and political knowledge have, in general, the same degree of certainty with those of the mathematics, yet they have much better claims in this respect than, to judge from the conduct of men in particular situations, we should be disposed to allow them. The obscurity is much oftener in the passions and prejudices of the reasoner than in the subject. Men, upon too many occasions, do not give their own understandings fair play; but, yielding to some untoward bias, they entangle themselves in words and confound themselves in subtleties.

Hamilton, *Federalist* 31

- 41 *Faust*. Oh, happy he who still hopes that he can  
Emerge from Error's boundless sea!  
What man knows not, is needed most by man,  
And what man knows, for that no use has he.

Goethe, *Faust*, I, 1064

42 That there should one Man die ignorant who had capacity for Knowledge, this I call a tragedy.

Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, III, 4

43 There are many things of which a wise man might wish to be ignorant.

Emerson, *Demonology*

44 So seemed it to me, as I stood at her helm, and for long hours silently guided the way of this fire-ship on the sea. Wrapped, for that interval, in darkness myself, I but the better saw the redness, the madness, the ghastliness of others. The continual sight of the fiend shapes before me, capering half in smoke and half in fire, these at last begat kindred visions In my soul, as soon as I began to yield to that unaccountable drowsiness which ever would come over me at a midnight helm.

But that night, in particular, a strange (and ever since inexplicable) thing occurred to me. Starting from a brief standing sleep, I was horribly conscious of something fatally wrong. The jawbone tiller smote my side, which leaned against it; in my ears was the low hum of sails, just beginning to shake in the wind; I thought my eyes were open; I was half conscious of putting my fingers to the lids and mechanically stretching them still further apart. But, spite of all this, I could see no compass before me to steer by; though it seemed but a minute since I had been watching the card, by the steady binnacle lamp illumining it. Nothing seemed before me but a jet gloom, now and then made ghastly by flashes of redness. Uppermost was the impression, that whatever swift, rushing thing I stood on was not so much bound to any haven ahead as rushing from all havens astern. A stark, bewildered feeling, as of death, came over me. Convulsively my hands grasped the tiller, but with the crazy conceit that the tiller was, somehow, in some enchanted way, inverted. My God! what is the matter with me? thought I. Lo! in my brief sleep I had turned myself about, and was fronting the ship's stern, with my back to her prow and the compass. In an instant I faced back, just in time to prevent the vessel from flying up into the wind, and very probably capsizing her. How glad and how grateful the relief from this unnatural hallucination of the night, and the fatal contingency of being brought by the lee!

Look not too long in the face of the fire, O man! Never dream with thy hand on the helm! Turn not thy back to the compass; accept the first hint of the hitching tiller; believe not the artificial fire, when its redness makes all things look ghastly. To-morrow, in the natural sun, the skies will be bright; those who glared like devils in the forking flames, the morn will show in far other, at least gentler,

relief; the glorious, golden, glad sun, the only true lamp--all others but liars!

Melville, *Moby Dick*, XCVI

- 45 It has often and confidently been asserted, that man's origin can never be known: but ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge: it is those who know little, and not those who know much, who so positively assert that this or that problem will never be solved by science.

Darwin, *Descent of Man*, Intro.

- 46 So that while It is the summit of human wisdom to learn the limit of our faculties, it may be wise to recollect that we have no more right to make denials, than to put forth affirmatives, about what lies beyond that limit.

T. H. Huxley, *Hume*, Bishop Berkeley on the Metaphysics of Sensation

- 47 The fatal tendency of mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful, is the cause of half their errors. A contemporary author has well spoken of "the deep slumber of a decided opinion."

But what! (it may be asked) Is the absence of unanimity an indispensable condition of true knowledge? Is it necessary that some part of mankind should persist in error to enable any to realise the truth? Does a belief cease to be real and vital as soon as it is generally received-and is a proposition never thoroughly understood and felt unless some doubt of it remains? As soon as mankind have unanimously accepted a truth, does the truth perish within them? The highest aim and best result of improved intelligence, it has hitherto been thought, is to unite mankind more and more in the acknowledgment of all important truths; and does the intelligence only last as long as it has not achieved its object? Do the fruits of conquest perish by the very completeness of the victory?

I affirm no such thing. As mankind improve, the number of doctrines which are no longer disputed or doubted will be constantly on the increase: and the well-being of mankind may almost be measured by the number and gravity of the truths which have reached the point of being uncontested. The cessation, on one question after another, of serious controversy, is one of the necessary incidents of the consolidation of opinion; a consolidation as salutary in the case of true opinions, as it is dangerous and noxious when the opinions are erroneous.

Mill, *On Liberty*, II

- 48 If you want to know whether you are thinking rightly, put your thoughts into words. In the very attempt to do this you will find

yourselves, consciously or unconsciously, using logical forms. Logic compels us to throw our meaning into distinct propositions, and our reasonings into distinct steps. It makes us conscious of all the implied assumptions on which we are proceeding, and which, if not true, vitiate the entire process. It makes us aware what extent of doctrine we commit ourselves to by any course of reasoning, and obliges us to look the implied premises in the face, and make up our minds whether we can stand to them. It makes our opinions consistent with themselves and with one another, and forces us to think clearly, even when it cannot make us think correctly. It is true that error may be consistent and systematic as well as truth; but this is not the common case. It is no small advantage to see clearly the principles and consequences involved in our opinions, and which we must either accept, or else abandon those opinions. We are much nearer to finding truth when we search for it in broad daylight. Error, pursued rigorously to all that is implied in it, seldom fails to get detected by coming into collision with some known and admitted fact.

Mill, *Inaugural Address at St. Andrews*

49 Ignorance is not innocence but sin.

Browning, *The Inn Album*, V

50 Among all forms of mistake, prophecy is the most gratuitous.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, I, 10

51 Ignorance gives one a large range of probabilities.

George Eliot, *Daniel Deronda*, II, 13

52 *Father Zossima*. Of the pride of Satan what I think is this: it is hard for us on earth to comprehend it, and therefore it is so easy to fall into error and to share it, even imagining that we are doing something grand and fine. Indeed, many of the strongest feelings and movements of our nature we cannot comprehend on earth. Let not that be a stumbling-block, and think not that it may serve as a justification to you for anything. For the Eternal judge asks of you what you can comprehend and not what you cannot. You will know that yourself hereafter, for you will behold all things truly then and will not dispute them. On earth, indeed, we are, as it were, astray, and if it were not for the precious image of Christ before us, we should be undone and altogether lost, as was the human race before the flood. Much on earth is hidden from us, but to make up for that we have been given a precious mystic sense of our living bond with the other world, with the higher heavenly world, and the roots of our thoughts and feelings are not here but in other worlds. That is why the philosophers say that we cannot apprehend the reality of things on earth.



Dostoevsky, *Brothers Karamazov*, Pt. II, VI, 3

- 53 I am thankful that the good God created us all ignorant. I am glad that when we change His plans in this regard we have to do it at our own risk.

Mark Twain, *Letter to the Alta California*  
[San Francisco] (May 28, 1867)

- 54 Philosophers can never hope finally to formulate . . . metaphysical first principles. Weakness of insight and deficiencies of language stand in the way inexorably. Words and phrases must be stretched towards a generality foreign to their ordinary usage; and however such elements of language be stabilized as technicalities, they remain metaphors mutely appealing for an imaginative leap.

There is no first principle which is in itself unknowable, not to be captured by a flash of insight. But, putting aside the difficulties of language, deficiency in imaginative penetration forbids progress in any form other than that of an asymptotic approach to a scheme of principles, only definable in terms of the ideal which they should satisfy.

Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, I, I

- 55 Error is not only the absolute error of believing what is false, but also the quantitative error of believing more or less strongly than is warranted by the degree of credibility properly attaching to the proposition believed in relation to the believer's knowledge. A man who is quite convinced that a certain horse will win the Derby is in error even if the horse does win.

Russell, *Human Knowledge*, V, 6

- 56 The proposition that symptoms vanish when their unconscious antecedents have been made conscious has been borne out by all subsequent research; although the most extraordinary and unexpected complications are met with in attempting to carry this proposition out in practice. Our therapy does its work by transforming something unconscious into something conscious, and only succeeds in its work in so far as it is able to effect this transformation.

Now for a rapid digression, lest you should run the risk of imagining that this therapeutic effect is achieved too easily. According to the conclusions we have reached so far, neurosis would be the result of a kind of ignorance, a not-knowing of mental processes which should be known. This would approach very closely to the well-known Socratic doctrine according to which even vice is the result of ignorance. Now it happens in analysis that an experienced practitioner can usually surmise very easily what those feelings are which have remained unconscious in each individual

patient. It should not therefore be a matter of great difficulty to cure the patient by imparting his knowledge to him and so relieving his ignorance. At least, one side of the unconscious meaning of the symptom would be easily dealt with in this way, although it is true that the other side of it, the connection between the symptom and the previous experiences in the patient's life, can hardly be divined thus; for the analyst does not know what the experiences have been, he has to wait till the patient remembers them and tells him. But one might find a substitute even for this in many cases. One might ask for information about his past life from the friends and relations; they are often in a position to know what events have been of a traumatic nature, perhaps they can even relate some of which the patient is ignorant because they took place at some very early period of childhood. By a combination of these two means it would seem that the pathogenic ignorance of the patients might be overcome in a short time without much trouble.

If only it were so! But we have made discoveries that we were quite unprepared for at first. There is knowing and knowing; they are not always the same thing. There are various kinds of knowing, which psychologically are not by any means of equal value. . . . knowing on the part of the physician is not the same thing as knowing on the part of the patient and does not have the same effect. When the physician conveys his knowledge to the patient by telling him what he knows, it has effect. No, it would be incorrect to say that. It does not have the effect of dispersing the symptoms; but it has a different one, it sets the analysis in motion, and the first result of this is often an energetic denial. The patient has learned something that he did not know before—the meaning of his symptom—and yet he knows it as little as ever. Thus we discover that there is more than one kind of ignorance. It requires a considerable degree of insight and understanding of psychological matters order to see in what the difference consists. But the proposition that symptoms vanish with the acquisition of knowledge of their meaning remains true, nevertheless. The necessary condition is that the knowledge must be founded upon an inner change in the patient which can only come about by a mental operation directed to that end.

Freud, *General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis*, XVIII

- 57 While the power of thought frees us from servile subjection to instinct, appetite, and routine, it also brings with it the occasion and possibility of error and mistake. In elevating us above the brute, it opens to us the possibility of failures to which the animal, limited to instinct, cannot sink.

Dewey, *How We Think*, Pt. I, II, 2

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