

# The Veil of Unknowledge

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*I borrow this title from an English mystical text written at the end of the fourteenth century, The Veil of Unknowledge, which has long been part of my life. The explicit aim of the book is to tear away this veil of unknowledge, or to give us the means to do it ourselves. The image of the veil invites a reciprocal gesture of raising, tearing, piercing. The desire that motivates this act goes beyond the veil, toward Isis and the truth, the naked figure we're endeavoring to know. Once we have cleared away the obstacles and gained a clear view of her, we—and she—are transformed.*

*This ancient mystical book describes neither an intellectualizing procedure nor a rigorous initiatory process accessible only to an elite. The book calls everyone to a conversion, a change of attitude that will produce a new perception. However, as always when a changed point of view is required, the most difficult thing is to determine the starting point. How to bring someone, anyone, to the realization that he or she lives and breathes inside a veil? How to convince him or her that the plenitude that surrounds and engrosses him, the apparent seriousness and solidity of this entire noisy world of certainties, is in reality but an evanescent, frail fabric of ingenious folds and slippery subterfuges, a negligible something that falls apart at the touch?*

*By succeeding in understanding the veil we escape its trap: the illusion, error, and ignorance of false knowledge can not withstand a lucid eye. But others will never even know that they don't know.*

*I have mentioned this theme of the veil precisely because an inquiry into the reverse side of knowledge is not essentially, or at least not solely, of an epistemological order. It is not only concerned with the nature of knowledge, of its limits, lacunas, uncertainties, promises and contradictions. Although in the idea of what one doesn't know there is of course a negation and deprivation of knowledge, there is also an I and a no. Any problematic relationship between knowledge and non-knowledge assumes a knowing I. The knowing person lies at the heart of any*

*inquiry based on such a viewpoint. In most of the articles that follow, this knowing person is central.*

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*Who are those that don't know, what is it they don't know, and what is the nature of their non-knowledge? This issue of Diogenes explores three aspects of this knowing being: the first is the psychic "I," the one of everyday experience and ordinary concerns; the second the more rare and penetrating "I" of artistic or mystical experience, a most singular one; lastly the "I," at work in the sciences and other knowledge-oriented professions.*

*Who doesn't know? All of us, precisely because each one of us knows so many things and no one is absolutely non-knowing. It is quite clear that all humanity strives to direct its activity and to know. One knows as one breathes; and, as many contemporary biologists have asserted, living itself is an act of knowing: elementary life too can be understood as a collection of activities through which an organism interprets, assimilates, and adjusts to, its environment. The more that the language of biology approximates the language of computers, the more living behavior seems akin to cognitive behavior, and the more the description of cognitive and vital activities overlap.*

*There are very few human activities that do not, in some way, have a cognitive function. There are very few moments in life that add nothing to a person's assimilation of the world. On this level sense equals knowledge. Everything we do and experience produces information, interpretation, discoveries and confirmations. It is consciousness itself that is simultaneously living and knowing. It is thus general human experience that provides the basis for a potential anthropology of knowing.*

*Knowledge is a question of everyone at all times. Humanity has never been outside of knowledge: neither collectively during the very long pre-historical period and the mystery of human beginnings; nor at the beginning of each person's individual existence, in the very first moments of life. The new-born is never alien to knowing. If in his awakening he were not already actively knowing, how could he do so later on? The knowledge acquired and integrated in the first moments of life is more powerful than the immensity of what he doesn't know, and even of what he will never know.*

*Knowing: part of what makes it so important and fundamental to each one of us is that in a certain sense it is common to and shared by all of us. General experience, everyday experience that everyone lives by, is therefore*

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not, to a certain extent at least, outside the scope of this inquiry. Nor are the experiences of all periods and cultures. From this sociological and anthropological standpoint, we call knowledge what has been invested with the social status and function of knowledge. Knowledge is an interpretative mechanism tied to certain behaviors and attitudes: this mechanism exists collectively, it is received and transmitted, imposed and interiorized; it is adhered to personally, either by submitting to it and defining oneself in relation to it (for example, within a religious framework, but this pertains to the scientific framework as well), or by personally applying or practicing it (as is the case for modern and traditional technologies).

To say that no one is completely devoid of knowledge is not tantamount to saying that all knowing relations are equivalent. On the contrary: all societies produce experts, since there exist bodies of knowledge that must be managed, preserved, transmitted, or hidden. Societies therefore distinguish between the small number of people who possess knowledge (in some cultures they are priests, in others the members of learned and scientific professions) and the large number who do not. This preliminary distribution obviously does not deal with the diversity of "I"s and their various relations to knowledge and the knowable. There are a thousand situations and ways of being in relation to a lack of knowledge, just as there are a thousand forms or zones of ignorance. In particular there exist thousands of ways for knowledge to escape our grasp altogether, whether we are talking about something (still) unknown, about something that is (perhaps) unknowable, about an impasse or mystery that acts as a methodological stimulus, about amnesia as a problem of identity, or about the existence of secret information that becomes a means of power. Diverse as our inquiry into non-knowledge will be, it can only be carried out against this background of the knowledge in which we live and that shapes us.

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Although there are many kinds of knowledge, in principle all of it could be organized into a finite number of areas and fields. The encyclopedia is not infinite: in theory it should be possible to map it. The reverse side of knowledge, however, offers us no such clearly definable territory. It can neither be completely explored nor immediately grasped. One could call it the empire of the manifold: a startling, oblique, atomized wealth. Here stands out learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*); an ignorance that is

materialized in the white book that the Si-Yeou-Ki, the Pilgrim Ape, is offered at the end of his long quest for wisdom. However, terrified by its indeterminate perfection, the plenitude of its whiteness, or perhaps fearing that the Emperor, who ordered the expedition, will simply not be able to understand its result, the Ape refuses the book. Here too another kind of ignorance—crass, brutal and humiliating—reigns; the inequality of knowledge that the members of the revolutionary French Convention found more disturbing and radical than the inequality of birth and wealth. Does there exist, between these two kinds of ignorance, an axis, a gradation, an order? No: nothing coordinates them, each problem makes its demands as if it were the only one. Nothing can summarize this wealth of penury, no category encompasses it; this ignorance eludes us by taking on unexpected forms through singular cases. This lack is superabundant and inexhaustible; no matter where one looks the lack looms into view, always lively and always different.

The most familiar kind of non-knowledge exists for a single subject alone. It concerns that which I don't know (yet), but which is not unknown as such. Others, sometimes everyone else, know it. Apprenticeships, instruction, all forms of education, are of this type. The library is the universe of the already-known arrayed before me. But who knows the library completely, who possesses it entirely?

Libraries hold archives and allow them to accumulate. Intellectual memory, however, does not retain everything. Much of what has been known and the object of a field of knowledge in the past, with its experts and its successes, has been lost. Entire bodies of knowledge once considered important have been nullified because scornfully rejected by learned authorities. Certain ancient fields of speculative knowledge (demonology, for example), practical knowledge both popular and professional (such as healing herb teas), and knowledge that no longer has any social relevance (heraldry), are sometimes granted an anemic existence at the margins of learned memory. Some of these fallen fields of knowledge have been expressly—and even polemically—rejected as inadequate or out-of-date. Other fields have never been explicitly rejected on cognitive grounds: they have simply been abandoned. Surely there exists some kind of necessity or right to forget, to lose, to ignore, to allow to disappear. However, is it fair to say that reason no longer has anything to learn from these abandoned debris of knowledge?

How should we interpret this immense mass of materials that we've accepted not to know: either because it is impossible to know in the posi-

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tivist sense—impossible to know and therefore unimportant because not cognitively interesting; or because we consider it useless to know, unimportant in the sense that another area of knowledge currently interests us; unimportant because we don't need it for our present intellectual purposes. More broadly we neglect what is not our subject; others—whose domain and field of specialty it is—will take it up. Anyone engaged in research knows that there exist areas of legitimate and productive research activity that the researcher has renounced. The division of research into disciplines offers the promise of a clearly defined field of potential activity. With one condition: one must renounce other potential fields.

It will perhaps be pointed out that this fragmented situation, which is both the price and result of specialization, is currently complained about by all. However, there is a still more serious renunciation that remains unnoticed and perhaps unconscious: I also renounce knowing whatever doesn't interest me personally. We must recognize the role played by limits of personal interest and curiosity—limits that often determine both our strokes of luck and what we will reject. We must recognize that any passionate interest or choice limits the extent of our curiosity. We are not equally receptive to everything, not ready to take in all that we encounter. Our interests focus our attention, giving it substance and contrast; our interests nourish our concentration but also enclose it. When intellectual curiosity becomes desire and even passion, it no longer knows that it doesn't know what it doesn't include. An intense preference blinds the creative mind to everything else. One's work shop is also a refusal: a particularly terrifying refusal because it is indispensable and because it also offers real results. The fact that exclusive attention is one of the conditions of creative labor is yet one more expression of finitude.

There is another, more vulgar and widespread, kind of inattention, which results from a lack of intellectual desire. We are speaking of indifference. To paraphrase Plato, it is penury without desire, which can itself never give rise to an Eros of knowledge. This destructive inattention can also turn into the closed mind that decides in advance that there is nothing to be learned from looking in a certain direction. This closed-mindedness of prejudice makes invisible whatever it refuses to see. Wanting to see nothing, it denies in advance to the other the possibility of being interesting. Here ignorance is doubled: it implies not only not knowing that there is something (in the other's ideas and person) to be known or perceived, it is also not wanting to know; so much so that in the face of

*this blindness, this obsessive inattention of prejudice, perceiving is an advance, to be perceived a victory.*

*We can measure neither the extent nor impact of our renunciations to know; but neither can we measure the extent or impact of our aspirations. In short, our relationship to knowledge embodies a profound ambivalence. This ambivalence is well expressed in the idea of aporia. Although aporia is in fact a stepping stone to all the great transformations of knowledge, it is taken as a sign of failure. Often called sterile it can in fact be extremely fruitful, since in forcing us to look away, it enables us to seek out a new path, to begin over again and differently, and approach the known and the unknown in a new way.*

*As Jean D'Ormesson, Ayyam Wassef and Bernard Williams point out, what is unknown that we are able to talk about is situated at the edge and margins of what is known. It is not the other of knowledge: but rather its companion and its mobile limit. What gives the act of knowing its special form and stake is precisely this ability to guess or even specify its lack, almost to anticipate what escapes us. Knowledge is spurred through its complex adventures by an unknown that does not quite leave us completely speechless. Knowledge dreams itself along this unknown, just as those who want to know (and whose motivations are simultaneously impure and legitimate) keep on dreaming, as do the detective, the jealous lover, the theoretical physicist.*