

421

1906

THE Theory of Ignorance

Ayer graduating essay

N. WIENER MC 22



The Theory of Ignorance

Graduating Essay

Norbert Wiener

Class '06



## The Theory of General Ignorance,

By general ignorance I mean the impossibility of man's being certain of anything. This is of great consequence, although its truth is quite self-evident, for to man's presumption in declaring that his knowledge has no limits, are due all religious wars. Besides this, there are many other consequences, as I shall hereafter point out.

This great truth is due to Socrates, who was the first to state it. The story goes



that someone once asked the Oracle  
of Delphi as to who was the  
wisest man in Greece, and it there-  
upon said, answering directly for  
once, "Socrates". Then Socrates went  
questioning all the people in Greece  
of any importance about his  
greatness, and he said he found that  
the difference between him and  
the other people was that he knew  
nothing, and knew it, and they  
knew nothing, and did not know it,  
although Socrates stated the  
theory, he did not prove it.  
The proof is very simple, for there are



so many pitfalls through which an idea has to pass to get lodged in the mind, suppose we read in the newspapers about the earthquake in San Francisco. The reporters may have had hallucinations or have lied, the report may have been misprinted, or we may have misread it or have had hallucinations. Any one of these or many other causes may produce uncertainty, and all - together there is a great doubt, but since it is universal, we usually pass it over. Yet, nevertheless, the uncertainty still remains and in some cases, ~~it~~ it is an important factor.



In history the theory ought always to be considered, for we can never trust to accounts. Suppose we are trying to make a history of the Gallic War. Then we have to trust mainly to Caesar's account. Caesar may have exaggerated it, it all may be a forgery, some scribe may have miswritten it, or we may have misread it. This doubt is especially important when we have contradictory accounts, for we then do not know which one to trust, when we have only looks to rely upon, and no other signs exist, and when the accounts are improbable, for instance we can not trust the statements of the Spaniards about



The Aztecs and Incas

The Aztecs and Incas, for it is highly improbable that such a highly civilized race could have vanished in four hundred years.

In experimental science the theory is quite important, as the slightest doubt in a delicate experiment may upset it. For instance, imagine that we are doing a very delicate chemical experiment. If we are called out of the room for a few minutes, and an unexpected result happens, the doubt caused by the theory will be great. For some dust may have fallen into the receptacle in which the reagents are



placed, and the substances contained in the dust may have entered into some kind of a reaction with the reagents, the receptacle in which the reagents are held may have been mistaken for another, the reagents themselves may have been confounded with others, or they may have been impure. These are not the only causes for doubt, since there are others quite as important. Hence the uncertainty will be too great to be easily passed over. This doubt exists in a lesser degree with every experiment.

In paleontology, we can not



trust to geological records, for we may not interpret them aright. Suppose we are trying to find out the origin of the horse by paleontology; the fossils used for reference may be those of analogous forms, they may have been misinterpreted, or the various fossils may have been placed in wrong order. These and many other causes come into operation, and some still are of importance even when the work is done with extreme care, and when it is not, the doubt almost overwhelms the investigation.

Philosophy is worthless without due consideration of the theory, since it



must be a factor of the true doctrine. One effect of it is to prove the impossibility of man's knowing the Supreme Power. This can be shown by a different method than that used previously, because we can only perceive form and matter, while there may be other things. This theory, although of the highest importance has been far too often disregarded in philosophy.

In religion the theory is true in the same manner as in philosophy and is of the same nature. The best a religion can be is a probable assumption, a makeshift for the truth. No matter



how beautiful a religion is, no matter how grand, no matter how moral, it is impossible to prove it. The solemnity of Christianity, and the pomp of the belief of ancient Rome are alike in vain, for the truth of the religions can not be ascertained. A religion that contains the appearance of God to man, or states that all non-believers are wicked, can not be true under any circumstances. Religion should always be free, for no man can be sure of any belief, Church and State ought to be always separate, because when they are not, it is showing too much favoritism to



religions, when there is but little preference. In short, all religions are equal on the same ground, and no belief is any more known than any other.

On the whole, this doubt is all-important, and can not be disregarded. In fact all human knowledge is based on an approximation, the assumption that like things always occur under like circumstances. This cannot be proved true, and even if it were always true, we could not tell when the circumstances were exactly alike.

Our knowledge of the forces will of necessity always be very small, for



we cannot perceive them, but only their results, while we can never know their causes, since force itself can not be felt.

Next matter can never be found, because all matter conducts force, and no matter can be isolated. In fact it seems as though man will never know the absolute. An absolute vacuum is an impossibility; an absolute universe can not be conceived; and eternity is far beyond the range of man's mind. One can not conceive an absolute zero, or an absolute infinity, for the mind works within limits which



can not be passed. While in mathematics we may speak of infinity and zero, we speak of infinity not as a definite number, but as a variable, and by zero we do not mean absolute zero. Concluding, man can never be sure of anything, and especially so of God.















