

The Forward Eagle

Compiled Weekly

“Let us endeavor mutually to enlighten one another.”

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Essay

1.

An image of ignorance occurs in a famous passage of philosophy: Plato’s Allegory of the Cave in “The Republic.” The scenario is: human beings dwelling in the darkness of an underground cavern, bound at the legs and neck so that they cannot move, even turn their heads. They have no other memory of life, since they have been imprisoned since childhood. Before them, they see only moving shadows that are cast by objects unknown to them, illuminated by a flickering fire that lies somewhere behind them. They know nothing of this except the shadows and hear only echoes from the voices of their keepers, whom they have never seen. In such a benighted state, they pass their days.

This place of ignorance is not only a dark cave; it is a prison, a deprivation chamber. Imagining this predicament, what we are likely to feel is an epistemic claustrophobia, the absence of freedom and the numbness and despair that would set in from such a deprived routine. Freedom is the ability to move our body. Beyond being our basic capacity for meeting our needs, bodily movement, including change of place, leads us to new experiences, permits learning, and generates perspective. But confined in such profound ignorance, the world of experience is restricted.

Plato regards such a plight as worse than imprisonment, worse than servitude, more like death. We feel deep sadness at the absence of any chance to understand anything, to achieve anything of value, or to experience anything of beauty. The horror of ignorance is incapacity.

This account of their predicament is not one that the prisoners themselves would, or could, offer. They do not and cannot understand their situation, since all of life’s experiences are but shifting shadows and echoes. Plato says that the “prisoners would in every way believe that the truth is nothing other than the shadows.” Indeed they would not suspect that the things they see are but shadows.

They pass the time in trivial games of shadow-prediction, unaware of their keepers, the fire, or the parade of objects behind them. They are like troglodytes. They do not feel claustrophobic or deprived. The actual circumstances of their confinement in the dark cavern, the possibility of a way up and out, and the notion that there may be an incandescent world of wonders to ascend to, are unknown and unsuspected. Life is what it is, what it has always been; they do what they do and feel what they feel because they know nothing else. They are ignorant.

But *we* know, and it is terrifying. Because Plato has, through his narrative, given us privileged knowledge of their situation, we know what they do not; we can affirm their ignorance.

The cave is a fiction, of course. With a shudder, we distance ourselves and our lives from that bizarre place and its “strange prisoners.” We breathe deeply the air of the sunlit world. But then, off-handedly, comes Plato’s stark and chilling statement: “They’re like us.”

Are we like these cave dwellers? Is this gloomy cave the image of the womb from which we were all thrust unknowing into the light? But do we not then quickly overcome the oblivion, or do we all still dwell in a place of such abysmal ignorance? Let’s reverse Plato’s approach: rather than describing how we may know the truth, let us consider how we recognize ignorance.



Plato's cave metaphor illustrates the cognitive trap of ignorance, where we may be unaware of the limitations of our understanding.

No one is born educated; and every educated person is, at any given moment, ignorant about many things. Often, it is easy to pinpoint our ignorance quite precisely. Though you may have acquired considerable knowledge about a subject, say, natural cotton fabrics, you may not know a particular facts, for example, how cotton is grown, harvested, carded, spun and woven into fabrics from denim to bed sheets. You simply do not know much information about this everyday item.

In this common form of factual ignorance, should the question arise, you are able to specify exactly the datum you lack. Based on what you already know, you comprehend fully what you need to learn, even before you learn it, you know what to “look up” or to search for. And you even already know the sort of fact that will constitute the answer, a four-hundred-thread-count Egyptian cotton with a percale, sateen, or flannel weave.

Suppose, however, that you had never heard of a pair of blue jeans, a tee shirt or a bed sheet.. Despite your familiarity with wearing clothing sleeping on straw mats, you might be surprised to learn about a thing called cotton..

Or, imagine that you only knew about wool and linen fabric.. In these cases, you would have some sense of what acquiring such new knowledge would be like; you could specify its parameters beforehand. You would grasp in a general way what learning about the unfamiliar would entail; and given that possibility, you could identify what it is you do not know, albeit with inexact precision. Such factual ignorance can be delineated in this way because you possess other general, relevant knowledge in this case, knowledge about textiles, their manufacturer, the meanings of “warp and woof,” and so on. In these ordinary situations, it is the knowledge we possess that serves to awaken and focus our sense of our own ignorance.

Our world is vast, however. There are whole realms of knowledge of which each of us is ignorant, though the list, if we could make one, is different for each person. You may be unusually well educated, perhaps possessing expertise in several fields, and yet, when it comes to, say, ichthyology or Chinese porcelain or deltiology or Sanskrit grammar, you are lost. In such cases, our sense of what we don’t know isn’t as sharp; we are less sure that we understand what it would mean to know such things.

Nevertheless, if we know the meaning of the relevant terms, if we are familiar with parallel or related subjects, we may have some sense of what

such missing knowledge would involve. If you know English, Latin, and Greek grammar, for instance, you will have a clearer idea of what it would mean to learn Sanskrit grammar than if you had never studied any grammar.

Of course, you might really have no desire to learn about such facts or fields; indeed, you might ignore them, avoid them, or even resist attempts to be informed or taught about them. Or, you might decide to master them or to learn more about them. In these cases also, we can identify what we have not learned, at least to some level of specification.

So, let us pause to amend a fundamental point: ignorance may be recognized and ascribed only from the perspective of knowledge, and the knowledge we possess determines the degree of specificity of the ignorance we recognize and serves to characterize the ignorance and its importance. This is why we recognize that Plato’s cave as a place of profound ignorance, lacking in truth and sustained by deception.

Word of the Week

benightedness

/bɪˈnaɪ.ɪd.nəs/ or /bəˈnaɪ.ɪd.nəs/

noun

1. as in *ignorance* the state of being unaware or uninformed

He takes perverse pride in his *benightedness* regarding popular culture.

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