

What We Do Not Know in Common Experience

Whatever our profession we are all engulfed in daily life and in the obscurity and density of the mental world. Who is this "I" that finds expression in such a wide variety of societies, in the convictions of the group and temperament of the individual self, in all that I perceive imperfectly and that makes me me? What does this sometimes slippery, sometimes thorny "I" say about the various attitudes towards knowing: the things I desperately want to know, things I believe myself capable of dispensing with, those I fear knowing?

What is the educated or uneducated reader, or even the specialist, doing when he or she distractedly looks into other fields, well knowing that he is completely ignorant of what is not his concern, and still would like to keep abreast of developments? Pierre Pachet writes about the extraordinary desire that motivates the reader of general information, for example the reader of magazines and reviews. Such a reader, by having tacitly renounced a deeper knowledge, strives to familiarize himself with the world and appropriate a bit of it for himself, to keep up to date on scientific discoveries as he would on the spectacle of political life.

I want to know, I am afraid to know, I well know but even so I don't want to know ... More particularly: I do not want to know what I know that I know. Lying, especially lying to oneself, is another knowledge relation. It is the game of bad faith and self-deception, which is half illusion and half strategy, as much a desire to communicate as to dissemble. Jean-Pierre Dupuy analyses this complex mechanism in its social, cultural, anthropological, and religious dimensions.

We never have enough knowledge at the beginning of an undertaking; and yet, on the basis of insufficient data and incomplete information, we choose, decide, and act. Economists and philosophers who analyze the mechanisms of decision-making and action have now made this question—after a long period during which they ignored it—central to their inquiry. In private life we

always base our decisions on approximate knowledge; we do not know in advance the effect of a word or a silence; we do not know what is going to happen when we marry, choose a profession, or decide to have a child.

Christie McDonald writes of certain particularly conspicuous cases that have become the collective myths of a society. Myths have always been a way of expressing or circumscribing—perhaps of domesticating—anxiety; at the very least they have served to help define anxiety. The subject matter of the myths prevalent in contemporary Western society—personal identity as mediated through kinship relations and birth—is fundamentally archaic. These myths have a scientific-technological expression as well, in genetics and television. They are also tied to the institutions of law, which give them direction without, however, mastering their meaning.

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