

A Little Learning Is A Dangerous Thing

Nobody asked but ...

Alexander Pope said it, when he penned the couplets:

*A little learning is a dangerous thing; drink deep, or taste not the
Pierian spring:
there shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely
sobers us again.*

On the drive to work this morning, I was listening to an audiobook, *This Idea Is Brilliant*. The second essay in this compilation really caught my imagination; The “Illusion of Explanatory Depth” by psychologist Adam Waytz. It refers to the general existence of wide information, but with shallow understanding. Waytz gives the example — if you ask, nearly anyone would say she understands how a refrigerator works, but if you ask further for a detailed process explanation, likely silence will follow. This is related to the thesis of Leonard Read’s *I, Pencil*. Probably, no one can explain exactly how a refrigerator works — in full.

The more compelling point, however, was that the principle also applies to our understanding of softer but tougher things, like politics and economics. Waytz cites the phenomenon that 6 out of 10 newspaper readers only read headlines. Since, apparently, headline writers don’t read the stories either, we are up the proverbial creek without a paddle. For the thinking reader, it only takes a short while to learn to stop reading headlines. The rest of us are pitiable victims of confirmation bias.

— Kilgore Forelle