

Professions of Ignorance from the Pentagon to the Couch

Chris Higgins

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Robert Pippin reads *Shadow of a Doubt* as offering us the sort of aesthetico-ethical engagement that René Arcilla has described as “existential learning.”¹ Specifically, Pippin argues that the film is constructed to disrupt our moral knowingness, to interrupt our sorting of the guilty from the innocent, the good from bad. To be sure, Pippin is not calling for amoral skepticism. He stresses the imperative to lead a good life even as he applauds Hitchcock for inserting doubt about what counts as good conduct in such a life. Hitchcock’s films, Pippin suggests, force us to reckon with the question of how we should live with “greatly reduced confidence in our application of moral standards?”² In this way, Pippin returns us to an essential question, posing it anew as a felt difficulty. What does a life of integrity, commitment, and open-mindedness look like? How do we confront our own ignorance? How do we navigate the shoals of confusion, paralysis, and spinelessness without running into the reefs of dogmatism and knowingness? In what follows, I offer my own brief exploration of these questions as a complement to Pippin’s.

I begin with a passage from the lesser known epistemologist, Donald Rumsfeld:

Reports that say that something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know. ... It is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones.³

Rumsfeld made these infamous remarks in 2002, not at a philosophy conference but in a Pentagon briefing. It was five months after 9/11 and less than a year before the U.S. would launch the 2nd Gulf War on the pretense that Iraq had developed “weapons of mass destruction” or “WMDs”,

when a reporter simply asked the Secretary of Defense whether there was any evidence of WMDs in Iraq. What should we make of his response?

Errol Morris, who made a feature-length documentary of Rumsfeld,⁴ doesn't mince words, calling it simply "the epistemology from hell."⁵ Rumsfeld was known for his ability to find clever "exit ramps" to avoid answering questions, and this response was no exception.⁶ Notice how, even when offering a taxonomy of ignorance, Rumsfeld cannot avoid a knowing tone, as signaled by the phrases "as we know" and "we also know." Notice too Rumsfeld's *mischievement* of forgetting the fourth category in this two-by-two matrix: unknown knowns.⁷ As Slavoj Žižek points out, this is the realm of the unconscious, the beliefs we disavow but on which we act all the same. Žižek cites the torture at Abu Ghraib as precisely one of the "obscene practices we pretend not to know about."⁸ Fittingly, Rumsfeld disavows his disavowal. Apparently, Rumsfeld was paying attention the day his logic professor explained the fallacy of "denying the antecedent." He was not wrong when he observed, later in the same press conference, that "absence of evidence is not evidence of absence." But this functions here as pure sophistry. The syllogism seems to go something like this:

Premise 1: If evidence E is present in Iraq, Saddam has WMDs.

Premise 2: After searching high and low, we have not found E.

via modus mendacium

Conclusion: We must invade Iraq.

While it is true that the search may have been flawed or incomplete, or simply that Iraq's weapons program left no traces of E behind, Rumsfeld is applying a veneer of methodological rigor and open mindedness to the not-at-all-open mind of an administration that has already decided to invade.

And yet, even if for all of the wrong reasons, Rumsfeld was on to something. After all, literal know-it-alls are fairly rare. Most of us readily admit that there are things we don't know—how could we deny it?—only to fall prey to the subtler conceit that we are aware of the extent and nature of our ignorance. The seeming modesty of marking portions of the map *terra incognita* conceals the more pernicious form of knowingness contained in these very maps and lines, as if all

of our unknowns were known unknowns. Perhaps, though, we academics do not need Rumsfeld's reminder. We are, after all, a bit obsessed with this category of the "unknown unknowns," stressing variously that central to privilege is ignorance that one has it, or that it is the very otherness of the other that demands our respect, or that we experience moments of significant understanding as being "pulled-up short."¹⁰ But here's the rub. If we are not careful this can easily become more fuel for self-deception. There are a great many ways to fend off the shock of recognition that we do not know what we do not know. One very sophisticated way may be to attend conferences where people argue over the correct map of how others misdraw their maps.¹¹

This leaves us in a tough spot, and I am not sure that either of our two main responses to this problem have been productive. I cannot follow those who try to elevate this impasse itself into a kind of negative theology. But I am also starting to doubt the fruitfulness of the main alternative, of boring down into the individual subject to identify some disposition toward openness or self-knowledge that can be honed, if not through formal education, then through experience itself. The hope has been that we can compensate for the Aristotelian adage that virtue is circular (since one has to practice virtue to become virtuous) with the Gadamerian addendum that such circles can be virtuous (since our *gestalts* make salient some details that lead to productive reframings). In the end, this approach seems like a paradoxical search for a way to will oneself into contact with the otherness that can disrupt the will. But what is left if we eschew both types of grand solution, looking neither to the starry heavens above nor to the moral law within?

To make progress I think that we need to get over two hang-ups. First, we need to let go of a certain perfectionist, all or nothing attitude. I think of the line from Beckett: "fail better."¹² Second, we need to remind ourselves that the idea of a *thing* called a "mind" in a container called an "individual" is a metaphor that obscures as much as it illuminates. Minding—let's use the gerund to remind ourselves—involves social and material processes. By turning our gaze to our interpersonal modes of mindedness, our everyday structures of attention and inattention, we may find both more tractable enemies of self-knowledge and some positive evidence of "negative capability."¹³ In the space remaining, I will

consider two examples, the first an example of a structure of knowingness and the second an example of a practice for learning to live with our unknown unknowns.

For our first example, we need look no further than our own profession as educational philosophers. What brings us together, we hope, is a common value, the pursuit of self-knowledge. And yet, the matter may be more complicated than it seems, as pointed out by Jonathan Lear. “Open-mindedness,” Lear declares, “is the capacity to live non-defensively with the question of how one should live.”¹⁴ Lear stresses non-defensiveness because keeping Socrates’ question open is for us both a source of aliveness and of anxiety. The anxiety is profound enough that we may accept, and indeed surreptitiously seek out, various forms of deadness as an acceptable price of quieting that anxiety. Instead of keeping the question open, we fall into various forms of “knowingness,” which I will define as an implicit social agreement to act as if certain significant, open questions never need arise or have already been answered, or that they are sophomoric, irrelevant, quaint, and so on. Thus, Lear concludes, if professions are essentially institutionalized forms of knowingness—“defensive structures” encouraging deadness in the name of various conventions and standards—and philosophy is the name we have given to an eclectic set of traditions and practices devoted to undoing such defenses, then the idea of a “profession of philosophy is ... a contradiction in terms.”¹⁵ It expresses an illusion, a fantasy, a wish. Let us resist the grand conclusion, not only that philosophy is the path to self-knowledge, but also Thoreau’s sweeping, “There are nowadays professors of philosophy, but not philosophers.”¹⁶ Let us simply note that we inhabit a professionalized practice that is poised in an interesting way between the urge to take some responsibility for one’s unknown unknowns and the need to protect ourselves with communal forms of knowingness.

My second example is a humble workaday practice that I think can help one live in closer contact to one’s ignorance. The practice I have in mind is psychoanalysis, but I hesitate to name it because trashing psychoanalysis has become such a popular sport. Hopefully, we have now finally entered the third phase in our relationship to Freud. In phase 1, we swallowed his ideas uncritically. In phase 2, we engaged in repeated gleeful topplings of our

little statue-Freud off the pedestal we put it on. Perhaps we are now ready to start reading him, making sense of what he said, and seeing what we can learn from his wonderful, flawed assaying of the human soul. In any case, it is not psychoanalytic *theory* I have in mind. It is the special form of educative conversation Freud invented. We can call this “therapy,” as long as we don’t assume that we already know what this means. In conversation with the poet HD, Freud made a point of saying that, far from being a “heal-all,” psychoanalysis was “the basis for a very grave philosophy.”¹⁷ It is grave because it calls into question our very ideas of self-transparency and self-mastery.

This profound pessimism about the human condition makes Freud, ironically, utterly unlike the contemporary therapeutic culture for which he is often blamed. Psychoanalysis, Adam Phillips writes, is “incompatible . . . with traditional concepts of cure” which presume “an original wholeness or health to be restored.”¹⁸ It is better described as a search “for new ways of living.”¹⁹ However, prone to their own version of defensive professionalism (professional defensiveness?!), psychoanalysts themselves may well resist this conclusion. “And yet,” as Phillips explains:

Freud’s description of the unconscious was a threat to, and a parody of, the more respectable versions of professional competence. If a psychoanalyst knows what’s in the unconscious, or knows how it works, she has a specific expertise. But if the unconscious is what cannot be anticipated, can there then be experts of the unknown? “The weather,” as Freud puts it here, “of course never comes from the quarter one has been carefully observing.”²⁰

I offer psychoanalysis, then, not as a teleological treatment but as a daily practice, not as fix for our epistemological problem but as a way of living with it. Psychoanalysis is the enactment of a special mode of attentiveness, a novel form of noticing. For example, when things go well, analysis puts in a space in which we are able to notice, to borrow Nelson Goodman’s famous phrase, our “ways of worldmaking.” How and why did I construe that as an obstacle? Why am I depressed after a success? Why is everyone in my life de-authorizing me? And so on. Another way to put this is that psychoanalysis helps us to learn to recognize

our relational templates, to slowly gain an awareness of how one connects with and, if I may, “disconnects with” others. Or consider the fascinating domain of “primary process.” The minding of which we are ordinarily aware is only one bandwidth, as it were, of a broader spectrum of mind constantly at work. We narrate, explain, deduce, and plan. This “secondary process” is all very nice and useful. And yet, at the very same time, we are making the most wondrous mischievements. It doesn’t matter how much practice you have: the unconscious never walks down the path of your expectations. It erupts into the session, or sneaks in wearing a disguise. Psychoanalysis is ongoing work, and often deeply invigorating play, in which we attend to our unknown unknowns, in which we engage in a way of being in proximity to even our most elusive and active ignorance.

Thus, even while we await a theoretical solution to the aporias of self-knowledge, we find concrete structures and practices that reinforce or disrupt our knowingness. I have offered two examples of the ways in which we fail and sometimes fail better in the worthwhile quest to take some responsibility for that interesting territory of unknown unknowns.

1 René V. Arcilla, *Mediumism: A Philosophical Reconstruction of Modernism for Existential Learning* (Albany: Suny Press, 2010).

2 I am quoting from the written version of the original, unrevised Kneller Lecture, given at the Philosophy of Education Society Conference, Chicago, March 24, 2018.

3 Donald H. Rumsfeld, Department of Defense News Briefing, February 12, 2002, <https://archive.defense.gov/Transcripts/Transcript.aspx?TranscriptID=2636>.

4 *The Known Unknown*, film, directed by Errol Morris (Los Angeles: Participant Media, 2014).

5 Errol Morris, “The Certainty of Donald Rumsfeld (Part 1),” *New York Times*, March 25, 2014, <https://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2014/03/25/the-certainty-of-donald-rumsfeld-part-1/>.

6 UPI Pentagon correspondent, Pam Hess in conversation with Errol Morris. See Morris, “The Certainty of Donald Rumsfeld (Part 1).”

7 This is Walter Kaufmann’s wonderful translation for Fehlleistung, the term of Freud’s that James Strachey (the General Editor of the “Standard Edition” of Freud in English) embalmed with his choice of parapraxis. See Walter Kaufmann, *Discovering the Mind, Volume 3: Freud, Adler, and Jung* (New York: Routledge, [1980] 2017), 24. For a critique of Strachey’s scientizing translation, see Bruno Bettelheim, *Freud and Man’s Soul* (New York: Knopf, 1983). On Fehlleistung, see pp. 85–87.

- 8 See Slavoj Žižek, "What Rumsfeld Doesn't Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib," May 21, 2004, <http://www.lacan.com/zizekrumsfeld.htm>.
- 9 Rumsfeld, Department of Defense News Briefing.
- 10 The term comes from Gadamer. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. rev. by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall, 2nd rev., Continuum Impacts ed. (New York: Continuum, [1960] 2004), 270. This concept has been central to the work of Deborah Kerdeman from "Hermeneutics and Education: Understanding, Control, and Agency," *Educational Theory* 48, no. 2 (1998): 241-266; and "Pulled up Short: Challenging Self-Understanding as a Focus of Teaching and Learning," *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 293-308; to "Preparing Educational Researchers: The Role of Self-Doubt," *Educational Theory* 65, no. 6 (2015): 719-738; and last year's Presidential Address, "Pulled up Short: Exposing White Privilege," in *Philosophy of Education 2017*, ed. Ann Chinnery (Philosophy of Education Society, 2019): 1-18.
- 11 As Jennifer Burns pointed out to me in conversation, making this point by drawing a two-by-two matrix might itself serve to defend us against the uncanny recognition of our ignorance of our ignorance, its tidy identical boxes implying that we can stand outside and measure the perimeter of this meta-ignorance.
- 12 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (1983), in *Nohow On: Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 89.
- 13 "Negative Capability ... of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." Letter from John Keats to his brothers, December 21, 1817. See John Keats, *Selected Letters*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert Gittings, rev. John Mee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 41-42.
- 14 Jonathan Lear, *Open Minded: Working out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 8.
- 15 Lear, *Open Minded: Working out the Logic of the Soul*, 5.
- 16 Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854), in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers, Walden, The Maine Woods, Cape Cod* (New York: Library of America, 1985), 334.
- 17 H.D., *Tribute to Freud* (1956) (New York: New Directions, 1984), 18.
- 18 Adam Phillips, "Psychoanalysis; or, Is it Worth It?," in *One Way and Another: New and Selected Essays* (London: Penguin, 2013), 378.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 379.
- 20 Adam Phillips, "Secrets," *London Review of Books* 16, no. 19 (1994): 3-5.