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What role did ignorance play in René Descartes’s philosophy and the experimental philosophy of the Royal Society of London? How did enduring Christian anxieties about the pursuit of ignorance and knowledge develop in early modern England and France? Did ignorance become more secular during the seventeenth century? Sandrine Parageau proposes answers to these and related questions.

*The Paradoxes of Ignorance in Early Modern England and France* investigates the lack of knowledge, its perceived virtues and vices, and its epistemic values and uses in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century theological and natural philosophical works in England and France. The paradoxes indicated in the title refer to both the time period under study and the problems with ignorance early modern French and English writers raised. During Europe’s revival of learning, some scholars condemned classical learning and scholasticism, arguing that the unlearned were closer to God and to nature. During the Reformation and subsequent religious upheavals, when old certainties had been shaken and many claimed authority, some authors insisted that acquiring knowledge would not actually yield wisdom or spiritual understanding. In addition to the legacy of ancient skepticism, Parageau calls attention to the medieval traditions that shaped early modern thinking about ignorance, such as negative theology and texts of Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus) on learned ignorance (*docta ignorantia*) and on the idiot as a cultural persona.

Parageau’s central claim is that ignorance, in relation to knowledge and wisdom, became a central concern for theologians and natural philosophers in the dynamic contexts of humanism, the Reformation, and the new science. Ignorance takes center stage in her account in three modes, which structure the book into three parts, each with a short introduction: ignorance as wisdom, ignorance as principle of knowledge, and ignorance as an epistemological instrument.

The first two chapters examine ignorance as a superior kind of wisdom. Parageau shows that
Michel de Montaigne, Pierre Charron, and Descartes borrowed not only from the Socratic tradition but also from Cusanus in their texts on learned ignorance. These French thinkers contrasted peasants, artisans, and “uncivilized” non-Europeans with scholars and seekers of knowledge. The former group were regarded as true philosophers because they exhibited positive attributes of wisdom, such as humility, simplicity, and self-knowledge. These late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century French authors thus argued that learned ignorance was a sign of wisdom, facilitated access to truths about God and nature, and brought happiness. English experimentalists, meanwhile, rejected the notion of ignorance as wisdom and were not influenced by the Cusan legacy. They were suspicious of learned ignorance and saw it as an obstacle to advancing learning. One exception was Joseph Glanvill, who, Parageau argues, borrowed from Cusanus and the French tradition on ignorance.

The second part of the book explores ignorance as a principle of knowledge. Here ignorance appears as a condition that paradoxically enabled unmediated access to divine and natural knowledge, as in the case of personal inspiration. Parageau contends that ignorance was associated with the internal light as a way to truth in early modern English and French religious and philosophical texts, but not unequivocally. Parageau discusses Quakers, who claimed personal inspiration, alongside Descartes, who spoke of the “natural light” in Discourse on Method (1637) and Rules for the Direction of the Mind (Dutch 1684, Latin 1701). She also considers English Puritans, including Richard Baxter and John Bunyan. Both questioned the role of ignorance as an immediate path to truth. In English, French, and Dutch worlds, sectarian violence had been a reality. Some feared that followers of Descartes and the Quakers would be led to enthusiasm and consequently destabilize society. These chapters convincingly expose why encouraging learned ignorance was seen as threatening to the established political, religious, and social order.

The third and final part considers ignorance as an epistemological instrument, that is, as a heuristic device or state of mind in the process of discovery. Parageau turns to the topoi of the idiot as an autodidact and the artisan as an objective and truthful observer as models for finding divine and natural truths. Although lacking learning, nameless artisans had been capable of great discoveries thanks to their sagacity, or ability to follow their nose through trial and error. She argues that Francis Bacon, Descartes, and later Baconian experimenters urged investigators to imitate the sagacity of the “illiterate inventor” (who had “by chance” invented the telescope, compass, and gunpowder). In their philosophies, Bacon and Descartes devised ways of harnessing chance and accident in order to promote discovery. The book closes with John Locke’s theories of ignorance as set out in his Essay Concerning Human Understanding (1689). Like Montaigne, Locke took a relativist approach to ignorance as a cognitive process and state of mind, and thought its role in improving knowledge ought to be better understood. Locke also used human ignorance to defend religious toleration: namely, because no one possesses infallible knowledge, no one should be permitted to impose religious opinions on others.

In a short study, there are inevitably some weaker points. Ignorance in the mid-seventeenth century between Bacon and Descartes, on the one hand, and Locke, on the other, in part 3 could have been developed. In chapter 6 on sagacity, Bacon, and discovery as a hunt, it is a pity Parageau does not engage with William Eamon’s Science and the Secrets of Nature: Books of Secrets in Medieval and Early Modern Culture (1996). Moreover, the claim that Bacon, Descartes, and members of the Royal Society praised artisans for their innocence, integrity, and objectivity is overstated: while necessarily reliant on tradesmen and technicians, they believed that craftsmen could
not produce knowledge; they saw craftsmen as preoccupied with earning a profit, time-poor, and ill-equipped to elaborate principles of knowledge. While clearly written, *The Paradoxes of Ignorance* sometimes sacrifices nuance and depth for the sake of brevity. At times, historical actors and schools of thought are lumped into broader groupings (e.g., “fellows of the Royal Society” and “Cartesianism”) and become responsible for developments where greater precision about historical agency is needed. Lastly, quotations and book titles of works in Latin, Italian, and French, which appear in the body of the text, are not always translated into English.

Parageau nevertheless contributes a valuable work to our understanding of how English and French theologians and philosophers developed and refashioned ignorance and its many meanings. Significantly, her book demonstrates that the Cusan tradition on learned ignorance had stronger roots in early modern France than England. In response to Cornel Zwierlein's argument about a secularization of ignorance from the medieval to the early modern period, Parageau in fact shows that there was “no linear evolution from one conception of ignorance to another, as several—and sometimes contradictory—interpretations of ignorance, inherited from long philosophical and theological traditions, coexisted at any given time in England and in France” (p. 24). A comparison of the two countries' intellectual histories of ignorance is much needed, and her book identifies and illuminates the debates about ignorance that echoed across the Channel. Parageau's exploration of Bacon and Descartes on ignorance, sagacity, chance, and scientific discovery invites further scholarship on the topic.

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