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The Quest for Knowledge

If I could sit down with you, and discuss all of the things I *know*, all of my knowledge, I daresay I could share a lot with you. I could share everything I know about childrearing, maintaining healthy relationships, and even every tidbit regarding coffee. Even with all of this so called knowledge, however, I never really felt that it amounted to anything. My knowledge was all gained through experience; I did not go to college to be a mother, a wife, or a barista. After all, there is always an expert who has studied child development and psychology who could enlighten you so much better than I. And so, I have always believed that true knowledge comes from higher learning, and with that belief, I have always doubted my own intelligence as well as the validity of the things I have learned during my lifetime.

I feel encouraged upon first perusal of Francis Bacon's essay, "Of Studies." In this essay, Bacon is lauding the pursuit of higher learning and he captures my love of it in his opening line, "[s]tudies serve for delight, for ornament, and for ability" (7). He goes on to further say that "natural abilities are like natural plants that need pruning by study" (8). Bacon understands that every individual has a natural ability within oneself, and believes that natural ability should be cultivated and grown through the expansion of knowledge. He chiefly feels that this cultivation should be done through books, and as an educated man, I believe he feels the best way to achieve that is through a formal learning environment. I agree with the thoughts Bacon puts forth, as I have felt more comfortable with my own knowledge as I have progressed through college. As I

read through his essay, I began to feel better about myself for my educational endeavors, and I even feel a bit of superiority over those less educated than myself.

It is this superiority I begin to feel when reading Bacon that makes me read through it again and again. His statement, “the general counsels, and the plots and marshaling of affairs come best from those that are learned” (7), comes off as boastful and full of self-import. I agree with the wisdom of that, to a point. What I feel Bacon is neglecting to notice is that knowledge through the form of higher learning is still largely a privilege. Certainly in his day it was afforded to men of a certain color and class, and while we have seen improvements in our current society, it is not yet equal. Bacon does concede that learning must be paired with experience, but I find that he maintains that experience without education is of little worth. I find him sitting on a pedestal, encouraging scholarly pursuits, while not even recognizing that those pursuits are not equally available to all individuals. His failure to attend to this wipes out a whole host of individuals who could contribute to this sea of knowledge. In this, he appears to deem that there is only one road toward achieving it, and that road is available to only a select few.

My feelings toward Bacon are vindicated when I read through Friedrich Nietzsche’s “Of Truth and Lie in an Extra-Moral Sense.” I feel he begins his essay almost attacking this concept of knowledge, and quite bluntly states that human intellect “has no further mission that would lead beyond human life” (42). I feel that Nietzsche defines knowledge by what we know to be true, and even that he calls into question. He seems to take this view that humans are only using knowledge as a way to make themselves feel better and it only enforces my idea that that I am arrogant for thinking myself above others who do not share it. Nietzsche makes several powerful statements regarding humans and their quest for truth, and I find myself nodding along with him as I read. He claims that humans are so busy with their own vanity, that it is almost impossible

to contemplate “how an honest and pure urge for truth could make its appearance among men” (43). I see myself and Bacon in those words, as we sit on our high horses and look down at the uneducated simpletons beneath us. Nietzsche continues this line of reasoning when he says that man is “indifferent to pure knowledge, which has no consequences; he is even hostile to possibly damaging and destructive truths” (45). Again, Nietzsche is driving home his point that humans are so full of themselves that they neglect, and even deny, truth and knowledge.

As Nietzsche attacks man’s concept of knowledge (as well as his reluctance to embrace it therein), he begins to break down certain truths as defined only by syllables and words. What strikes the biggest note of doubt in me is how he explains the concept of a leaf. How one can look at a leaf, and see the beauty therein, and yet reduce it to the simple word “leaf” (46). He senses the arrogance in using such a simple word as that to describe the uniqueness of every leaf on every tree. I hear what he is saying: man is attempting to condense the wonders of the universe into simple concepts that he can master and feel good about himself. But I can’t help wanting to ask him: what else are we to do, Nietzsche? If the mosquito is flying around convinced of his own self-importance (42), what makes it so wrong for man to do so? Are we not driven to make sense of the world as it relates to us? If I find myself so enamored with a leaf, how do I communicate that beauty to another without snippets of sound and syllables to create a word? Language is the way in which we make sense of our world. Nietzsche is free to question our use of language, but he should be wary of criticizing it.

As I find myself contemplating the truth of all I have learned, I come across Plato, and the “Allegory of the Cave.” Plato draws a picture of man imprisoned in a cave, where there are only shadows to define his reality. When he talks about the cave, and the prisoners contained therein, I think he is referring to the concept of ignorance. Or, perhaps, even more so the concept

of staying within your own defined terms of reality. I think the cave he is referring to is the way in which individuals do not want to look beyond their own concept of truth and reality. Plato's light represents the knowledge we gain from looking beyond ourselves; from challenging our own way of thinking. His metaphor so eloquently describes the conflict one feels when our realities are questioned. In reference to his newly freed prisoner, Plato asks, "if he is compelled to look straight at the light, will he not have a pain in his eyes which will make him turn away to take refuge in the objects of vision which he can see, and which he will conceive to be in reality clearer than the things which are now being shown to him?" (3). Certainly, I have seen this in my own life, where I have refused to believe the words of another, because it has conflicted with my own strictly defined terms of truth.

Plato calls on his newly freed prisoner to go back into the cave in order to enlighten those still in the shadows. At first, I agreed with him wholeheartedly. As I have found my boundaries ever expanded with the amount of knowledge I have gained, I too want to go back to my former inmates and shed light on their dank and dark world. But then I realize, to do so would again be arrogance on my part. In looking back through the "Allegory of the Cave", I cannot help but wonder if Plato has accounted for the reason these people are imprisoned in the first place. Even if that prison is just ignorance, how can anyone hold another accountable for what they do or do not know? I get the sense that Plato defines the light as better than the darkness of the cave, but I do not understand why. Once again, I find myself questioning the arrogance of a man who believes his version of truth and knowledge more valid than another's.

As I contemplate the words of Bacon, Nietzsche, and Plato, I find myself more comfortable with the idea of knowledge, as well as my own limited mastery of it. If Bacon has encouraged my scholarly pursuits, Nietzsche has cautioned me not to get too caught up in my

own self-worth. Of all of these writers, I find my ideas of knowledge transformed the most by Plato. Initially, I thought of Plato's cave as a bad place, and I felt good that I was finding my way out of it. In recognizing Plato's, as well as my own arrogance, I have come to the conclusion that the quest for knowledge is not a destination, it is a journey. Knowledge is more than just reading books, mastering language, or even obtaining a college degree. Plato's cave is not a bad place. In that cave, I have earned a wealth of experiences, and those experiences shape my journey into the sun. I think, perhaps, we are all on our own journey from darkness into light, and I find I have a new found respect for it. I realize that no two journeys are the same, and it is foolish of me to judge one person's knowledge above or below another. All I can do is keep reaching for the light, and in so doing, gain more knowledge.

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