The virtues of unknowing

Richard Smith

University of Durham, UK

ABSTRACT

Traditional epistemology is often said to have reached an *impasse*, and recent interest in virtue epistemology supposedly marks a turn away from philosophers' traditional focus on problems of knowledge and truth. Yet that focus re-emerges, especially among 'reliabilist' virtue epistemologists. I argue for a more 'responsibilist' approach and for the importance of some of the quieter and gentler epistemic virtues, by contrast with the tough-minded ones that are currently popular in education. In particular I make a case for what I here call 'unknowing': a positive state that is not the same as ignorance. I acknowledge the mystical connotations of the term, and suggest that there is a strong interest in unknowing in writers such as Plato, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. In their style of philosophising they also address the paradox of being knowing about unknowingness itself.

The virtues of unknowing

I   Epistemology

It has become common to read of the 'death of epistemology' (eg Christie, 1989). Less dramatically, Charles Taylor finds it in serious trouble at least. He writes (1995): 'Epistemology, once the pride of modern philosophy, seems in a bad way these days. Fifty years ago, during the heyday of logical empiricism ... it seemed as though the very center of philosophy was its theory of knowledge'. As he notes, it is not always clear quite what has brought about epistemology's decline. Perhaps it is the kind of foundationalism associated with Descartes, and the search for unchallengeable certainties. Perhaps it is the view that the paradigm role of knowledge is to represent reality. Perhaps it is the intractable difficulty of Gettier problems (Gettier, 1963), which are widely held to defeat all attempts to give an account of knowledge in terms of true, justified belief, and thus to distinguish anything that can be called 'knowledge' at all. A further blow to epistemology lies in pragmatist theories such as Rorty's, according to which 'true' is an empty compliment we pay to sentences we find useful from time to time, while traditional philosophical questions about knowledge are ones that we are coming to recognise as emanations from exhausted and fruitless ways of thinking: questions that will in time, without being 'solved', come to be replaced by more interesting questions. These criticisms are generally from philosophers in the Anglophone, analytic tradition; in continental Europe on the other hand the challenge to the epistemological tradition has been established for longer, as Taylor again notes, instancing Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.

One striking consequence of epistemology's problems is that if epistemology is at the heart of philosophy, then what threatens epistemology threatens philosophy itself. If the concepts of truth and knowledge are radically insecure then it is not clear what saves the various branches of philosophy – for example ethics, aesthetics, metaphysics and of course the philosophy of education – from being anything more than a form of rhetoric, while the texts that we thought marked out a distinctive intellectual endeavour going back to Plato are just a branch of literature, alongside epic poetry, drama and the magic realist novel.

Philosophy of education naturally registers many of the same symptoms as philosophy more broadly. Kotzee (2013, p. 157) writes that 'a chill has come over the relationship between philosophy of education and analytic epistemology'. Questions about what kind of knowledge is most worthwhile, and so most deserving to form the basis of the curriculum, tend now to be seen as assuming an unwarranted universalism. The idea that it might be possible to distinguish different forms of knowledge or meaning, an idea associated especially of course with Hirst (1974), but embraced also by Brent (1978) and others, seems to have vanished altogether in the face of scepticism both about the extreme version of analytical philosophy – the view of concepts as stable and susceptible to definitive mapping – on whose techniques it drew, and on foundationalism more widely. Certainly there is still a good deal of work being done that either assumes or directly explores ideas about the nature of knowledge. Recent examples include Bakhurst (2011) and Derry (2014), both exploring in different ways the implications of the work of Brandom and McDowell, Winch's exploration of knowledge how (Winch, 2010), and critique of easy talk of constructivism and muddled ideas of what neuroscience can tell us about education. Yet systematic accounts of the nature of knowledge and its implications for education, on the ambitious scale of Hirst's 'forms of knowledge' thesis, are now rare.

Among the supposedly more interesting questions about knowledge – to adopt again Rorty's way of putting it – to which many philosophers have turned in the last two decades or so is the range of questions less about knowledge than the knower: the field of what has become called virtue epistemology. Its central question is 'not so much what knowledge is as what it is to be a good knower' (Kotzee 2013, p. 157). Baehr (ibid. pp. 248-9) instances such 'intellectual character virtues' as 'curiosity, open-mindedness, attentiveness, intellectual carefulness, intellectual courage, intellectual rigour, and intellectual honesty...an intellectually virtuous person is one who desires and is committed to the pursuit of goods like knowledge, truth and understanding'. These virtues 'flow from and are grounded in a firm and intelligent love of epistemic goods' (p. 250), prominent among which will be knowledge and truth. Some writers, such as Sosa (1991), see the possibility here of a way round Gettier problems: knowledge can be defined as true belief possessed 'out of intellectual virtue'.

It is usual to divide virtue epistemologists into reliabilists and responsibilists. Reliabilists focus on what are sometimes called 'faculty virtues' such as accurate perception and good memory. Sosa describes an intellectual virtue as 'a quality bound to help maximise one's surplus of truth over error' (ibid., p. 225). Responsibilists emphasise the knower as an active

individual who is part of a community to which he or she has obligations and from which he or she derives norms and examples. Someone with a relatively passive range of experience could be reliable, but hardly responsible to any significant extent, and it is from intellectual responsibility that the full range of intellectual virtues, such as those listed by Baehr, derive. Some responsibilists go further. Montmarquet (1993) detaches intellectual virtues from any necessary connection with knowledge and truth. Somebody who was intellectually lethargic and complacent, for example, might – simply by becoming accustomed to reading a good newspaper and following the BBC news programmes – end up with a stock of beliefs that were mainly true. Montmarquet argues that it is still good to be intellectually curious and dogged even if these virtues lead you astray: if, for example, the authorities of some science fiction world have systematically planted false evidence for free thinkers to come across. It would still be good to have the mind of Charles Darwin even if God had fabricated the fossil evidence in order to deceive unbelievers.

There is no space here to attempt a thorough discussion of these versions of virtue epistemology. Rather I want to draw attention to two oddities that can be found in both, but especially in reliabilism. I quoted Baehr above: an intellectually virtuous person is one 'who desires and is committed to the pursuit of goods like knowledge, truth and understanding'. It is common for virtue epistemologists of both kinds to specify 'love of truth' as a major quality of the good knower. This is the first oddity. I find it difficult to make sense of the idea of loving truth, or even of desiring or being committed to the pursuit of knowledge and truth. There are all kinds of true statements that I could make of my immediate world as I write this. They include the make of my laptop, the fact that my study door is open, and that my wife can be heard giving the dog its dinner. I do not love these truths, nor am I particularly committed to them. Certainly there are other statements whose truth does matter to me, but this is almost always the case because they are commonly misrepresented. Dinosaurs flourished and eventually became extinct many millions of years before the existence of *homo sapiens*: they did not share the Earth with them. Universities have often been thought of as places where students are offered more than merely the chance to acquire what are now called employability skills. There are strong grounds for believing that our planet is undergoing a process of warming, sometimes known as climate change, and that this is caused by the activities of humankind. My commitment to the truth of these statements is less because they are true, that is that they accord with the facts, than because they are important, and they are important because some people deny them. The fact that they can be judged

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important means that we cannot conceive virtue epistemology outside of a framework in which the idea of judgement has a central place. Someone who simply loved knowledge, or was concerned to maximise her surplus of truth over error, if we can make any sense of such a person at all, might express her love by memorising random facts, or by becoming knowledgeable about bus timetables in the 1950s. We do not think of her as epitomising the good knower. Along similar lines Elgin (1988) argues for 'the epistemic efficacy of stupidity': 'the blunt man of solid, uninspired common sense, being untroubled by subtleties, may know what's what, while the more sensitive, finely tune intelligence is distracted by nuances' (p. 310), and possesses less clear and distinct knowledge altogether. Thus the astrophysicist may say that the more she understands the origins of the universe the vaster she realises her ignorance is.

The second oddity is that the relevant virtues here are commonly listed with such heavy emphasis on knowledge and truth at all. This, it seems to me, is not where the significant epistemic virtues – using the phrase to indicate the full range of our qualities of apprehension, understanding, interpretation and so on – are found. The point about the development of Elizabeth Bennet, to take a familiar example from Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, is not so much that she comes to make judgements that are more true (the oddness of the English here should remind us of that), but that she makes them less precipitately. Similarly Mr Darcy's apprehensions of the world do not become more accurate, as if we readers had been worried by the fact that he gets things wrong: they become less coloured by his excessive concern for his status. The interest of the novel is not in the fact that he got things wrong but in the way that he did so. That is why it is called *Pride and Prejudice* and not *Truth and Falsehood*. The point is similar to J.L. Austin's remark that we might make more progress in aesthetics if we could forget for a while about the beautiful and 'get down to the dainty and the dumpy' (Austin 1961, p. 131), and to Elgin's conclusion (1988) that 'it is unwise to restrict epistemology to the study of what contemporary theories count as knowledge'. Zangwill (1995) makes a contrast between what he calls 'substantive' and 'verdictive' aesthetic judgements. While responsibilists are inclined to use more substantive epistemic terms than reliabilists they too often incline from time to time towards the verdictive and an emphasis on truth and knowledge. And this is all the odder 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.

Perhaps this is one reason why there has been relatively little treatment of what might be called the quieter epistemic virtues. Intellectual modesty and diffidence, for example, often characterise people whom we are drawn to and respect. Self-deprecation has an intellectual dimension too, even if it can be suspect, particularly in the academe ('I speak as a mere medieval historian, Vice-Chancellor, but there seem to me to be some contradictions in what you have just said'). The idea of irony is important here, and I shall make some comments about it below. Yet these qualities are easily overshadowed by the tougher epistemic virtues, 'intellectual courage, intellectual rigour, and intellectual honesty', in Baehr's words above, and their character virtue cousins, such as grit and resilience, now increasingly being recommended to both schoolchildren and their teachers.[1]

II   Unknowing

These opening remarks may at any rate go some way to prepare the ground for the main business of this paper, which is to argue that the good knower – or, as I would prefer to put it, the 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, as I prefer to put it, for reasons that I shall explain, of unknowing. Since this is easily misunderstood I must make certain things clear. Simple ignorance is seldom a virtue at all, nor for the most part is averting one's attention from what one would prefer not to know, nor is wishful thinking, nor (perhaps especially) self-deception. On the contrary, I would make a strong case for that old-fashioned virtue, the possession of *a well-stocked mind*. It is good to have such a mind which, despite frequent claims to the contrary, cannot be replaced by the internet. Such a mind is organised according to a sense of what is worth knowing and what is not, and is not organised promiscuously or arbitrarily. Although ideas about what is worth knowing and what is not change over time and vary from culture to culture, such a mind is laid out on the basis of principles both of selection and order (this, I take it, is the meaning of *stocked*). There was a 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 – such a mind. Again, to avoid misunderstanding, acknowledgement of the virtues of unknowing does not entail facile ideas about relativism. It is partly in an attempt to avoid such misunderstandings that instead of writing of not knowing I write of unknowing.

Giorgio Agamben (2011) writes:

> The ways in which we do not know things are just as important (and perhaps even more important) as the ways in which we know them. There are ways of not knowing – carelessness, inattention, forgetfulness – that lead to clumsiness and ugliness but there are others…whose completeness we never tire of admiring.

He suggests, in this category, 'the enchanting *sprezzatura* of an infant', and the beauty of 'a woman whose mind seems happily unaware of a secret that her body is perfectly attuned to'. He continues:

> There are, then, successful ways of not knowing oneself, and beauty is one of them. It is possible, in fact, that the way in which we are able to be ignorant is precisely what defines the rank of what we are able to know and that the articulation of a zone of nonknowledge is the condition – and at the same time the touchstone – of all our knowledge. If this is true, then a *catalogue raisonné* of the modes and types of ignorance would be just as useful as the systematic classification of the sciences on which we base the transmission of knowledge.

However, as Agamben says, 'we lack even the elementary principles of an art of ignorance'. To begin to sketch such principles would involve grasping that what he calls 'nonknowledge' is not just a matter of 'lack or defect'. It means 'maintaining oneself in the right relationship with ignorance…the art of living is, in this sense, 'the capacity to keep ourselves in harmonious relationship with that which escapes us'.

I do not intend to attempt a *catalogue raisonné*, but what follows are some of my own examples of unknowing. I asked a group of sixth-form school students, visiting my university to see if it was the kind of place they wanted to study in, just what they thought the purpose of coming to university was. One answered, hesitantly: 'I suppose that's just what I want to come to university to find out'. 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 respectable manuals 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.

There is a tradition, or more accurately there are traditions, of valuing what I am here calling unknowing. In western thought its earliest practitioner seems to have been Socrates, as represented by Plato (it is of course difficult now to distinguish the two figures). It is often said that Socrates' view of philosophy, and perhaps Plato's too, is protreptic: it aims to turn the soul of the interlocutor or pupil around – towards wisdom, or the Good. The prisoner in the cave in *Republic,* who turns from the display of images towards the light of the sun, is emblematic of this. This reorientation is more like a kind of therapy than any form of teaching. Thus Plato for the most part depicts characters whose problem is not that they are lacking in knowledge so much as that they are too knowing: Euthyphro, for example, is so sure of what is required of the god-fearing man that he has no hesitation in prosecuting his own father for his part in the death of a slave:

> *Socrates*: Good heavens, Euthyphro! And have you such a precise knowledge of piety and impiety, and of divine things in general, that...you are not afraid that you too may be doing an impious thing in bringing an action against your father?

> *Euthyphro*: The best of Euthyphro, and that which distinguishes him, Socrates, from other men, is his exact knowledge of all these matters. (Plato, *Euthyphro* 4-5, Jowett's translation, 1871)

The phrase 'exact knowledge' can be translated as 'accurate knowledge'. The adverb *akribōs,* 'accurately', is at home in talking about knowledge in mathematics and geometry, and the young geometer Theaetetus presents another Platonic example: he 'moves surely and smoothly and successfully in the path of knowledge and enquiry; and he is full of gentleness, flowing on silently like a river of oil; at his age, it is wonderful' (Jowett's translation, 144b). There is something worrying about a young man who makes such steady and inexorable progress, as if the development of understanding was a linear matter, or as if all learning proceeded like an idealised geometry lesson, from basic axioms to what can be derived from them. Since it is in geometry that Theaetetus shows unusual promise, it is natural to wonder if he has assumed that all understanding should strive towards the status of geometry or mathematics. It is significant that he readily agrees with Socrates' suggestion that knowledge and wisdom are the same thing (145e). From this we might see that acquiring knowledge is

often less important than learning how to live with our knowledge; and that one way not to live well with our knowledge is by being *knowing*, which as I noted above is the condition displayed by many of Socrates' principal interlocutors. Socrates himself, by contrast, insisted that the one thing that he knew was how little he knew; or, to put it slightly differently, when he didn't know something he didn't imagine that he did (*Apology* (21D).

Elements of the dialogue form in Plato's texts serve to distance us from any sense that we are being offered anything solid and reliable which we can be confident that we know. The openings of many of the dialogues, in particular, present us with many layers that position the dialogue being reported as uncertain and incomplete. The *Timaeus* supplies an excellent example, especially since it is often taken as Plato's definitive account of the universe as divinely created: the philosopher to whom all the rest of philosophy is merely footnotes speaking truth about nothing less than the nature of things. The online *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* notes that 'Because of the vast scope of the work, as well as its character as a monologue — by excluding exchanges between interlocutors the discourse is much more like an authoritative statement than a set of questions to be investigated — the *Timaeus* was generally taken to be the culmination of its author's intellectual achievement'.

It is all the odder, then, that this 'authoritative statement' begins with an absence, a lacuna. Four people – Critias, Timaeus, Hermocrates and another – are to present this 'feast of discourse',[2] but one has been taken ill and is missing. Timaeus says that he and the other two will make up for his absence. Socrates offers an *aide memoire* from the discussion of the day before, which seems to be a kind of tabloid overview of the *Republic*, focusing on such matters as the procreation of children. Now the other three are to 'carry the discussion further'.

Hermocrates says that he and the others have talked the matter over, and Critias told them of an ancient tradition passed down from his great-grandfather, Dropides, to his grandfather, also called Critias, and so to him. Some authority, making the tradition 'not a mere legend, but an actual fact', derives from Solon, 'the wisest of the seven sages', having been 'a relative and a dear friend of Dropides', though at this point the tradition is not actually traced back to him. However as the story of this tradition develops, we are told that Critias the elder attributed the story to Solon, who brought it with him from Egypt, where he heard it from a priest, memories and records in Egypt going back further than those of the Athenians. The story is about 'the greatest action which the Athenians ever did': of how they successfully led

resistance to invaders from the lost continent of Atlantis. This however is little more than the prologue. Critias' agreement with his friends is that 'Timaeus, who is the most of an astronomer amongst us, and has made the nature of the universe his special study, should speak first, beginning with the generation of the world and going down to the creation of man'. Thus begins what is now usually taken to be the real business of the *Timaeus.*

It is worth pointing up how the introduction, as we may be tempted to think of it, works to distance the reader from a reading of the rest of the text as authoritative (cp. Smith, 2014). Even when we come to the story of the universe, Timaeus himself describes the account he is about to give only as 'likely' (*eikōs: the word is used twice here*), and constantly reminds us of its merely 'likely' character from time to time in what follows. The opening of the *Timaeus* thus attunes the reader to a view of learning and knowledge in which the ease by which knowledge, still less wisdom, may be acquired is cast as deeply problematic. The complex openings of many of the other dialogues can be read in the same way, especially *Theaetetus*, *Symposium*, *Parmenides* and *Republic* – the last of which is set as an entertainment, delivered by Socrates and Glaucon to the rich Cephalus under threat of physical compulsion by his mobsters, led by Polemarchus.

The dangers of a hyperbolic commitment to knowledge, of a culture characterised by what we might call knowingness, are a constant theme in the writings of Nietzsche. He invites us to imagine the limitations of 'abstract man, without the guidance of myth – abstract education, abstract morality, abstract justice, the abstract state' (*The Birth of Tragedy* § 23). Without myth and with too much ratiocination a culture becomes unhealthy and its creative powers decline. This is the state of our own age, the product of what Nietzsche calls Socratism, an age 'bent on the destruction of myth' (*ibid.*). The connection with Socrates seems unfortunate, in the light of what I have written above. For Nietzsche 'Socratism' labels the determination to rationalise, and to dismiss the miraculous. When the Greeks no longer apprehended the world through the medium of myths they invented, at much the same time, tragedy and that reasonable institution, democracy. Although we today may think of Greek tragedy as the dramatic presentation of barely comprehensible, elemental forces Nietzsche analyses it as an increasingly rational form of literature. He convicts Sophocles of offering us, in *Oedipus Rex*, a delight in 'dialectical unravelment' that 'casts a sense of triumphant cheerfulness over the whole work, and takes the sting from all the terrible premises of the plot' (*The Birth of Tragedy,* § 9). But the full force of his criticism is reserved for Euripides:

> The Euripidean *prologue* may serve as an example of the productivity of this rationalistic method… Having a character at the beginning of the play tell us who he is, what has preceded the action, what will happen in the course of the play…As a poet, therefore, Euripides was first and foremost the echo of his conscious knowledge. (ibid., § 12).

Elsewhere, in *The Gay Science* for example, Nietzsche attributes positive value to what he calls *Unwissenheit*, ignorance or unknowing. [3] We return from immersion in its agonies with a delight that 'flares up again and again like a bright blaze over all the distress of what is problematic, over all the danger of uncertainty' (§ 3). Even here, though, a particular danger lies: that the very articulation of the value of *Unwissenheit* undoes our unknowing. 'There are a few things we now know too well, we knowing ones: oh, how we now learn to forget well, and to be good at *not* knowing, as artists!' (ibid. § 4). Thus Nietzsche invites us to consider the paradox of making rational sense of unknowing, a point to which I return below.

Talk of 'unknowing' has mystical connotations: *The Cloud of Unknowing* is one of the best-known works of medieval mysticism. You are to think of nothing but God, so that the only thing that acts in your will or intellect is God. You are to put away all though of his creations and attend to him only. When you first try to do this,

> You will find only a darkness, and as it were a cloud of unknowing, you do not know what, except that you find in your will a naked purpose towards God. Whatever you do, this darkness and this cloud are between you and your God, and hold you back from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason and experiencing him in the sweetness of love in your feelings. (trans. Spearing, 2001, ch. 3)

We are not to transcend this darkness, but prepare ourselves to remain in it for as long as possible: 'for if ever you are to feel or see him so far as is possible in this life, it must always be in this cloud and this darkness' (ibid.). The repudiation of instrumentalism is absolute; and it seems that this can only ever be a mystery, whether in the Middle Ages or in our own time.

The theology of this work is negative or apophatic. It is religion without religion, perhaps 'theology without religion' (Robbins, 2004). God is not the name for any kind of reality, nor for any kind of consolation or comfort. The approach to him is a *via negativa*, aporetic in a way that Plato might have recognised. The prisoners in his cave (*Republic,* Book VII) not only mistake shadows for reality but are reluctant to shake off their chains, to leave the

warmth of the familiar fire for the journey up and beyond. There are similarities too with the thinking of Simone Weil, for whom the 'attention' that is a kind of waiting on God lies in breaking out of our customary miasma of private anxiety and fantasy. 'Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object' (Weil 1951, p. 108). There are similarities too with recent work on ethics that asks us to reorient ourselves to other people as unknowable, as a mystery. In Levinas's terms, responsibility precedes ontology: our ethical encounter with the Other is not to be thought of as based on knowledge about him or her. John Caputo writes of Derrida as influenced by the same strand of Judaeo-Christian mysticism:

> Derrida finds in negative theology a unique and irreducible idiom for answering the
> call by which we are all addressed, whether our discursive inclinations are
> theological, antitheological, or a/theological (or something else). For we are all – this
> is Derrida's wager – dreaming of the wholly other that will come knocking on our
> door (like Elijah), and, taking language by surprise, will tie our tongue and strike us
> dumb (almost), filling us with passion. (Caputo, 1997. p. 3)

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 dishonest strategies we are particularly unknowable to ourselves. Many psychoanalysts tend to a similar view. Simple knowledge on its own proves little help, may even prove an obstruction, to the patient: there is no cure by information (cp. Phillips, 2002 p. xvii, who traces the insight to Freud). Spinelli (2000) finds the idea of 'un-knowing', as he spells it, helpful in resisting the intrusion into psychotherapy of quasi-medical conceptions of diagnosis and intervention, and in allowing 'an opening, an un-knowing', into the 'sedimented values and beliefs' of both partners in the psychotherapeutic relationship (p. 50). Although ideas that have some of their roots in mystical traditions will not recommend themselves to everyone, perhaps some philosophers especially, those traditions to which the idea of unknowing is central may suggest an important corrective to many of the superficial assumptions and slogans of our time – of the Information Age, as it is often revealingly called.

III   Knowingness

We might consider some of these superficial assumptions as they appear in the world of formal education (I can only speak of the UK, or more particularly of England, but colleagues from other parts of the world tell me that we are not unique). School inspectors circulate among students, asking them what they are meant to be learning: reference to the lesson's 'learning objectives' is expected, so the teacher will write them on the board and make sure the children can repeat them. Everything is known in advance here by all concerned, except of course what the children 'know' will be largely meaningless to them (the thought that the teacher herself might understand them better by the end of the lesson can be discounted: what business did she have teaching the topic if her own understanding was incomplete?). The claim that students have individual and distinctive learning styles (eg visual, auditory, reading/writing preference, kinaesthetic/tactile) which they can learn to identify as part of the process of thoroughly knowing themselves continues to be popular, despite the damaging criticisms that have been levelled against it (see eg Snook, 2007). University students are encouraged to conduct an 'audit' of their 'employability skills', with the help of their Academic Advisors, at the beginning of their first undergraduate year. With clear knowledge of the gaps in their CV – perhaps they can offer no evidence that they possess leadership skills – they have the opportunity to repair them, for instance by founding and leading a new university society. Thus the student is constructed as someone who is to be eminently knowing about the real meaning of a university education.

Lastly I come to the question of philosophical style. Nietzsche, as I noted above, is alive to the paradox of making rational sense of unknowing: of writing all too rationally and knowingly about this condition of knowingness that he diagnoses. How then can a philosopher, one who is presumably more committed than most to making rational sense of things, write about the virtues of unknowing? Those thinkers who seem to be most conscious of the paradox have a number of features in common. They are wearers of masks: explicitly so in the case of Nietzsche, who writes that 'Everything profound loves the mask' (*Beyond Good and Evil* § 40). So too Kierkegaard, whose analysis of knowingness and unknowing I have not had space to include here, adopts personae: Victor Eremita, Johannes Climacus, Johannes de Silentio. Plato speaks mainly through the mask of Socrates; his other masks include the Athenian Stranger of the *Laws*, and Timaeus. The multiple layers through which many of the dialogues are introduced, as I have discussed above, also work as a kind of masking, suggesting that what we have come to think of as the philosophical parts of the dialogues cannot be understood as speaking to us with unambiguous authority. A second

common feature of these writers or thinkers is that they adopt what has been called in Kierkegaard's case 'indirect communication'. Nietzsche writes with approval of the 'hidden man', 'who instinctively uses speech for silence and concealment and is inexhaustible in evading communication', and who wants 'a mask to roam the heads and hearts of his friends in his stead' (*Beyond Good and Evil* § 40). Plato's indirectness is clear enough. These features are all aspects of the irony that is in evidence throughout most of the writings of these three philosophers.

There remain interesting questions about philosophical style, and the related question of what is and what is not philosophy. It is usual to note that Kierkegaard's work is difficult to classify: is it philosophy, theology, literature, psychology? The *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* describes him as 'an outsider in the history of philosophy'. Of Nietzsche perhaps it is enough to say that analytic philosophers do not usually number him among their company. No-one is likely to deny that Plato is a philosopher, but extensive parts of his dialogues appear to be of little interest to commentators, not least the openings, which they tend to pass over in silence. The death of philosophy, the possibility of which I touched on in the second paragraph of this paper, seems to be there in its beginning, where it is accompanied by – so to say – some of philosophy's most vivid and engaging examples.[4]

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NOTES

[1] For children, see for example Public Health England/UCL Institute of Health Equity (2014); for teachers, see for example Henshaw (2012).

[2] All quotations are from Jowett's (1871) translation.

[3] It is peculiarly appropriate that the word *Unwissenheit* is ambiguous and presents the translator with difficulties. For example Kaufman sometimes prefers 'ignorance' in his version of *The Gay Science*: at 287 the wanderer says to his shadow 'I love my ignorance of the future'. Here Brinker-Gabler (p. 211, n. 22) prefers 'unknowability' on the grounds that it emphasizes 'an active character to the privative prefix *Un-*'.

DRAFT