

Books

Review

The dangerous allure of not knowing

From Socrates and Oedipus to Dickens, this compelling work explores the temptation and cost of ignorance

BY DANIEL KEANE

Ignorance and Bliss

Mark Lilla

In Daniel Keyes's 1966 novel *Flowers for Algernon*, the protagonist Charlie Gordon is offered the chance to have experimental surgery that will turn him into a genius. Born with a low IQ, Charlie longs to read, write and understand the world. After the experiment, his IQ triples and he begins to read voraciously. But the pursuit of knowledge does not bear fruit; he soon finds that his relationships stagnate. "I don't know what's worse: to not know what you are and be happy, or to become what you've always wanted to be, and feel alone," he reflects.

The existential dilemma of whether to know or not to know is the subject of Mark Lilla's superb new book, *Ignorance and Bliss: On Wanting Not to Know*. It is a whistlestop tour through concepts of knowledge advanced by the great thinkers of human history, from Sigmund Freud to Plato to Elias Canetti. The book does not argue that we should live in ignorance, only that we should know and understand its origin.

Lilla, a professor of humanities at Columbia University, bases his argument around a series of short chapters that break down why human beings are tempted by ignorance. There are certain periods in history, he argues, in which "evident truth" is subordinated by delusion. In what sounds like a grimly accurate synopsis of our times, he writes of how "mesmerised crowds still follow preposterous prophets, irrational rumours trigger fanatical acts, and magical thinking crowds out common sense".

The book sees Lilla analyse ideas of knowledge in everything from ancient myth to Charles Dickens. At the beginning we encounter the story of Oedipus, the infamous figure of Greek mythology who unknowingly killed his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta. After discovering what he has done, Oedipus gouges out his own eyes in despair.

For Lilla, the story is defined by the tension between Oedipus's desire for knowledge and his suspicion that this "may come with poisoned knowledge about himself". All the characters in Sophocles's tragedy are "caught between the will to know and the will not to know". But Lilla notes that Oedipus never "fully acknowledges the horrifying truth — that he desired his mother, possessed her and enjoyed it". Faced with the possibility of confronting our demons, human beings will almost always seek the comfort of self-deception.

Socrates, a recurring figure in the book, believes that learning can only begin with the



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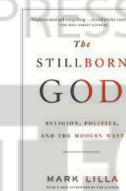


The Once and Future Liberal
A prescient 2017 critique of the Democrats' obsession with identity politics.

Further thoughts of Mark Lilla



The Shipwrecked Mind
An attack on nostalgia written in the wake of 2016's political earthquakes.



The Stillborn God
Lilla's 2007 book argued that secular liberal democracies are more fragile than we realise.

"Wise and wonderfully enjoyable."
John Banville, *The Observer*

Ignorance and Bliss

On Wanting Not to Know

Mark Lilla

admission of total ignorance. For him, true knowledge is acquired through dialogue: he spent most of his time pestering the citizens of Athens for their thoughts on lofty concepts such as morality and the nature of true wisdom. But his quest for knowledge ultimately proved fatal, when he was condemned to death for impiety and "corrupting" the Athenian youth with his ideas. His downfall illustrates the human instinct to reject self-discovery, Lilla claims. "We willingly give up a shot to acquire true beliefs about the world out of fear that truths about ourselves will be exposed in the process."

The book's most engaging chapter deals with the human preoccupation with nostalgia, which for Lilla reflects the regressive desire to "experience a state of mind unburdened by what we have experienced and learned since childhood and the responsibilities we have

taken on". This takes on a political dimension when a society collectively feels "that things are not as they once were". But such perfection never really existed; it is merely the "shadow of an imagined past". To wallow in nostalgia is really to take solace in ignorance — and reject the destabilising pursuit of knowledge.

There is a strangely readable quality to this book despite its density and complexity. "You are being invited on a ramble, not a journey to a fixed destination," Lilla declares at the outset. Most modern philosophy is characterised either by an abstract pretentiousness or a tendency to oversimplify. But reading this book feels like attending a brilliant lecture — its best passages leave your mind fizzing with ideas.

In the Information Age, access to knowledge is virtually infinite. The mere swipe of a finger on a smartphone can unlock a treasure trove of information, ranging from the mundane to the profound. Yet somehow society feels less curious than it has ever been. According to the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, four in 10 people are willingly choosing to avoid the news, while conspiracy theories are thriving in an unregulated social media landscape. Lilla writes that our era is defined by a "nagging sense that accelerating disruption has become a permanent condition of human life".

At his trial, Socrates said that the "unexamined life is not worth living". But Lilla's conclusion is that, for too many of us, this is transparently false: human beings are programmed to ignore what they don't want to hear. Opportunities to enrich the mind are abundant, but a life spent in blissful ignorance has never seemed so seductive.

Ignorance and Bliss is out now, published by Hurst, £18.99