



## The bliss of ignorance

### Description

It's old news now, but Prime Minister David Cameron was asked on a late night US tv show if he knew what *Magna Carta* meant in English. He didn't and had to bluff ([Guardian](#)). An acquaintance told me about an overseas visitor who thought that *Magna Carter* was the lady in the green dress in the Bodleian Library pointing at an old document. This is an easy mistake as the document is usually referred to without the definite article.

On the subject of David Cameron's lapse, London Mayor Boris Johnson said that Cameron was only feigning ignorance so as not to appear too comfortable with Latin, which would draw attention to his... as shared by both Cameron and Johnson ([Guardian article](#)). ... ordinary.



*Magna Carta* was formulated to curb the arbitrary will of

despotic kings, and as such served as a prototype for the declarations and constitutions of the Enlightenment that followed many years later. It contains the mere whiff of what we regard today as liberty, with only oblique reference to the eradication of ignorance. It says that judges and other officials must at least know the law, and no one can be put on trial without credible witnesses (*testibus fidelibus*). The idea of sound *evidence* lurks within the text.

*Magna Carta* is available online, complete with histories, anecdotes, and the "credible witness" of over 6 million mentions on web pages (according to a Google search). As long as you're able to get online, it's easy to feign knowledgeability and even to throw in a bit of Latin.

But as long as you are at a keyboard and on line it's getting harder to pretend ignorance. By that I mean unless you are extemporising and away from a computer, it's hard *not* to know your facts, and it's hard to *pretend* you don't know. Ignorance is barely an excuse. In the age of the Internet, ignorance becomes an *empty signifier*.

## A history of ignorance

But facts don't constitute knowledge and their lack doesn't signal ignorance. Here's a potted history of *real* ignorance.

**Skeptics** question constantly and claim rhetorical superiority by unsettling their adversaries. Skepticism is a trait of which the philosopher Plato accused his opponents, and even practiced himself. To claim that no one can ever know the truth and to unsettle any truth claims, are time honoured rhetorical



Rene Descartes began his famous philosophical journey with

the proposition that the only truth of which he could be certain was his own **doubt**. What is it that doubts, or thinks doubtfully? The self. "I think therefore I am."

Immanuel Kant wrote about "things in themselves," independently of how we sense them. This is the **noumena**, which turns out to be unknowable — a substrate of unknowable reality, the way things really are, according to some interpreters of Kant.

Then there are the **Agnostics**, a term coined by Thomas Huxley in the nineteenth century to describe his position about religion. You really cannot know if God exists.

The twentieth century Logical Positivists observed that people make certain assertions about God, spirit, deep and invisible underlying truths, that are not only unsupportable, but meaningless, as there is no way of verifying their truth or falsity. The **metaphysical** is thus beyond reason, and therefore unreasonable, and we can't discuss it sensibly. Ludwig Wittgenstein said at the end of his *Tractatus*, "That about which we cannot speak we must remain silent."

Thomas Huxley makes a reference to the condition in Scottish law in which a verdict of guilt or innocence is not possible. The case is **not proven** – a verdict that carries certain consequences, including the possibility that the case gets reopened at a later date as more evidence comes to light.

That's handy as it suggests a deferral of truth, a condition that characterises Jacques Derrida's take on – ignorance, – his play on the idea of *difference*, which looks a bit like *deferral* in French. So he invents the word **différance**. In fact a documentary of Derrida's later life includes a charming anecdote. Derrida's mother overheard a conversation between Derrida and his admirers about his interesting and infamous formulation of the concept of *différance*. She was taken aback: "You mean you spelt *difference* with an *a*!"

## Some other kind of ignorance

Ignorance can be a force for positive intellectual development, but we still need a term for the bad kind of ignorance that none of *Magna Carta*'s descendants could comfortably endorse, ignorance of the kind many want to ascribe to the rogue cleric Abu Hamza for example. We would have to qualify that kind of ignorance with *blind*, *big*, *pig* or *plebeian*, were it not that such adjectives also insult someone or something other than the target.

The term "extremely prejudiced" is helpful, but hermeneutical scholars point out that the ability to pre-judge is vital before we can develop any kind of understanding or evaluation of anything – a text, a law, a legal case, a work of art. For the bad kind of prejudice, think of the hermeneutical investigation that stops with a prejudgement and is closed to revision, challenge, and renewal, as if all is now decided and beyond dispute. That's the worse kind of ignorance.

The problem is not how to deal with those people who don't know very much, but with those who don't want to know more – those who seem incapable of succumbing to curiosity, or have already circumscribed what they are prepared to be curious about. Perhaps that's the kind of ignorance that requires our attention – or sympathy.

Drawing on Hans Georg-Gadamer, the philosopher Richard Bernstein affirms, "To risk and test our prejudices is a constant task (not a final achievement)" (p.129) – the positive perpetuation of a state of sublime ignorance.

## Bibliography

- Bernstein, Richard J. 1983. *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Decker, Jason. 2012. Disagreement, evidence, and agnosticism. *Synthese*, (187) 753-783.
- Huxley, Thomas H. 1902. *Collected Essays Volume V*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.
- Merrihew Adams, Robert. 1997. Things in themselves. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, (57) 4, 801-825.

## Notes

- Huxley defines agnosticism: "it is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justifies that certainty." (p.107)

- On evidence: “A verdict of “not proven” is undoubtedly unsatisfactory and essentially provisional, so far forth as the subject of the trial is capable of being dealt with by due process of reason.” (p.9)
- Shakespeare’s lesser known play, *King John*, makes no mention of *Magna Carta*.
- I remember now, it was Edmund Burke who indicated the power of ignorance: “It is our ignorance of things that causes all our admiration, and chiefly excites our passions” (p.57). Burke, Edmund, and James Boulton (ed.). 1958. *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press. First published in 1757.
- On hermeneutics see [Interpretive communities](#), [Conservative hermeneutics](#). On ignorance see [Against understanding](#), [Mystery philosopher fakes own death](#), [Why ask?](#). On curiosity see [How the Internet kills curiosity](#), [After affects](#). On the verdict of “not proven” or *non-lieu* see [No way logo](#).

### Category

1. Culture

### Tags

1. agnosticism
2. Derrida
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4. interpretation
5. knowledge
6. Magna Carta
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### Author

rcoyne99

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