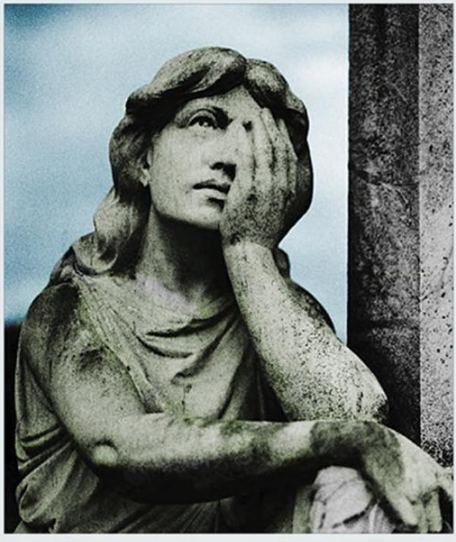
Understanding Ignorance



THE SURPRISING IMPACT OF WHAT WE DON'T KNOW

Daniel R. DeNicola

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Preface

Over the years, I have occasionally taught a seminar for first-year students titled Secrets and Lies. During our discussions about the ethics of seeking, withholding, and revealing information, I became drawn to the epistemological issues, the ways in which we trade in knowing and not knowing within an epistemic community. Early thoughts about the multifaceted nature of ignorance coalesced in "Intimations of Ignorance," a talk given to Gettysburg's Phi Beta Kappa chapter in 2009. Later that year, I devoted a Senior Seminar to an exploration of the topic. I had intended to discuss ignorance in the book that became *Learning to Flourish* (2012), but soon realized it was too large, complex, and rich for anything but a peripheral inclusion. Ignorance required a front-and-center discussion. It took until 2015, and a sabbatical granted by Gettysburg College (for which I am thankful), before a first draft was completed.

Many of my intellectual debts are of course reflected in the bibliography, but some of the most significant are not. My home department, an exemplary epistemic community, has continually offered encouragement: I am grateful to my colleagues—Steve Gimbel, Gary Mullen, Lisa Portmess, Kerry Walters, Vernon Cisney, Paul Carrick, and Gary Ciocco—for their engagement with my preoccupation and for their thoughtful responses. At Lancaster University (UK), where I was a visiting scholar in 2012, I had numerous helpful conversations with faculty members and doctoral students. All were first rate, but I owe special thanks to Neil Manson for a memorable lunchtime discussion of "epistemic restraint." I benefited from interchanges with many at both institutions who attended my research colloquia. There are also people with whom I had a quite brief conversation that proved significant—though they would not have known it then. I recalled with new resonance nearly forgotten interchanges about ignorance

with mentors Israel Scheffler and John Rawls; though both are now gone, they have my gratitude. I thank Catherine Elgin and Amelie Rorty for their quick enthusiasm for my project; Timothy Williamson for his immediate, astute response to an out-of-the-blue email query; and Jennifer Logue and Tyson Lewis for sidebar discussions inspired by their conference papers. The anonymous reviewers engaged by the MIT Press improved this book—even when they differed. One later agreed to divulge his identity to give me access to his many perceptive annotations to the text: Michael McFall, I thank you. MIT's editorial staff is excellent, especially Chris Eyer and Judith Feldmann, and the book simply would not have appeared without the steady support of Senior Acquisitions Editor Philip Laughlin.

It is my wonderfully good fortune to have, every day and always, the loving support of my wife, Sunni. I have regularly called upon her indulgence as a listener; her fine, editorial sense of the reader's needs; and her tolerance of precarious piles of books. *Grazie, luce del sole della mia vita*.

An acknowledgment: the epigraph for part 2 is from "The Outcry," a poem by Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi, as translated by Atef Ashaer, and is reprinted here with permission of Taylor & Francis. It appears on page 396 of Ashaer's article, "Poetry and the Arab Spring," in the *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*, edited by Larbi Sadiki (New York: Routledge, 2014), 392–407.

Four decisions shaped the writing of this book. I chose: (1) to attempt a comprehensive study that would examine many facets of ignorance; (2) to integrate perspectives drawn from contemporary studies in many disciplines; (3) to structure the discussion using four spatial metaphors for ignorance—place, boundary, limit, and horizon; and (4) to write a rather nontechnical, occasionally broad-brush text. (Even so, I am likely to try the patience of some readers.) The public importance and interdisciplinary nature of ignorance have led me to reach for a readership beyond epistemologists, beyond philosophers—*beyond*, but not *without*, I hope, for the issues and conclusions are also of philosophical relevance.

This book is about ignorance, but it is sure to exemplify it as well. If I knew the where or how, I would have made it better. But *ignorance* is both a charge and an excuse. To the former, I can only offer the latter—and the hope that it exemplifies understanding, as well.

Daniel R. DeNicola
Gettysburg, 2017

1 Images of Ignorance

If I were given carte blanche to write about any topic I could, it would be about how much our ignorance, in general, shapes our lives in ways we do not know about. Put simply, people tend to do what they know and fail to do that which they have no conception of. In that way, ignorance profoundly channels the course we take in life.

—David Dunning

1 The Impact of Ignorance

Knowledge is a big subject. Ignorance is bigger. And it is more interesting.
—Stuart Firestein

Ignorance abounds. It is ubiquitous, and to doubt that fact is to risk becoming another case in point. In the familiar metaphor, our ignorance (whether individual or collective) is a vast, fathomless sea; our knowledge but a small, insecure island. Even the shoreline is uncertain: both the history of the human race and psychological research suggest that we know even less than we think we do. Indeed, our ignorance is extensive beyond our reckoning.

Ignorance endures. It persists. Oh, we may be lulled by its apparent fragility, as in the oft-quoted Oscar Wilde quip: "Ignorance is like a delicate exotic fruit; touch it and the bloom is gone."[1] It wilts and vanishes at the merest touch of learning. But, its evanescence notwithstanding, ignorance is not endangered. Its blooms may be delicate, but the species is as hardy as kudzu. Despite the spread of universal, compulsory education; despite new tools for learning and great advances in knowledge; despite breathtaking increases in our ability to store, access, and share a superabundance of information—ignorance flourishes.

One might wonder *why* this is so. Does ignorance thrive because, well, we are so ignorant? Might we simply lack enough knowledge—or the right knowledge—to roll back the tide of ignorance? Perhaps its persistence is a reflection of our fallen state, a shameful weakness of will, or a sin of epistemic laziness. Is ignorance like the dirtiness of the world, which stubbornly resists our most industrious efforts to cleanse it thoroughly, and which will be with us eternally? Or, worse, is it possible that more learning actually increases our ignorance—like daubing a stain that only

spreads further with every attempt to eradicate it? The idea has become cliché: the more we know, the more we know we don't know. Could we really be the creators of our own ignorance? Such ruminations, like all questionings, express a desire to understand, that, ironically, can arise only within and from ignorance. Ignorance is both the source and the target of such questions.

Pictured in this way, there is a mysterious grandeur, even a sublimity, in the dark profusion of our unknowing. It has overwhelmed some since ancient times, reducing them to a skepticism in which knowledge is out of reach and learning is ultimately futile. Others, like the anonymous fourteenth-century author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, have been moved to a courageous surrender, abandoning the pretense of knowledge to seek a mystical transcendence. But those of us who resolutely affirm the human capacity for genuine knowledge, even those who would enshrine knowledge or understanding as the highest of goods, may still be awed by the vast surround of impenetrable and imperishable ignorance.

Ignorance devastates. Every one of us—however intelligent and knowledgeable—is bedeviled by our ignorance. Indeed, our personal and collective ignorance exacts a fearful toll every day. The morning news brings word of a friend who has died from a disease for which we know no cure; of a horrible crime enabled by a church that unknowingly put a pedophile in charge of children; of the financial ruin and angry despair of unsuspecting victims defrauded in a phony investment scheme; of a politician's secret that has blown up in shame and heartbreak for his unknowing and innocent family and friends; of a nation in turmoil because its citizens do not know whether their votes were fairly counted; of the pain of those whose loved ones are missing after a natural disaster, their fate unknown, perhaps forever. Our ignorance weighs on us: it can be exasperating, as when we have forgotten a password or the combination to a lock; humiliating, as when it is revealed to peers that we do not know something we should; haunting and distressing, as when someone simply disappears without explanation, or when we are told that the cause of a friend's death will never be known.

Ignorance is implicated in nearly all our suffering; it enables our errors and follies. It can threaten anything and all we value. Is ignorance not our woeful plight, a mighty scourge, and a profound conundrum?

Public Ignorance

We live, we are told, in a "knowledge society" during the "Information Age." Indeed, we carry small devices that give us access to an enormous portion of human knowledge and allow us to share information, virtually instantaneously, with people around the globe. But our era has also been called the "Age of Ignorance." Thoughtful observers decry the contemporary "culture of ignorance"—especially, but not solely, in the United States. The contradiction is troubling and puzzling. Ignorance, it seems, is trending.

The sort of ignorance sparking concern is what might be termed *public ignorance*, by which I mean *widespread, reprehensible ignorance of matters that are significant for our lives together.* Functional illiteracy and innumeracy are examples. Such ignorance might once be explained, if not excused, by lack of educational opportunity; but that seems obtuse when applied to countries with rich educational resources. Besides, the rate of functional illiteracy may be higher in today's America that it was in colonial New England.[2] Stubbornly high rates of illiteracy and innumeracy are a public shame, no doubt. This is remediable ignorance. The need is for learning—except that many such forms of ignorance thrive *despite* years of schooling.

Among young students, whose schooling is incomplete, a certain lack of basic knowledge is unsurprising. The evidence can be ruefully comic (picture knowing teachers chortling over hilarious student errors). But when the individuals are schooled adults, our surprise becomes shock and our amusement fades. Gross historical misunderstanding, witless anachronisms, appalling geographical mistakes, quantitative and literary obtuseness—these are, as depressing surveys regularly inform us, widespread.[3]

Political ignorance, especially in an advanced democracy, is especially disturbing. Tyrants and other advocates of authoritarian systems have long appreciated the advantages of an ignorant constituency. Claude Adrien Helvétius, the eighteenth-century philosopher, observed: "Some politicians have regarded ignorance as favourable to the maintenance of a prince's authority, as the support of his crown and the safeguard of his person. The ignorance of the people is indeed favourable to the priesthood."[4] By contrast, democracies—at least in theory—rest on the pillar of an enlightened citizenry. Unfortunately, the problem of political ignorance in the United States is now so severe that the ideal of an informed citizenry seems quaint.

It goes far beyond not knowing the names of one's congressional delegation: in a survey conducted by the National Constitution Center, a third of respondents could not name any First Amendment rights, and a majority of the remainder could identify only free speech; 42 percent thought the Constitution explicitly states that "the first language of the United States is English"; and a quarter believed that the Constitution established Christianity as the official national religion. In a second survey, 41 percent of respondents did not know there are three branches of government; 62 percent could not name them all; and 33 percent could not identify even one.[5]

Faced with dismal surveys like these and the intractability and extent of political ignorance, some scholars see the need to revise democratic theory in response. A few have argued that capitalism actually *prefers* widespread ignorance to informed citizen-consumers. If extensive ignorance of political matters is now the "new normal," argues one theorist, we are left with an imperative for smaller, more localized, less significant government[6] (as though, I might note, a reduction in the scope and agency of government would reduce in parallel our public interests and real problems of living).

Language, our strongest medium of communication, is another arena of public ignorance. In the United States, all too many have felt embarrassed and resentful over their inability to master a second language (often despite years of instruction). With disturbing frequency, this inability is coupled with hostility toward "foreign" speech. All of this is on display in a recent, widely reported incident. A Vermont eighth-grader studying Latin proposed that her state should have a historically resonant Latin motto to accompany its English motto, and a state legislator agreed to advance her proposal. The proposed motto was: *Stella quarta decima fulgeat* ("May the Fourteenth Star Shine Bright")—an allusion to Vermont's place in joining the Union. When her idea was floated on social media, the benighted replied in force: "I thought Vermont was American not Latin? Does any Latin places have American mottos?" "No way! This is America, not Mexico or Latin America. And they need to learn our language …" and "ABSOLUTLY NOT!!!! sick and tired of that crap, they have their own countries." Sadly, these are typical of the angry postings.[7] Below some threshold, ignorance does not recognize itself.

False beliefs structure networks of ignorance that incorporate other false beliefs and erroneous actions. A 2014 study, using a national sample of

over 2,000 Americans, polled citizens' views about the proper response of the United States to the conflict in Ukraine.[8] It also asked respondents to locate Ukraine on a world map. Though about one in six correctly located Ukraine, the median response was 1,800 miles off target. Many respondents placed it in Asia or Africa, some even in Latin America or in Canada. As bad as this is, the correlation that emerged is more alarming: the less the respondents knew about the location of Ukraine, the more likely that they would urge the United States to intervene in the conflict.

All forms of ignorance are especially dangerous when allied with arrogance or bigotry. As Goethe commented, "There is nothing more frightening than ignorance in action." It can be truly horrifying: in 2012, six members of a Sikh temple in Wisconsin were fatally shot by a man who apparently thought they were Muslims—one of hundreds of cases of hate crimes misdirected against Sikhs in the United States since 9/11.[9]

A Culture of Ignorance

There is more to a culture of ignorance, however, than abominable public ignorance. In a culture of ignorance, appalling ignorance not only flourishes, it is flaunted, even celebrated. It becomes an ideological stance.[10]

The tenacious strain of anti-intellectualism in American life is well documented. Disparagement of "book-learning," wry skepticism about establishmentarian views, trust in "common sense" over expertise, and rural suspicion of urban life and values—these have long characterized a populist strain in American public life. Whatever portion of thoughtful skepticism may motivate this outlook, it is soured by those who take a perverse pride in their ignorance. Sometimes, the attitude may be a matter of class envy turned to spite, a poke in the eye of intellectuals; but often it is merely a defensive pose adopted for religious or political reasons. ("I am not a scientist," say politicians who wish to avoid any public acknowledgment of climate change or evolution—as though such pleas of comfortable ignorance are excusable or commendable.)

Frequently, a disdain for commonly accepted knowledge is buttressed by claims of private, special insights into "the real truth"—insider knowledge of conspiracies, information available only to the initiated, or truths "revealed" to individuals. But such claims to esoteric knowledge by the supposedly savvy are merely forms of ignorance in elaborate disguise.

Today, their number is legion. They are not benignly eccentric; they shape public discourse. As a nation, we have to spend too much time, energy, and capital battling willful ignorance: "Vaccinations cause autism." "The Earth is 4,004 years old and Neanderthals roamed with dinosaurs." "The wild winter in my state disproves global warming." "President Obama is Muslim." "The Sandy Hook massacre never happened." "Massive voter fraud allowed Hillary Clinton to win the popular majority." Such claims represent a refusal to know and a denial of the possibility of error. Their proponents assert their "right to believe"—a silly claim that carries no acknowledgment of responsibility for their beliefs. Many simply deny any evidence that falsifies a cherished belief about policies, practices, and people. Currently, there is an Internet slang term for this phenomenon: *derp*. When such ignorance is influential, it becomes difficult not only to solve social problems, but even to acknowledge them as problems. Who weeps for the truth?

In cases like these, it is hard to separate ignorance from stupidity and unreason, though their meanings are quite distinct. *Ignorance* is, in common usage, a lack of knowledge.[11] *Stupidity* is a mental dullness that indicates an inability to learn or a sustained disinterest in learning.[12] Although stupidity is surely a contributing factor, to make rife stupidity the single, simple explanation for this culture of ignorance is cheaply reductionist and unfairly dismissive. *Unreason* refers to any type of irrationality, such as intentional but self-defeating actions or the affirmation of contradictory beliefs. Ignorance can be remedied; stupidity is intractable. One can be ignorant without being stupid or irrational, though stupidity is sure to produce ignorance across an impressive front. Irrationality seems less a matter of not knowing than of acting contrary to what one knows—though willful ignorance may indeed be irrational.

What is going on in today's culture of ignorance is complicated. It is more than widespread, reprehensible ignorance; it involves the distrust of mainstream sources of information and the rejection of rationally relevant factors in forming beliefs. It seems to abandon institutions and hard-won standards of knowledge that have served us since the Enlightenment, that have brought us the living conditions we enjoy today. Blindly and oddly, individuals will couple the rejection of scientific knowledge with the use of technology it has produced. Evidence and conclusions are accepted selectively, usually to fit some intractable ideological commitment. This culture

discounts the value and authority of expertise in favor of shared opinion. The empty "right to believe" (a claim I will discuss in chapter 7) is linked to the right to be heard. We are left to wonder, with Scott Adams's cartoon character Dilbert, "When did ignorance become a point of view?"[13]

Social critics suggest many possible precipitating conditions of this culture: the thrall of fundamentalist religion and partisan political ideology; postmodern deconstructions of institutions and ideals, including truth and reason; the conflation of news and entertainment and misdirected attempts to offer "balanced" coverage by the media; the seduction of virtual reality; the corruption of pure science by "sponsored" research and profit motives; "the silence of the rational center";[14] and many other ingenious and plausible candidates. Today, our ignorance can be sustained by "user-preference" technology. Whatever our beliefs, we may enjoy a cozy informational cocoon in which we hear only the news, opinions, music, and voices we prefer. Ideas that might challenge our views never reach us. Whatever its causes, the culture of ignorance reflects an elevation of will over reason, the loss of a credible concept of objectivity, and a radical change in democratic epistemology. To be sure, its participants would deny that ignorance is involved. But when you undermine the concept of knowledge, you undermine ignorance as well.

Knowledge over Ignorance

Perhaps this assessment seems harsh and presumptuous. In common parlance, when I call someone ignorant, it is an insult. I implicitly claim a kind of superiority: I know that which they do not, plus I know that they do not know it. All too frequently, ascriptions of ignorance and stupidity have been used to deprecate and further marginalize minorities or unpopular groups.[15] Saying "He is ignorant" can be verbal epistemic shaming and a subtle assertion of power. So, yes, the sometime arrogance of the knower should be a cautionary image when one asserts the ignorance of others.

The term *ignorance* gets its harshness from its negative value, particularly in historic Western culture. There is no doubt that the Classical strain of Western culture embraced the idea that knowledge is good and ignorance is a defect that requires remedy. Socrates and Plato took the extreme view that every vice and all societal evil ultimately derive from ignorance. Over the centuries, education (the formal pursuit of knowledge) has evolved from a

claimed to know only that he was ignorant—an ironic self-awareness that entitled him to a reputation for wisdom.

Nicholas himself, however, aims much higher than self-awareness alone. He projects a true knowledge that goes far beyond mere acknowledgment of one's ignorance: he attempts to reveal the limits of human understanding, to explicate them as a contrast between the finite and the Infinite, and to demonstrate the implications of understanding our own ignorance for cultivating lives of learning. Understanding ignorance is, for Nicholas, fundamental to understanding the human condition. I concur.

Yet, for centuries, serious studies of ignorance were scarce. Few scholars followed Nicholas's ambitious lead. An important exception is the nineteenth-century Scottish philosopher, James Frederick Ferrier, who gave ignorance a central role in his *Institutes of Metaphysic*. Ferrier was well aware of the inattention given to the topic: "There have been many inquiries into the nature of knowledge: there has been no inquiry into the nature of ignorance."[17] Next to the vast literature on knowledge—texts on learning and education, studies in the sociology and social history of knowledge, analytical works of epistemology, accounts of the scientific method and its self-correction, and so on—the literature on ignorance is remarkably slim.

One reason for this dearth is found in the traditional preoccupations of Western philosophers engaged in epistemology—the "theory of knowledge," to use its brief-form definition. The analytical focus has been on the sources, structure, and justification of knowledge, along with its distinction from mere belief. Certainty has seemed the only safe standard in the face of withering skepticism, yet ignorance has infrequently been mentioned directly. It is truly remarkable how seldom the word *ignorance* occurs in the indexes of books on epistemology. Thus, ignorance has had no special interest; it was simply a negative, an absence. Formally, it has been just the denial of the proposition, "*S* knows that *p*." It has been assumed that, by theorizing knowledge, one would capture all that was relevant about its lack.

Within the last few years, however, the concept has generated notable scholarly interest: several monographs and anthologies on aspects of ignorance have appeared, emanating from many disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, psychology, economics, education, environmental studies, science studies, women's studies, and philosophy.[18] The term is

appearing in titles of conference papers in the social sciences and humanities with increasing frequency. Although the conceptual frameworks vary widely in these studies, and differ in scope, purpose, and rigor, they are promising and pioneering studies that reflect the naturally wide-ranging and multidisciplinary nature of the subject. I have benefited from many of them in forming my own thoughts, and I will draw upon all of these approaches in this book.

Within this recent literature, the grandest proposal I have encountered is that ignorance should define an emerging field of systematic study: an incipient discipline to be baptized *agnotology*.[19] Some scholars, less sanguine about the prospect of a discipline, have called the topic of ignorance studies *agnoiology*.[20] One cannot legislate usage, of course, but if in what follows I do not adopt these terms, it is not because I reject the idea outright. Both are heuristically useful, and the notion of a special field is provocative, for we do need to accelerate the study of ignorance. Rather, it is because I prefer ultimately to support a stance that *integrates* ignorance and knowledge and explores their interactions.

My approach is broadly philosophical. In the pages that follow, I hope to engage you in an exploration of the intricacy and impact of what we do not know. To structure the discussion, I use four spatial images or metaphors: ignorance as place or state, as boundary, as limit, and as horizon. Though the treatment is comprehensive, including ethical and practical issues, it is neither exhaustive nor tightly systematic. Nor, unfortunately, does it provide a solution to our current culture of ignorance. While this study has implications for mainstream epistemology, it is not intended as a technical work of epistemology; but I will reserve for an epilogue a summary of those implications.

2 Conceiving Ignorance

The deprivation of anything whose possession is consistent with the nature of the Being which wants it, is a defect. But ignorance is the deprivation of something which is consistent with the nature of intelligence: it is a deprivation of knowledge. Therefore ignorance is an intellectual defect, imperfection, privation, or shortcoming.

—James Frederick Ferrier

The aim of this chapter is to sketch the contours of the concept of ignorance. The task is not simply a matter of consulting the dictionary and reviewing common usage; because it reveals contested and subtle issues, it requires doing philosophical work and taking positions on these issues. The analysis inevitably entails argument. At this early stage, precision is less important than evocativeness; elaboration and refinement will continue through the book. First, however, we must deal with the quirkiness of the concept.

Despite its ubiquity and importance, whenever we try to think seriously or talk insightfully about ignorance, especially about our own ignorance, we step into a muddle. We encounter two conceptual peculiarities that may lead to frustration, irony, or futility. Together, they suggest that any attempt to understand ignorance is impossible and to pursue the topic is folly.

The first arises from the negativity of the concept; the second concerns the implicit paradox in understanding our ignorance. Neither is as problematic as it first might seem, but the wise course is to confront both at the outset. As you might guess, I will conclude that neither concern should dissuade us.

Negative Concepts

Privatives, or negative concepts, are those that indicate an absence, deficiency, or loss of something. Our use of them is a tribute to our capacity for abstract thought, and they can be philosophically complex and deceptive. *Ignorance* is a privative: it is, at its core, a *lack* of knowledge or understanding (though I will argue it is not merely this). We will need, therefore, to examine an absence, a privation, a deficiency, a negative state or property. Talking about an absence seems to turn it into a presence, in the way that talking about nothing seems to transform it into a something: nothingness. At first glance, this is only linguistic sleight-of-hand, an illusion of syntax that results from treating all nouns equally. That trick, however, can ensnare the unwary in metaphysical tangles.

The traditional concern is a fallacy of reification: the error of taking what is merely a negation to be a real entity. In some contexts, that mistake is blatant to the point of silliness. For example, if I were to say, "I saw no one in the office," it would be ridiculous to ask whether "no one" was sitting or standing. If I tease a child by saying, "You may eat the donuts, but be sure to leave the holes," the reification is deliberate and funny, like the playful nonsense of Lewis Carroll. I too would be exploiting the fallacy to perplex or delight.

But this might take a more serious turn: my little joke might lead to musings about just what sort of thing a donut hole is, how this one differs from that one, and what it might mean for a hole to be gone. There are grounds for taking holes to be real, if nonmaterial, entities: we perceive them; we can locate, count, and measure them; we often create and use them; we can distinguish actual from possible holes—and yet they are a kind of negativity, an emptiness. What is ontologically proper, what holes really are, is difficult to discern.[1]

Moreover, there is a baffling array of such negativities, from those that have a physical locus to those that are quite abstract: we speak of the crack in the sidewalk, the holes in Swiss cheese, the vacuum in the pump, the shortage of family physicians, or a deficiency of vitamin D. Many of these negativities may be interpreted alternately as denoting a missing property or as the absence of a particular state of affairs: incongruence, for example, may be thought of as a negative property (the lack of congruence) or negative state (the absent state of being congruent). Negative concepts even


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