

5. Virtuous Ignorance (14/9/10)

In his by now famous [review](#) of Sarah Palin's "Going Rogue," Jonathan Raban described her book as a "four-hundred-page paean to virtuous ignorance." Raban was referring to the kind of homespun philosophy that is exemplified by expressions such as "I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." He characterizes it as a "commonsense conservatism" whereby morally upright laypeople are better able than experts to judge the merits of, say, American foreign policy, because too much expertise clouds judgment. Some commentators opined that "virtuous ignorance" is another way of saying "anti-intellectual." Be that as it may, I would like to focus on the concept of virtuous ignorance itself. I've mentioned this concept elsewhere ([Smithson 2008](#)), and I think it holds plenty of riches for anyone who cares to dig into it. Once we know what to look for, virtuous ignorance turns up in lots of places, and not just among right-wing politicians or, for that matter, laypeople.

I'll begin by drawing a distinction between ignorance as a virtue and ignorance as a preferred state. An old friend of mine was involved in early selection tests administered to men applying to the Australian Air Force. He used to claim credit for having selected two airmen in particular: One who dropped a dud bomb on a bicyclist during a practice run and another who retracted the landing gear on a Mirage fighter-jet when it was on the ground. My friend also told me that one of the admission test questions asked applicants for the name of the artist who painted "Blue Boy." If they correctly responded "Thomas Gainsborough," that was sufficient to reject them. There was no place in the Australian Air Force for men who knew that Gainsborough painted "Blue Boy."

Is this an example of virtuous ignorance? Not quite. While it displays a preference for Air Force men who do not know their Gainsborough, it stops short of claiming this as a virtue. In other words, the selectors may not have believed that knowing about Gainsborough diminished a man's worth. Instead, they may have been merely pragmatic: Perhaps they believed that men with interests in and education about the arts would not fit in well to the Australian Air Force of the time.

Here's an example closer to virtuous ignorance, and one that isn't attributable to conservative politicians or anti-intellectuals. In fact, it involves highly educated people. Back in the 70's I took a PhD in sociology. My then fellow sociology graduate students and I hadn't read any psychology beyond a few selected works by Freud, but we all knew we hated psychology, with the possible exception of Freud. More than that, some of us also knew that psychology was full of reductionist, positivist, medical-model-following reactionaries who were blind instruments of the capitalist order.

Eventually, nevertheless, my curiosity was piqued. What was so dastardly about psychology? I decided to find out. When I revealed to my peers that I had started taking a class in psychology, my status immediately plummeted. For them, *not* studying psychology indicated superiority of intellect. True cognoscenti would know better than to waste their time reading up on such an obviously misguided discipline.

Years later, I ran across anecdotal evidence that this view was not confined to students. A psychologist colleague attended a seminar by a very prominent sociologist, and was inspired by the sociologist's portrayal of a revolutionary future for the social sciences. However, he was puzzled that no mention was made of psychology or psychologists. Afterward, he approached the professor and asked him how psychology would fit into his vision of the future. The sociologist replied that he had once, long ago, taken a class in psychology but tried not to think about that unfortunate lapse in judgment. These days, I work in a psychology department. Clearly, I have gone over to the Dark Side.

I'm not picking on sociologists. Plenty of examples are available in other disciplines. Another psychologist friend of mine, very well educated and highly intelligent, once confessed to me that she was proud that she knew nothing about economics. In these examples, ignorance is made virtuous by converting it into a kind of status marker. Professing ignorance of the "right" things can be an indicator of high status. In many societies, class and/or caste distinctions have been partly based on this. Not so long ago in English society, knowledge of a mere craft or trade (versus an art or discipline) was considered beneath nobility.

So the issue isn't in the decision or preference not to know X, it's the moral judgments about those who do or don't know X. This is the key to the fascinating realm of virtuous ignorance. At first, the very phrase may seem almost oxymoronic, or at the very least, something to make fun of. However, it isn't too difficult to find cases of virtuous ignorance with serious moral purposes underpinning them. More on this shortly.

But first, can people think that ignorance is virtuous in other ways than conferring status on the ignoramus? In the first words to his book, "Strange Weather" ([Ross 1991](#)), on the Acknowledgements page, the self-appointed critic of science Andrew Ross declared "This book is dedicated to all the science teachers I never had. It could only have been written without them." Taken literally, the second sentence seems unexceptional. I think we would all grant that had he even a bare-bones scientific education, Ross could not have written the book that he did. But some of those rebutting Ross' work, such as biologist Paul Gross and mathematician Norman Levitt, interpreted his declaration as a hubristic "boast" ([Gross and Levitt 1994](#): 91).

Why might this dedication have been a boast, and if so, what could Ross have been boasting about? A clear hint comes in the Introduction on pg. 8: "As I lacked the training of a scientific intellectual and the accompanying faith, however vestigial or self-critical, in the certainties of the scientific method... My position, then, became that of a cultural critic..." There we have it: Ross is claiming not only that scientists are indoctrinated into a faith, but also anyone undergoing scientific "training" becomes contaminated by this faith and, worse still, cannot be rid of it even through self-criticism. It's like the stain of Original Sin. Therefore, contamination can be avoided only by *not studying science*.

It isn't a big leap from the idea that knowledge might be a contaminant to the notion of taboos against knowledge. Where do knowledge taboos come from? What creates and sustains them? The anthropologist Mary Douglas wrote a classic book "Purity and Danger" ([Douglas 1967](#)), with an intriguing first approximation to a general theory of taboos. She claimed that there are two kinds of proscription in taboos: One against threats or dangers, and another against pollution or contamination.

So, let's try this out on knowledge. First, some information could be declared off-limits because knowing it would pose a danger (to oneself or to others). Or perhaps the process of acquiring the information would incur dangers. What kinds of danger lurk here? In the first case, perhaps the most obvious example is knowledge that can be used against other people. In the second case, the dangers could range from physical (e.g., experimenting with explosives) to social (e.g., committing illegal acts in the pursuit of knowledge).

Now, consider the second kind of taboo, pollution or contamination. "Innocence," when it refers to a kind of saintly naivety, is a familiar but interesting kind of virtuous ignorance. In Christian traditions it is associated with the tree of knowledge, forbidden fruit, and the events that got humanity kicked out of Eden. Those who have lost their innocence or known sin are "tainted." Mary Douglas defined pollution as dirt in the wrong place. Translated into the realm of knowledge and ignorance, the crucial idea is that information can be in a "wrong place." For instance, some kinds of knowledge may be considered

appropriate for adults but not for children. One of the most intriguing aspects of innocence is the notion that its maintenance often requires the protection of innocents by more knowledgeable (and therefore unclean) guardians.

At first glance, proscriptions against knowledge raise familiar images of oppression and domination—Book burning, bans against certain teachings. This is fair enough; examples abound of ignorance imposed by one group on another. Nevertheless, virtuous ignorance also can be found at the base of benign or even benevolent arrangements agreed to by society as a whole.

Privacy, for instance, amounts to a multilateral ignorance arrangement, whereby we agree that certain kinds of information about ourselves will not be available to others without our consent. Respecting others' privacy is virtuous behavior, thus, virtuous ignorance. People who violate privacy norms pose a threat to the person(s) about whom they have obtained private information. A right to privacy amounts to a right to at least some control over who knows what about you. Secrecy is unilateral; privacy is multilateral and therefore privacy invokes social norms for good conduct. Virtuous people do not poke their noses into matters that are none of their business.

Social relations based on trust operate in a similar manner. Trust is not about concealing information, but trust relationships do require observance of an interesting kind of privacy. If one person is monitoring another or insisting that they fully account for their actions, the person under surveillance will conclude that the monitor does not trust them. Trust entails running the risk of being exploited but increases opportunities by rendering the truster more mobile and able to establish cooperative relations more quickly than someone who insists on surveillance and binding contractual relations. Trust, therefore, is both an example of a social relation that requires tolerance of undesired uncertainty (the risk of being exploited) in favor of desired uncertainty (freedom to seize opportunities for new relations) and, of course, virtuous behavior. Good friends don't place one another under 24-7 surveillance.

And so, we have arrived at examples of virtuous ignorance that are socially mandated and underpin some important forms of social capital: Privacy, trust, and friendship. Well and good, one might say, but these are examples of self-imposed, voluntary ignorance. What about the virtues of imposing ignorance on others? I'll take a tour through some of that territory next time.