

Know Not Know

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There is a proverb (reputed to be from ancient Persia) that goes something like this:

He that knows not, and knows not that he knows not, is a fool. Shun him.

He who knows not, and knows that he knows not, is a student. Teach him.

He who knows, and knows not that he knows, is asleep. Wake him.

He who knows, and knows that he knows, is a wise man. Follow him.

Apart from the obvious male chauvinism, this seems like pretty good advice — except that “knowing” in any *absolute* sense is a dangerous fantasy. We cannot really **know** *anything*.

We can become *familiar* with things like the reports of our senses regarding the physical world, and we can become *convinced* of the *validity of the interpretation* of those sensations by the neural networks in our own skulls or those of others; but *knowing*? Forget it.

Same with “**facts**”: *there aren’t any* — at least not in the sense we love to fantasize about, where their *factualness* is utterly incontestable, incontrovertible, indisputable, undeniable, irrefutable, unassailable, unquestionable and indubitable. We’d prefer to believe that once a critical number of people have reached an informed consensus about some interpretation of sense evidence, that interpretation is no longer merely an opinion. Sorry.

I know this is a particularly offensive statement in today’s political environment, since lots of disagreeable people are having a field day with “alternative facts” and “fake news”. Too bad. It’s still true, and until we accept the reality that “consensus building” is *all there is*, we can’t begin to devise a reasonable strategy for choosing what to treat conditionally and provisionally as “the best bet”.