

5. "In expanding the field of knowledge we but increase the horizon of ignorance" (Henry Miller). Is this true?  
Irene Jeanette Victoria Pyne, Sha Tin College

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Theory of Knowledge Prescribed Essay

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(Henry Miller) Is this true?**

Nature's limit, the horizon: a line that divides the sky from the earth, the land from the stars and yet, it is intangible: it is only there because the curvature of our earth actually limits us from seeing further than a certain point. In 'increasing' the horizon, we consciously make this line more visible; we realise there is much more to the horizon than we had initially foreseen. Miller almost seems to suggest that there really is no end to the ignorance of our society; the more we know, the more we know we still have *yet* to know. If we believe that this statement is targeted at the 'we', as individuals, it is more likely to hold true; the limited time we have on earth, our limited brain capacity, and our society's reliance on secondary information, would all lean to the impossibility of ever gaining real knowledge (according to Plato's classical definition of "justified, true belief"). As life implies transience, our knowledge gained is also affected by change and so, the horizon of ignorance increases because we continuously seek to justify our knowledge using emotion, perception, reasoning or language.

We must also question how the field of knowledge can be "expanded". Is knowledge finite? Surely, if we were given all the time in the world to study one area of knowledge, like Mathematics, there would be a limit to this field of knowledge. On the other hand, it could be argued that the influences of Mathematics have spread into other subjects like technology, medicine or engineering and so, to completely know about one subject, one would have to study its effect on another. This point, in particular, is why we might be inclined to believe that there is really no end - that everything is intrinsically linked – and so long as we have Time, knowledge will continue to progress in our society. In the same respect, to what extent can we honestly say we know someone? Every individual is influenced by many different components and, with time and experience, a person's character can gradually develop as a result. Research in Psychology base many of their schools of thoughts under the premise of either 'determinism' or 'free will', opening up a whole range of different factors which could affect an individual's behaviour.

It could also be said that the correlation between ignorance and knowledge is only valid in a particular context. In regard to Miller's statement, when we look up at the sky, outside the restrictions of Earth, we can see stars light years beyond our horizon. If we choose to take

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Miller's collective pronoun 'we' in reference to our general society, the human race etc., we could argue that – collectively – our capacity for knowledge is infinite. Whether or not knowledge itself is infinite, the idea that we could potentially know everything could eliminate the possibility of a collective ignorance. At the same time, we are posed the question: are there some things we – as a species – can/will *never* know? Religion might say 'yes': God is its only omniscient being and we need only look at the Tower of Babel affair or various other passages in the Bible<sup>1</sup> to see that Christianity – among others – has created a barrier between ourselves and this enlightened all-knowing supremacy; that we will constantly be overcome by ignorance so long as we are human.

The implications of this perspective can be seen every day: when we find it difficult to explain something through logical deduction, we instinctively yield to the paranormal<sup>2</sup> or, arguably, we fall to the fallacy of an Appeal to Tradition whereby we believe something is good or right because it has been good enough for our ancestors<sup>3</sup>. If we look at biblical traditions, particularly in the Book of the Genesis, we can see almost an appeal towards ignorance in Christianity, as God punishes Adam and Eve for taking a bite from the apple of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Does God cast them away from the Garden of Eden because they have disobeyed Him or, alternatively, because they have tasted the fruits of "justified true belief" and have realised their own ignorance? Perhaps this is a good analogy for Miller's case: we are only able to find the products of our knowledge (enduring knowledge, as opposed to the transient knowledge that changes with age) in a Paradise where one is not affected by time.

Our society's history with religion throughout, and possibly our own religious upbringings, makes it very difficult to tear ties and so, some of the knowledge we gain could be based on systems that could have dire consequences in our society today (e.g. the Catholic condom ban across Latin America when HIV is rising exponentially<sup>4</sup>). This is an example of how knowledge needs to be constantly justified according to our times so as to refrain from falling into ignorance. Furthermore, our thirst for knowledge makes it difficult for us to ever be

<sup>1</sup> "Attributes of God 12 (Omniscient)." Welcome to The Parent Company. 01 Mar. 2009  
<[http://www.parentcompany.com/awareness\\_of\\_god/aog12.htm](http://www.parentcompany.com/awareness_of_god/aog12.htm)>.

<sup>2</sup> "Religion Is Ignorance." Buzzle Web Portal: Intelligent Life on the Web. 01 Mar. 2009  
<<http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/12-28-2005-84989.asp>>.

<sup>3</sup> "Fallacies of Relevance: Appeal to Tradition." Agnosticism / Atheism - Free Inquiry, Skepticism, Atheism, Religious Philosophy. 01 Mar. 2009  
<<http://atheism.about.com/od/logicalfallacies/a/tradition.htm>>.

<sup>4</sup> "Catholic condom ban helping AIDS spread in Latin America - UN." Christian News on Christian Today. 01 Mar. 2009  
<<http://www.christiantoday.com/article/catholic.condom.ban.helping.aids.spread.in.latamun/14140.htm>>.

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satisfied with 'I don't know' for an answer; we, as a species, constantly seek regularity and routine – we have dates, numbers, circadian bodily rhythms etc. Of course, there are some of us who would prefer anarchy (or at least, the idea of anarchy) and, in our century, the foundations of religion have been criticised by a few intelligent personalities, such as Richard Dawkins<sup>5</sup>. According to a study conducted in 2008, people with higher IQs were less likely to believe in a God<sup>6</sup> and, as Dr Hardman explained "higher levels of intelligence are associated with a greater ability - or perhaps willingness - to question and overturn strongly felt institutions."<sup>7</sup> This might explain why many dictators have targeted the masses with a demagogic approach to achieve their aims, or have aggressively propagated the idea of anti-intellectualism so as to keep their population subdued (e.g. Nazi Germany or Mao and the 'Great Leap Forward'). Here, the government creates ignorance by limiting one's field of knowledge.

Personally, I find that I jump quickly to the paranormal or superstition when there is something I cannot explain. The other day, I had recalled to a friend how I felt paralysed when I was waking up from a nap, believing I had been possessed and that someone else was in the room. My friend then told me it was the result of my terrible sleeping schedule – that many people get Sleep Paralysis (or ISP) when they are either stressed or tired, and sometimes feel like they are being compressed (the 'Hag Phenomena'<sup>8</sup>). I had used my senses to determine a cause for what had happened, but instead used my emotions to judge the situation as opposed to logical reasoning. My ability to expand my field of knowledge by using different ways of knowing, with the help of my friend, increased my horizon of ignorance: not only did I become aware of the cause, but realised that I could find out how the situation could actually be helped (i.e. sleeping earlier, not getting stressed). In this way, the use of the word "increasing" actually reflects my awareness; I then realised I was ignorant, but the potential to be ignorant had always been present.

The Natural Sciences are an example of how we can become more sceptical of our natural world's beginnings through empirical evidence, and finding causal links. Theories like the Big Bang or Darwinism have challenged religious thinking, which values introspection and

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<sup>5</sup> Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. New York: Mariner Books, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> "Intelligent people 'less likely to believe in God' - Telegraph." *Telegraph.co.uk: news, business, sport, the Daily Telegraph newspaper, Sunday Telegraph - Telegraph*. 01 Mar. 2009  
<<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/2111174/Intelligent-people-%27less-likely-to-believe-in-God%27.html>>.

<sup>7</sup> "Intelligent people 'less likely to believe in God' - Telegraph."

<sup>8</sup> "The 'Old Hag' Syndrome." *Paranormal Phenomena*. 01 Mar. 2009  
<<http://paranormal.about.com/library/weekly/aa112000a.htm>>.

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emotion more so than quantifiable evidence. However, although there is a lack of empirical evidence to support the existence of a God, to rely on knowledge from the Natural Sciences could be seen as an *argumentum ad ignorantiam*. This fallacy is quite significant as Miller could be alluding to the idea that, what we perceive as knowledge is little more than a basic human need for comfort. Instead, we reason, we find causal links and we rationalize, in order to satisfy ourselves as the knower – to give us a more peaceful state of mind. If this is the case, then our "knowledge" is only actually making us more ignorant, because we continue to neglect the blemishes in our methodologies. If we continue to add weight onto weak foundations, the entire structure then has potential to collapse.

Miller's statement seems reminiscent of Socrates' view that "true knowledge exists in knowing that you know nothing" but both are open to much interpretation. As this essay considers, our world is constantly being shaped by Time, making it impossible for an individual to gain complete knowledge of something because it would need to be justified time and time again in accordance with our reality to be "true"; no single person can ever expand their field of knowledge without having the potential to be ignorant also. However, when something is 'on the horizon', it usually means that it is imminent and so this quote could also be seen in an alternate light: in 'expanding' our knowledge, we are further from ignorance. Perceiving ignorance in the distance – like the horizon, far away on the brink of our sense of sight – is the result of being so knowledgeable. In this way, ignorance is not so much a bad thing as it is a means of steadying oneself, or of measuring how much we actually know. Before electronic navigation, sailors would use the horizon to determine their position at sea. Similarly, widening the limits of ignorance might help us realize our capacity for more knowledge. Knowledge then has more potential to be justified, because one has the measuring stick of ignorance to hold against it.

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