

Positive Ignorance: Unknowing as a tool for education and educational research

Introduction

In an article published in the *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, Richard Smith (2016) proposes and argues for what he calls 'the virtues of unknowing'. In it, he reads, amongst others, Jacques Derrida and Friedrich Nietzsche. He does so in a manner that I will suggest could be expanded to further develop his conception of 'unknowing'. I will claim that further readings of both of these philosophers would support a significant expansion of the important epistemological and educational claims that Smith makes, and, further, show that such an expansion would be true to their thought. This critical development of Smith's research into 'unknowing' attempts to outline how the process of unknowing might be utilised as a tool for education and educational research.

Central to Smith's argument is the distinction that he draws between 'unknowing' and 'not knowing'. He first introduces this distinction as if it was reasonably inconsequential, but then develops an argument against not knowing in the name of the virtues of unknowing. I will suggest that Smith's assignation of unknowing as productive or constitutive of virtues, especially in the context of the other epistemological virtue he describes (that of a 'well-stocked mind'), does not attend substantially enough to the problematic relationship both of these philosophers have with understandings of this latter conception. It will be suggested that Smith (I think against his intentions), runs the risk of presenting 'unknowing' as too comfortable with a traditional and conservative pedagogical argument. In outlining the significance of this issue and attempting to somewhat rectify it, my own argument will return with interest to a distinction Smith makes early in his article. If, instead of following Smith's turn away from 'not knowing' to the 'virtues of unknowing', we instead focus on offering a fuller conceptual elaboration of "not knowing", in keeping with the philosophical and specifically epistemological positions of the philosophers he engages with, his already significant contribution to contemporary work in the philosophy of education through the development of the idea of 'unknowing', could be enhanced. I will, after outlining where Smith's argument leaves us, attempt to take his aborted path in the direction of educational thought and research and develop a conception of 'not knowing' that challenges some aspects of 'the virtues of unknowing' and its concomitant epistemological and ethical positions tied to the 'well-stocked mind'. To do so I will draw from the theoretical conclusions of Barbara Johnson's (1989) essay, 'Teaching Ignorance: *L'Ecole des Femmes*', as well as from the work of Linda Martin Alcoff (1996) and Walter Mignolo (2011).

Smith's Defence of Epistemic Virtues

In 'The Virtues of Unknowing', Smith positions his argument for unknowing against what he conceives of as a contemporary malaise in epistemological thought. He tells us that "it has become common to read of the 'death of epistemology'" (p. 272). He splits the surviving virtue epistemologists into two camps: reliabilists, who "focus on what are

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sometimes called ‘faculty virtues’ such as accurate perception and good memory”, and responsibilists, who “emphasise the knower as an active individual who is part of a community to which he or she has obligations from which he or she derives norms and examples.” (p. 274). While Smith positions his own argument on the side of the responsibilists, he nonetheless appropriately criticises them as “they too often incline from time to time towards the verdictive and an emphasis on truth and knowledge”, this being “all the odder” for Smith “since virtue epistemology was born out of a sense that traditional epistemology, which took its central task as giving an account of truth and knowledge, had become sterile.” (p. 275). He then begins to frame his subsequent argument for unknowing in terms of ‘the quieter epistemic virtues’ such as ‘[intellectual] modesty and diffidence’ (p. 275).

This introduction makes way for Smith’s major claim, which is that the ‘good knower’ or ‘epistemically admirable person, one who stands well with regard to knowledge and related goods—may sometimes be one who does not know: whose virtues are those of not knowing or [...] of unknowing.’ (p. 276). This description, I will argue, is problematic on two levels. Firstly, in that the philosophical resources Smith relies upon to support his claim – drawing special attention to Nietzsche and Derrida – would support a more nuanced and self-reflexive conception of unknowing. Second, that this is partly because the unknowing Smith describes is, in fact, a form of knowledge (knowing what not to know). It is also important to note that, in relation to this second problem, especially given Smith’s contextualisation of his paper as a rebuttal of ‘the death of epistemology’, he does not engage with recent work produced on epistemologies of ignorance (for prominent, extensive, and wide-ranging edited collections of essays see Sullivan & Tuana 2007 and Malewski & Jaramillo 2011, as well as, more recently, Santos 2014 and Medina 2013), which could be seen to prefigure and problematize the contextualisation and content of his argument.

Most problematic in terms of my own argument – and partly where my motivation to develop it further as a tool for education and educational research comes from – is that Smith provides no evidence to justify the ‘strong case’ he would make for ‘that old fashioned virtue, the possession of a well-stocked mind [...] organised according to a sense of what is worth knowing and what is not, and is not thrown together promiscuously or arbitrarily.’ (p. 276). This ‘sense of what is worth knowing and what is not’ is not itself conditioned by any self-reflexive unknowing (a feature central to my development of the idea of unknowing here). This might provoke the question: how does one know what it is worth knowing apart from via this quasi-mystical ‘sense’? Smith’s sense of ‘what is worth knowing’ is opposed, through several of his own examples, to the contextual specificity of knowledge worth having. The caveats he provides to this are that the things that are worth knowing ‘change over time and vary from culture to culture’, which exhibits the danger of implying (I think against his intentions) that everyone who is subject to, for example, ‘Western’ or ‘British culture’, at a particular time, should know the same things worth knowing, otherwise their mind would not be considered ‘well-stocked’ by Smith’s standards. No doubt, Smith’s conceptions of both culture and temporality are far more nuanced than his reference here implies, but in the absence of evidence, and because of my position that nuance and complexity are crucial to the process of unknowing or not knowing, I will attempt to add to Smith’s argument by emphasising them. In the case of my own position, it is just as important to emphasise that the absence of a culturally dominant conception of a ‘well-stocked mind’ that I am proposing as the next step in the development of Smith’s progressive responsibilism would not imply an

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individual's inability to distinguish between what could be individually and/or socially considered good or bad actions, as well as good and bad social and cultural norms. This development of Smith's approach is neither relativistic nor nihilistic in terms making judgments, it is rather concerned that these judgments are significantly informed by a mitigation of the risk of pre-judgment or even prejudice. The notion of 'unknowing' I propose to develop from Smith's is a process of unpicking the knowledge we think we have and the prejudices that often come along with it. This process attempts also to move the centre of gravity, for judgment of what is appropriate to know and not to know, away from individuals with a culturally dominant conception of what should stock a mind and act as its own basis for judgment; it persistently disconcerts and resists our self-certainties. In the context of ethical relation, this centre of gravity does not only move toward those whose minds might be stocked with other or more contextually applicable 'content' than our own but also, as Jack Bicker (2018) puts it, towards those, often in non-culturally-dominant positions, who "embody and signify difference through the lived substance of their lives" (pp. 83-84).

While Smith's approach to epistemology, as a quasi-responsibilist, is clearly not unresponsive to context, the emphasis he assigns to the derivation of "norms and examples" (p. 274) in that school of epistemology, combined with the assertion of the culturally and temporally specific possession of a 'well-stocked mind', ties down his otherwise progressive approach to some of the limitations he already finds in responsibilism (p. 275). His strong case for the 'possession' of particular knowledge seems to suggest that his preference for the idea of 'unknowing' over 'not knowing' might be more to do with the fact that 'unknowing' is a quality or a virtue that one can possess, while it would be impossible to 'possess' not knowing. Thus, on the one hand, Smith runs the risk of suggesting that he possesses the knowledge worth knowing (and he *knows* it's worth knowing because of a 'sense' he has, or perhaps because of its perceived cultural hegemony, manifested in the 'well-stocked mind'), while on the other hand, he might also be seen to possess the virtues associated with unknowing. The 'virtues of unknowing', on Smith's account, seem only to refer to knowledge that it is, without question, good to not have. One's knowledge that some knowledge is worthless or obstructive is, apparently, his definition of 'unknowing'. Thus, what Smith describes as 'unknowing' is, at least in my reading of his evidential anecdotes, the preference for some immediate, intuitive or practical knowledge over other knowledge.

Unknowing is not only, if at all, in post-Nietzschean readings, a quasi-mystical and intentionally passive relation to that which one does not know, but rather, and perhaps more importantly, a conditioning of one's own self-assured knowledge, which would of course include Smith's well-stocked mind. This can be deduced even in the passages of *The Gay Science* that Smith cites from. For example, Smith cites a few lines from the third and fourth sections of the text (see p. 280) but does not reference a longer and, I would suggest, more central passage to the third section wherein Nietzsche (2001) more clearly defines his approach:

Only great pain, that long, slow pain that takes its time and in which we are burned, as it were, over green wood, forces us philosophers to descend into our ultimate depths and put aside all trust, everything good-natured, veiling, mild, average – things in which formerly we may have found our humanity. I doubt that such pain makes us 'better' - but I know that it makes us deeper. Whether we learn to pit our pride, our

scorn, our willpower against it, like the savage who, however badly tormented, repays his tormentor with the malice of his tongue; or whether we withdraw before pain into the Oriental Nothingness - called Nirvana - into mute, rigid, deaf self-surrender, self-forgetting, self-extinction: one emerges from such dangerous exercises in self-mastery as a different person, with a few more question marks, above all with the will henceforth to question further, more deeply, severely, harshly, evilly, and quietly than one had previously questioned. The trust in life is gone: life itself has become a problem. (pp. 6-7)

What Nietzsche seems to be concerned with in this passage is not unknowing as an outward-facing state of being which allows us only to know the limits of what we should know but, in fact, the surrender of our own self-certainties, which would include this knowing of what not to know. I would argue that this more expansive conception of 'unknowing' (if we were to keep the name) that Nietzsche outlines here could profitably problematise and develop what Smith says about the 'well-stocked mind', and the epistemic state reflected in the anecdotes Smith provides to illustrate his account of the experience or practice of unknowing:

The psychotherapist who resists her clients' demands for answers and solutions, since she both understands as a matter of theory and senses from everyday professional experience that 'answers' are no help at all but the patience to live with the lack of them in some quite mysterious way is. The university tutor who says of his (well regarded) seminars: 'I just try to be there for the students, it seems to work somehow, I don't really understand why'. Any conversation in which we don't know where it's going, where it would be quite wrong to steer it, to direct it. A man who, becoming a father for the first time, read some of the available books on fatherhood and said that the best ones encouraged him simply to be with his son, to become attuned to him, to live with the mystery that is another person. (p. 277)

These anecdotes could be seen to express the opposite of what I have argued that Nietzsche proposes. Instead of putting knowledge or a sense of what 'works' or is 'good' and 'true' in to question, they show a lack of Nietzschean distrust. The practical, experiential, or immediate knowledge, and the knowledge of what is not worth knowing, expressed in these anecdotes, would not, without the development I suggest, fully support Smith's claim of their association with a Nietzschean unknowing. The psychotherapist utilises negative ignorance in the service of a professional knowledge which determines exactly what should and should not be known. The university tutor's knowledge may be unreflective or unarticulated but is produced by experience, intuition and feedback from students who engage in his 'well regarded' practice - the fact that it is 'well-regarded', being itself a form of knowledge and affirmation. However, the seeming absence of reflection and self-criticality, implied by Smith, means that this tutor's practice is somewhat removed from Nietzsche's thought (although may well serve as an object of Nietzschean critique, which is what I am arguing). Smith's conversational example suggests that we should allow some conversations to direct us, rather than the other way around; however, one would then have to know the difference between which conversations (and with which interlocutors) this would be appropriate (perhaps something more appropriately revealed by context, rather than by norms). The final anecdote of the father

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reading and determining the ‘best’ books on fathering (that present a specific course of action which one must know) implies not only that the father somehow knows these are the best books, because they confirm what he already intuitively ‘knows’, but more problematically, that the father-son relation wouldn’t already be conditioned by all sorts of social conventions and remembered (and judged to be ‘good’) experiences of the father; the ‘mystery that is another person’ being exactly that which forces us back onto knowledge we do have access to and can put into action. Smith, then, in all of his examples, is presenting unknowing as a form of knowledge, it is only that it is not knowledge in overtly codified and explicit form, and instead intuitive, tacit, and experiential knowledge. While such a position is certainly defensible, its dynamic is significantly elaborated by the further educational research I have attempted to provide in the Nietzschean and post-Nietzschean critical trajectories that Smith utilises to make his argument.

Smith’s reading of Derrida, via John D. Caputo (who, it must be noted, is one of the more prominent Derrida scholars to have been heavily criticized in Derrida studies; see, for example Hägglund 2011 and Schrijvers 2016), does not go far enough in representing Derrida’s thought in this context. Smith tells us that

Derrida is impressed by the thought that other people are more obscure to us than we readily suppose, and that we are barely knowable to ourselves—or perhaps that in our tendencies to self-deception, wishful thinking and other evasive strategies we are particularly unknowable to ourselves. (p. 281)

It is conceivable that Smith’s brief gloss on Derrida here is to provide a stronger justification for why in some instances we should not aim at knowledge. This interpretation of Smith’s strategy seems justified as he immediately follows this statement by claiming that ‘Many psychoanalysts tend to a similar view,’ (p. 281). ‘simple knowledge’ proving obstructive to the patient (p. 281). This approach of it being ‘better not to know’, or giving priority to what we don’t know, does not quite capture Derrida’s perspectives on these issues. Derrida tells us, in *Of Grammatology*, that his style (like Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot’s before him) ‘is affected by nonknowledge as by its future and it *ventures out* deliberately.’ (p. 162). This venture is marked by ‘the departure from the closure of a self-evidence’, which, of course would include the knowledge of that which it is better not to know, indicated in Smith’s anecdotal examples of unknowing. As an aside, Smith’s rejection of a sometimes promiscuous and arbitrary relation to knowledge (p. 276) seems a little too dismissive of what I would suggest are some of the fundamental tenets of post-Nietzschean (and – it is also arguable, although I will not have the space to do so – post-Socratic and post-Freudian) thought. Why should one not learn from several (possibly contradictory) sources? And more to the point, how could one avoid doing so?

Attending carefully to ‘the facile ideas about relativism’ (p. 276) that Smith dismisses, as perhaps including advanced forms of epistemic justification such as coherentism (see Alcoff 1996), might provide an even stronger, more ethical, and rigorous understanding of what unknowing – and, its perhaps sharper and more clearly actionable as well as less mistakenly virtuous formulation: not knowing – might have to offer research and teaching in philosophy of education and education studies. This expanded understanding of ‘unknowing’ or ‘not knowing’ might see that unknowing is no, or not just, an outward-facing virtue, concomitant

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with the 'right' knowledge of a 'well-stocked mind', which allows one to decide or 'sense' what is and is not worth knowing. It is instead, or as well, the putting in to question of the legitimacy of what one thinks one knows.

A helpful way of understanding just what is involved in this understanding of 'not knowing' and of its educational significance comes from Barbara Johnson's discussion of ignorance. In her essay, 'Teaching Ignorance: *L'Ecole des Femmes*', Johnson (1989) distinguishes between two types of ignorance relevant to education and educational research. *Negative ignorance*, which is the conscious or unconscious repression of some knowledge, often in favour of other knowledge, and *positive ignorance*, which is the putting into question of, and sometimes moving on from, the knowledge we think we have. Neither of these forms of ignorance are necessarily good or bad in and of themselves. In fact, Johnson argues that, 'negative ignorance may be the necessary by-product – or even the precondition – of any education whatsoever' and that 'positive ignorance [is] the pursuit of what is forever in the act of escaping, the inhabiting of that space where knowledge becomes the obstacle to knowing – that is the pedagogical imperative we can neither fulfil nor disobey.' (p. 85). However, this of course does not mean that there are not more and less good ways to utilise and experience these forms of ignorance. My above analysis suggests that Smith's conception of 'unknowing' only utilises negative ignorance, thus risking association with its repressive tendencies, while at the same time neglecting the conditioning of knowledge which stifles the work of positive ignorance. I would argue that a consideration of these points opens up important critical perspectives on education and on the role of philosophy of education in learning, teaching and research. Specifically: perhaps philosophers need to consider the possibility that a valuable epistemological practice for education would be one that puts less emphasis on knowing (including knowing what not to know), and more emphasis on putting into question.

The putting into question of the legitimacy of what one knows is how Socrates, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Jacques Derrida, and most of their interpreters, certainly those I cite below, would be more likely to conceive of what could be called unknowing. In contrast, the attempt to control both what is worth knowing and what is not worth knowing could – despite the important merits that Smith outlines – too easily be aligned with the remit of the conservative or overbearing educator, whose aim it is to uphold a particular vision of what the educated person should look like. Non-knowledge, or the kind of disposition of unknowing that Smith advocates can, for some educators, be a convenient excuse for unethical action, inaction, or exclusion. Equally, being secure in one's knowledge, especially from a position of privilege and/or in education, has been shown to repress and exclude forms of knowledge and being that might undermine or contradict one's own. Notably, feminist, queer, and decolonial theory are still at work to undo this self-certainty. Smith's seemingly nostalgic nod to the 'time when it was thought that a principal purpose of education was to help the student to acquire—to build, to understand the value of having [a well-stocked mind]' (p. 276), doesn't, understandably but problematically, attend to the often inherent – and certainly by means of 'unknowing' exclusion – sexist, racist, anti-queer, colonial and classist mentality that historically shaped and was shaped by educators in these and our times. This is, of course, still the case, which leads to the point that the idea of the 'well-stocked mind' and all its ideological baggage should be subject to the critique and operation of 'not knowing', rather than saddled too comfortably alongside it.

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Ignorance *Against* Unvirtuous Knowledge

Some things are obviously not true but were (and regrettably still are, by some people) taught to be true. Often false claims of knowledge are used to support those in power, or give some power over others. False 'knowledge' can also be used to support irrational hatred. Examples of false knowledge that has long been proved (through experience, science, and logical reflection) to be the product of these causes rather than any truth include: the idea that there is a divine right of kings – i.e. that God has put a particular monarch in place to rule; that there are innate differences of ability between different genders or 'races'; that homosexuality is the product of mental illness; that there is no such thing as climate change. Apart from the divine right of kings, there are still those who make these false claims to knowledge, without epistemic legitimacy. The effects of these false claims to knowledge also continue to structure our society and therefore these knowledge claims require continual de-legitimation, both within education and society more generally. The effects themselves are also subject to important challenges, not least through education, legal action, and social and political activism.

The work of Walter D. Mignolo, especially as presented in his book, *The darker side of western modernity: Global futures, decolonial options*, offers great assistance in the conceptualisation and critique of received approaches to knowledge and knowing; an approach arguably expressed, for example, by Smith's nostalgic desire for the 'virtue' of the 'well-stocked mind'. Mignolo (2011) explains that,

Subjectively, the modern/colonial matrix of knowledge (e.g., coloniality of knowledge) has been created, perfected, transformed, expanded, exported/imported by a particular kind of social agent: in general (and we can go through the biographer of the great thinkers and scientists in the Western canon), they were male, they were Christians, they were white, and, as we said, they lived in Western Christendom, which, after the sixteenth century, was translated into Europe. That is to say: the modern/colonial matrix of knowledge has been linked to a kind of subjectivity emerging from the lived experience of white and Christian males who lived and studied in [Italy, Spain, Portugal, France, Germany, and England, and their languages]. (p. 112)

In terms of both Johnson and Smith's concepts, we could read the 'modern/colonial matrix of knowledge' as being the major example of the conscious operation of negative ignorance or (Smith's) 'unknowing', which 'knows' and asserts (sometimes through simple exclusion) what is and what is not worth knowing. On the other hand, positive ignorance or (Johnson's) 'unknowing' (which, as I have argued, Smith does not present an equivalent concept for) provides a means to conceptualise a critique of the modern/colonial matrix of knowledge, including its effects on our own thinking. Doubling as a prime example of positive ignorance, Johnson (1989) puts into question the practice of negative ignorance in education, asking:

Could it be that the pedagogical enterprise as such is always constitutively a project of teaching ignorance? Are our ways of teaching students to ask some questions always correlative with our ways of teaching them not to ask – indeed, to be

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unconscious of – others? Does the educational system exist in order to promulgate knowledge, or is its main function rather to universalize a society's tacit agreement about what it has decided it does not and cannot know? (pp. 76-77)

These are, I argue, crucial questions for the future of learning, teaching, and research in philosophy of education and education studies. No doubt, some of the best resources we have to combat the undesirable effects of negative ignorance, as well as judging when it might be a good idea to utilise it consciously, can be found in the academic study of education. As such, we might ask, what are the ways the concepts of negative and positive ignorance might be used to help us think about education? And what different forms of education might they apply to? Mass education (e.g. schooling and university)? Individual educational experiences, in and out of institutions? Education through media (e.g. news, social media)?

Negative ignorance is the conscious or unconscious repression of some knowledge, often in favour of other knowledge. A classic example here is Charles Mills' account of "white ignorance" which, rather than acting as "the passive obverse to knowledge" actually functions actively to present itself as knowledge, while simultaneously suppressing other forms of knowledge (see Mills, *White Ignorance*, in Sullivan and Tuana, 2007 pp. 13-14). Accordingly, we might also ask what kind of knowledge does schooling consciously or unconsciously repress? What aren't we taught? How might looking at what we are taught help us to think about what schooling is trying to avoid, as well as what it is trying to do? Which social and cultural forms of knowledge are privileged in education and society? Which aren't? Does mass education seem to work to dramatically change society, or basically keep it the same? Or both in different ways? How might thinking about negative ignorance, and consciously or unconsciously repressed knowledge help us to answer the questions above?

Equally, a *positive ignorance* is the putting into question of, and sometimes moving on from, the knowledge we think we have, and asking where it might be just or helpful to do so. It might be especially useful to developing our own ways of looking at ourselves and engaging with the world, as well as in academic (including scientific) research, and questioning how education operates and what it seems to take for granted in various contexts, as well as looking at what seems to be valued (often without question) in society. In an interview with Barbara Johnson, published in *The Wake of Deconstruction* (1994), she explains that

It's not as if I think life is simple, so I retreat into literature so as to find the difficulty that I crave! I think, on the contrary, that life is extremely complex, and a literature that tries to work on what the nature of that complexity is interests me as a way of thinking about the difficulty life presents. So much of the indoctrination we get in the socialization process implies that everything should be simple. We should just love each other; men should just take care of the children half the time; that would be simple. What is it that resists those simple solutions that we all say we believe in? That's what I'm interested in, that kind of persistence of resistances to the simplicity that our ideology bombards us with as that which we fall short of through seemingly accidental fault. (pp. 98-99)

This disposition of simplicity that Johnson is perturbed by has striking similarities to Smith's description of unknowing, especially as expressed through his anecdotes (not least that

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describing the father-son relationship). The critical approach that Johnson endorses might be a useful addition to Smith's reflections. Although Johnson does not state it explicitly, positive ignorance is a particularly good example of this 'persistence of resistances', challenging, as it does, unquestioned virtues, such as that of 'the well-stocked mind'. In contradistinction to Smith's presentation of 'unknowing', Johnson (1989), through a reading of the *Phaedrus*, makes received knowledge the subject of critique, rather than the object of possession or aversion:

Up to now we have been viewing the teaching of ignorance in a purely negative light, a repressive method of instructing the student not to know. What Socrates seeks, on the other hand, is to teach the student *that he does not know*. To teach ignorance is, for Socrates to teach to *un-know*, to become conscious of the fact that what one thinks is knowledge is really an array of received ideas, prejudices, and opinions – a way of *not* knowing that one does not know. (p. 84)

This 'way of *not* knowing' is not a state of being, like Smith's conception of it, wherein what is and is not worth knowing has already been determined (at least within a specific time and a specific culture), it is instead a means of putting into question what one thinks one knows.

Education Studies and Educational Research: putting positive ignorance and unknowing to work

Adopting an epistemological position along the lines articulated here may shed new light on the ways we engage with education and the teaching and research of education, particularly in the context of "education studies" courses. The questions we already – and might continue to – put to ourselves and our students might then include: What do you know? What have you been taught? What have you learned, either from that teaching or from other experience? What experiences outside formal education have you learned things from? Does knowledge you have sometimes seem contradictory? Do things other people seem to know sometimes contradict what you think you know? What don't you know? What haven't you been taught? What might be the reasons for not teaching something that could provide knowledge? Is some knowledge possibly dangerous in the 'wrong' hands? Might some knowledge challenge or undermine what many consider a 'good' society to be? Is it sometimes better, or even just 'easier', not to know something? Should we question what we do and do not teach? Should we question our teachers? Are there things that are not taught that should be? Are there things that are taught that shouldn't be? How might selective teaching keep us ignorant about certain things? Can this ignorance be positive or negative? And, who decides? Should we question what we think we know? Are there some things we think we know that are more certain than others? What provides knowledge with legitimacy? Our own experience? The trust we have in our teachers, scientists and other authority figures (compared, for example, with what some politicians or tabloid newspapers say)? What other people say and do? It's seeming logical coherence? A combination of all of these?

The tireless operation of positive ignorance is anything but an 'anything goes' relativism and is much closer to advanced forms of coherentism. While it would no doubt imply that truth is, in Linda Martin Alcoff's terms, 'plural and changeable', it would not make

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it any less important, or any less the subject of urgent and ongoing epistemological work in philosophy of education and education studies. As Alcoff (1996) claims:

...truth is best understood as indexed to a set of specifics, which include not only what we can see from a given time and place, but where our thinking is at any given moment, as well as the relevant features of reality. This makes truth both plural and changeable, since it is relative to a context richly conceived. But it does not make truth arbitrary or subjective: given sufficiently specifiable contextual ingredients the determination of truth can be objective, in some cases perhaps even conforming to a deductive-normological method. The so-called subjective elements – the interpretive schema of knowers, their horizons of understanding, the historically specific episteme – are never sufficient to establish truth. Truth becomes apparent when beliefs and practices cohere within a lived reality. (p. 211)

If this coherentist conception of truth were to be applied to the future of education studies, then then the field could easily be defined as extending to the study of all beliefs and practices, and their relative coherence or non-coherence with a lived reality: How have we learned them and what are their effects? Do they cohere with reality? And can we go about unknowing them if they don't? Would these questions not then also put philosophy of education at the heart of education studies? And wouldn't education studies then be justified in situating itself as asking fundamental questions relevant to all disciplines and, in the process, indicate that philosophy of education is anything but a second order discipline? Could – using the limited scope of this essay as an example – the location of practices productive of negative ignorance and the application of positive ignorance provide theoretical means for exploring and developing highly topical research and study questions in subjects ranging from technology to social justice (of course, not implying that these do not intersect)?

First and foremost –and as this paper has attempted to do – positive ignorance can be put to work against claims made *in* philosophy of education.

Unknowing, then, while not necessarily a 'quieter epistemic [virtue]' (p. 275), might be a 'virtue' (or at least an epistemological practice) that is persistently resistant.

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