

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER: THE FORGOTTEN PERILS OF THE INTELLECT

I've been reviewing some of the stories and lessons in *McGuffey's Readers*, which were by far the bestselling textbooks in 19th century America (the only book that outsold them was the Bible). They were originally authored by William Holmes McGuffey in 1836. McGuffey, who was a deeply religious man, believed that education was both intellectual and moral—that to empower someone with knowledge without forming their character would be to only make them a “more clever devil.”

With that in mind, I ran across this powerful short story, entitled “Knowledge is Power,”¹ about the dangers of knowledge unbridled by virtue in *McGuffey's Fourth Eclectic Reader*, which was a revised edition published in 1879 after McGuffey's death:

“What an excellent thing is knowledge,” said a sharp-looking, bustling little man, to one who was much older than himself. “Knowledge is an excellent thing,” repeated he. “My boys know more at six and seven years old than I did at twelve. They can read all sorts of books, and talk on all sorts of subjects. The world is a great deal wiser than it used to be. Everybody knows something of everything now. Do you not think, sir, that knowledge is an excellent thing?”

“Why, sir,” replied the old man, looking grave, “that depends entirely upon the use to which it is applied. It may be a blessing or a curse. Knowledge is only an increase of power, and power may be a bad, as well as a good thing.”

“That is what I cannot understand,” said the bustling little man. “How can power be a bad thing?”

“I will tell you,” meekly replied the old man; and thus he went on: “When the power of a horse is under restraint, the animal is useful in bearing burdens, drawing loads, and carrying his master; but when that power is unrestrained, the horse breaks his bridle, dashes to pieces the carriage that he draws, or throws his rider.”

“I see!” said the little man.

“When the water of a large pond is properly conducted by trenches, it renders the fields around fertile; but when it bursts through its banks, it sweeps everything before it and destroys the produce of the fields.”

“I see!” said the little man, “I see!”

¹*McGuffey's Fourth Eclectic Reader, Revised Edition* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1879), 151-53.

“When the ship is steered aright, the sail that she hoists enables her sooner to get into port; but if steered wrong, the more sail she carries the further will she go out of her course.”

“I see!” said the little man, “I see clearly!”

“Well, then,” continued the old man, “If you see these things so clearly, I hope you can see, too, that knowledge, to be a good thing, must be rightly applied. God’s grace in the heart will render the knowledge of the head a blessing; but without this, it may prove to us no better than a curse.”

“I see! I see!” said the little man, “I see!”

This reminded me of a sobering passage from C.S. Lewis’ *The Abolition of Man*, in which he observes the dehumanizing impact of knowledge divorced from virtue.

There is something which unites magic and applied science while separating both from the ‘wisdom’ of earlier ages. For the wise men of old the cardinal problem had been how to conform the soul to reality, and the solution had been knowledge, self-discipline, and virtue. For magic and applied science alike the problem is how to subdue reality to the wishes of men...²

“To subdue reality to the wishes of men.” Isn’t this, indeed, what that elementary textbook was warning us of? Isn’t *that* the issue—that our ability to “subdue reality” through knowledge is not at all a necessarily good thing if the wishes to which such conquests are directed are themselves evil?

This is a question of deep urgency to contemporary humanity, which is once again all too confident in bestowing moral approbation on anything that partakes of the label “science.” History must condemn those who succumb to such naiveté.

It was 1932. The Nazis were the biggest party in Germany, but had not yet attained power. Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, Winston Churchill was a man who was not only a political outcast, but had lost most of his fortune in the U.S. stock market crash of 1929. But what was to Winston’s disadvantage was to our advantage, for the portly prophet of the 1930’s set his pen to work writing essays, columns, and books in order to earn an income. In his classic essay, *Fifty Years Hence*, he reflected on the increasingly materialistic zeitgeist of his age (is it not still our age?), the possibilities of science, but also its dangers. He presciently observed that science itself, though necessary to the attainment of some ends, was not capable of achieving others, particularly those by which human beings are provided with a sense of purpose and meaning. He warned:

²C.S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperOne, 2001), 77.

Projects undreamed of by past generations will absorb our immediate descendants; forces terrific and devastating will be in their hands; comforts, activities, amenities, pleasures will crowd upon them, but their hearts will ache, their lives will be barren, if they have not a vision above material things...Once more the choice is offered between Blessing and Cursing. [Deut. 30:19] Never was the answer that will be given harder to foretell.³

The following year, 1933, the Nazi party came to power in Germany, and Adolf Hitler was appointed Chancellor. Churchill was one of the first to become piercingly aware of the true nature of this neo-pagan death cult and its satanic leader. His warnings went unheeded. He was called a “warmonger,” and his prophecies were seen as nothing but the ravings of an old man which would only drag Great Britain into another bloody and devastating “Great War” (the name then given for World War I).

But when Hitler proved to be exactly what Churchill had warned—when the piece of paper which the kindly Prime Minister Chamberlain declared represented “peace in our time” lay prostrate and lifeless under the jackboot of Nazi tyranny—Churchill was called by his nation to ascend to its highest civil office, and become Prime Minister.

The same day on which this occurred, Hitler invaded France, and in a matter of weeks managed to humble the pride of Gaul in a series of lightning victories. Foreseeing that Britain was next, Churchill delivered perhaps his greatest speech to an anxious British nation:

I expect that the Battle of Britain is about to begin. Upon this battle depends the survival of Christian civilization. Upon it depends our own British life, and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire. The whole fury and might of the enemy must very soon be turned on us. Hitler knows that he will have to break us in this Island or lose the war. If we can stand up to him, all Europe may be free and the life of the world may move forward into broad, sunlit uplands. But if we fail, then the whole world, including the United States, including all that we have known and cared for, will sink into the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science. Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, “This was their finest hour.”⁴

As he did in 1932, Churchill saw all too clearly the implications of “the lights of perverted science” in an age of biological and chemical weapons, bombers that could destroy entire cities, and—as

³Winston Churchill, *Fifty Years Hence* (1932); Winston Churchill, *Thoughts and Adventures: Churchill Reflects on Spies, Cartoons, Flying, and the Future* (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2009), 295.

⁴[Winston Churchill, *Their Finest Hour* \(June 18, 1940\).](#)

the world would soon discover—industrial capacity murder in the form of Nazi extermination camps.

Lest we believe these sins may be ascribed only to politicians and soldiers and not to intellectuals and men of science also, we are reminded by the 1946 indictment of German intelligentsia by Max Weinreich in his classic book, *Hitler's Professors*, that we would be in error to do so:

And now the final question that has been the subject of this survey: are Germany's intellectual leaders guilty of complicity in the crimes against humanity for which Germany's top politicians and generals have been brought to trial? It seems that only one answer is possible. With the political and military leaders, the intellectual leaders first declared Germany the final judge of her own acts and then renounced accepted morality. With the political and military leaders, they arrogated to themselves the right to dispose of millions of people for their own and their fatherland's greater glory. With the political and military leaders, they prepared, instituted, and blessed the program of vilification, disfranchisement, dispossession, expatriation, imprisonment, deportation, enslavement, torture, and murder. Some of them even took part in executing the program. The question of legal responsibility is for a United Nations Tribunal to decide. Before the world's conscience, German scholarship stands convicted.⁵

And from the American General Omar Bradley, speaking three years after the end of World War II in the “brave new world” of the atomic era, we must again be sobered in our assessment of the awesome powers of the human mind unbridled by morality and virtue:

With the monstrous weapons man already has, humanity is in danger of being trapped in this world by its moral adolescents. Our knowledge of science has clearly outstripped our capacity to control it. We have many men of science; too few men of God. We have grasped the mystery of the atom and rejected the Sermon on the Mount. [Matt 5-7] Man is stumbling blindly through a spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious secrets of life and death. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants. We know more about war than we know about peace, more about killing than we know about living.⁶

As McGuffey had warned America's schoolchildren the previous century, knowledge with all power, and no virtue, was “no better than a curse” indeed.

⁵Max Weinreich, *Hitler's Professors: The Part of Scholarship in Germany's Crimes Against the Jewish People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 242.

⁶[Omar Bradley, *Armistice Day Address* \(November 11, 1948\).](#)