

On Modern Uncertainty

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There have been four sorts of ages in the world's history. There have been ages when everybody thought they knew everything, ages when nobody thought they knew anything, ages when clever people thought they knew much and stupid people thought they knew little, and ages when stupid people thought they knew much and clever people thought they knew little. The first sort of age is one of stability, the second of slow decay, the third of progress, the fourth of disaster. All primitive ages belong to the first sort: no one has any doubt as to the tribal religion, the wisdom of ancient customs, or the magic by which good crops are to be secured; consequently everyone is happy in the absence of some tangible reason, such as starvation, for being unhappy.

The second sort of age is exemplified by the ancient world before the rise of Christianity but after decadence had begun. In the Roman Empire, tribal religions lost their exclusiveness and force: in proportion as people came to think that there might be truth in religions of others, they also came to think that their might be falsehood in their own. Eastern necromancy was half believed, half disbelieved; the German barbarians were supposed to possess virtues that the more civilised portions of mankind had lost. Consequently everybody doubted everything, and doubt paralysed effort.

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, exactly the opposite happened. Science and scientific technique were a novelty, and gave immense self-confidence to those who understood them. Their triumphs were obvious and astonishing. Repeatedly, when the Chinese Emperor had decided to persecute the Jesuits, they would turn out to be right about the date of an expected eclipse when the imperial astronomers were wrong, and the Emperor would decide that such clever men, after all, deserved his favours. In England, those who introduced scientific methods in agriculture obtained visibly larger crops than those who adhered to old-time methods, while in manufactures team and machinery put the conservatives to flight. There came, therefore, to be a general belief in educated intelligence. Those who did not possess it allowed themselves to be guided by those who did, and an era of rapid progress resulted.

In our age, the exact opposite is the case. Men of science like Eddington are doubtful whether science really knows anything. Economists perceive that the accepted methods of doing the world's business are making everybody poor. Statesmen cannot find any way of securing international co-operation or preventing war. Philosophers have no guidance to offer mankind. The only people left with positive opinions are those who are too stupid to know when their opinions are absurd. Consequently the world is ruled by fools, and the intelligent count for nothing in the councils of the nations.

This state of affairs, if it continues, must plunge the world more and more deeply into misfortune. The scepticism of the intelligent is the cause of their impotence, and is itself the effect of their laziness: if there is nothing worth doing, that gives an excuse for sitting still. But when disaster is impending, no excuse for sitting still can be valid. The intelligent will have to shed their scepticism, or share responsibility for the evils which

all deplore. And they will have to abandon academic grumblings and peevish pedantries, for nothing that they may say will be of any use unless they learn to speak a language that the democracy can appreciate.

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