

# On the Value of Not Knowing: Wonder, Beginning Again and Letting Be

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The numbers in the paper refer to the accompanying powerpoint slides; material that was on the slides is highlighted in blue in the text.

1. When Rebecca [Fortnum] first approached me about today's event, she suggested I might want to take up the theme of not knowing from a feminist perspective in particular, and I was excited by the immediate connection between this theme and a strand of feminist ethics to which I am very much drawn. This mode of ethics seeks to cultivate difference in ways that remain open to others as *always* to some degree unknowable and ungraspable by us. While I will draw on this strand of feminist thought in this talk, I am not going to offer an explicitly feminist argument here about the value of not knowing. Rather, I hope to bridge feminist concerns and the wider question of thinking and making without knowing where one is going. So while one of the key thinkers I will refer to is the feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray, I am going to start with a perhaps more unexpected ally, namely, Descartes.

2. Descartes is of course well known for suggesting that I can know with certainty that I exist as long as I am aware I am thinking (the famous *cogito ergo sum*, I think therefore I am). Given his argument that mind and body are essentially separate and that knowledge arises from the proper use of our mental faculties, it might seem hard to imagine a philosopher who places more emphasis on the value of our capacities to think and to know. But in his writings on the *Passions of the Soul*, Descartes also values the feeling of wonder that arises when we encounter something we do not know, something surprising and unfamiliar. Thus he writes:

'When the first encounter with some object surprises us, and we judge it to be new or very different from what we formerly knew, or from what we supposed that it ought to be, that causes us to wonder and be surprised; and because that may happen before we in any way know whether this object is agreeable to us or is not so, it appears to me that wonder is the first of all the passions'.<sup>2</sup>

Thus described, wonder is the passion that can accompany not knowing, providing we recognize that the object we encounter is not the same as what we already do know. Wonder arises before we know enough to make any utilitarian calculation about whether an object might be pleasing or useful to us (or not). For Descartes, as for Aristotle, it could therefore be said that philosophy begins in wonder, for this passionate state of not knowing is what makes us think, ask questions, and seek to understand. Wonder is the 'first of all the passions' not only because it is our initial response to something new and unknown, but because it implies that other passions will follow, as we find out more about what we have encountered.

3. Although she critiques Descartes' model of a self-founding subject, Luce Irigaray takes up his notion of wonder in a short essay where she writes (second quote):

'In order for it [wonder] to affect us, it is necessary and sufficient for it *to surprise, to be new, not yet assimilated or disassimilated* as known. Still awakening our passion, our appetite, our attraction to that which is not yet (en)coded, our curiosity (but perhaps in all senses: sight, smell, hearing? etc) vis-à-vis that which we have not yet encountered or made ours.'<sup>3</sup>

The as-yet-unknown is here aligned with that which we have 'not yet encoded', not yet translated into the conceptual and symbolic frameworks we use to make sense of the world; at the same time, the passage hints at an entirely different way of coming to know someone or something, involving an attunement of the senses to that which is other and irreducible to those frameworks. While we may still go on to grasp and appropriate the unfamiliar, Irigaray calls on us to cultivate the sense of wonder that can inhabit *all* our encounters,<sup>4</sup> providing we remain attentive to the unique singularity of others, to the ways in which, no matter how much we know about someone else, they remain irreducibly different from us. Wonder thus remains the first of all the passions, not simply because it is the first we experience, but because it has an ethical priority. Cultivating wonder is a way of remaining open to the otherness of the other without seeking to appropriate or assimilate them.

For Irigaray, the difference to which wonder holds us open is first and foremost the difference between the sexes; sexual difference is for her the first difference in the same sense as wonder is the first passion. Wonder is thus essential to the possibility of an erotic encounter in which each desires the other without seeking to own or appropriate. However, as well as love, the wonder that arises from not knowing is, she says,

'the passion that inaugurates ... art. And thought.'<sup>5</sup>

4. Art, thought, and not knowing are linked in a long and complex history, from which I have selected only one particular moment here, albeit a particularly influential one. In Kant's account of genius, he emphasises that genius works without knowing what it is doing, insofar as no rule could be formulated in advance for producing a truly original artwork. Rather, the rule must be abstracted after the fact, to the extent that works of genius come to serve as examples for others. In fact, Kant's genius works in a delicate balance between knowing and not knowing, for while the artist is unable to use concepts or rules to fully determine what will emerge from their creative activities, for these to be productive of more than mere nonsense, they must nonetheless draw on other kinds of knowledge. This includes the technical knowledge or skills required to work with their materials as well as knowledge of preceding aesthetic traditions – which true genius will always both break and reinvigorate.

For those of us not blessed with what Kant calls genius however, not knowing remains an essential component of what he describes as the most intense kind of aesthetic experience, that of the sublime. One trigger for the sublime is the encounter with something which seems infinite to us – an ever-receding mountain range or the vastness of the ocean. Our faculties struggle to grasp such apparent infinities, for the moment we try to take them in and represent them in a single image, we place a limit on them and thereby lose the suggestion of infinity which attracted us to them in the first place. In ways that recall the poster for this symposium, we experience sublimity when we are all at sea (though the image also pokes gentle fun at the overly serious language of the sublime, as it shows someone all at sea in a pedal-boat).<sup>6</sup>

On Kant's account, even though we cannot represent infinity, our very *failure* to grasp it makes us all the more aware of our ability to *think* that which we cannot know, to have an idea of that which goes beyond anything we can take in via the senses. Thus he writes:

'[N]othing that can be an object of the senses is to be called sublime. [What happens is that] our imagination strives to progress toward infinity, while our reason demands absolute totality as a real idea, and so [the imagination], our power of estimating the magnitude of things in the world of sense, is inadequate to that idea. Yet this inadequacy itself is the arousal in us of the feeling that we have within us a supersensible power ... *Sublime is what even to be able to think proves that the mind has a power surpassing any standard of sense.*'<sup>7</sup>

Note the movement that characterises Kant's account of the sublime, which begins with a sense of awe at nature's apparent infinities, but ends with a similar sense of awe at our own rational faculties. On Kant's model, the disruptive moment of not knowing is recuperated in ways that re-affirm the powers of the subject, and reinforce his ability to separate himself from and transcend the material world of the senses.

5. Despite this, the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, writing nearly 200 years after Kant, recognises the potential in Kant's account of the sublime for a more radical challenge to the knowing subject. For Lyotard, as for Kant, the sublime occurs when we encounter something we cannot represent, but unlike for Kant, this does not have to be the grand horizons of seemingly limitless oceans or mountain ranges. Rather, the infinite is contained within the most immediate and subtle of sensations, insofar as any sensation is infinitely unique, irreplaceable by any other. Hence, any attempt to grasp a sensory event, to make it present to ourselves by re-presenting it, will inevitably erase that which we were seeking to capture. Rather than recoup this inability via our power to think the infinite, Lyotard places the emphasis more on the value of this temporary incapacitation. It is only when we are thus undone as knowing subjects that we are able to remain open to the singularity of the material event, which Lyotard describes in terms of:

'a singular, incomparable quality – unforgettable and immediately forgotten – of the grain of a skin or a piece of wood, the fragrance of an aroma, the savour of a secretion or a piece of flesh, as well as a timbre or a nuance. All these terms ... designate the event of a passion, a passability for which the mind will not have been prepared, which will have unsettled it'.

'Nuance or timbre are the distress and despair of the exact division ... From this aspect of matter, one must say that it must be immaterial. ... The matter I'm talking about is 'immaterial', anobjectable, because it can only 'take place' or find its occasion at the price of suspending [the] active powers of the mind.'<sup>8</sup>

Though Lyotard does not describe the sublime in terms of wonder here, perhaps wonder is still present in the 'passion' and 'passability' that allow us to remain open to the material event. Such events are *immaterial* to the knowing subject who can only betray their incomparable uniqueness by trying to grasp them via familiar forms and concepts. For Lyotard, as for Irigaray, the moment of not knowing thus holds an ethical promise, that of being able to do justice to the singular by letting go of the desire to know, and allowing ourselves to be unsettled into bearing witness to the incomparable and irreplaceable.

6. Allowing oneself to be thus undone is, for Lyotard, the very condition of thought, and hence, the condition of doing philosophy. Learning how to think means letting go of everything one thought one knew, so as to think again with an open and questioning

inventiveness; teaching someone how to think means learning how to *unlearn*, so as to enter with them on the journey of a question.<sup>9</sup> Teacher and pupil both must be prepared to return to a state of unpreparedness and unknowing that he calls infancy:

‘You cannot open up a question without leaving yourself open to it. You cannot scrutinize a ‘subject’ ... without being scrutinized by it. You cannot do any of these things without renewing ties with the season of childhood, the season of the mind’s possibilities.’<sup>10</sup>

The inventiveness of infancy allows us to judge without criteria, where there are no rules to follow and no one to tell us what to do. Lyotard counsels us to nurture and renew the potency of infancy, the ‘childhood of thought’ that remains with us in adulthood and that grants human beings a capacity to begin again, to find new ways of thinking and being.

Such infancy, he argues, is at odds with the contemporary emphasis on ‘performance’ which insists that our inventiveness must be quantifiably productive and refuses to tolerate a questioning that does not know where it is going or whether answers will be found. What Lyotard calls ‘the stifling busyness of performativity’<sup>11</sup> cannot bear the idea of not making progress, nor find any value in the possibility of failure: from this perspective, having to begin again is a sign of time wasted, rather than of a capacity for renewal. Yet without the risk of failure, of getting lost or ‘being adrift’,<sup>12</sup> there is no real openness to the unknown, to the new thoughts that might emerge from the as yet unthought:

‘We write before knowing what to say and how to say it, and in order to find out, if possible. ... We recommence, but we cannot rely on it getting to the thought itself, there, at the end. For the thought is here, muddled up in the unthought, trying to sort out the impertinent babble of childhood.’<sup>13</sup>

To foreclose this impertinent time of infancy is to foreclose the possibility of re-commencing, of thinking again and beginning anew.

7. The intrinsic link between beginning anew and not knowing is affirmed by Hannah Arendt, who writes of:

‘the human capacity for action, for beginning new and spontaneous processes ... whose outcome remains uncertain and unpredictable .... [H]e who acts never quite knows what he is doing, ... he always becomes ‘guilty’ of consequences he never intended or even foresaw’.<sup>14</sup>

For Arendt, the capacity to act necessarily entails not fully knowing what we are doing, as action is by its very nature open-ended and unpredictable. Yet Arendt’s insight also draws our attention to an unease we may feel about affirming the value of not knowing: for it is one thing to forgive those who are ‘guilty’ of consequences they never intended and could not foresee, but quite another to excuse those who deliberately close their eyes and do not want to see or know what they do, and who thus refuse to take responsibility for their actions. Arendt herself confronted such issues in the trial of the Nazi war criminal, Adolf Eichmann. Her analysis suggests that the problem with Eichmann was not that he did not know: he was all too aware, in horribly bureaucratic detail, of what he was doing. The problem was rather that he was neither willing, nor perhaps able, to *think* about what he was doing:

‘The longer one listened to him, the more obvious it became that his inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to *think*, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.’ ‘He was not stupid. It was sheer thoughtlessness’.

‘Those few who were still able to tell right from wrong went really only by their own judgements. ... They had to decide each instance as it arose, because no rules existed for the unprecedented.’<sup>15</sup>

Like Lyotard, Arendt counters Eichmann’s thoughtlessness with the ethical significance of thinking for oneself so as to make judgements where there are no pre-given criteria and no rules to guide us. Acting ethically requires a capacity to judge without knowing, rather than know without thinking. It also, for Arendt, involves a recognition of the limits of our own knowledge that prompts us to try and think from the standpoint of somebody else.

8. It is here that I would like to return to Irigaray, to suggest that no matter how hard we try to think from the standpoint of others so as to take them into account in our judgements and actions, we need to remember that we can never take up and occupy their position, because of the ways in which each human being is irreducible to any other. As we have seen, for Irigaray, the passion of not knowing, wonder, calls on us to value others in their irreplaceable uniqueness and difference, without imposing our own frameworks of understanding so as to make them more familiar, or more like us. Wonder allows us to let the other be, as other, and to value their otherness. The cultivation of wonder provides us with a guiding principle that ensures we neither annul nor appropriate the existence of the other:

‘This first passion is indispensable not only to life but also or still to the creation of an ethics. ... Before and after appropriation, there is wonder. ... Wonder must be the advent or the event of the other.’<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the problem with Eichmann was not just his thoughtlessness, but that he refused to allow himself to be touched by wonder, to allow the other to be other without need of appropriation or worse. And thus perhaps one way to counter what Arendt famously called ‘the banality of evil’ would be to cultivate wonder, the passion of not knowing:

‘It is when we do not know the other, or when we accept that the other remains unknowable to us, that the other illuminates us in some way, but with a light that enlightens us without our being able to comprehend it, to analyze it, to make it ours. The totality of the other ... touches us beyond all knowledge, all judgment, all reduction to ourselves ... . [P]erceiving and respecting the irreducibility of the other ... this opening of a world one’s own, experienced as familiar, in order to welcome the stranger, while remaining oneself and letting the stranger be other’.<sup>17</sup>

9. By way of a coda, I would like to draw attention to an implicit limit to everything I have said about knowing and not knowing thus far. For both Irigaray and Lyotard, not knowing is amongst other things a condition for knowing: for renewing our capacity to think, and for coming to know the other in his or her otherness. Such insights find their roots in the very beginnings of western philosophy, in Socrates’ claim that, despite being declared the wisest of men by the Delphic oracle, in fact his wisdom lies in knowing when he does not know:

‘when I do not know, neither do I think I know, so I am likely to be wiser ... to this small extent, that I do not think I know what I do not know.’<sup>18</sup>

For Socrates, not knowing, and *knowing* that we do not know, is the condition for seeking greater wisdom. But equally, not knowing in one regard can be the occasion for drawing on other kinds of knowledge, like the Kantian genius who does not know in advance what he will create, but who draws on his technical skills to experiment without a plan and allow something unforeseen to emerge.

When we talk about not knowing, we often mean not being able to recognise or identify something, not being able to bring concepts to bear to determine an object or goal. But in the absence of knowing what something is or where we are going, we draw on many other kinds of knowledge to open paths forward: *practical knowledge*, in the Kantian sense of knowing what to do, our moral sensitivity and judgement; *bodily knowledge* born of habit and acculturation; as well as what Plato calls *techne*, the craft and skill involved in making (and of course, this is not intended as in any way an exhaustive list). Together, Lyotard and Irigaray remind us that letting go of conceptual knowledge can be the condition for renewing the activity of thought, as well as for bringing other kinds of knowledge into play. But there is one thing that all these kinds of knowing have in common: whether on the Kantian model of genius, or Lyotard's account of the sublime undoing of the subject, or even Irigaray's affirmation of wonder, they all implicitly assume that knowing is something that is done by a *human* subject.

10. Thus, I would like to conclude by reminding us of the title of the exhibition which this symposium accompanies. 'Material intelligence' implies not only human intelligence *about* matter, but the intelligence *of* matter, understood as adaptive and self-organising. Thus conceived, matter is far from the inert stuff which needs to have form imposed upon it by a creator God or god-like artist; rather, matter actively delimits the forms it can take, and participates in the processes of making. If we are willing to listen, the materials we work with will tell us which forms they can hold and sustain, and which they cannot. It is this kind of self-organising, self-shaping matter that Kierkegaard attempts to figure in the following passage, where he asks us to imagine a wind which blows over a strange and mountainous landscape and which slowly takes shape as it learns the land as well as its own limits:

'In a mountain region where day in and day out one hears the wind relentlessly play the same invariable theme ... [o]ne perhaps does not reflect that there was a time when the wind, which for many years has had its dwelling among these mountains, came as a stranger to this area, plunged wildly, absurdly through the canyons, down into the mountain caves, produced now a shriek almost startling to itself, then a hollow roar from which it itself fled, then a moan, the source of which it itself did not know, ... until, having learned to know its instrument, it worked all of this into the melody it renders unaltered day after day.'<sup>19</sup>

Here, it is not human beings, but the wind as an animate, sensitive, material force that starts as unknowing and that becomes more defined, though also more fixed, as it learns. Faced with a different landscape, the wind too would have to unlearn so as to take shape all over again.

If, following Socrates and Irigaray, ethical wisdom lies not only in knowing that we do not know, but in allowing others to approach us in our ignorance and illuminate us with their difference, then perhaps aesthetic wisdom lies at least in part in knowing how to let go of knowledge so as to let matter bring *its* intelligence to bear on the ways in which we work with it. Material intelligence would then belong neither wholly to human beings nor to matter, but would emerge in the space between them. It is in this space between perhaps - where an acceptance of not knowing allows human intelligence *about* matter to be coupled with the guiding intelligence *of* matter - that the creative practices of art and thought can take place.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Rebecca Fortnum and Lizzie Fisher for inviting me to contribute to this event, and Barry Phipps for suggesting me to them.

<sup>2</sup> Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, quoted in Luce Irigaray, 'Wonder', in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, trans. C. Burke and G. Gill (Athlone, 1993), p. 73; see also *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: vol. 1*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, D. Murdoch (CUP, 1985), p.350.

<sup>3</sup> Irigaray, 'Wonder', in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.75.

<sup>4</sup> For a reading of Descartes and Irigaray on wonder which draws out the ethical significance of cultivating a sense of wonder, see Marguerite La Caze, 'The Encounter between Wonder and Generosity', *Hypatia*, vol 17 no 3, Summer 2002, pp. 1-19. La Caze interrogates the limits of Irigaray's privileging of wonder and suggests that wonder needs to be extended to differences beyond sexual difference. In ways that are highly relevant to this paper, and in particular to the encounter between Arendt and Irigaray sketched in sections 7 and 8 below, she also argues that wonder needs to be supplemented by generosity to allow us to approach others in terms of both differences and likeness: 'Responding to others in terms of generosity is to imagine others as like ourselves. Responding in terms of wonder is to accept the limits of our imagination and accept difference.' (La Caze, p. 15). In this paper, I align the former mode of response with Arendt, the latter with Irigaray. While I am very much drawn to La Caze's suggestion that '[g]enerosity and wonder balance each other' (ibid, p.13), I would tend towards the view that there is nonetheless a dissymmetry between these two modes of response such that the difference to which we attend in wonder is the ground for a non-appropriative generosity, preventing likeness from collapsing back into sameness.

<sup>5</sup> Irigaray, 'Wonder', in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, p.82.

<sup>6</sup> The image on the poster is a photograph by Sarah Cole which in fact features not just 'someone', but a heavily pregnant woman in a peddloe on the day her baby is due (see [http://www.sarah-cole.co.uk/Naval\\_Gazing\\_subpage.html](http://www.sarah-cole.co.uk/Naval_Gazing_subpage.html)). Knowing (rather than 'not knowing') this makes a difference to how we read the image, which is already at odds with the Kantian model of the sublime insofar as the subject is not in a position to distance themselves from or transcend nature, but rather, is a fairly small speck on an insubstantial craft completed surrounded by sea. The knowledge that the person in the boat is a heavily pregnant woman adds an uncomfortable element of risk which is a direct challenge to Kant, who suggested that women should not be educated into overcoming their fear of nature – and thus should not be educated into a capacity for sublime feeling – precisely because of the importance of instinctual reactions for their reproductive role. It also, of course, adds a whole new set of dimensions to the sublime by linking it with birth, in ways that are foregrounded by the title of Cole's image: *Birthplace Heterotopia* (from the triptych *Naval Gazing*, 2004). Along with the gently subversive playfulness of Cole's image and the triptych title, the link to birth suggests a different way of thinking the sublime: rather than involving human transcendence *over* nature, we might instead locate transcendence in the process whereby one gives birth to another *within* a dynamic nature that both generates and surpasses individual beings. Thus, while the trail of light on the water in Cole's photograph evokes images of annunciation as well as the wonder of birth – 'the advent or the event of the other' as Irigaray puts it ('Wonder', p.75) – there is no horizon line to lift our gaze above the waves; instead, like the woman in the peddloe, as viewers we too remain immersed in this 'naval' world of incessant movement and flux. Read in this way, we can see Cole's image as invoking the risky adventure and wonder of birth (as well as the heterotopic possibilities within which it is situated) in ways that resonate with Irigaray's image of wonder as: 'A birth into transcendence, that of the other, still in the world of the senses ("sensible"), still physical and carnal, and already spiritual.' ibid, p.82

<sup>7</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans W. Pluhar (Hackett, 1987) §25, p. 106.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, 'After the Sublime, the State of Aesthetics', in *The Inhuman*, trans. G. Bennington and R. Bowlby (Stanford University Press, 1991), pp.140-1.

<sup>9</sup> See Lyotard, 'Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy', in *Postmodernism Explained to Children*, trans J. Pefanis et al (Turnaround, 1992), p.117.

<sup>10</sup> Lyotard, 'Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy', p.116. For Lyotard on infancy, see also his essay 'Survivant', in *Lectures d'enfance* (Galilée, 1991); translated by R. Harvey and M. Roberts as 'The Survivor', in J-F Lyotard, *Toward the Postmodern*, ed. Harvey and Roberts (Humanities Press, 1993), pp. 144-63.

<sup>11</sup> Lyotard, 'Survivant', p.82; my trans.

<sup>12</sup> Lyotard, 'Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy', p.116

<sup>13</sup> Lyotard, 'Address on the Subject of the Course of Philosophy', p.119.

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<sup>14</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958) § 32, pp. 231-33.

<sup>15</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*, rev'd edn (Penguin, 1994), pp.49, 287, 295.

<sup>16</sup> Irigaray, 'Wonder', in *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, pp.74-5.

<sup>17</sup> Irigaray, 'Approaching the Other as Other', in *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, trans. S. Pluháček (Columbia University Press, 2002), pp.123-5.

<sup>18</sup> Plato, *Apology*, in *Five Dialogues*, trans. G. M. A. Grube, rev'd J. M. Cooper, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn (Hackett, 2002), 21d.

<sup>19</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, *Repetition*, in *Fear and Trembling / Repetition*, trans. H. Hong & E. Hong (Princeton University Press, 1983), Part One, p. 155. I am indebted to Christine Battersby for drawing my attention to this passage and to her specific use of it in her elaboration of a feminist metaphysics in which matter is positioned as self-shaping and active, and also as incorporating otherness within. Those interested in these themes should see Battersby's 1998 book, *The Phenomenal Woman* (Polity Press), especially chapters 8 and 9; the Kierkegaard passage is quoted and discussed in the latter, on p.184.