

# I Don' t Know

(A nonfiction novel)

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June, 2003

(modified slightly June 11, 2013)

## Preface

*I Don't Know* is the result, ultimately, of a series of manic psychoses that I experienced beginning in October of the year 2000. These psychoses were thought to be the result of interactions among several odd substances, so-called “smart drugs,” that I was taking at the time. I am quite confident—as much as I am about anything these days—that the psychoses were much more than merely drug-induced glitches. I believe that they were a necessary adjunct to a communication with God, for reasons that will be clear to the reader upon completion of this book. At the time that this communication took place, I had no desire to have ideas that would involve work to write up, in either my field of economics or in politics, and certainly not in theology. I was hoping to become—indeed looking forward to it—what is known as “deadwood” in academia. Moreover, I was an extremely avowed atheist, for nearly four decades, going into this time of psychosis and insight.

I no longer am an atheist, again for reasons that will become quite clear. At the time of the psychoses, I was given—in admittedly somewhat rough form—many ideas in the span of just a few seconds, much like a “computer dump” right into my head. This book presents three of the more important ideas that were given to me in those few seconds. As will be seen, the ideas presented here are neither uniformly liberal nor conservative, as those words are usually bandied about. Indeed, the dogged adherence to such worldviews is here argued to be antithetical to original thinking, or really any kind of thinking...*knowing* harms *thinking*, and it is only at the latter that humans have some (limited) expertise.

I am hoping that *I Don't Know* will be particularly enjoyed by those readers who like to read novels but are frustrated when they do not come away from having taken the time to read a book with “something more.” Something more substantive, some new insights, some learning...something worthwhile. An entrée for the mind, as it were, rather than just mind candy.

The book is broken into three relatively self-contained parts. Part I contains certain concepts from economics. After some background material of a fairly traditional sort, it presents some new material I was given involving so-called “public goods.” This part argues that there is a flaw in the economists’ traditional approach to valuing public goods. The flaw implies that many goods such as species preservation, carbon dioxide abatement, and the like are underprovided, possibly by a large amount.

A portion of the discussion of Part I deals with over-suburbanization and public policy. Much of the vast amount of suburbanization historically observed has not been about lotsize, per se, but rather about attempts to obtain higher levels of public goods than those provided in the urban centers of large American cities. This part argues for increases in governmental spending for such location-specific central public goods as quality schools, reduced crime and noise, more parks, and so on. The material of Part I is likely to seem “liberal,” as most readers currently use that word. I don’t know how much practical significance the material of this part possesses, but I think the ideas might be very important...it is up to the reader to decide.

Part II flows logically from the discussion of Part I, as characters in the book criticize the ideas of Part I that would seem to suggest that government spending should be larger and that there should be more regulation of certain kinds. Part II, then, takes up

politics and points to a novel potential solution to the problem of controlling the growth, and to some extent the composition, of government spending. It is argued here that government does too many things that it should not be doing at all and not enough of the things it should be doing. The novel insight in Part II is that there exists a simple mechanism that would transfer control of government spending levels directly to voters. In advocating this mechanism, I compare it to a popular, but I think much less desirable, alternative—the various Balanced Budget Amendment proposals. The overall thrust of this part will be seen by the typical reader as being “conservative.” Again, I don’t know how important or practical the central idea of Part II is, but I think it might be very much so...as with Part I, it is up to the reader to decide.

Part III considers theology and presents what I think might be a novel view of the nature of God. I experienced a realization of the existence of God that was jarringly at odds with my prior, strongly held, (dis)beliefs. This part represents an attempt to render consistent the experiences of God that I had during my psychoses, with my prior arguments against the existence of God. The arguments of this part are likely to please neither atheists nor religious theists of traditional types. Religious people are likely to find the ideas aesthetically unsatisfying vis-à-vis the more traditional concepts of their various religious upbringings. Atheists on the other hand are likely to find the notions of God presented here to be sufficiently “innocuous” as to render their usual vituperation toward religion unwarranted. They will not enjoy losing their reasons for hating, hence denying the existence of, the traditional All-Knowing, All-Powerful, and All-Loving God. I don’t know how this part will be perceived, and it would certainly be difficult to characterize in terms of “conservative” versus “liberal!” However, for me, the arguments

of Part III provide a convincing scientific rationale for belief in a God of the traditional sort, a notion that I was never even remotely convinced of before.

The three parts can be read in any order, though the character development would favor reading them in order. The parts are not all likely to be equally interesting to the reader. Part III on theology will probably appeal to virtually all readers, but it is presented last for a reason. Parts II and I are largely designed to give credibility to the central protagonist, Charles, in his notions of God presented in Part III. The characters are all fictitious, with names generally changed from those corresponding to real-world people. All of the characters of the book are, as is probably inevitable, a hodge-podge of people that I have met and enjoyed...if you see yourself, and like what you see, it is you. If you see yourself, and you don't like what you see, I am writing with somebody else in mind!

--P.E.G.

*I Don't Know*

“He who knows nothing is nearer the truth than  
he whose mind is filled with falsehoods and errors.”

--Thomas Jefferson

“When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school,  
it's a wonder I can think at all.”

--Paul Simon

## **Part I: Economics**

“The third and last duty of the sovereign or commonwealth is that of erecting and maintaining those public institutions and those public works, which, though they may be in the highest degree advantageous to a great society, are, however, of such a nature that the profit could never repay the expense to any individual or small number of individuals, and which it therefore cannot be expected that any individual or small number of individuals should erect or maintain.”

--Adam Smith.

### The Drive Home

“One of the nice things about driving home for the holidays is that you don’t have to worry too much about packing...just throw everything in but the kitchen sink,” I said to Robin, while getting ready for the long drive back to Indiana. Robin, an ex-girlfriend, was going to be taking care of Tripod and the fish while I was gone.

“And, you can leave when you’re ready and don’t have to mess with lines at airports,” she volunteered perkily. The harsh reality was that this trip is always truly a pain in the butt, more accurately the back, something our light banter tried to obscure.

Robin didn’t bother to say anything about the additional disadvantage of trying to fly with a bunch of Christmas gifts, especially after the introductions of all the restrictions after 9/11 a few years ago. She knew I had “unilaterally withdrawn” from Christmas many years earlier. I had offered a Secret Santa name drawing option as an alternative to the obscenely extravagant upward creep in lavish gifting that had occurred

in our family over the years. My sister Michelle was adamantly opposed to my solution, thinking it curmudgeonly, so I dropped out of Christmas giving. Oh sure, the first year nobody believed I would really do it...I came out way ahead that year!

“Yeah,” I continued, “and it is easy to throw in a couple of cases of wine to lubricate the already frisky family conversations—they have sort of come to expect that from me. Might need more than usual this year, too!”

“What do you mean, Dave?” Robin asked.

“Charles says he has an announcement to make that he is saving until the family is all together, and it seemed a little ominous, not likely to be pleasant,” I replied. Robin had met most of my family and knew Charles, my older brother.

“Any idea what it is about?”

“No, but Charles hasn’t seemed quite as happy with his job at the University during the past couple of years as he used to seem...I’ve always thought he had it made, though.” I am referring to his Tuesday-Thursday teaching schedule at SUNY, Binghamton that always seemed pretty cushy to me. As a pharmacist, I work long and irregular hours to keep the creditors at bay. Of course, Charles always maintains, not too convincingly, that his research eats up all his spare time...but he always seems to do pretty much whatever he wants!

“And,” I continued, “as I’m sure you remember, Charles had a series of psychoses a few years ago that had us all really worried. He always was sort of a health nut and had gotten into anti-aging medicine, taking a bunch of so-called “smart drugs” like deprenyl, hydergine, piracetam, ghb, and centrophenoquine along with his usual handfuls of vitamin

pills. As a pharmacist, I could have told him it was likely that he was going to screw up his neurotransmitters, getting his serotonin and dopamine levels way out of whack!

I hope his mysterious announcement doesn't have anything to do with that," I fretted to Robin, "While Charles claims to know he had real psychoses, he also thinks they were part of a bigger theological experience. He now claims to believe in God, after having been an atheist for practically as long as I can remember. I was eight years old when, at age fourteen, he suddenly decided there was no God, though he may have been agnostic for a while. I sure hope he hasn't gone off the deep end, planning to give away his worldly possessions and enter a monastery or something."

"Would he do that?" asked Robin, adding "Hasn't he been back to normal for quite some time?"

"I think he's back to normal, but I'm not sure," I replied. "But, if he is willing to talk about it, I do want to find out what it felt like to be crazy and to be locked up with a bunch of other crazy people. And, I'm curious what the contrast was like the next day, when he was more-or-less normal after being pumped full of intravenous Haldol, an anti-psychotic, all night. I guess that's just the pharmacist in me, though."

"Well, you'll find out soon enough," said Robin. "Are you planning on driving straight through again?" I usually did just that, starting early in the morning, cruise-controlling at 10 or 15 miles over the posted speed limits, with quick pit stops for fueling the Subaru and me. Sure, sometimes I would be somewhat slower, if drivers—I called 'em "cop filters"—were not passing me, and faster if enough cars were passing me.

I knew I'd be feeling pretty wretched when I arrived, as usual. However, as Charles would have said, it is all about expected benefits and costs—I could fly, if I

really thought that was the better overall alternative. The drive gave me lots of time to reflect on things in solitude. Plus, I didn't have to worry about packing lightly and I could take plenty of wine for the family gathering. And, I would have my car back in Indiana, avoiding having to borrow or rent one.

"I'm not sure...it depends on how I feel when I get to Columbia, Missouri—I have a friend who was a fellow pharmacy major at Butler who works there...did you ever meet Chris?" I asked, more or less rhetorically, "He'll be out of town for the holidays, but left a key out in his shed for me, if I want to stay there."

I could tell that Robin was beginning to get bored, and she had watched the house so many times in the past that I knew she had no questions and everything would be fine. The great fish massacre of '93 was but a distant memory for both of us now...finally. It had been traumatic to lose so many fish, including my pricey African tigerfish, a pet freshwater fire eel, and a large arowana. But, the fish were not going to be overfed anymore, and everybody loves Tripod, a three-legged part yellow lab that I picked up at the pound a couple of years ago. So he will have lots of company, in addition to Robin. I had thought about naming him "Fester" after the infection that had claimed his leg, prior to my picking him up at the pound. But I ended up opting for Tripod, which is more descriptive of his current condition. People like to take Tripod for walks because he's a lot more manageable to walk than the typical lab, operating on all fours. I sometimes refer to him as the "zero price Rent-a-Dog."

"Well, have a good trip, and be careful driving...see you when you get back!" and, with a hug, Robin disappeared into the Colorado night. After the usual early male immaturity, in which guilt about breaking up—from either side—caused me to try to

avoid all ex-girlfriends, I had nearly always remained a friend with each. After all, there was a reason why we liked each other and there is no reason that should disappear if it didn't work out for other reasons... which seemed to always be the case. Perhaps I was too picky.

Or, maybe Angela, an ex, was right that I “usurp the knowledge” of the women I date and then lose interest in them. I hope she isn't right about that, as that would be pretty awful, and not leave much hope of ever achieving a long-term relationship. Oh well... never terribly introspective at best, I quit worrying about it.

I finished piling up everything I planned to take with me in the kitchen...I hoped to smuggle it out to the car while Tripod hobbled around on the roof tomorrow morning. I always try to trick Tripod, hoping he won't know I am leaving. I hate the look in his face whenever he sees my luggage...a peculiar sort of sadness that pulls at the heart.

The next morning everything went according to plan. Tripod inhaled his dogfood (usually about 38 seconds, independent of quantity) and went up the stairs to the back deck, hopping gingerly over onto the roof where he liked to hang out. He seemed to enjoy looking at people and, I think, soaking up the high-altitude Colorado sun—sometimes he would come down from the roof and his hide would feel warm to the touch. Occasionally when I was upset with him, and even when I wasn't, I would tell people about what a beautiful “pelt” he would make. It wasn't a particularly humorous thing to say, but I liked to watch their reactions when I referred to Tripod, beloved by all, as a potential “pelt.”

Too, some local passersby refer to him as “roof-dog,” unaware of his much cooler real name.

Having backed the car into a non-Tripod-visible position the night before, I quickly tossed my stuff in and yelled, "See ya later, Tri!" For all he knew, I was just going to the store...or so I hoped anyway...he seemed to be really intuitive about such things. He was a "good boy" in more ways than could be known.

Fifteen hours, plus two time zones, later I pulled up in front of my Mom and Dad's house. I didn't stop in Missouri...probably would have if Chris had been in town, but it wasn't all that much farther down the pike to go ahead and get "home." Funny how we refer to home as the place we grew up or where we experienced certain things. I have lived in Colorado longer than I ever lived in Indiana, but still often think of Indiana as "home." Maybe it has to do with where you spend certain stages of your life more than just experiences. Oh well...thoughts for another time.

It was very late, or really early, depending on how you count such things...I knew my parents would be getting up pretty soon. Beginning at about age 40 they had started getting up about an hour earlier every decade. Now, well into their 70s, they are often up at 5 a.m. I don't get it, but maybe it's just a matter of time before the "see the sunrise" contagion spreads to me.

I quickly let myself into my parent's house with the easy-to-remember code on the garage door opener. 484953, the last two digits of the birth years of each of the three kids, Charles being the oldest, Michele the middle child, and me, the youngest...and almost certainly an "accident." Born just fifteen months after Michelle, it had suddenly occurred to me at the ripe old age of thirty that I was unlikely to have been "planned," in the modern terminology. When I confronted Mom with my "accident hypothesis," she

smiled and said, “Oh David, I still remember that night...we knew it might not be safe, but you were a love-child!” How bad could I feel?

Sneaking quietly into my old room, I thought a little about the long trip. Without audiobooks on tape, I doubt I could have kept awake. Usually I listened to several short mystery novels, like the latest Tony Hillerman and Mary Higgins Clark books... fluffy stuff...but this time I was actually able to keep myself awake with some heavy-duty philosophy material, narrated by Charleton Heston. I made a mental note to discuss some of the deeper theological stuff with Charles, who has almost certainly thought more about such things, especially since he had those psychoses, than I had...and I drifted off to sleep.

#### Charles' Announcement at the Family Lunch

My brother and I had, for many years, prepared for our family gatherings by finding a joke about the other's profession to tell over lunch. He went first.

“A pharmacist looks out the front of the store and sees a woman holding a bottle jumping up and down in the parking lot. The pharmacist walks out to the parking lot and asks the woman what's the matter. She replies ‘I saw that it said 'Shake Well' only after I had already taken it.’”

“Hmmm,” I said, “not very funny, Charles. Well beneath your usual quality...but perhaps pharmacist jokes just aren't as inherently funny as economist jokes.” I liked to rub in how funny economist jokes were, partly because economics never really turned me

on. Drug stuff was always interesting...odd that Charles would get in trouble with drugs, but they were not the sort of drugs that I had tried and enjoyed.

“Let me try again...a customer gets a topical cream. The directions say: apply locally two times a day. The customer complains to the pharmacist: ‘I can't apply locally, I'm going overseas.’”

“Sheesh...is that all you've got!” But, I was pretty sure mine wasn't going to be much better.

“You know why astrology was invented?...to make economics look like an accurate science!”

Charles chuckled politely, then said, “I thought you were going to tell the one about the economist who returns to visit his old school. He's interested in the current exam questions and asks his old professor to show him some. To his surprise they are exactly the same ones he had to answer 10 years ago! When he asks about this, the professor answers: ‘the questions are always the same - only the answers change!’”

Portentously, it was right after that old joke, halfway through lunch, when Charles made his big announcement. The collective munching on the ham sandwiches and sour-cream flavored potato chips came to an abrupt halt.

“You're what?!” I blurted out, almost spewing a mouthful of beer on my sister, Michelle, when Charles said he is planning to quit teaching economics at the university.

“Well, I've been a professor for thirty some years, which is a long time,” Charles replied, continuing, “and I'm pretty sick of it...the teaching mostly.”

“But it is only six hours a week, with maybe some office hours thrown in,” I protested. I couldn't conceive of getting burnt out under the circumstances. Burnout is

fairly common among pharmacists and of course among doctors and nurses...but we work long hours, often 12-hour shifts, mostly on our feet. And there are the missed lunches, the demanding customers, and the non-pharmacist chain-store owners. Probably the worst part of it right now is the incessant paperwork for the ever-present insurance companies. No wonder Charles has a full head of dark hair while I am already quite gray, despite being almost six years younger. Of course, I was single during the sexual revolution of the '70s, while Charles was married, and that might have put a little gray on my noggin, too. But I had always had a lot of fun.

What keeps me going, at least so far, is the feeling that I often make a difference in people being healthy or at least getting better if they get sick. Plus, I like the people I work with—great camaraderie, lots of dirty jokes told... very politically incorrect, but none of the men or women working there would want to change a thing, especially Kim who I have a smallish, probably temporary, crush on. People would probably say she was too young for me, were we to go out, but I had heard that before and it wouldn't bother me.

Intrigued that Charles might retire, I asked, "But Charles, don't you get satisfaction out of molding young minds?" I always liked to say "molding young minds" when talking to Charles because of the image of shower mold that I knew it conjured up in his mind. Yeah, I can be a real card at times... increasingly, I'm finding as I get older, I try to come up with bold, funny statements—despite the fact that I steal most of them from more clever people.

“I might if I really thought I could have any lingering impact on their minds,” he said rather seriously, ignoring my attempt at humor, “and I don’t even know for sure that I *should* even be trying to have an impact on them.”

“What do you mean?” Michelle asked, joining the conversation, “I’m sure that you teach very well and that the students in your classes learn gobs of things!” Michelle was always very supportive. As an accountant with a CPA, she usually saw things as being pretty black-and-white. On the other hand, it might be that she saw things that way all along, and that is why she became an accountant. Charles would probably call that some kind of “selectivity bias” or something, using his economic jargon that we seldom understood.

“Oh, I try,” said Charles, “but there are a lot of reasons why I can’t get through to them and some of those reasons are my fault, I think.”

“What do you mean?” asked Michelle, leaning forward. I notice that she looked quite good “for her age,” as people always irritatingly add. In fact, the whole family is holding up pretty well, apart from my gray hair. The Peterson family curse, a potbelly, had already hit me, but it only looked like I was trying to hide half a cantaloupe under my shirt. Dad is working on a basketball, while inexplicably, Charles seems unaffected by the curse... hmmm, it occurred to me that Charles does a lot more exercise than Dad does or I ever do. Charles’s response to Michelle pulled me back into the conversation—just before I reached to point of vowing to do something about the gut.

“Well, there are the usual problems you hear about. Short attention spans, probably due to the impact of advertisements breaking up TV shows. And, all of that ‘self-esteem’ nonsense—it used to be when a student didn’t understand something right

away, they thought it might be at least partly their fault. Now, if they don't pick something up fast, or at all, they think it must be something I'm doing wrong!

But what has been bothering me the most of late," Charles continued, "is that students seem to think they *know* a lot of things. I'm not talking about  $2 + 2 = 4$  sorts of things, either. Take, say, social issues like capital punishment, abortion, and gun control or any of a huge variety of general public policy issues, like trade, war, or policies affecting the environment. They have very strong beliefs, often thinking the proper position is completely obvious. Yet, about half believe one position is completely obvious, while the other half finds a directly opposing position to be equally obvious! It has gotten to where when somebody says 'It's my opinion that...' this is intended to finish the argument rather than being the beginning of a discussion, as might seem appropriate to us old Socratic types."

"Well, why can't you just present the evidence and convert the half that is wrong?" Michelle persisted.

"It isn't that simple... first of all, each student has a 'world view' that their specific beliefs fit into. They really *don't want* to have those specific beliefs questioned, because that threatens their more basic worldview. If they're "liberal" they take a liberal position and if they're "conservative" they take a conservative position—either way they really don't want to seriously entertain alternative viewpoints. Besides, and this is what has been bothering me the most lately, I'm increasingly convinced that the best answer to *any* interesting question is 'I don't know.'"

"Huh... would you elaborate on that?" from Michelle.

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