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Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know (Book Review)

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one for which all in their own ways advocated, and thus all move into different projects disconnected to their war-year efforts. The sense one gets is that they all give up, with the exception of Weil, who had already died by this point (170ff, 190ff). In the afterward Jacobs concentrates on Jacques Ellul, and the ways in which Ellul moves in a different direction from these intellectuals as he thinks about Christian life in a post-Christian world. It is hard to know if Jacobs is optimistic or pessimistic about the place of the Christian intellectual in helping to shape the world today. While he lauds his subjects, ultimately he has to admit that “they came perhaps a century too late, after the reign of technocracy had become so complete that none can foresee the end of it while this world lasts” (206). And he seems to know, or at least hope, that another generation of thinkers will rise and attempt

to shape the patterns of culture. But he also seems to question whether or not they will arise on time, or show up too late like these thinkers (206).

Jacobs’ book is well worth a read by anyone interested in wrestling with the Christian’s role in post-Christian society, those interested in any of these literary figures particularly, or even those who simply enjoy Jacobs’ prose. One of the most enjoyable aspects of this book for me is Jacobs’ readings on a variety of texts by these intellectuals. At times, it was almost as if I had the opportunity to eavesdrop in a Jacobs’ seminar on these writers, and as a result I look forward to carving out time to reread many of these texts. Alan Jacobs has my thanks for writing this book that has shaped my subsequent thinking, teaching, and writing.

Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know. Daniel R. DeNicola. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017. 250 pp. ISBN 978-0-262-03644-3. Reviewed by Dr. Carl P. Fictorie, Professor of Chemistry, Dordt University.

In *Understanding Ignorance*, Daniel DeNicola invites us into a paradox, an attempt to understand what we don’t know. Early in the book, he acknowledges this paradox and confronts possible objections to his efforts to understand ignorance: “[p]rofessing to write a whole book on ignorance,” he says, “reeks of clever irony and invites sarcasm” (10). Yet the paradox of the title drew me into reading this book. I learned that there is a wealth of knowledge about ignorance, and understanding facets of our ignorance aids in our understanding our knowledge. In this comprehensive but not exhaustive overview, DeNicola shows that understanding something about ignorance is very helpful to knowledge and wisdom.

DeNicola is Professor of Philosophy at Gettysburg College, and while the book is philosophical in tone, it is not overly technical, so it meets his goal of being approachable by a wide range of readers (xii). At the same time, the book serves as groundwork for the development of a new field of epistemology that integrates knowledge and ignorance into a single discipline (13, 208). Time will tell whether that goal was achieved and whether this field takes hold in academic circles.

In the opening chapter, DeNicola provides his impetus for studying ignorance. He surveys modern Western culture and observes a “tenacious strain of anti-intellectualism in American life” (7). Published in 2017, *Understanding Ignorance* was presumably

written just before or at the start of Donald Trump’s term as president, and the author clearly sees and laments the era of “fake news” in this larger anti-intellectual context. It is precisely because of this anti-intellectualism that a book such as this is needed. DeNicola reminds us that Western culture from the time of Socrates has placed great value on knowledge while viewing ignorance as a vice (9). As we progress through the book, the author argues that not all knowledge is good and not all ignorance is bad. In fact, understanding ignorance is, for the author, necessary if we are to gain knowledge.

A nuanced discussion of two conceptual challenges is the subject of the second chapter. First, DeNicola describes ignorance as a negative concept, one which indicates the absence of something, in this case the lack of knowledge (16). This concept can become problematic when we try to treat this lack as a real entity in and of itself. The author suggests that “ignorance implies the capacity to learn,” making ignorance a key part of the structure of knowledge (18).

The second conceptual challenge is the paradox that to try to understand ignorance must necessarily destroy that ignorance with knowledge, the problem implied in the title of the book. However, DeNicola argues that this is conflating the concept of ignorance with the content or subject of that ignorance. It is possible to know that one does not know something without specifying what that something is (19).

Having established the possibility of a meaningful discussion of ignorance, DeNicola introduces a set of four spatial metaphors that become the framework for the remainder of the book. Let us look at each of these metaphors in turn.

The first metaphor is the notion of ignorance as a place (32). Herein we are introduced to two places: ignorance as a horrible place that we want to leave by entering the place of understanding, and ignorance as a place of sweet innocence before we are tainted with knowledge of the world. He uses Plato's Allegory of the Cave to illustrate ignorance as a type of hell and uses the Garden of Eden to illustrate ignorance as a type of heaven. In both places, the occupants are unaware of their ignorance, lacking needed self-knowledge to be aware of their state, and thus they require outside intervention to escape. The process is irreversible; one cannot return to the cave or the garden and lose the knowledge obtained.

In the context of Plato's cave, DeNicola concludes that since "ignorance may be recognized and ascribed only from the perspective of knowledge," the cave dwellers do not know what they do not know and are the worse off for it (35-36). The infinite vastness of our lack of knowledge is a repeated theme throughout the text, one that is intended to keep us intellectually humble.

DeNicola next presents ignorance as a state of innocence in the context of the Garden of Eden. From his perspective, which he describes as "provocatively revisionist" (49), the Garden is a place of an innocence grounded in Adam and Eve's ignorance of the broader world, and thus the Fall "marks the rise of self-consciousness, autonomy, and responsibility" (49). That is, the fall is a type of epistemic liberation rather than a rebellious act of selfishness. As DeNicola proceeds to compare the Garden with the Cave, his analysis presumes that awareness, experience, and knowledge are innately good things. He overlooks the possibility of a sinless world where innocence with knowledge is possible.

The second metaphor is the notion of ignorance as a boundary. In this metaphor, the idea of a map is the central image—an ancient map such as Ptolemy's from the second century, on which he detailed known features of the world but also regions that had not yet been discovered, the *terra incognita* or unknown territory (67). Maps show territory, but they also show boundaries between different places or domains. For DeNicola's purpose, the key boundary is that between the known and the unknown: "Ignorance is the domain where learning

has not yet penetrated" (67). We can articulate, or map out, our knowledge, often in the form of a circle on a whiteboard. Knowledge is that which is inside the circle, while ignorance is that which is outside the circle. The sobering aspect of this image is that knowledge is bounded and finite, while ignorance is unbounded and incomprehensibly vast (69).

DeNicola does not suggest that seeking knowledge is futile (45). It is possible to know something without having comprehensive and exhaustive knowledge; this in fact may well be the normal state of affairs for all our knowledge (71-72). In this context, the author surveys several classes of ignorance such as simple ignorance that is unintentional, to various kinds of intentional ignorance that reflect conscious choices by individuals to avoid or withhold knowledge. While he acknowledges the appropriate need for privacy, he advocates for transparency and criticizes secrecy in most other situations (88-91)

In this metaphor of boundary, DeNicola introduces ethics into his discussion. Readers of this journal will wonder if DeNicola builds his ethical framework from a Christian worldview. The answer is that no such foundation is evident. Rather, his ethical system is grounded in the notion of the innate human aspiration to truth (9, 79, 98). His analysis begins with the notion of basic belief. Someone who has a belief takes that belief to be true. However, it is possible that the belief is actually false if not adequately justified, and DeNicola suggests that false beliefs become morally problematic when the believer consciously retains the belief even when shown it is false (99). A problem in this logic is that many if not all beliefs are held based on limited evidence, which can undermine the belief, the ability to believe, or the ability to critique a belief.

This point leads to a new chapter exploring the virtues and vices of ignorance. DeNicola introduces an approach known as *virtue epistemology*, a method that focuses on virtuous traits needed to pursue, possess, protect, transmit, and apply knowledge (116). A key assumption of epistemology is that knowledge is the only epistemic value; knowledge is the only end-goal, and as such it is good, a notion that DeNicola qualifies. Virtue epistemology leads to the position that there ought to be some boundaries on our personal or collective knowledge. Not all knowledge is inherently good, and thus not all ignorance is inherently bad, in DeNicola's view (133). At the same time, he also retains the classic notion that being ignorant, the opposite of being wise, is not virtuous.

While boundaries suggest that there is something on the other side of the boundary, DeNicola's third metaphor of ignorance as a limit suggests that there are also boundaries beyond which there is nothing (137-138). The line of inquiry has no further to go, or the set of resources has been exhausted. There are limits grounded in the finiteness and directionality of time, the structural and cognitive nature of our biology, and the axiomatic and systemic limits of formal and mathematical logic. While some have suggested that we are approaching the "end of knowledge" (151), DeNicola notes that new discoveries likely still exist, given the inexhaustibility of factual data that will cause us to reconsider our theoretical frameworks in the future. In a brief discussion of the possible omniscience of a god, he concludes that the implication of omniscience for a god is an unstable concept (153). I think he fails to recognize that finite humans ought to find it impossible to comprehensively understand an omniscient god.

The final chapter explores the metaphor of ignorance as a horizon in the sense of one's point of view. One can see so far, which is the boundary, but when one moves, that horizon moves as well, so the boundary is always out of reach (179). His point is that it is the interaction of the known and unknown that is key to understanding "epistemic aspects of the human condition" (180).

We see the effect of moving horizons when we learn. New knowledge also generates new questions, as any critical thinker understands. As we move to learn more, the horizon shifts, and more ignorance becomes apparent, as unknown unknowns become known unknowns (185). At the same time, the awareness of our ignorance is what sparks imagination and creativity. The pursuit of knowledge is in fact movement into ignorance, a view that resonates with my scientifically trained mind (186).

As he concludes the book, DeNicola's expertise comes to the fore as he articulates his understanding of the purpose of philosophy. He writes, "Philosophy

is not a science: its task is not to assemble and validate a set of facts, not even to produce new propositional knowledge of the world in a narrow sense....The philosopher's task is, in the first instance, to maintain, sustain, and expand our sense of the possible....*The philosopher is the shepherd of possibilities*" (189). He notes that philosophy, while it encourages knowledge, wisdom, curiosity, and discovery, ultimately understands that complete escape from ignorance is impossible, just as touching the horizon is impossible. In an epilogue, DeNicola delves briefly into the technicalities of epistemology. While he acknowledges the value of Cartesian-based modern epistemology, he argues that epistemology needs to broaden its scope to include a grander vision that includes knowledge, understanding, and ignorance.

DeNicola returns repeatedly throughout the book to the challenge of public ignorance. There are different types, from lack of understanding of common knowledge (75), irrational beliefs (7), and privileged ignorance (113), to the right to believe or not believe what one wants (99). It is the last types that he criticizes, as it leads to cultural disharmony, isolated likeminded groups, and even various kinds of violence. His ethics of ignorance, as noted above, clearly favors the benefits of knowledge while allowing for limited instances of willful, intentional ignorance.

DeNicola has written an interesting survey of a curious topic. He achieves his goal of writing a comprehensive but not exhaustive overview while still providing enough depth and many examples to illustrate his points. He integrates ideas from a wide range of disciplines, many of which are dealing with questions of how to manage ignorance. He acknowledges a place for ignorance in everyday living and in the discipline of epistemology but sees this as a necessary qualifier on the traditional notion of the inherent value of knowledge in and of itself. While we cannot ignore ignorance, we cannot allow it to define our knowledge and understanding.