

## The Value Of Ignorance: A Philosophical Perspective.

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### Abstract

This study is a philosophical exposition of the value of ignorance based on the epics of Homer and Scriptural sources. It analyzed the terms: “value” and “ignorance”. The paper discussed some related philosophical issues that impinge on the value of ignorance. It articulated the logical basis for the value of ignorance, and synthesized the educational philosophy of the value of ignorance. The advocacy of the paper is that people should learn to be ignorant of those life issues or experiences that go with negative consequences. It contended that ignorance of evil could become a virtue, a value or serve as a saving factor.

### Introduction

The theme of this paper implies the fundamental question of whether ignorance has value, and if it has, how can it be justified? To go about this task, the term, value is considered as the “good” desired or cherished by the individual. As Aristotle (384-322 B.C) attested in his *Nicomachean Ethics* “the good” is that at which all things aim.<sup>1</sup> In the act of aiming or desiring there is choice or decision making. Similarly, Lewis points out the fact that there are many ways by which people can make their personal choices that shape their lives.<sup>2</sup> Values help one to decide what one ought to do, and what is right in a given circumstance. There are hierarchies of values which man must learn to recognize.

Buttressing the above, Okafor highlights that there are spiritual values and material values. Spiritual values are higher than material values. The former is in the eternal order of reality, while the latter is in the temporal order. The one is transcendent, permanent and immanent; while the other is human value which is fleeting, transient, changing and relative<sup>3</sup>. Suffice it here to submit that there are base honours and values which are not in keeping with man as a rational being. As well there are more refined or dignified values that are in keeping with man as a psycho-physico entity.

By and large, man needs knowledge in order to make appropriate choice of his value. When one lacks this knowledge of choosing or making preference, it implies that one is ignorant of what one ought to appreciate or strive for. The question that begs for an answer here is: how can one make one’s choice or decision or preference when one is ignorant of what to choose or prefer? According to the Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy the word or noun ignorance is derived from Latin word, **ignorantia** which means, absence, or want of knowledge, lack of knowledge, or information of what one is capable of knowing, or ought to know.<sup>4</sup>

An ignorant person is therefore that person who lacks the knowledge which he is capable of knowing, or may decide not to have certain experience he ought to have. Arguably, when the individual lacks the knowledge of choosing or making preference, he is then ignorant of what he ought to appreciate, or strive for. If there is value in ignorance, it implies that ignorance is viewed from the perspective of being a virtue (a rewarding thing, a

mark of excellence or prudence). If this is acceptable, where and how can the value of ignorance be derived in the daily human experience?

### **Philosophical Studies on the Value of Ignorance**

Ignorance is the greatest antithesis of wisdom. Philosophically ignorance and knowledge are symbiotic partners whose co-existence is desirable and inevitable in human life. Relatedly Iroegbu highlights that; whatever one does or has, or thinks, presupposes first and foremost some degree of knowledge. Even when one doubts or claims ignorance, or denies knowing the fact, this is already a knowledge of scepticism, agnosticism or negation. It implies that in the process of denying, one acknowledges (accepts the knowledge) that, he knows that he is denying.<sup>5</sup>

It is in the same wake of thought that Abiogu in his research report re-affirmed the Igbo dictum that: “What one has no knowledge of, cannot cause one’s death.”<sup>6</sup> By implication, it is that which one knows, chooses or prefers that can be instrumental to one’s down fall or death. One therefore should be careful of what one desires to know. Every theory is not to be practicalized, and all thoughts are not to be desired. One should be able to lift one’s life and value above the vagaries of chance and relocate it to the level of thoughtful appraisal and intellectual control.

Additionally, Fulton Sheen in his work titled, “Victory Over Vice” as cited in Hallet maintained that the best measure of one’s maturity is the manner by which one responds to the odds and ends of our passing values.<sup>7</sup> In order to press home his point, Fulton Sheen related the story of the Greek glorious Poet Homer (c.850 .B.C), who among his works wrote the two great epics namely, Iliad and Odyssey. In Iliad, Achilles defeated Hector, but Achilles was not the hero. The glorified hero was Hector, the leader of the enemy Trojans whom Achilles defeated and killed. In Odyssey, the hero was not Odysseus but his wife, Penelope.

During the years of Odysseus’ travels, many suitors sought for Penelope’s affections. She kept off her suitors by informing them that she would become interested in their courtship after she might have finished spinning the material in the spinning wheel. However, unknown to the suitors is that each night she would unravel what she had woven during the day, and thus remained faithful until her husband returned. “Of all women”, she alleged “I am most sorrowful”. Her expression and feelings correlates to that of Shakespeare: “Sorrow sits in my soul as on a throne. Bid kings come and bow down to it”<sup>8</sup>. For a thousand years before the birth of Christ, pagan antiquity resounded with these two stories of the poet, who threw into the teeth of history the mysterious challenge of glorifying a defeated man and hailing a sorrowful woman. In this trend of thought, the subsequent centuries continued to ask, could anyone be victorious in defeat and glorious in sorrow?

The answer to the supra stated question lingered and almost eluded time and age of every generation for donkey years, before Christ and his mother Mary answered the question with their life. On the cross or infamous gibbet, Christ became victorious in defeat and his mother became glorious in sorrow. Christ was innocent but he never made any claim to that, rather he pleaded for the forgiveness of those who killed him – “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do”<sup>9</sup>. Christ pleaded for their ignorance, and they were saved by their ignorance. The ignorance which this paper epitomizes is not ignorance of the truth, but ignorance of evil. It is to be taken note of, that Christ’s executioners were pleaded for and

they were forgiven because they were ignorant of their terrible crime. It was not their wisdom that saved them, but their ignorance of the consequences of their crime. This is the value of ignorance.

St. Peter, the “*primus inter Paris*” (the first among equals) in his apostolic lecture reinforced the value of ignorance. “Now I know, brothers that neither you nor your leaders had any idea of what you were really doing.... Now you must repent and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out,...”<sup>10</sup> In other words, since you people acted in ignorance, you are not to be held responsible. This is another case in point regarding the value of ignorance.

Naturally human beings find it hard to manage their crisis, but Mary who was loaded with crisis withstood her troubles. She was not lying prostrate or reeling on the ground in sorrow. St. John, as well as other Evangelists witnessed that Mother Mary stood at the foot of the cross sorrowful– (*Stabat Mater dolorosa*)<sup>11</sup>. The situation points to her dialogue with the Archangel Gabriel – “How can this come about since I am a virgin or (since I know not any man)<sup>12</sup> that is one who is quite ignorant of body gratification or sexual experience. It was her ignorance of sin based on God’s unconditional choice that qualified her to be the mother of Christ, which caused her the trouble that made her glorious in sorrow.

### **Logical basis for the Value of Ignorance**

Human beings may sin a thousand and one times and be forgiven, but the Angels who sinned but once, were not forgiven.<sup>13</sup> The reason is that the Angels are higher beings than human beings. They have higher spiritual qualities than human beings. They knew what they were doing. If they did not, it would be a culpable ignorance. They are always with God, and they know the consequences of each and every one of their decisions with the same utmost clarity by which human beings know that, a part can never be greater than the whole. Their decision is irrevocable because they are spirits imbued with innocent knowledge. Human wrong decisions can be forgiven on the basis of their depravity of human mind and ignorance.

The words of Mary and Jesus suggest that there is value in one not knowing evil (how can this come about when I am a virgin i.e. innocent of sexual pleasure; father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing). Human beings live in a world in which earthly man could proudly hypothesize that, if one does not entangle oneself with the earthly pleasures, one may not know what is life. People of such irregular ideology presume that knowledge occurs only through practical experience. It should not be less known that it is with this kind of dishonest scheme that Satan tempted Adam and Eve. Satan told them that the reason God forbade them to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, was that God did not want them to be wise as He is.<sup>14</sup>

Satan as such hid the truth from them, for he did not tell them that, if they come to knowledge of good and evil, their knowledge would be shatteringly different from that of God. God knows evil not in the actual fact but only in the abstract. It would be a negation of God’s goodness and love for Him to know evil in actuality or practically. On the part of man, he (man) is prone to know evil practically or experientially. Be that as it may, the advocacy of this paper is that man should endeavour to know evil theoretically rather than practically. For example, it is not necessary for a medical doctor to become a typhoid fever stricken patient so as to have the knowledge of how to cure a typhoid fever patient. Such doctor could have the knowledge of typhoid fever theoretically.

### **Educational Philosophy of the Value of Ignorance**

As a child, one may not understand why one's parents forbade him to play with matches, but the burn will convince him of the truth of the law. The world that violates God's moral law, finds the wisdom of the eternal law through war, strife and misery. That is why the world is labouring under the nostalgia of correcting its false learning. Must one "experience evil" in order to "know life" or to become human? Is a doctor wiser by allowing himself to be struck down by disease? Does one know cleanliness by living in the toilet or sleeping on the same bed with a leper? Does one become educated by experiencing stupidity? Does one know peace by fighting? Does one know the joys of vision by being blind? Does one become a better pianist by hitting the wrong keys? Must one become drunk to know what drunkenness is? Should one live the life of spend - thrift and debauchery in order to experience rough life.

The problem of knowledge is a critical issue because it is very closely related to the nature and the essence of man himself. It is related to man's rationality. The knowledge of man includes what man knows and how man knows it. Based on the fact that man is a moral agent and a moral being in his environment, the material of man's knowledge should not be left to chance.

### **Summary and Conclusion**

The paper argued on the value of ignorance and submits that valuing forms an integral part of man's vocation to fully realize himself. For man to become "fully human" as Ashiegbu asserts, he "is to become fully alive."<sup>15</sup> This implies that man has to subdue his lower instincts and bring his desires and appetites strictly under the control of reason in order to realize the value of ignorance. The extent man realizes himself, and becomes more human, is the extent his life becomes more meaningful and significant.

Analytically the paper defended that ignorance is better than error. It further posits that *scientia is not sapientia* (knowledge is not wisdom). This is why wrong education makes the mind sceptical about the wisdom of God. Conclusively it is by becoming ignorant of certain life experiences which go with negative values that man can advance though slowly towards becoming the being he ought to be. In other words man's state of problem comes not from his ignorance, but from his life perversion. This is the value of ignorance.

### **End Notes**

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8. Ibid. 384-387.
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11. Ibid. John. 19:25-27.
12. Ibid. Luke. 1:34.
13. Ibid. Apoc. 12:7-9.
14. Ibid. Gen. 3:4-5.
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