

In Praise of Not Knowing, Or Why We should Unknow More: Reflections on Knowing and Teaching Ignorance

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How can we remember our ignorance, which our growth requires, when we are using knowledge all the time? —Thoreau, *Walden*

To know or not to know? That is the tension. Freud long ago discovered that humans live in the contradictory space between knowing and not-knowing. The mechanism of disavowal is one strategy we use to know and not-know at the same time, and enjoy while doing so.¹ A contemporary example of how disavowal functions culturally is captured in what Alenka Zupančič observes as the predominant attitude of our time: “The end of the world is coming, but hey, don’t worry, it’s not the end of the world.”² The human propensity to disavow difficult knowledge, even in the face of impending doom, is well depicted in Adam McKay’s 2021 film *Don’t Look Up*. While the film got mixed reviews, and I myself have mixed feelings about it, I find it a useful fiction to invite students into democratic dialogue about the strategies people use to deny traumatic realities and avoid change—even when their lives depend upon it.

The best depiction of disavowal in the film comes when the public begins to acknowledge the earth will actually implode in less than 6 months while the front page of a newspaper reads something like: “Comet approaches earth, will there still be a Superbowl?” Reminiscent of a modern-day Cassandra, Kate Dibiasky, a main character in the film, played by Jennifer Lawrence, is a PhD candidate who discovers the new comet hurtling toward earth, set to wipe out the entire planet. Like Cassandra, who was ill-fated by Apollo to utter true prophecies but never to be believed, Kate finds people will not take her discovery, nor her proclamations of existential threat seriously. The President in the film, played by Meryl Streep, is more interested in playing the polls than in saving the people; popular media, and the highest-ranking morning show, portray Kate as a hysteric their audience can mock and then ignore. Just how different is our present day socio-political “reality” from the depiction in the film?

As I write this, “35 states have introduced legislation that limits what schools can teach about race, American history, politics, and gender and sexual diversity.”³ Suppressed knowledge campaigns designed to disavow our history continue to gain ground. It is clear that the alt right is on the rise in the U.S, and around the globe, threatening to undermine democracy, with their skilled use of “weapons of mass delusion.”⁴ The popularity of candidates who endorse the “Big Lie” of election fraud is stunning. In the words of our PES president, Michele Moses, “Something is clearly awry if people cannot discern truth from lies or conspiracy theories from scientific theories.” Is this predicament a matter of aptitude for discerning truth, or affective investment in desired truths, as in the case of disavowal?

Even more alarming still, the doomsday clock, designed in 1945 by Albert Einstein, along with those enlisted to develop the first atomic weapons, is set to 90 seconds to midnight, warning the public of just how close we are to completely destroying the world—with the dangerous technologies of our own making. Climate catastrophe continues to flood and burn communities out of existence. And yet, these threats of human created existential annihilation are too often depicted and digested as natural occurrences to which we must adapt, rather than collectively organize to change. Social justice educators, activists, and advocates the world over, seem to me to be as cursed as Cassandra, whose predictions of impending doom and calls to action fell on deaf ears. How might we educate for democracy, social solidarity, and sustainability in such undemocratic, dystopian times?

It’s tempting to call upon Kant’s dictum, “Dare to know!” to come to our rescue. Revolutionary as it was in its time for setting in motion Enlightenment dreams of freedom, equality, and democracy, it also unleashed unfettered investment in the projects of knowledge and progress, leading to ongoing colonialist-capitalist exploitation and the twin apocalyptic threats of cultural climate catastrophe and nuclear devastation. And yet, that knowledge is a good, and that shared knowledge is even better, seems to go without saying. That knowledge is good, particularly as we navigate global pandemics of health, wealth, truth, hate, and fear, seems more obvious now than ever. But, as Dany Nobus asks, “should we let this assumption pass unquestioned?”⁵ Perhaps we ought

to consider whether knowledge, and, more importantly, “the epistemological drives behind it, are worth losing.”⁶

In this culture of post truth, climate catastrophe, ever increasing inequality, and expanding polarization, people on both sides of the political divide seem equally invested in knowing what’s best. Whether the issue is COVID 19, or cultural climate catastrophe, entering into a debate armed with knowledge, reason, and information seems to shut down dialogue, make us hard of hearing, and set fierce resistance to new ways of thinking and being into motion. Whether fueled by an anti-intellectual authoritarianism or inspired by a value in epistemology and knowledge with reasons, it seems that knowing might be getting in the way of change, and might even be enabling enjoyment while we avoid mobilizing the revolutionary collective action upon which all of our lives depend. Could it be that in the current climate of so much impending doom, knowing what’s best has started to function as a fetish? Perhaps not-knowing, cultivating a willingness to un-know more, is a viable strategy with which to engage students in transformative dialogue about how we might learn to live better with ourselves, others, and our shared environment.

In this paper, I draw on psychoanalytic theory to explore the counter intuitive proposition that perhaps the time has come to dare to not-know. Psychoanalysis teaches us that it is the act of putting affect into speech that fosters change, not knowledge, information, or understanding. I share elements of a psychoanalytic epistemology, which prioritizes change over knowing or understanding to invite reflection on how not-knowing, un-knowing, and the mobilization of a “knowing ignorance” might be a viable strategy with which to facilitate dialogue across difference in this context of polarization, apathy, and defensiveness (and maybe even inspire the requisite collective action needed to save ourselves and the world).⁷

In what follows, I provide a snapshot of three interwoven, interrelated reasons why we might want to trouble our ways of using knowledge. The first is that knowledge is often called upon to solve problems that are not caused by a lack of information. Secondly, knowledge can become defensive, authoritarian, and when proffered by a domineering mind in the know, it can alienate instead of stimulate thinking and learning. Third, knowing about a problem doesn’t

seem to inspire the requisite action needed to change it. We enjoy being in the know, and the more we enjoy knowing, the more we seem to resist change. Perhaps by exploring some ways we know too well to our detriment, we can become willing to admit not-knowing and the complexity of our emotional worlds—common to all, no matter which side of the political divide we find ourselves on—to inspire change. I conclude by providing a sketch of how mobilizing a knowing-ignorance might help us not-know better together and stimulate collective, transformative, democratic dialogue across political divides.

AGAINST UNDERSTANDING: WHAT'S THE TROUBLE WITH KNOWING?⁸

In a rather underappreciated essay, “‘Wild’ Psychoanalysis,” Freud argued that you cannot cure a symptom with knowledge or information. Telling a person what is wrong with them, and then what to do about it, is likely to exacerbate their problem(s). Diagnosing and prescribing was for Freud, “wild” psychoanalysis, and might be thought of as an authoritarian (mal)practice. Freud shows us that within the fields of psychic and social structures, knowing isn’t healing; furthermore, too often, knowing about a detrimental habit doesn’t amount to changing it, and it can even intensify the destructive behavior. For example, a smoker knows cigarettes are bad, but this knowledge doesn’t deter their smoking. In many cases, the more a smoker is admonished for smoking, the more they resist, the more they smoke. Further, many smokers enjoy the act of smoking, as well as the act of ignoring the knowledge that smoking is harmful to their health. Attempting to rectify the problem of smoking with the knowledge that cigarettes are bad, misses the mark of why the person is smoking in the first place, and fails to address what is at stake in the formation of the symptom. Similarly, providing climate deniers with knowledge, data and, scientific evidence about why we need to change our destructive behavior will usually not convince them to change, and will often intensify their belief that climate disaster is natural, and fuel their search for the information that justifies their position.

More often than not, it is aspects of the person’s emotional world that need to shift, Freud learned, before knowledge can make an impact. “The pathological factor,” he writes of the patient, “is not his ignorance in itself, but

the root of this ignorance in his inner resistances; it was they that first called this ignorance into being, and they still maintain it now.”⁹ So for Freud, there is an emotional factor, an affective attachment, that comes first, and it is the emotional disturbance that then produces the protective investment in ignorance. Attempting to treat the emotional disorder with knowledge sets resistance in motion and fails to grapple with the actual source of the problem. Freud writes:

If knowledge about the unconscious were as important for the patient as people inexperienced in psychoanalysis imagine, listening to lectures or reading books would be enough to cure him. Such measures, however, have as much influence on the symptoms of nervous illness as a distribution of menu-cards in a time of famine has upon hunger. The analogy goes even further than its immediate application; for informing the patient of his unconscious regularly results in an intensification of the conflict in him and an exacerbation of his troubles.¹⁰

If we are willing to learn from Freud, perhaps we might learn to think differently about the nature of our troubled lives, where ignorance is often scapegoated as one of the main problems we need knowledge to solve. Many political projects on the left seem intent on mocking, or presenting as shockingly irresponsible, the ignorance of those on the right, while they pat themselves on the back for being in the know. Political projects on the right seem invested in not being tricked or duped by the experts and authorities of the left. I very much appreciate and admire the work of John Stewart, John Oliver, Hassan Minaj, Trevor Noah, Stephen Colbert, and others, working to bring a little informative joy and humor to people’s lives—if only a joke could save us!¹¹ These are certainly important projects, but as we observe ongoing climate devastation, increasing nuclear threat, and the rise of extremism in the U.S., and around the globe, it is clear that their impact is limited.

Naming, shaming, and blaming the ignorance of those to whom we are politically opposed, I propose, might be thought of as a kind of “wild” education, potentially increasing political divide and apathy for the suffering of others.¹² We might get more traction in motivating revolutionary collective action if we become more attentive to the conflicted emotional entanglements

we all share. By virtue of being a member of the human condition, we all suffer (albeit in different ways and to different degrees), and our suffering takes different forms, shapes, and shades of lack, loss, anxiety, desire, fear, enjoyment, etc., often unacknowledged and misrecognized as such. We cannot hope to solve our suffering by distributing menus in a famine. If we want to address the problems of polarized, mass produced and self-protective ignorance, we might want to note that knowledge alone isn't going to do the trick—we need to grapple with the ambiguous emotions that invest in knowing, mis-knowing, and ignoring, and be willing to examine our propensity to enjoy our various investments.

A psychoanalytic perspective invites us to consider how, similar to the way an emotional disturbance calls upon ignorance to protect a person from becoming more fully aware of that which is disturbing them (thereby avoiding the difficult work involved in change), it is often anxiety due to a hostile, impinging environment that calls the drive to be a mind-in-the-know into action. Like ignorance, knowledge can become a defense against traumatic, difficult realities. Unlike many traditional approaches to Western religious and philosophical doctrine that have treated the body as suspect, as the enemy of truth, psychoanalytic insight shows that it is when the body's needs don't get met well enough that we value mind over body.¹³ A psychoanalytic epistemology centers the needs, desires, the limits of the body as the impetus for thinking, and thinking involves grappling with uncertainty and not-knowing—whereas being in the know seems to foreclose thinking, feeling, learning.¹⁴

In the Anti-Cartesian meditations of psychoanalysis, writes Adam Phillips, Descartes' mind "is an attempted self-cure for a too-problematic dependence," a traumatic and impinging environment. "Descartes' solution to the question of being" Phillips writes, "is the problem for psychoanalysis."¹⁵ A psychoanalytic epistemology shows that when early development is ruptured or put under threat by unassimilable environmental encroachment, we evacuate frustrating affect, and use our minds to maintain ourselves. If early development has been satisfactory, the mind does not exist as a separate, dominating entity in the individual's scheme of things. With satisfactory care, Phillips ventures on, a mind would be an ordinary, unknowing, uncertain, democratic participant in one's non hierarchicalized psychic-somatic life, rather than an excessive,

all-knowing preoccupation. In other words, for psychoanalysis, a disembodied mind in the know is “a necessary fiction invented to cover for, to manage, any felt unreliability in the care-taking environment, and it is therefore potentially tainted by resentment,”¹⁶ misrecognized as such. Whenever the world is not good enough, one may install a knowing mind instead, which becomes a “kind of enraged bureaucrat, a master of circumstances.”¹⁷

It is noteworthy that a disembodied mind, as described by Phillips, “cannot bear the kind of knowledge called not-knowing” and lives by convictions and information on which it is an expert.¹⁸ A healthy development means, in part at least, to learn by thriving on ignorance, fundamental as it is to the human condition. Knowing in this sense, writes Phillips, “is the opposite of and the (false) self-cure for an unacceptable dependence. In other words, “we only need to know that which we cannot trust depending on.”¹⁹ If we had a more secure social structure, where folks didn’t fear for their basic needs, perhaps there would be less investment in knowing about the “Big Lie” and other perilous forms of authoritarian, resentful domineering minds insisting they are right and know best; perhaps there would be more openness to admit ignorance—with which we are all fundamentally beset. Instead of aiming for mastery and certainty, perhaps we can work to encourage recognition of the limits of knowledge by becoming more curious about our ways of knowing and not-knowing together.

If we are willing to learn from psychoanalysis, we might be willing to consider whether our biggest political problems involve not a lack of knowledge, nor different forms of structural or self-protective ignorance, but what and how we fear, desire, and most importantly, enjoy. Because being in the know is satisfying, providing one with a sense of mastery and certainty, we might want to become more cautious about being in the know, and work to keep our not-knowing close by at all times. Knowing and understanding satisfy, as Fink argues, and provide us with a sense of gratification, and thus, might be treated with more suspicion than seems customary. And because people enjoy being in the know, we might consider whether their enjoyment stops them from actually addressing the serious problems they know about. Knowing doesn’t seem to be inspiring radical change in destructive behaviors on the left or the right.

Another way to think about all of this is that calling on knowledge to solve our problems, and rid us of anxiety, is a way to maintain the status quo. Folks on both the left and the right seem to be equally invested in not being duped and take pleasure in knowing (whether what they know is falsehood or fact). Like Descartes' evil genius who might be intent on deceiving him, it seems both the left and the right are motivated to uncover the lies of the deceiving, duping authorities on the other side of the divide. Are we more concerned with knowing, with calling out deception—fact checking on the left, and the creation of “corrective” conspiracy theories on the right—than with mobilizing revolutionary collective action? How does our use of knowledge contribute to sustaining the illusions/delusions it allegedly disrupts? Has our satisfaction in being in the know become more precious than anything else—including our very lives?

A psychoanalytic epistemology suggests that we can and must always address the ambiguities of affect and enjoyment if we are going to learn to think and live differently. Perhaps if we are willing to not-know and unknow more, we can learn to live better with others, to better tolerate difference, the unfamiliar, and the anxiety we ought to be feeling in the face of so much polarization, insecurity, loss, and devastation. We learn from psychoanalysis that the only way to change troubling emotional attachments is to facilitate a new libidinal economy. It is through speech, an act that involves bodies and minds, feeling and thinking together, in dialogue with another, or others, or that which is Other, that inspires change. Perhaps if we stop efforts to correct political polarization, social injustice, and socially sanctioned ignorance with the right knowledge, we might learn to better create conditions for radical change in solidarity with different others.

KNOWING IGNORANCE: ON TEACHING WITH PSYCHOANALYTIC SENSIBILITY

What are the pedagogical possibilities of approaching classroom encounters not only with predetermined knowledge, but also with a stance of not-knowing together via the mobilization of a knowing-ignorance? Andrew Bennet's concept of knowing-ignorance is an important intervention against defensive, rigid habits of thinking. Knowing-ignorance according to Bennet, is

the cultivation of a literary imagination to invite the embrace and exploration of the condition by which we are all beset, namely, the state of ultimately not knowing. Part of what it means to be human is to grapple with not-knowing: What is the meaning of life? What does the future hold? What are you thinking? Bennet's concept of knowing-ignorance is a call to approach texts, and life, with what we don't know, don't want to know, and can't know always in mind. We cannot eradicate ignorance, but we can learn to direct our not-knowing towards new ways of reading, thinking, and being in the world with others.

One helpful way to (re)discover our capacities to tolerate not-knowing and cultivate curiosity might be to heed Bennet's call to step into the literary imagination and linger in what poet John Keats calls "negative capability," the "capacity for remaining in uncertainties, mysteries, and doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact, logic, and reason."²⁰ We need to learn to dwell in a state of openness to all experience, and identify with the inspirational power of beauty, which is, according to Keats, much more important than the quest for objective fact. What we learn from Bennet is that we need to unlearn desire for certainty and cultivate a disposition of curiosity—aspects of the human condition stymied by mainstream education, enamored as it has become with the cult of efficiency, accountability, measurement, predictability, and productivity.

Encouraging a willingness to unknow and not-know together, by developing a stance of knowing-ignorance, might help educators challenge entrenched habits of thought, and help students become more vigilant in their studies, enabling them to better grapple with different forms of knowledge, and ignorance—perhaps even the troubling beliefs of their parents, peers, and even their professors that are difficult and challenging. Knowing-ignorance is an important strategy as we try and repair a misremembered history and relinquish dreams of mastery, superiority, and invulnerability—the driving forces behind so many fake news and misinformation campaigns. Efforts to cultivate a knowing-ignorance can help us to disarm the defenses that impede change, as we learn to be on the look-out for bias, blind spots, active forgetting, willful, structural, and self-protective ignorance in the encounter with knowledge and minds in the know—our own and others'.

Engaging students in discussion about what we don't know, can't know,

and don't want to know, being willing to unknow more together, might be facilitated by encouraging the stance of knowing-ignorance. Not-knowing and unknowing with students can help to invite them into reflection and conversation on the emotional world of learning. Making the human capacity to deploy defense against unbelievable truths part of a class conversation from the outset is a productive way to begin any semester and can help to prevent them from becoming aggressively strengthened. I have found that chapter two of Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* leads to fruitful classroom dialogue about the ways in which each of us defends against anxiety inducing feelings and ideas. "Life, as we find it," Freud writes, "is too hard for us; in order to bear it, we cannot dispense with palliative measures."²¹ He names three such strategies: powerful deflections, which cause us to make light of our misery; substitutive satisfactions, which diminish it; and intoxicating substances, which make us insensitive to it.

In my experience, students become enthusiastic in the attempt to provide examples of each of these defensive tactics that they themselves may have engaged in, those they have seen in others, and the strategies that are encouraged and reinforced in our culture more generally. They have addressed topics ranging from how some parents and teachers are unable to see the flaws in, or the struggles of, their children and/or students, and vice versa; they've mentioned alcoholism, binge drinking, and addiction to social media as strategies with which to avoid intimacy. We have discussed how our consumerist society has us defending against aging, feeling sad, our mortality, and pretty much anything and everything that makes us uneasy or uncomfortable. These discussions pave the way for more productive dialogues about the more troubling and divisive issues with which we need to collectively grapple in teaching and learning about the ways in which we are each complicit (albeit in different ways and to different degrees) in on going injustice and environmental destruction.

Not-knowing together, I suggest, is facilitated by igniting the literary imagination with poetry and fiction, which invite critical reflection on what it means to be a member of the human condition, what it means to be caught in the contradiction between wanting to know and wanting to ignore, and the perilous ways in which we enjoy. We get an intimate portrayal of how minds work. Short stories in particular are tremendously well suited to justice-oriented

classrooms as they can be read alongside a thicker theory chapter and be digested in a week, stimulating a more complex reflexivity on a host of challenging issues that are raised in the main text. To facilitate class discussion, educators can invite students to free write about their experience with characters in fiction. How did they make them feel? What associations did they have? What motivated the characters? Where are their blind spots? How is the narration (un)reliable? Did it resonate with their own life experiences? We can approach fake news and other sources of information in a similar way, inviting discussion of the feelings behind certain ideas, beliefs, or theories, encouraging students to be on the lookout for the narrative blind spots, as well as their own.

If are willing to take seriously key elements of a psychoanalytic epistemology, we might learn to attribute more importance to what disturbs or what is absent from a body of knowledge than to the themes which give it consistency, coherence, and cohesion. Not-knowing more together means we foreground the epistemological limits of all involved in the pedagogical exchange, precluding us from taking comfort in the power of knowledge. We might invest more in acknowledging the certainty of the fundamentally instability of knowledge and mobilize a knowing-ignorance to relieve us from the restless, relentless desire to understand, rationalize, know more, and predict the unpredictable. The idea is not to eradicate not-knowing with knowledge, but learn to use it to create conditions for dynamic dialogue that inspires actual change, collective personal and social transformations.

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- 2 Alenka Zupančič, “Back to the Future of the End” (speech presented at Princeton University, Princeton, NJ, April 20, 2022), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YCN_3W7AzAI.
- 3 PES president, Michele Moses, reported in PES members’ note, October 7, 2022.
- 4 Robert Draper, *Weapons of Mass Delusion: When the Republican Party Lost its Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2022).

5 Dany Nobus and Macolm Quinn, *Knowing Nothing, Staying Stupid: Elements for a Psychoanalytic Epistemology* (London: Routledge, 2005).

6 Nobus and Quinn, *Knowing Nothing*,

7 I discovered the concept of “knowing ignorance” in Andrew Bennet, “Literary Ignorance” in *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*, eds. Matthais Gross and Linsey McGoey (New York: Routledge, 2015). I unpack it in the last section.

8 I borrowed the phrase “against understanding,” and much inspiration, from Bruce Fink, “Against Understanding: Why Understanding Should Not Be Viewed as an Essential Aim of Psychoanalytic Treatment,” *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 58, no. 2 (2010): 259-285. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003065110369349>. Fink argues, within a Lacanian framework, that an analytic aim at understanding easily reduces the unfamiliar to the familiar, transforms the radically other to the same, and makes the analyst hard of hearing. For him, *change* is the most important aim in psychoanalysis and understanding can at times present an obstacle to articulations leading to change. I wonder if change should be the priority in social justice education, along with new ways of thinking and being.

9 Sigmund Freud, “‘Wild’ Psycho-Analysis,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 11, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1910), 225.

10 Freud, ‘Wild’ Psychoanalysis, 225.

11 Todd McGowan, *Only a Joke Can Save Us: A Theory of Comedy* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2017). <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv47w7ff>

12 Two recent texts I would place in this camp include: Andy Borowitz, *Profiles in Ignorance: How America’s Politicians Got Dumb and Dumber* (New York: Avid Reader Press, 2022) and Robert Draper, *Weapons of Mass Delusion: When the Republican Party Lost its Mind* (New York: Penguin, 2022), but there are many.

13 Adam Phillips, *Terrors and Experts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

14 Wilfred Bion, “A Theory of Thinking,” *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, 43, (1961):

306-10.

15 Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*, 94.

16 Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*, 94.

17 Phillips, *Terrors and Experts*, 94.

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20 Cited in Bennet, "Literary Ignorance," 39.

21 Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1975), 13.