

The Hallmark of Intelligence: Knowing That You May Not Know You Don't Know — And When to Keep Your Mouth Shut About It

by Paul Raymond Doyon

"To know and yet (think) we do not know is the highest (attainment); not to know (and yet think) we do know is a disease."

— Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching*

"If A is a success in life, then A equals x plus y plus z. Work is x; y is play; and z is keeping your mouth shut."

— Albert Einstein

The literal meaning of *anosognosia* depicts a mental disease describing "a deficit of self-awareness, a condition in which a person who suffers a certain disability seems unaware of the existence of his or her disability" (Anosognosia) and usually entails brain damage to the right parietal lobe. On a more figurative level, however, it has been associated with both individual and group self-deception or denial — and probably at least everyone at sometime in their lives has engaged in some form of self-deception either by themselves or with a larger group of people (i.e. groupthink) — be those your friends, your family, your peers, your colleagues, your countrymen and countrywomen, and/or even perhaps fellow members of your racial or ethnic background. Furthermore, it's most likely that a good number of people out there right now are engaging in some form or another of self-deceit. And to make matters worse, a good majority of the people out there most likely engage in some kind of self-delusion on a regular basis. Perhaps you yourself are engaging in some form of self-deception right now and you are not even aware of it? There are many examples — not only in both the distant and more recent history, but also in the present day — of people engaging in self-deception — and these include both the real and literally levels, the latter usually being a reflection of the former.

In his *New York Times* article, “The Anosognosic’s Dilemma: Something’s Wrong but You’ll Never Know What It is (Part 1),” Morris (2010) introduces, via a Professor David Dunning, an example of *anosognosia* with the story of a Mr. Wheeler, a bank robber who believed he could make himself invisible by rubbing lemon juice on his face. Morris goes on to conclude that

if Wheeler was too stupid to be a bank robber, perhaps he was too stupid to know that he was too stupid to be a bank robber — that is, his stupidity protected him from an awareness of his own stupidity.

Morris talks about how Dunning, after reading about Wheeler, became fascinated with the idea of how one’s own “self-assessed level of competence” can be contrasted with one’s “actual competence” and hence organized a research project with his graduate student, Kruger, which resulted in the paper, “Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties of Recognizing One’s Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-assessments,” where they state

when people are incompetent in the strategies they adopt to achieve success and satisfaction, they suffer a dual burden: Not only do they reach erroneous conclusions and make unfortunate choices, but their incompetence robs them of the ability to realize it. Instead, like Mr. Wheeler, they are left with the erroneous impression they are doing just fine. (Kruger and Dunning, 1999, as cited in Morris, 2010)

This, in turn, “became known as the *Dunning-Kruger Effect*” – one’s incompetence distorts one’s capability to recognize one’s incompetence (Morris, 2010). I imagine that everyone probably knows or has had experience with people like this. (I can recall a time when I personally had to fire several people working on the remodeling my townhouse because they were much less competent than I was made to believe by their overly inflated descriptions of themselves and their abilities.) I think we all meet people in our everyday lives who seem to think they know what they are talking about when they are

in essence just regurgitating clichés (like “tin foil hat” or “enabler”) that they have heard repeatedly over and over again from one or more of our media outlets. (And they most likely developed these patterns in school where they probably got good grades by being able to regurgitate information the teacher had laid out in front of them. It’s called “indoctrination.”)

Dunning, in his interview with Morris, states that one’s knowledge “that there are things you don’t know that you don’t know” (Morris) is essentially the hallmark of intelligence. In other words, it is the knowing that there are “unknown unknowns” – that there are questions that have yet to be asked and naturally answers to these questions that have yet to be answered.

Take, for example, the case of Ignaz Philipp Semmelweis, a German-Hungarian physician who discovered the cause of puerperal (childbed) fever in the mid 1800s (Zoltán, 2013). Semmelweis was able to reduce the mortality rates from puerperal fever in one ward of the obstetric clinic of Vienna from 18.27 percent to 1.27 percent by having the doctors in the clinic wash their hands with chlorinated-lime solution before delivering babies — and in spite of this was mistakenly considered a fool by many of his medical peers at the time. Semmelweis was subsequently committed to a psychiatric hospital where he ended up dying of the same disease he had tried so hard to prevent.

Semmelweis knew that women and children were dying from a disease state called puerperal fever in maternity hospitals throughout Europe at the time; yet he and the rest of the population did not know how or why this disease was being transmitted. He did know enough though to be able to ask and discover what these unknown unknowns might be – i.e. “how” this might be happening – by being able to *notice* and connect two distinct events: (1) that the death rate in the first ward of the clinic (where medical students were taught) was two to three times higher than the death rate in the second ward (where midwives were taught), and (2) that the death of a friend from a wound

infection occurred shortly after his friend had examined a woman who had died of puerperal fever. He, hence, concluded that the medical students must have been carrying the disease from the dissected corpses to the healthy mothers (Zoltán, 2013).

Semmelweis had known that he did not know what was causing the problem. He did, however, indeed believe that he might be able to find out and looked for clues as to what might be happening and in effect engaged in what can be described as *mindful intelligence*. On the other hand, his chief, who had objected to Semmelweis' investigations (and others like him), "had reconciled [themselves] to the idea that the disease was unpreventable" (Zoltan, 2013) and seemingly had not even considered that there might indeed be some unknown unknowns — questions that needed to be asked and answers that needed to be answered — out there. They hence in contrast can be said to have been anosognosic by seemingly engaging in acts of *willful ignorance*.

Some other examples of the phenomena of anosognosia can also be drawn from the literary world. Both Hans Christian Anderson and H.G. Wells — world-famous authors who were also seemingly both astute students of social psychology — bring up the idea of a mass social anosognosia or willful ignorance in their stories, the first in *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1837) and the latter in *The Country of the Blind* (1904).

In the well-known story, *The Emperor's New Clothes* (1837), the Emperor is blinded by his vanity; his bureaucrats are blinded by their fear of being incompetent; the common people are blinded by conformity and the fear of being seen as stupid; and everyone is seemingly blinded by being too concerned about what other people might think of them. And because of this, they all are fooled by the *weavers of the lie* — i.e. by the swindlers. And in the end, it takes the pure perception and pure honesty of a child to bring everyone back to their senses.

In the story, *The Country of the Blind* (1904), a mountaineer named Nuñez finds himself in a country of blind people cut off from the rest of the world. In this world of the blind, Nuñez initially thinks that he will be king. But he soon finds out that these people who through many generations have lost their eyes, have no conception of sight: They do not — like Wheeler not knowing that he is stupid — know that they are blind.

In all these stories we see parallels between those who can and cannot see — either literally or metaphorically. Semmelweis is a *seer*, as is Nuñez in *The Country of the Blind*, as is the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes*. On the other hand, Wheeler is obviously blind, as are Semmelweis's peers, as is everyone except the child in *The Emperor's New Clothes*, not to forget to mention the blind in *The Country of the Blind*. Being blind in these contexts can be seen as a metaphor for either being willfully ignorant or just plain stupid. Nuñez, in the end, realizes that there is nothing he can do to make the blind see and escapes from that limited world. Semmelweis, unfortunately, is not so lucky and gets tricked into being committed to a mental institution where he ironically suffers the same fate — as a number of his patients — in succumbing to the disease he had tried so hard to eradicate. Seemingly, while his Machiavellian peers might not have been that smart — they were not that stupid either.

Historically, we have seen many instances where extremely intelligent people were either ridiculed or attacked or both by their less intelligent peers. Socrates, in 399 BC, was put to death for philosophizing and speaking his mind in public. Galileo, in the 1600s, was put on trial by the Catholic Church for suggesting that the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around. Ironically, in the late 1800's, Marconi, the inventor of the radio, was referred to an insane asylum for merely suggesting that there were these invisible waves that could transmit sound (Guglielmo Marconi); and probably more prophetic than ironic perhaps is his statement shortly before his death in 1937: ***“Have I done the world good, or have I added a menace?”***

(Guglielmo Marconi). Between the 1920s and 1970s, people got their feet x-rayed to determine shoe size. And up until the 1960s, the majority of adults smoked with no clue whatsoever of adverse health effects and cigarette manufacturers cleverly and unethically employed doctors to not only state, in their advertisements, deceptive untruths like nicotine having a beneficial effect on our health, but even employed them actually smoking in the advertisements. In the 1960s, the American people got dragged into the Vietnam War under a false credence in the *domino theory*, which stated that once one country fell to communism, other countries would fall like dominoes with it spreading like a cancer throughout the world. In the 1970s, people all over the Western world got duped into eating the unhealthier margarine because they were led to believe an oversimplification that the cholesterol in butter was bad for them — (when it is the consumption of oxidized cholesterol by macrophages and the resultant formation of foam cells that actually creates the problem.)

Looking around at the present world in the 21st Century, there are indeed many modern examples of the above quandaries: People are getting duped into supporting unnecessary wars, taking loads of pharmaceuticals, eating genetically-modified foods, and mindlessly placing microwave-emitting devices next to their brains — without realizing they have been told a web of lies for another man's profits. And, if we look carefully, we can find numerous incidences where today's modern swindlers are weaving their elaborate lies — often through today's modern media outlets — only to blindly be consumed and hence digested and believed by the common people, many of whom mistakenly believe they are intelligent because they are able to regurgitate with *debonair flair* some of this smooth-sounding garbage. And there are indeed cases, conversely, of people employing their mindful intelligence to figure out what is really going on only to have it summarily dismissed by people who have reconciled themselves — in their small-minded worlds — to an idea that “that is just the way things are and that there is nothing we can do

about them” and that “anyone who thinks otherwise must be the ones who are crazy and stupid.”

As George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel stated in the early 19th century, “The only thing we learn from history is that we learn nothing from history.” Perhaps if the modern-day Semmelweises employing their mindful intelligence were just a little bit more intelligent, they would know better than to waste their precious time and energy trying to convince today’s versions of the blind to see. For if these “blind” people indeed are so blind that they cannot be aware of their own blindness, they certainly will not be aware — and hence be able to acknowledge or appreciate — what the Semmelweises or the Nuñezes of the world have to offer them. Hence, many of the latter mindfully intelligent people, while perhaps extremely intelligent, might be even more “intelligent” to hold on tightly to their pearls of wisdom — and not be so ready to cast them before what might be less than appreciative simpletons — not to mention their swindling Machiavellian masters. As an ancient Japanese proverb maintains:

“A clever hawk hides its claws.”

(脳ある鷹は爪を隠す – *Nō aru taka wa tsume o kakusu.*)

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