

Rory Stewart on Ignorance

Rory Stewart, once a knowledgeable UK government minister, but now a knowledgeable member of the faculty of Yale University and someone who noted on his podcast, *The Rest is Politics*, that he has over 2000 books on his Kindle, has made another podcast for the BBC. It's called *The Long History of Ignorance*, and seems to be in at least partial praise of ignorance. Is this like a wealthy man making a speech in favour of poverty? It may also seem surprising that anyone should defend ignorance at all, any more than anyone would defend poverty at all. Charles Dickens, who had seen much of both, in *A Christmas Carol* saw them as twin evils, but ignorance was the worser. He makes them peek out as a sorry boy and girl from under the cloak of The Ghost of Christmas Present:

This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.

In defence of ignorance, Stewart refers to other distinguished figures who have apparently spoken out for it, such as the Buddha, St. Paul, Montaigne and, somewhat surprisingly, Socrates, best known perhaps for his motto, 'Know thyself' and for the imaginary state, the Republic, which he argues must be governed by the most knowledgeable of all citizens so that they

will not make the mistakes that Socrates saw as due to the ignorance of typical rulers, of which Stewart was once presumably one. Citing Socrates as a defender of ignorance might feel like citing Mother Theresa as a defender of poverty.

But Stewart also values knowledge, which is hardly surprising for one who has amassed so much of it. And he values it in others. One is conscious during his trawl through ignorance of the large number of scientists, theologians, psychologists, classicists, historians, neurologists and other intellectuals he has interviewed for his program. The general form of the podcast is that Stewart says something interesting and an authority is immediately brought in to back it up with something equally interesting, as if Stewart's saying it might not be enough to convince us it were true. What we are presumably enjoying here is the authority of the authorities, not their ignorance. We are implicitly expected to see them as authorities, so we are constantly exposed to the products of the knowledge-based Western education system that it appears to be one of Stewart's aim to challenge, even though it is currently one of his employers. It is suggested that this system, addicted as it apparently is to knowledge, places too much store on facts, information and data and that the kind of education it provides is unlikely to provide one with something Stewart sees as more valuable than

knowledge, what he calls understanding, even wisdom. Stewart is clearly in search of wisdom, and believes that it comes somehow from an interweaving between knowledge and ignorance. The series ends, like one of T.S.Eliot's Four Quartets (which Stewart quotes very freely) with the rotund assertion that wisdom emerges from the dance of knowledge with ignorance. Stewart clearly wishes to lead us on a merry dance.

Still, Stewart's view of the Western education system seems faulty. He is right that there is some stress on facts in it, but from a fairly early stage, factual learning is only ever seen as a part of what is seen as understanding. One gets some marks for knowledge, but one gets extra marks for understanding, which is what you do with your knowledge. Most educational institutions recognise, explicitly or implicitly, the so-called Data-Information-Knowledge-Wisdom pyramid, or some similar model that sees facts and data as only a first step towards knowledge and knowledge as only a first step towards understanding, even wisdom. Stewart's frequent implication that Western education systems fail to see this is surprising.

Stewart argues in support of ignorance by stressing how widespread it is, how we do not know as much as we think we do. He sometimes does this as if we did not already realise it. At times, despite the number of scientists who are interviewed,

there seems to be a suspicion that at least some scientists are first among those who think they know more than they do. The fear here is perhaps the threatening grasp of science, how it seems to be reaching into all areas of life. But William James, the psychologist, is quoted as a corrective : science is a drop, ignorance is a sea. This is no doubt true. But this is presumably what acts as a spur to the scientist, pushing back the sea of ignorance. It is never quite clear whether Stewart thinks this damming of the sea of scientific ignorance is a good thing or not. At one point, he gets Michael Ignatieff to archly infer from the fact that (scientific) specialists seem to know more and more about less and less that ultimately, we will know everything about nothing. This swipe at scientific specialisation is too slick by half. What we learn from science is just how *hard* it is to acquire serious knowledge about the world, and that it depends on countless persons who have worked away largely anonymously on tiny, yet for that reason, manageable areas of knowledge, so that they can get it precisely right. This is what gave us something like the Covid vaccine. Later on in the program, Stewart gets the artist Antony Gormley, to muse on the miracle that is a leaf, and how the world is comprised of such miracles, and how we all need to see this. But this sense of the miraculous nature of the world is shared by science, yet addressed in a different way. The scientific response is to spend endless time trying to understand

how it all works. What we have learned is just how difficult this task is. In arguing for the value of ignorance, Stewart needs to be careful that he shows insufficient appreciation of the value of very hard-earned knowledge.

Is ignorance ever valuable? Stewart points out the excitement of ignorance, such as in getting to know someone, a first-love for example. But even here, are we not in search of knowledge? Surely we do not wish to remain ignorant, even of our first-love? He is more convincing arguing for the importance of ignorance in artistic creativity. We are told by Antony Gormley, for example, how creativity seems to arise from a period of incubation, in which there seems to be little thinking, little concern with knowledge. The creative product then seems to emerge, spontaneously. The sources of creativity are talked of as unknown, perhaps even unknowable.

This is an interesting area. The poet, Seamus Heaney who, for obvious reasons, could not be interviewed for this podcast, has written about his own creative activity, echoing Gormley's intuitions about the role of what seem to be unconscious processes. For Heaney, poems seem to arise from the darkness, almost writing themselves. There is clearly a great deal that is not understood about artistic creativity, such as the writing of poetry, but presumably we should be careful to conclude that the

mechanisms involved here are ‘unknowable’? One of the most interesting contemporary developments in the understanding of creativity, for example, are Artificial Intelligences that appear to be capable of writing poems, painting pictures and making photographs. It is early days, but what these computer systems aim to expose are the underlying principles at work in artistic creation. Working backwards from existing works of art, they aim by a process of deconstruction to articulate rules of operation that allow them to produce their own attempts at such works. It is clear, at least in principle, that human creativity is based on very complex *cognitive* processes. Are these processes unknowable? Perhaps, but it should not be assumed they are. And we can admire attempts to make them knowable. Or else, like the philosopher, Plato, we shall have to assume that all art is inspired by the Gods.

Stewart is very interesting and amusing on the role of knowledge in politics, something about which he presumably *knows* a great deal. He treats us to worrying stories about being thrown as a government minister into roles for each he was seriously ill-equipped and *ignorant*. Nonetheless, he refuses to see political problems as ones that simply require more knowledge. This is clearly a swipe at Socrates. Stewart makes the obvious point that society will only improve if we have more *moral* people, not

simply more *knowledgeable* people. But how does that happen? We are no doubt completely ignorant of that, and it does not seem good that we are. Socrates also thought that the rulers of society should be good men and women, as well as being knowledgeable men and women. He was no doubt wrong to think that the latter would automatically lead to the former. He had a faith that knowledge would lead to goodness. Clearly, as Stewart says, it doesn't, and we don't know why it doesn't. But is this an ignorance we wish to have?

Like all philosophers, and there is no doubt he is a philosopher, Stewart seems ultimately interested in goodness. He thinks the road to goodness lies through wisdom, not simply through knowledge. But how do we make men and women good? Stewart suggests, interestingly, that one practical step might be opening government to citizens' assemblies. This idea seems to be one partly inspired by his own eye-opening experiences in Afghanistan, where he lived in communities run by local people. He suggests, strikingly, that these assemblies might be formed by lotteries, so that people are picked to govern in the way they are picked to be members of juries. The people who end up on these assemblies might not then be the most knowledgeable, in some narrow sense of knowledge, but Stewart's faith is that any random

group of citizens will represent a suitable proportion of the national good will and bring their practical wisdom to bare.

There is also no doubt that Stewart suspects that the path to goodness overlaps at some stage with the path to God. He is clearly a spiritual man. A number of theologians, like Rowan Williams, figure in his podcast, and Stewart talks of his own interest in meditation and how he has retreated at times into dark silence in order to find himself. This program is, in some sense, a part of his own spiritual journey. He seems tired of knowledge, at least a certain kind of knowledge, and he values insights that come from meditation, and from art and, to some unspecified extent, from religion. One suspects, as Stewart relays his experiences of government, and various shit-shows in which he has been involved, or even been a minister, that he perhaps wishes that he had been an artist, like Gormley, or a theologian, like Williams. Those of us who admire Stewart have often thought that he was certainly too good a man to be a politician. The key question, of course, is why is he too good? About this, we are no doubt, and will remain, quite ignorant. This seems undoubtedly a bad thing.