

Editorial Views

In Praise of Ignorance—Sometimes

FRANCIS BACON wrote in 1620 that the accumulation of knowledge “rather inclines us to admire our wealth rather than perceive our poverty.” A moment’s reflection should convince any intelligent person that ignorance is the normal human condition. Even those who are familiar with all that is known about any subject must be considered ignorant: They are less ignorant than other people but they nevertheless know only an infinitesimal fraction of what is knowable about that subject. The most learned expert must reach the limits of his knowledge when, like a do-it-yourself Socrates, he asks himself questions concerning what he knows.

Ignorance can be useful in some circumstances. Ignorance combined with intelligence is a stimulus to imagination and a spur to study. On the other hand, ignorance combined with stupidity (or foolishness) is a deterrent to inquiry. It is not always easy to recognize the combination of ignorance and stupidity, since it may express itself in language that is superficially impressive; in fact, it must do so in order to attract an audience. However, when the passage of time or the heat of criticism causes the words to evaporate,

the residue is found to be an amorphous sticky blob—or nothing at all.

A serious disadvantage of the combination of ignorance and stupidity is its effect on vision: it prevents the recognition of innovators. Innovators are usually so far ahead of the crowd that they either are hardly visible or else can be seen only because of the dust that they raise. The latter is particularly unfortunate since stupid persons mistake the cloud of dust for the man who caused it by building a new road. On the other hand, the combination of ignorance and intelligence favors the recognition of the innovator who is far in advance of the crowd or else permits the correct interpretation of clouds of dust visible at a distance across unknown territory.

Intelligence is essential for the very recognition of ignorance: the stupid (or foolish) are almost certain to remain ignorant of their own ignorance. On the other hand, the intelligent not only recognize their own ignorance but use it to direct their inquiring thought.

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