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'Ignorance and Bliss' Review: To Know or Not to Know

What happens in a secular world where ancient taboos about forbidden knowledge have been dismantled and individuals must cope alone?

By Michael Saler

Jan. 23, 2025 at 5:59 pm ET



Knowledge can be a source of power and pleasure, but it also can be unsettling, humiliating, even terrifying.

In “Ignorance and Bliss,” Mark Lilla, a professor of humanities at Columbia University, suggests that our passionate quest for knowledge is inextricable from our anxious retreat from ignorance. We want to both know and not know—and “playing hide-and-seek with ourselves can become a perilous game.” It’s what Friedrich Nietzsche calls “the will to

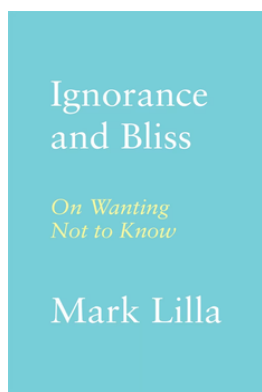
ignorance,” and while there are certainly rational reasons for adopting ignorant stances, Mr. Lilla highlights the irrational “denial of evident truths” prevalent today. He fears we have reached a dangerous moment when “mesmerized crowds follow preposterous prophets, irrational rumors trigger fanatical acts, and magical thinking crowds out common sense and expertise.”

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Ignorance and Bliss: On Wanting Not to Know

By Mark Lilla

Farrar, Straus and Giroux



“Ignorance and Bliss” is an avowedly informal excursus on a complex topic, “a ramble, not a journey to a fixed destination.” Mr. Lilla claims that philosophers have not devoted sufficient attention to willed ignorance, forcing him to focus on “works of the imagination” in Western culture, from ancient myths and religions to plays, poetry and fiction. It is true that the topic has been studied more by psychologists and legal scholars than philosophers, but one misses a consideration of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose concept of “bad faith” is perhaps the most influential philosophical analysis of willed

ignorance since that of Nietzsche. Mr. Lilla’s discussion of life’s “hardest truth” effectively channels Sartre’s existentialism: “No stratagem for keeping knowledge at bay,” the author writes, “can ever relieve us of responsibility for our actions.”

To illustrate the difficulties involved in attaining even a modicum of self-knowledge, Mr. Lilla analyzes a diverse set of works and cultural icons. Sophocles’ “Oedipus Rex” is one such representative symbol of humanity’s divided state between seeking and avoiding knowledge. Oedipus knows he must comprehend why the plague is afflicting his kingdom, and obscurely senses that he might be responsible, but cannot face this self-knowledge until it is thrust upon him. His willed ignorance limits his understanding of the world. In this respect, Oedipus exemplifies a destructive dynamic addressed by Sigmund Freud, who demonstrated that a patient’s psychic energies could be redirected from harmful neuroses to constructive engagements with the world on its own terms.

Mr. Lilla explores how ancient mythologies and religions have helped individuals cope with their double-minded ambivalence about knowledge and ignorance by establishing taboos on certain forms of knowledge. In the Hebrew Bible, the accessible yet prohibited Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is a remarkable symbol of the simultaneous desire for knowledge and ignorance. While the Bible tends to condemn curiosity, God's demand that humanity honor His commandments inadvertently promotes the quest for more knowledge, both to understand how to fulfill His demands and as a self-assertive protest against restricted knowledge.

What happens in a secular world where most of these taboos have been dismantled and individuals are left alone to cope with an uncertain world? Mr. Lilla explores three common escapist fantasies that promote willed ignorance. The first is the search for absolute, nonrational, mystical knowledge of the sort commended by St. Paul, who condemned profane wisdom in favor of spiritual illuminations that are impervious to empirical evidence or rational argument. Paul, we are told, contributed a "distinctive strain of anti-intellectualism" within Christianity that percolates in American culture today, degrading its politics: "The history of Western populism—spiritual and political," Mr. Lilla writes, "began with Paul."

A second fantasy is that of "innocence," an unsullied naivete that must be affirmed against corrosive knowledge. Mr. Lilla is thinking primarily of how childhood has been idealized in Western culture. To him this is yet another malign effect of the "infant-besotted New Testament," which rejected the more mature understanding of childhood and human experience recounted in the Hebrew Bible in favor of an unworldly focus on lambs, shepherds and cherubic insight. ("Can a Christian be an adult?" Mr. Lilla asks wryly. "It's a fair question.") This discourse has also colored American politics, with the United States envisioning itself as a virgin birth, called into being to redress the sins of the Old World.

Finally, Mr. Lilla explores the fantasies of historical nostalgia. This dynamic has less to do with a desire to return to an actual past than with escaping from the disappointments and insecurities of a tumultuous present. "Suffering nostalgics"—among them 19th-century Russian Slavophiles, 20th-century Islamic fundamentalists and fascists, and 21st-century

global populists—concoct an ideal past that redresses their feelings of powerlessness, humiliation and alienation. They are often reactionary modernists, seeking to establish their faux past in the future against the putative machinations of enemies responsible for corrupting their way of life. “In truth,” Mr. Lilla notes, “the nostalgic do not so much want to recover something as to lose something. They want to flee what to them tastes like toxic knowledge about the world and themselves.”

“Ignorance and Bliss” is lucid, nuanced, ironic and stimulating. Yet there is a jarring disjunction between the urgency Mr. Lilla palpably feels about the contemporary crisis and his measured, essayistic responses.

Or might this critique itself reflect the anxious craving for simple and immediate solutions that nourish willed ignorance? Mr. Lilla ultimately shows that acknowledging complexity, accepting fallibility and confronting uncertainty are required to balance our contending desires for knowledge and ignorance. As he resolutely insists, “Getting to *maybe* is the greatest cognitive achievement human beings are capable of.”

—*Mr. Saler is a professor of history at the University of California, Davis.*

Appeared in the January 24, 2025, print edition as 'To Know or Not to Know'.

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