

## Masking Cruelty with Ignorance

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In exhorting us to consider the educative potential of not-knowing, Jennifer Logue pushes us to consider that knowing does not do all it might seem to do. In our hope that knowledge is useful, she argues we miss a few things: “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, learning, and responsible agency. Third, knowing about a problem doesn’t seem to motivate the willingness or capacity with which to address what is at stake in the knowledge. Further, we often enjoy being in the know, and the more we enjoy knowing, the more we seem to resist change.”<sup>1</sup>

In this well-argued paper that provides new knowledge about resistances to knowledge, Logue deploys compelling reason and description to suggest that reason and description are not enough to challenge the strategic uses of ignorance. By demonstrating where knowledge fails, she makes it quite clear that being reasonable is not enough when disavowals and desires—and power imbalances of all sorts—are also staging their own contests in the midst of an apparent exchange of contending reasons. Logue suggests that we need a fuller vocabulary for these encounters with what appear to be either a will to not know or a determination to refuse the justifications of reasonable exchange. I will use this response to suggest that there are multiple forms of refusal operating and this fuller vocabulary of forms may not solve arguments but will at least indicate different stakes of unknowing, including the all-knowing forms of ignorance. But in agreeing with Logue’s main argument, I’m also agreeing with her opening points: politicized ignorance leads to cruelty. I’m compelled by her discussion of teaching in the midst of ignorance. I’m also inclined to re-emphasize her point that when ignorance is used to harm, it ought to be challenged as cruelty masquerading as ignorance.

The first distinction Logue sets out is that information may be insufficient to the task of solving a problem. For educators, this is a challenge: how do we both think about teaching about ideas while also think about why and how such teaching will either not work, not be compelling enough, or stimulate out and rejection? Her reminder is crucial for pedagogy. But when ignorance is structuring laws and policies, the resistance is of a different sort. That careful and caring approach Logue is suggesting will need to be bolstered by a political refusal to tolerate cruelty. For instance, as Logue notes in her opening pages, not-knowing is becoming a political strategy. As more state legislatures outlaw gender affirming care for transgender youth, for instance, they do so knowing that the American Medical Association, American Psychiatric Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, The Endocrine Society, and more have come out with public statements refuting the various conservative governors and legislatures who claim gender affirming care is experimental or dangerous.<sup>2</sup> But conservatives do not care about this. And like Logue, I think their affective refusal to care is a problem. They have no interest in knowing what other knowers know nor do they care about other knowers. But they do know the non-knowledge they create does something else: it enables cruelty. A certain segment of the population appears to desire and enjoy that cruelty to the extent that they are willing to seemingly violate their own embrace of “parental rights” in order to remove parental rights of those seeking to provide affirming medical care for gender diverse youth.

I don't think these are equally damaging: “fact checking on the left, and the creation of “corrective” conspiracy theories on the right” so will focus my critique at conservatives. Do conservatives know that they are enacting power in ways that limit the life possibilities of others? It would seem so and so another aspect of not knowing is a determination to enact power over others as the primary desire and to worry later or never about whether one's justifications were anything other than that apparent frisson of joy in sticking it to the libs (or the trans, or the immigrants, or whoever). It would also appear, from the ever-growing list of things that conservatives do not want others to know about or care about (the educational effectiveness of

bilingual education, accurate Black history, the existence of LGBTQ families, comprehensive sex education, wearing masks in a global pandemic) that the route to power is as ever through a ridicule and exclusion of someone else. In other words, I think it is necessary to consider the place of studied cruelty in what appears to be ignorance but might very well just be uncaring menace.

Logue might reasonably say at that point that ignorance and even cruelty are all part of not being willing or able to think further. Maybe the scale of social change is so daunting as to mount a panicked and damaging form of refusal. Like Logue's rebellious example of knowing smoking is bad and determining to do it more, there are forms of refusal that cannot bear to see the scale of change that is happening or cannot imagine, in the case of climate change or hunger, to see how knowing about it can have an impact on it. To take the metaphor Logue quotes from Freud, a "menu-card" may even do more damage to someone experiencing "famine." So, knowing we resist, Logue smartly notes, does not help when that resistance comes from somewhere that we do not know or could not adequately access via knowing.

If knowing doesn't work as an antidote to difficult ignorances against difficult knowledges or against the all-knowing mind does that mean reasons don't work at all? Do we change the way we teach based on the heckler's veto of the strategically ignorant and the unintentionally intransigent? The caution that we ought not continue to patiently educate when it doesn't work is likely at least a good way to relieve some of our delusions that it might work. As Logue rightly points out, we need to consider how what we are teaching may be taken up rather than assuming if we teach thoughtfully we will be received thoughtfully. I'm not so sure that many of teach with an arrogance of knowing, I suspect instead that we're aware of some of the pitfalls Logue is suggesting we become more attentive to. But I think Logue's point is that we have more of a faith in persuasion by reasons and thinking than is merited given the complex ways that people deny difficult knowledge. We are left with a problem, of course, which is how to still attempt to teach and learn knowing that our efforts will be shaped or refused by the resistances that are both processes internal to an individual psyche and political

maneuverings. Logue's turn to solving material inequities prior to engaging forms of not-knowing seems a good strategy but then we're left with the trouble of scale and the apparent unwillingness of those who embrace not-knowing voting in ways that might reflect their own material interests. So not-knowing makes addressing materials conditions is all the more challenging.

Logue's argument does not entail that we stop teaching, far from it: she encourages us to consider with more depth just where learners (and teachers) are and how their positionings and strategies affect what we do. I think this reminder that we're teaching in the midst of refusal is likely always there, even in the common place "there is a difference between teaching and learning." But her analysis gives us more tools to understand what is happening in that gap.

There may be a point at which we have to find ways to problematize the mobilization of cruelty even if we understand in more detail the ways knowledge is refused. I think there's more to be said about what ignorance does to others and I think Logue raises this very effectively in the opening of this paper, too. Logue's argument helps me to develop some compassion about the difficulties of knowing, but I'm inclined to want to push those who refuse to more strongly acknowledge their damaging effects on others. This seems at the heart of new determinations to censor libraries and remove books from classroom shelves, even based on judgments derived from never having read the books, which may be a key challenge to the suggestion to consider narrative. It's one thing to refuse for oneself a recognition of difficulty and quite another to determine that everyone must follow in ignorance.

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## REFERENCES

1 Jennifer Logue, "In Praise of Not Knowing, Or Why We should Unknow More: Reflections on Knowing and Teaching Ignorance," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 2 (same issue).

2 See Barbara Simon, "Medical Association Statements Supporting Trans Youth Healthcare and Against Discriminatory Bills," <https://www.glaad.org/blog/med->

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