

The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge

Edited by Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson.

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We approach with humility and with a promise...that the Tree of Knowledge will remain subordinate to the Tree of Life.

—Wes Jackson¹

The original Pandora was sent to earth with a jar which contained all ills; of good things, it contained hope. Primitive man lived in this world of hope. He relied on the munificence of nature, on the handouts of the gods, and on the instincts of his tribe to subsist.

—Ivan Illich²

Long before the written word, wisdom was shared through stories. Common sense emerged from stories shared in the commons—knowledge of the land, people, and place. But stories are never complete. They change as they are told, and they become part of the person who tells it and the place where it is told. These stories are a partial truth, which is where their wisdom lies.

I walk through a prairie preserve, a planted restoration intended to re-create what once covered over 60% of my home state of Illinois. I walk its planned paths, set within the confines of its defined boundaries: a chain link fence that runs its perimeter, designating the end of wild and the beginning of development. My walk is a reflective journey in the in-between space of knowledge and ignorance. Knowledge has made this place, just as knowledge has created the need to create this place. Knowledge of the land as a resource—to be exploited and turned into “something.” Turned into agricultural plots, turned into suburban developments of ranch homes and cul-de-sacs, turned into a preserve. But my walk also inspires a wonder of this place—a knowledge of its beauty, its sanctity and the importance of conservation.

At the end of Ivan Illich’s *Deschooling Society*, he retold the cautionary tale of the brothers Prometheus and Epimetheus. Illich likens the institutions of modern society to a “Promethean endeavor”, looking forward with knowledge, so that we might meet the expectations and curb the social ills of an ever-developing society.³ On the contrary, Prometheus’s brother, Epimetheus, marries Pandora, unleashing the ills contained in Pandora’s box, along with hope. This story may be interpreted as a lesson about the limits of knowledge, a suggestion to temper action with humility. Illich’s hope for the rebirth of

¹ Wes Jackson, “The Changing Relationship between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge,” *The Land Report* 68 (2000).

² Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1971), 106.

³ *Ibid.*, 151.

Epithemean man entails an ongoing conversation about the limits of knowledge and the knowledge that underpins our actions.

Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson have revisited this conversation vis-à-vis environmental sustainability in their recent edited book, *The Virtues of Ignorance*. Vitek and Jackson take a cue from Wendell Berry (one of the contributors to the book and a long time colleague to Jackson), in their argument for an “ignorance-based worldview,” the philosophical foundation of the book that opposes what Jackson calls the “knowledge-based worldview.” In considering these frameworks, I wonder about the prospect of an ignorance-based worldview and how “the extent of our knowledge will always be, at the same time, the measure of the extent of our ignorance.”⁴

Recognizing the limits of knowledge is not a new endeavor. Some, including Jackson, have argued that this is a theme in the biblical story of Adam and Eve (they were thrust from the garden where everything was provided to them, left to fend for themselves after eating from the tree of knowledge).⁵ Daniel Quinn’s popular novel, *Ishmael*, in which a learned gorilla teaches a human about the *leavers* and *takers* of this world, embraced a similar interpretation of the biblical “fall of man.”⁶ Many scholars have raised this question, including, but not limited to, Erich Fromm, Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, Chet Bowers, and David Orr.⁷ Framing the limits of knowledge through a lens or worldview of *ignorance* is a notable contribution, although notwithstanding critique.

Both Berry and Jackson have engaged this question of ignorance for some time. Berry is a well-known author and essayist, the agrarian ideals therein inspired by his personal history and life experience as a farmer. Jackson is the Executive Director of the Land Institute, an organization that seeks to integrate an understanding of farming within the limits of ecosystems—to address the problem of agriculture. His critique is not against knowledge, per se, but the way in which knowledge is qualified and the implications such knowledge has on the way people act upon and with their environment. An alternative to the dominant knowledge paradigm is humility—to accept unknowns as *mysteries* and to render knowledges as being relatively *small*. We are led to question the relationship between cultural assumptions that underlie knowledge and the way we act on that knowledge.

But the term ignorance is problematic. It encourages humility, but may do so at the cost of taking informed action. Jackson speaks to this when he says “acting on the basis of ignorance, paradoxically, requires one to know things, remember things—for instance, that failure is possible, that error is possible, that second chances are desirable

⁴ Wendell Barry, *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Emoryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005), ix.

⁵ Wes Jackson, “The Changing Relationship between the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge,” *The Land Report* 68 (2000).

⁶ Daniel Quinn, *Ishmael* (New York: Bantam, 1992).

⁷ See Eric Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Continuum, 1976); Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998); Chet Bowers, *Educating for Eco-Justice and Community* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2001); *Mindful Conservatism: Rethinking the Ideological and Educational Basis of an Ecologically Sustainable Future* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003); *Revitalizing the Commons: Cultural and Educational Sites of Resistance and Affirmation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006); and David Orr, *Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment, and the Human Prospect* (Washington, DC: Island Press, 1994).

(so don't risk everything on the first chance), and so on."⁸ There is the question, of *whose ignorance*? Vitek and Jackson's volume, for instance, incorporate multiple perspectives from people with various academic and professional backgrounds. However, this book still represents an authoritative center of knowledge, without effectively incorporating the subaltern knowledges of indigenous communities, international perspective, the non-traditionally educated, and the economically marginalized.

It is the need for this diverse discussion that prompts me to write this exploratory essay. It is important to engage in a dialogue about the limits of knowledge, as well as to revisit what Illich meant by the "rebirth of the Epimethean man." Vitek and Jackson's proposal for a worldview of ignorance is an intriguing and worthwhile contribution to an ongoing critical lens through which to evaluate the meaning of knowledge and the purpose of action. As we find ourselves in the midst of an ecological crisis, the need to question the knowledge through which we have learned to name our world is relevant.

I walk through the prairie and see no homes, no roads, just grasses, reaching high into the sky, giving a slight bend into the breeze. It is a common space in which various creatures co-exist. Complex webs and relationships define this space. But it is no longer common for humans. For we post closing times (dusk at this particular place). We must purchase the land in order to protect it. Not common, owned.

Identifying the commons—a place (physical, emotional, psychological) in which we might deliberate the limits of knowledge—is no easy task. Illich noted that the transformation of the environment from "a commons to a productive resource" is the "most fundamental form of environmental degradation."⁹ It was this transformation that Illich critiqued in the process of schooling—that schools sought to make people into *something*.¹⁰ We become caged by the institutions and the knowledges and beliefs that underpin them. They come to define our existence. Education, in much of the Western world, has been rendered a commodity by the institution of schools, something to be bought and traded. In order to reclaim or "revitalize the commons", we must reconsider our expectations for both physical and metaphysical space.¹¹

Our knowledge of this destruction prompts actions—we read and we experiment, we work to repair the damage that has been brought upon the land. It is an improvement on our anti-ecological lives—we improve by setting up a nature preserve—it preserves the way of life (the knowledges, the assumptions, the practices) that has underpinned the idea of developing land into anything, be it "natural" or "productive."

⁸ Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson (eds), *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2008), 22.

⁹ Ivan Illich, "Silence is a Commons," *The CoEvolution Quarterly* Winter (1983). Retrieved September 2009 from <http://www.oikos.org/ecology/illsilence.htm>.

¹⁰ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1970).

¹¹ See Chet Bowers, *Revitalizing the Commons: Cultural and Educational Sites of Resistance and Affirmation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006) and Madhu Prakash and Gustavo Esteva, *Escaping Education: Living as Learning within Grassroots Cultures* (New York: Peter Lang, 1998).

By privileging particular knowledges, we deny the balance of interdependency—of both living things and knowledge. Berry made this argument in his critique of the inequitable relationship between centers of knowledge and the periphery.¹² Centers of knowledge (universities, corporations, governments) dictate to the periphery, subordinating local knowledges to the dominant ways of knowing. Given that schools (another center of knowledge) privilege particular ways of knowing as a means of perpetuating the institutions that support those knowledges, we should consider what is left out—what have we ignored?

The centers of knowledge are ignorant—what Paul Heltne in this volume would call an “imposed ignorance”—ignorant to local ways and customs and ignorant to the complexities that persist despite *knowing*.¹³ The value of recognizing the interdependence of knowledges in the commons—that our knowledge of a particular thing is not a universal knowledge (nor a correct knowledge, for that matter)—may help to foster humility in a time when it is most needed. To this end, Derek Rasmussen has critically examined “rescuers”—those who seek to help *others* when their very livelihood contributes to the detriment of the *other*.¹⁴ In his work with the Inuit of Nunavut, he deconstructs the “welfare colonialism” that results in “creating dependencies, shattering links of sharing practices, [and] stealing children in order to give them a ‘proper’ education.”¹⁵ Rasmussen writes about the dire medical concerns of the Inuit community as “over 60% of the Inuit children... and almost 40% of Inuit women... were found to have PCB body burdens exceeding ‘tolerable’ guidelines.”¹⁶ Still, he argues, the Inuit do not need to be rescued. Instead, the medical issues impacting the Inuit of Nunavut are likely a result of dioxins produced as a byproduct of U.S. industry, and therefore attention should be directed to the source, not the recipient of the problem. Our knowledge helped us to build industry, but we are ignorant to the impact it has on people and place. By acknowledging the limits of our knowledge, we may “be humble and work on an appropriate scale,” mitigating our degradation of the commons.¹⁷

A worldview of ignorance may play a part in an ongoing effort to challenge the static knowledges that become ritualized. We live in a context where such knowledges are being challenged regularly—through user created media, through literature, through social movements, through contemplative action. What we know of the world—and how we sense it—is open to interpretation and dialogue. Evelyn Glennie, a virtuoso percussionist who is also profoundly deaf, teaches us that it is possible to listen with parts of our body other than our ears—parts of our body to whose ability to ‘hear’ we are ignorant.¹⁸ As a musician who cannot ‘hear’ what she is playing, she argues that she has “no more idea of how [she] hears than [others] do.” Amanda Baggs, a YouTube director

¹² Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Emoryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005).

¹³ Bill Vitek and Wes Jackson (eds), *The Virtues of Ignorance: Complexity, Sustainability, and the Limits of Knowledge* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, 2008), 135.

¹⁴ Derek Rasmussen, “Cease to Do Evil, Then Learn to Do Good” in *Rethinking Freire: Globalization and the Environmental Crisis*, eds. C.A. Bowers and F. Apffel-Marglin (Mawah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2005), 115-132.

¹⁵ Ibid, 123.

¹⁶ Ibid, 128.

¹⁷ Wendell Berry, *The Way of Ignorance: And Other Essays* (Emoryville, CA: Shoemaker & Hoard, 2005).

¹⁸ Evelyn Glennie, “The Hearing Essay,” Retrieved September 30, 2009 at http://www.evelyn.co.uk/live/hearing_essay.htm.

and autism rights activist who made the video “In My Language,” challenges the normalized “abled” (as opposed to disabled) population to consider the marginalized ways of knowing and experiencing the world—namely those ways lived and practiced by those institutionally labeled with (dis)abilities.

The Virtues of Ignorance is a worthwhile read, especially for Illich scholars. The questions raised throughout the book encourage a pause for reflection—on what we think we know and the implications our knowledge has on the world around us. It is a foundational pursuit that builds upon the work and vision of Ivan Illich—who sought to dismantle our dependency on institutional practice by understanding its complex implications for people, culture, and relationships. This book, while not intended as a contribution to a discourse on Illich is strikingly complementary. It encourages us to embrace ignorance as a virtue and disposition—a place to begin. Vitek and Jackson suggest that by acknowledging the limits to our knowledge, we may come to value a commons—a physical, emotional, and spiritual place—where we are able to share stories of wonder and contemplation, where we are able to talk and listen. We still strive to explain, but realize that our stories are partially true, and incomplete. The “rebirth of the Epimethean man” was Illich’s vision that we might move beyond products and come to “value hope above expectations.”¹⁹ It is not about what we know, but what we might learn from each other, our world, our histories, and our hopes.

I know much about this prairie. I know the names of the plants that grow in the soil. I know the problematic history of prairie land in the state of Illinois. I know the irony of a place ‘preserved’ from the detriment of human impact. But in the moment, I am happy to simply wonder, and not know much, other than I am in the midst of something beautiful that cannot (nor should not) be easily captured by words. I look to the stories told and the dreams had about this place. In my wonder I find insightful knowledge, and a valuable ignorance.

Author’s Bio

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¹⁹ Ivan Illich, *Deschooling Society* (New York and London: Marion Boyars, 1971), 115.