What Is Not Worth Knowing

In this essay I shall explore the idea that there are many things an intelligent and educated person should not know. To put the point in a slightly different way, I shall argue that there is such a thing as intellectual and even emotional trash, and that it is harmful to stuff the human head with too much of it. But how can we identify it? More specifically, when we call some piece of information pure trash, how can we be sure that we are doing anything more than expressing some kind of snobbish prejudice? Today one person’s trash looks like a neglected masterpiece to someone else. From a relativist standpoint there can be no such thing as worthless knowledge. But no serious thinker works without some criteria for sifting knowledge. In order to get a better grasp on our problem let us see how the sifting usually works.

Most professionals have to be uninformed about huge blocks of knowledge outside their area of special competence. Such a decision to avoid the acquisition of knowledge does not however, carry any implication that other forms of knowledge are not worth having. A physicist’s decision not to learn the economic history of Japan from 1867 to 1900 does not automatically imply that this history is not worth knowing. Professional thinkers as a group may make thousands of decisions a day that result in voluntarily assumed ignorance. These are matters of intellectual economy, concessions, if you will, to human frailty and the biological impossibility of omniscience.

These decisions are not what we are looking for. Indeed, rather the opposite. We are trying to find out if there are kinds of knowledge that are intrinsically trivial or worthless even though they can be exciting and attractive as entertainment for many people. A century ago hardly any serious thinker would have bothered with such a question because the answer seemed too obvious, even though the reasoning behind similar
What Is Not Worth Knowing

answers was quite varied. There were those who felt that worthwhile knowledge was different from vulgar knowledge and trash, and that anyone who could not grasp the difference right off was not worth talking to anyway. Then there were the Marxists who believed that all "real" problems appeared on the historical agenda at the same time that solutions to them became available. Capitalism was a solution to one set of problems and socialism the answer to the next set. Any work on intellectual issues not obviously part of the historical agenda was for the Marxist simply an evasion. In this instance an evasion meant trash or something very close to trash. Often enough, the Marxist conception of intellectual trash becomes a form of self-protecting dogma. That is one damaging feature of the Marxist conception. Another is the lack of any room for an aesthetic criterion. Marxism is heavy-footed in its utilitarian emphasis. Nevertheless, the Marxist emphasis on the changing historical component in the meaning of significance and importance has been a valuable intellectual contribution.

Finally there is the liberal tradition. Where uncontaminated by traditional elitism or Marxism, the liberal tradition advocates a democracy of curiosity. One question, one issue is just as good as any other question or issue. There is no way to decide which is more important among them. Kinship in an exotic nonliterate tribe stands on the same level of importance as the connection between German big business and the Nazis at the end of the Weimar Republic.

This democratic liberalism in the search for truth was appropriate to England, the classic land of the cultivated amateur who chose his own topic and ways of pursuing it. Discussion with other amateurs provided the sanctions that validated the findings in accord with generally accepted rules of logic. Democratic liberalism has also survived in American and British universities where it justifies teaching just about anything and everything a professor wants to teach or investigate. There is an informal but very strong taboo on raising questions about the significance of a colleague's work. If the colleague thinks it is important and the funds and students are available, that is enough.

To be sure there are those who are quite aware that democracy of curiosity cannot possibly serve as a rationale for allocating scarce intellectual and material resources among competing tasks and projects. For instance, the instructions that accompany requests from the National Endowment for the Humanities for assessments of scholarly projects acknowledge bluntly that not every project is equally significant. But like others faced with the same general issue, they refrain, perhaps wisely, from
telling us what makes the difference. To state the criteria openly would intensify existing quarrels and provoke new ones.

Obviously it is not just the talent of the individual scientist or scholar that makes the difference, important though this quality may be. To stress the importance of the individual investigator merely pushes the question one step backward up the causal chain. What is it about the investigator that leads one to recognize superiority? The superior investigator is one who recognizes that not all facts (or questions about facts) are equally significant. By now that has begun to seem obvious. The notion of a democracy of curiosity just won’t wash. It is neither a description of what happens nor a serviceable prescription of what ought to happen in any form of serious intellectual inquiry. But if not all questions and not all answers are equal, what makes them different?

To ask this question is to ask, What are the criteria for evaluating knowledge? I suggest that there are essentially two criteria: a utilitarian criterion and an aesthetic one. They are visible, I believe, behind all the variations over time and space that appear in the record of human curiosity. The utilitarian or instrumental criterion comes in three shapes, possibly more. The acquisition of knowledge that diminishes human suffering, as in the case of medicine for the most part, certainly satisfies the utilitarian criterion. By any standard it is useful knowledge. But so also is destructive knowledge that increases human suffering. Military technology is the most obvious example. In this connection it is necessary to emphasize that we are discussing here the ways human societies actually have evaluated the search for knowledge and are likely to do so over the foreseeable future, not the way they ought to evaluate knowledge according to an ethical ideal.

There is one more possible form of the utilitarian criterion. Any form of knowledge that contributes or promises to contribute to human happiness might meet the utilitarian criterion. Here, however, we run into serious difficulty. It is almost impossible to assess any given piece of knowledge in terms of its effect on human happiness, because there are so many forms and levels of human happiness—such as the excitement one may feel from coordinating muscles and brain in work or play, to minimal satisfaction on receiving a birthday card from a barely welcome well-wisher. Even the debate about ethically desirable forms of happiness continually changes. Both the effect and the happiness are too protean to yield worthwhile judgments. To talk about the importance (or acceptability) of human knowledge in terms of its contribution to human hap-
piness lands us back in the quagmire of a democracy of curiosity out of which we have just tried to crawl.

One way to cope with this problem might be to work out a rough scale of forms of social happiness as opposed to merely individual pleasure. Then one might be able to assess the importance of one piece of knowledge—or the search for such knowledge—in terms of its contribution to social happiness. Actually we make similar estimates quite often anyway, without going through all the logical steps such a judgment requires. But there are serious dangers down this road. Who is to determine what social happiness means and on what basis? Twentieth-century dictators have given far from reassuring answers. In such a dictatorship social happiness is what the dictator tells the population it ought to feel. Social happiness can become an instrument of arbitrary and terrorist rule, like the notion of virtue at the height of the French Revolution. “Social happiness” suggests group compulsion to be happy, directed at individuals who want to drown out their own unhappiness. The whole notion evokes the sound of a male chorus singing “healthy” songs against the flickering light of a bonfire, a scene full of camaraderie and community, with strong young men tossing books into the fire.

The best way to deal with this set of confusions and ambiguities, I still think, is to ignore it by dropping the whole issue of happiness and sticking to the reduction of the more extreme forms of human misery as the main utilitarian criterion for judging knowledge and assessing the search for new knowledge. There is enough extreme poverty, disease, and cruelty in the world to keep professional thinkers busy for a long time to come. In saying this I do not wish to imply that all serious inquiry has to be about social pathologies past and present. Such an attitude would lead to a sour-faced earnestness, not to significant truth. To understand these pathologies we have to know how human societies work and how human nature behaves under more “normal” or less stressful conditions. What little knowledge we have of this kind is precious, and we need a great deal more.

Let us move on then to the aesthetic criterion for assessing the importance of one or more truths. Its essence is the discovery of order and pattern in the universe or parts of it. For a long time astronomy was the classic example of aesthetically ordered inquiry, though there arose an instrumental element through its contribution to navigation. Many forms of knowledge mix utilitarian and aesthetic components, even though the two are analytically distinct. Later, physics and chemistry took over from
astronomy as sciences with a powerful aesthetic component. Pure mathematics has of course all along been the science of possible forms of order.

It has often been remarked that the social sciences have not been able to achieve the degree of logical rigor and aesthetically attractive patterning found in mathematics and the natural sciences. When the social sciences try to follow the model of the natural sciences too closely, they are liable to turn into grotesque parodies. They can become pseudosciences sustained by pseudofacts, a creation easy to market among military intelligence officers and, in business, marketing and investment advisers.

By no means do all aesthetically pleasing patterns turn up in the natural sciences. Scientists prefer relatively simple “classical” patterns and are inclined to avoid “gothic” or “romantic” exuberance. The scientists’ aim is to account for as large a number of facts with as simple a set of propositions as possible. A large number of social scientists share this aim, and even historians on occasion have found it attractive despite their quite justifiable emphasis on the particular and the unique. Recent developments in physics have, on the other hand, pushed researchers toward a much more willing acceptance of highly complex and “romantic” patterns. These developments have been taking place in a set of problems loosely and somewhat misleadingly labeled the study of chaos. So far as this outsider can make out, these scientists and mathematicians search for patterns and order in phenomena like turbulence in the flow of gases and liquids, where chaos apparently prevails and no ordering principle seems apparent. They have by and large succeeded. But the order in chaos often turns out to be bizarre and complex in comparison to other known forms of order. Often it is also very beautiful. Conceivably this research may lead to far-reaching changes in scientific conceptions of pattern and order. But it is too early to tell now.

Discussion of the aesthetic criterion for distinguishing what is worth knowing from what is not leads to the question of whether similar criteria may apply to the emotions. At first glance the answer appears negative. Knowledge takes the form of assertions about facts. The assertions may be true or false with a number of degrees of uncertainty in between. The emotions, on the other hand, have to do with feelings. As such, feelings have nothing to do with truth or falsehood. They are just there as part of the human reaction to experience.

But is the distinction between knowledge and emotion as sharp as all that? To a great extent human emotional responses are learned responses. The emotional repertoire of a five-year-old child is only a fraction of the repertoire of a thirty-five-year-old adult. Emotion shares with knowledge
What Is Not Worth Knowing

a learned component: the individual has to learn how to feel and express emotions, even though feelings, unlike factual knowledge, almost certainly have an ultimate biological source. Among highly educated people literature, art, and music make a major contribution to emotional learning. It is a vicarious form of learning in which young people learn and even experience feelings by familiarizing themselves with the reported sensations of literary and artistic models. In social groups and cultures with less of a formal educational system, emotional learning takes place by listening to and questioning the tales of the older generation and near contemporaries. There is also a great deal of simple observation about how grown-ups feel and behave in different situations. In this fashion one learns at the very least whom to hate, what to fear, and whom to love.

Human beings are not born with these responses, at least not with specific targets for the release of emotional discharges. From one person to another there is also much variation. Quite a number of individuals seem incapable of emotional reactions, as any teacher will testify. For large numbers of young people in our society it is especially difficult to step outside the confines of their own local culture and empathize with the suffering or joys of a literary or historical figure from another time or place. To the young this kind of empathy may seem just silly. With advancing age and declining understanding such empathy for “foreign” ways is liable to appear threatening. The reaction will then be a taut-lipped and even vicious xenophobia.

These considerations indicate that there are feelings not worth having (leaving aside the morally reprehensible ones) just as there are facts not worth knowing. They are trash insofar they fail to meet the utilitarian and aesthetic criteria. Both forms of trash are traceable to educational failures. In the case of emotions there are grounds for criticizing those who display some kinds of emotions as well as those incapable of certain types of emotional response. Misdirected hostility is an example of the first and an incapacity for human sympathy or affection is an example of the second. The parallel with facts one should and should not know appears reasonably clear. Nevertheless it is far from easy to find our way to the next step and specify clearly what kinds of emotions are not worth having. Many intelligent people, to be sure, sound as though there were no problem here. From time to time we hear criticism of trashy, cheap, and trivial emotions. But are these adjectives anything more than a string of snobbish epithets? Or do they refer to an identifiable way of feeling and behaving?

It may be possible to identify this emotional pattern by taking an in-
direct route through criticisms of popular taste and the emotions associated therewith as well as efforts to distinguish genuine art from entertainment. Admittedly this route presents certain dangers. Lambasting popular taste has been an indoor sport for dis­contented intellectuals with and without artistic gifts ever since the days of Flaubert, if not Plato. There is an odor of partisan apologetics about these claims. Yet behind the pyrotechnics we may come upon important social and psychological facts.

We can begin with two widely accepted characteristics of what we can call genuine art and the kind of emotional reactions expected from it. First, genuine art has a high degree of coherence and form, or at the very least an intuitively recognizable style. In the second place—and for the purpose at hand this is more important—genuine art puts before us a recurring human dilemma such as unrequited love, the impact of death, or the conflict of deeply felt obligations. The dilemma is often one for which no solution is possible, at least not in the historical epoch during which the work of art is created. To give some examples, even to an untrained ear Beethoven’s music clearly has form and style despite all the sudden loud emphatic phrases and romantic flourishes. Tolstoy’s treatment of the social and psychological impact of death in The Death of Ivan Ilich and of conflicting emotional demands and obligations in Anna Karenina are both acknowledged masterpieces. But because there is much less guilt associated with adultery nowadays, the story of Anna Karenina has probably lost much of its force. The dilemma is not so insoluble as it seemed in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, unfaithfulness remains a highly charged emotional situation despite all the air of sophisticated tolerance. Thus in the case of really great art, and the emotions it is expected to create, we can still say of the person who is not moved: there is something wrong with the person, not with the art. The observation also applies to the individual who has no response to the great works of non-Western cultures.

It is the other way around, I suggest, with the trashy entertainments and shallow emotions whose characteristics I shall now try to specify. There is something wrong with a person whose emotions stir only in response to such stimuli or who devotes too much time to them. There are good reasons for suspecting that such a person never had the opportunity or the desire to grow up. In other words, the love of trash may be a phase in the emotional growth of the individual, at least in modern Western society. On a worldwide scale, however, it scarcely looks like a
transient phase. Socialist societies have an insatiable appetite for adolescent capitalist trash.

In comparison with the music of Mozart and Beethoven, in my opinion, contemporary popular music lacks real form. Instead it usually displays simple very repetitive themes over a monotonous beat. The emotions it tries to arouse are easily accessible: an eroticized gaiety or more often an eroticized self-pity and sadness. Where great art manages to depict a typical situation without turning it into a cardboard sociological category, modern trash appeals to self-centered sentimentality, as if one’s disappointment were the only one in the world that mattered. Popular entertainments rarely present permanent human problems that have no solution. Instead they choose reassuring familiar subjects and settings. The settings tend to be pseudorealistic, that is, sanitized; disagreeable elements are reduced to jokes we can all supposedly share. (Thus, we find pseudoexotic settings, such as the tropics without bugs.) In this way modern media promote a passive and rather shallow escapism. The emotional problems that the media present are by and large banal in at least two senses. Since so little of ordinary daily behavior remains subject to taboo, especially in “trend-setting” circles, a great deal of human behavior becomes banal. Even sex loses its emotional charge as it turns into one more form of recreation. The problems are banal for a further reason: anyone with a minimal supply of common sense can see a solution. The woman who fails to realize that the man with whom she has been living for two years has no intention of marrying her may be an object of some pity. But not much. The element of self-deception reduces our sympathy.

To be sure, trashy emotions may be intense and quite painful for a brief period of time. But they are ephemeral and can be forgotten, especially if replaced by a new stimulus. For that matter the emotion may remain pretty much the same while the person requires a new stimulus at frequent short intervals to generate the sensation of being a human being. Is that perhaps the reason why radios keep on blaring fourth-rate jazz as youngsters try to study and house painters try to paint? Or does this disagreeable and inconsiderate habit reflect a fear of being left alone with one’s thoughts? Whatever the reason, trash goes into the human head and spirit whenever this happens.

It is important to recognize that trashy and trivial information often exerts far greater attraction than valuable knowledge just as the appeal of cheap and shallow emotions easily outweighs deeper and more discriminating ones. There are a variety of reasons for the triumph of triviality.
The mere fact that much of it is already labeled as entertainment means that there is no reason to take it seriously. There is no need for strain and effort. (By this observation I do not imply that forms that require strain and effort are therefore good. Often they are just fake.) Indeed the main point of entertainment is distraction from real and serious problems, intellectual or emotional. Trivial entertainment often mimics serious problems in real life, insofar as it centers on aggression and strategy—but in a way that extracts most of the bite and poison. Amateur chess, checkers, and poker are examples.

Collecting miscellaneous and essentially trivial objects such as stamps is another widespread form of recreation, especially in the United States. The role of aggression seems to be less in such activities, though rivalry certainly exists. Collecting appears to be mainly a way of creating little islands of personally controlled order in a chaotic and threatening world. There is also the pleasure of recognizing or completing a pattern. Completing a pattern is generally easier in adding to a collection of, say, mediocre Victorian glassware, than in sorting out the essentials of complicated business deals and legal arrangements in real life. And, finally, does not the avid collector have the right to ask, “Which is the real life anyway? That where the money comes from or that where the money gives pleasure?” To reply that the question reflects a pathetic and impoverished hedonism will hardly satisfy the questioner.

Before coming to a close I want to make a few remarks to avoid possible misunderstandings and perhaps smooth out unnecessarily ruffled feathers. I am not making an argument for some bureaucratic authority to determine the prospective worth of every piece of scholarly research and scientific investigation. There is enough of that around already. When the bureaucracy becomes omnipotent and serves a single overriding doctrine, as was the case in Stalinist Russia and only somewhat less so in Nazi Germany as well as in wartime Japan, the consequences are disastrous not only for scholars and scientists but also for the general population. At the same time it is necessary to recognize that there cannot be any such thing as complete intellectual autonomy—or for that matter complete emotional autonomy. No matter how much some scientists and scholars may work alone, a practice that varies greatly from one field to another, they are dependent on the larger society for the support of their activities. They also depend on both the larger society and each other for judgment about the worth of their work. The selection of issues for investigation depends greatly upon career prospects and pressure from colleagues. Beneath these social determinants one can discern a bedrock of objective reality. Issues
and problems are there whether anybody sees them or not. They change historically as do the intellectual tools available to cope with them.

Insofar as complete intellectual autonomy is a pipe dream, scholars and scientists have to work out and apply criteria for evaluating their products themselves or have it done for them and done badly. A great deal of this evaluation takes place in a somewhat haphazard way anyhow. I have tried to suggest how the arguments might become more explicit, comprehensible, and where mistaken, subject to reasoned correction. The best we can probably hope for in the way of an institutional setting is, to paraphrase a familiar quip about the Hapsburg Empire, a bureaucracy softened by sloppiness, wealth, and intellectual curiosity. That situation provides a reasonable prospect for intellectual diversity, innovation, and growth. The other prospects are much less pleasant to contemplate. One is a comb-out and Gleichschaltung of university life in the manner of Margaret Thatcher. In the United States the yahoos and other vindictive anti-intellectuals might gain control of the process. Another possibility, and perhaps a more likely one, is a generalized refusal of professional thinkers to discuss the rationale of their work out of a pudeur des sentiments and a fear of upsetting collegial arrangements. That road can only lead us further down toward the fragmentation and disintegration of Western culture, a process threatening enough in its own right. But the reactionary redeemers that crop up along the way are liable to be much worse.

Finally I do not seek to present here a thinly disguised neo-Puritan argument against all forms of emotional release through distraction and entertainment. Life would be even harder to bear without an occasional easy pleasure. On the other hand, I remain suspicious of anyone with an esoteric academic specialty who displays detailed knowledge of television dramas and not much else. That is intellectual snobbishness in reverse. A person whose main pleasures are limited to mass-produced entertainment and distraction is culturally impoverished to the point of being damaged goods intellectually and emotionally. An individual who is unable to distinguish between trivial and significant forms of knowledge, or cheap transient emotions and deep mature feelings, will soon get a head and a heart that look like the inside of an unemptied vacuum cleaner. If the machine doesn’t blow a fuse, it will only work at about one quarter of its capacity, and usually with unbearable screeching noises.