

Common metaphors for ignorance and uncertainty are highly informative about how it is regarded and used in a society. I regard such metaphors as important for the reasons elaborated in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's classic [1980](#) "Metaphors We Live By." To poet [Robert Frost](#), metaphor "is all there is of thinking. It may not seem far for the mind to go, but it is the mind's furthest. The richest accumulation of the ages is the noble metaphors we have rolled up." For those of us who would dispute Frost's grand claim by pointing to science as a mode of thought with no place for metaphors, I recommend Theodore Brown's [2003](#) book, "Making Truth: Metaphor in Science."

Most Western metaphors for ignorance, uncertainty, and the unknown have a negative cast to them. This negativity is symptomatic of (and may be partly responsible for) a blind-spot in Western culture, namely a tendency to overlook positive manifestations and aspects of the unknown. Drawing attention to this blind-spot is one of the chief motivations behind this blog.

Where do our ideas about ignorance and uncertainty come from? I think there are two sources: *commonsense realism*, and *commonsense sociality*. Commonsense realism encompasses everything we believe or think about how the non-social world works. Commonsense sociality refers to our beliefs about the social world and includes our commonsense psychology. The main reason for distinguishing these two sources is that a number of important characteristics we attribute to people (e.g., intentions) we do not attribute to objects in the non-social world, and that has direct consequences on how our commonsense theories direct us to think about ignorance.

Here is a sample of metaphors for ignorance from mainly modern English-speaking cultures. These are an extended version of the lists I presented in the [2008](#) book I co-edited with Gabriele Bammer.

Sensing

1. Ignorance is obstructed vision. Ignorance is blindness. To know is to see. Vague ideas are blurry, murky, hazy, unclear, obscured. Knowledge is brilliant, illuminating, and enlightening. Ignorance is dim and dark.
2. Ideas can be felt. Vague or uncertain ideas are soft and woolly. Objective knowledge, truth and logic are hard. Incomplete ideas are rough, finished ideas are polished.
3. Ambiguity and vagueness are soft and dull. Precision is hard and sharp.
4. We can smell knowledge, get onto or lose the scent of it. Bad ideas stink. Good ideas are sweet.

Navigating, gathering and hunting

1. Learning and discovery are a journey. To know or discover is to arrive at a destination. A path can be cleared or paved to help us learn or discover. Learning is finding one's way. Ignorance is straying from the path, getting lost, going in the wrong direction, going around in circles, wandering aimlessly, failing to arrive.

2. Seeking knowledge is gathering and hunting. The unknown is prey. Sought-after ideas, facts, and truths can be elusive, hard to find, slippery. They can be apprehended, grasped, or homed in on. They can also escape. Errors or bad ideas are off-target, wide of the mark.

Craftwork and art

1. Ideas are food (for thought). Data are raw and have yet to be cooked into knowledge. Thinking or analyzing is cooking. Bad ideas are half-baked or even raw.
2. Learning or discovering is carving, sculpting, and constructing. We can carve knowledge. We can build it into a grand edifice. Incomplete ideas are rough-hewn; complete ones have been fully worked, finely crafted, well constructed. We work with building-blocks to construct knowledge.
3. Knowledge is the objects in a setting. Ignorance is the spaces between the objects. Drawing the spaces between objects gives us a picture of the unknown.

Structures

1. Ignorance is gaps or holes. Ignorance is a vacuum. Knowledge covers a surface or fills a container. An ignoramus is devoid of knowledge, whereas an expert is brimming with knowledge. An incomplete theory has holes or gaps, whereas a complete theory covers the terrain.
2. Ideas, theories, and arguments are structures, such as buildings and bridges. Uncertain or erroneous ones are shaky, badly constructed, unfounded. They collapse, don't hold together, fall apart, can be knocked down.

Direction, location and time

1. Knowledge is up. Ignorance is down.
2. Knowledge is forward. Ignorance is backward.
3. Knowledge is inside. Ignorance is outside.
4. Immediacies are certainties. Delay is uncertainty. The farther a potential event is in the future, the more uncertain that it will occur.
5. Certainties are nearby, close up. Uncertainties are distant, far away.

Geography and rooms

1. The unknown is wilderness. Knowing is domesticating and taming the wild.
2. The border between the known and unknown is a wild frontier. Learning and discovery push back the frontier, diminishing the domain of ignorance.
3. The unknown is an ocean. Knowledge is an island. The bigger the island, the larger the border between the known and unknown.
4. The unknown is an abyss, a chasm. Uncertainties are shifting sands. When we know, we are on solid ground, we are grounded.

5. The unknown is a secret. Nature keeps secrets. The unknown is hidden, locked away. Discovery or learning is unlocking and revealing.
6. Knowledge is a mansion with many rooms. The rooms are categories of knowledge. Ignorance resides in the corridor, hallways and stairways. We may enter the rooms if the doors are unlocked or if we have keys to the locks, but otherwise those rooms are barred to us.
7. The unknown is a dark room. You feel your way around the room, bumping into and becoming gradually familiar with the objects in it. Eventually you find the light-switch, and you can see everything in that room. But there's a door that leads into another dark room...
8. [Plato's Cave](#) is an extended metaphor for ignorance, in which the cave-dwellers perceive only the shadows of things outside the cave, but take the shadows to be the whole of reality.

War

1. Inquiry is invasion. Learning is conquering. Ignorance is conquered or overcome by knowledge and ideas. Deception falls before truth.
2. Argument is war. Rational argument is still war. Ambiguity or indecision is internal conflict, a house divided, a person in two minds.

Power, equality and tyranny

1. Knowledge is power. Ignorance is helplessness and impotence. Uncertainty or doubt still is impotence. We succumb or languish under ignorance.
2. Ignorance is being stuck, enslaved. Knowledge makes us free.
3. Ignorance is inequality. Shared knowledge is equality, democracy, freedom. Unshared knowledge is selfishness, autocracy, elitism, oppression. Secrecy is selfish. Privacy and expertise are elitist.
4. Ideas and knowledge are resources. Knowledge and information are currency. Ignorance is poverty, want. Bad ideas are worthless, bankrupt. An expert has a wealth of knowledge. Good ideas are rich; bad ideas are impoverished.

Sex and procreation

1. Innocence is chastity. Skepticism, doubt, or uncertainty is still chastity. To become known is to be violated. To believe or be persuaded is to be seduced.
2. Information exchange is sexual intercourse, cross-pollination. Good ideas are fertile and can procreate; they are productive. Bad ideas are sterile or barren, unproductive.

Feelings

1. Uncertainty is insecurity and ignorance is fear. We are afraid we don't know.
2. Uncertainty is unsure, unconfident. Certainty is sure and confident. We are sure we know.

3. Uncertainty is hesitant, indecisive. Doubt is immobilizing. Certainty is decisive, active.
4. Not knowing is painful. Doubt is pain, agony. To know or believe is to attain relief from pain.

If you want more positive metaphors for ignorance, uncertainty, or the unknown then your best bet is to look for metaphors for positively-badged unknowns, such as “freedom.” Here’s a small sample.

1. Freedom is flying. Freedom is the sky.
2. Freedom is open space, room to move. Freedom is broad horizons.
3. Freedom is unfettered, unshackled.
4. Freedom is release, escape.
5. Freedom is an open road.
6. Freedom is wild animals (e.g., birds, wild horses), wilderness.
7. Freedom is riskless (nothing to lose).
8. Freedom is jazz, improvisation.
9. Freedom is dancing.

Send me your favorite metaphors for ignorance, uncertainty or the unknown, or any you think I’ve neglected—I’m sure I’ve missed a bunch of them.