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BOOK REVIEW

**The Wisdom of Not-Knowing: essays on  
psychotherapy, Buddhism and life experience**

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## Book Review

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**The Wisdom of Not-Knowing: essays on psychotherapy, Buddhism and life experience**

**Editors: Bob Chisholm and Jeff Harrison**

**Axminster: Triarchy Press (2016) pp. 184**

**Paperback £12.50**

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**Senior Lecturer, University of Aberdeen**

The progress of science and technology has enabled human beings to extend their capabilities for material manipulation far into the deepest fabric of life. On the front cover of Science recently, researchers were reporting on 'gene editing' as a technique for deliberate 'dis-activating' of protein transcription to prevent the potential misconduct of birth-related functions of the body (Saey, 2016). Basic frontiers research - as it is called – is driven towards the generation of focussed questions that lead to a fragmentation of definable answers, and even, as in the above example, to the anticipation of solutions for potential problems. Such wealth of questions associated with circumscribed and definable responses is what we normally refer to in the West as the process of producing knowledge, or knowing.

This book, edited by Chisholm and Harrison, brings a refreshingly new perspective on the idea of knowledge by putting the emphasis on 'not-knowing'. As the editors declare in their opening introduction: *"if knowledge represents power and makes any exercise of power possible, not-knowing might seem to amount to little more than a confession of ignorance"* (p. 7). Yet, from this humble position, the book unravels through a series of thirteen chapters, which illuminate the multiple facets of 'not knowing' as an integral and fundamental dimension of our human self.

A certain irony characterises each contribution in the book. How could the negative statement of 'not-knowing' give rise to any knowledge at all? The writers are all practicing counsellors and psychotherapists with years of experience of clinical practice. Each chapter in the book recounts moments of clinical experience during which practitioners and clients were confronted with the recognition of 'not-knowing' as a necessary moment of change and transformation. Far away from the seeking of answers and the anticipation of solutions, *"every successful course of psychotherapy – recount the editors – hinged on an event that could not have been predicted beforehand"* (p.7).

Hence, interesting questions are being posed. First of all, what is 'not-knowing' and how can we know about it; secondly, and most importantly, what is the value of 'not-knowing' and thirdly, can the experience of 'not-knowing' be just as rich and meaningful for other fields of

endeavour? Personally, as an educator working in the field of teacher education, I was particularly intrigued by such questions.

Many colleagues may recognise that a common, default position in teacher education is often not dissimilar from the position outlined in the opening paragraph of this text ... akin to scientific inquiry, also social and educational processes, at University as well as in schools, are constantly interrogated with questions about the future. Namely, there are questions about the value of investing in 'getting an education' and whether it may enhance one's life prospects; similarly, there are questions about curriculum and teacher preparation, that is, what set of knowledge and skills teachers might need to know and be able to perform. A number of assumptions seem to go undisclosed and within the limitations of this review I am particularly struck by the narrative of linear time, which characterises such discourses. It is assumed that knowledge accumulates and continuously grows; that the future may result from the accumulation of present events; that human beings, as children, adolescents and indeed beginning teachers, would grow up and 'become' by asserting their own solid identities, as characters in their own personal stories of confident professionals taking leading roles.

This book confronts us with a very different starting point.

Contrary to the technocratic view of knowledge and development, the first contribution by Margaret Meyer focuses on liminality that she describes as a moment of secret growth, "*a mediatory movement between what was and what will be*" (Turner, 1969). So 'not-knowing' is the state of mind and experience of the 'transitioning person' crossing a metaphoric threshold into a hybrid place, of paradox and ambiguity. We recognise here the experience of late childhood and adolescence, the identity crisis, the unsettling recognition of bisexuality. Transitioning, however, is also the passage into a world of new social codes, as it may be the experience of displaced people being uprooted from a state of physical, geographical or social security to set foot into a new professional culture, or indeed, a new town or a foreign country. The practice of psychotherapy as Meyer articulates, is a response to the problem of 'not-knowing' that arises at these transitions. The language of possibility, play and tentativeness prevails over the dominant language of conquest, prediction and control that is common in Western cultures.

The next two contributions by Rosemary Lodge and Caroline Brazier add further layers of understanding of 'not-knowing'. Lodge places emphasis on feelings and emotions and provides a useful articulation of the relationships between the two. Drawing on the work of the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, Lodge stresses the knowing power of feelings, that is, their crucial role in the development of knowledge and particularly, the knowledge we gain from experience. Far from being simple and taken for granted 'body reactions', feelings arise from the unity of emotion and cognition thus being central to the symbolisation of experience. 'Not-knowing' in this regard may be associated with the lack of unawareness of one's own feelings and the cognitive power they hold, but it can also be the rich space in which feelings

arise as we embark upon new experiences. Rather than discounting what cannot be rationally known, both Lodge and Brazier stress the need to step into a different frame of mind by 'allowing' oneself to become aware of deeper, emotional, intuitive knowledge.

From an educational point of view it is tantalizing to reflect on the means and the opportunities for learning through transitions, whereby a state of play may allow for new ways of acting to be tried out, adopted and discarded... What pedagogies may be enacted? And how flexible are our systems of education to accommodate them?

A certain sense of surrendering and letting go permeates the writings concerned with 'not-knowing'. Knowledge is not 'gained' or even 'produced'; rather, it seems to surge and flow through the body expanding and flowing in and out of differential states of change and personal awareness. Yet, while the book is set to make a distinction between the personal, existential 'not-knowing' and the more conventional, objective 'knowing that', many examples are given by the contributors to illustrate points of contact between the different ways of knowing. Caroline Brazier, for example, describes the common experience of doubt respectively, in academic research and in psychotherapy, which is calling for the readers' attention. While doubt is celebrated in research as a high form of intellectual lucidity, it is not uncommon for prejudice to linger in the discourses; 'doubt' can be escaped from by preferring to stick to what can be recognised and be named: denial and false security narrow the opportunities for knowing.

Each of the remaining ten chapters of the book reports on the practice of psychotherapy in addressing the psychological and existential states of denial, escapism and closure that are part of the fabric of our relationships. Far from being a soft process, knowing through 'not-knowing' is deeply challenging for both clients and practitioners, for neither will know where therapy may lead. As argued by Bob Chisholm in chapter four— knowing what is truly important for each person remains at all times an uncharted and un-prescribed territory.

I was fascinated by the powerful accounts provided by the contributors to this book, each one concerned with understanding and working with the state of 'not-knowing'. I cannot help trying to draw parallels between the person-centred approach described in the book and the child-centred approach professed by contemporary pedagogies. What can we learn from this book that would enhance our practice in education? How can we learn to work within the expansive space of 'not-knowing'? How could such a turn in our professional conduct change our 'selves', our practice and our ways of relating with one another?

The book provides a rich array of symbols and images for understanding one's own practice. The 'via negativa' of Jeff Harrison; 'the path' of Manu Bazzano and also the 'dance' proposed by Owen Okie, that is, the on-going movement of stepping inside and outside the boundaries of one's experience, one's belief and one's perspective. The suspension of judgement; the questioning of assumptions or even the breaking of habit-patterns are all aspects of this

dance which the psychotherapists are skilled at recognising. 'Not-knowing' enables the 'not-knowing' of a subject from every possible perspective.

In a contribution dated 1993, two philosophers of science and mathematicians, Silvio Funtowicz and Jerome Ravetz advanced the idea of post-normal science as a new type of interdisciplinary, hybrid and dialogical inquiry more suited to address the complexity of current social and environmental problems. Funtowicz and Ravetz recognised the limitations of scientific predictions in the face of unknown unknowns and unpredictability: "surprise is inevitable" (p. 748). Contemporary insights from the philosophy of technology and the expanding field of ecosystem science are questioning whether it will even be possible to think of complex problems such as climate change as being 'problems' requiring humans-heroes to rise and become the new powerful species of the new geological epoch (Smil, 2015). Such statements raised questions for academic scientists and policy-makers as much as they did for educators... how do we prepare for a turbulent world? How do we prepare for meaningful knowing in the face of uncertainty?

The proposition may be that we are 'not-knowing'.

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