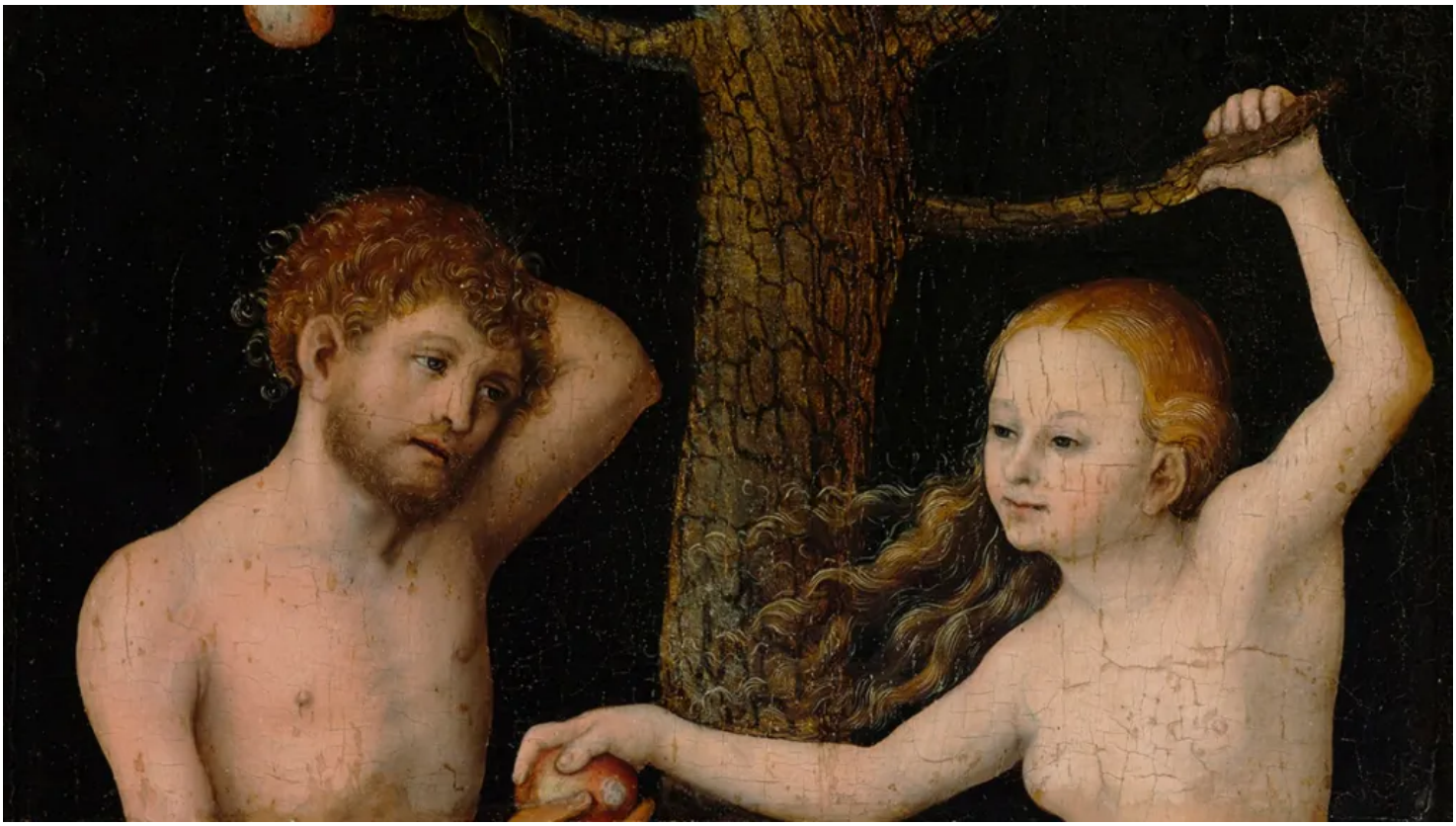
Contemporary philosophy | *Book Review*

To know or not to know

Uncomfortable truths about ourselves are the hardest to accept

By Costica Bradatan



"Adam and Eve" from the workshop of Lucas Cranach the Elder, c.1528 | © Fine Art Images/Heritage Images via Getty Images

IN THIS REVIEW

IGNORANCE AND BLISS
On wanting not to know
256pp. Hurst. £18.99.
Mark Lilla

According to an ancient story, King Midas hunted in the forest for the wise Silenus, Dionysus' companion. It took the king a while to capture the god of the forest, but eventually he did. He burnt to know what was "the best and most desirable of all things for man", and pressed Silenus for an answer. The god was reluctant at first, but after some royal arm-twisting he talked. The answer, though, may have made Midas regret the question: "Oh, wretched, ephemeral race, children of chance and misery",

Silenus started, “why do you compel me to tell you what it would be most expedient for you not to hear? What is best of all is utterly beyond your reach: not to be born, not to be, to be nothing. But the second best for you is – to die soon”. Live with that knowledge, now, if you can.

Elsewhere in the ancient world, it was written in a holy scripture that the “Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. And the Lord God commanded the man, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die’”. But, of course, Adam did precisely that: he ate from the tree. In so doing, he – like King Midas – showed that he was too curious for his own good. He also demonstrated that distinctive aspect of human nature: all too often, a prohibition is an invitation to transgression in disguise. Much of the history that followed Adam’s affair of the apple would be incomprehensible without this particular reading of prohibition.

Each of these stories points, in its own way, to an intimate, uncanny connection, in the western mind, between knowledge and death. To know or not to know, to seek knowledge or to abstain from it, understanding (of oneself, of the others, of the world around) or lack thereof – these are no trifles, but matters of life and death. You can lose your soul or you can save it, depending on your relationship with knowledge. The tragedy of Oedipus encapsulates, like few other works of western literature, the tragedy of the West itself.

This is, roughly, the thematic niche where Mark Lilla’s latest book could be

placed. “How is it that we are creatures who want to know and not to know?” he asks. *Ignorance and Bliss* is not by any means an academic work, neither a systemic treatise nor a conventional essay. In search of an answer to the book’s central question, the author takes us on a tour. His project, he writes, “can perhaps best be described as an intellectual travelogue retracing my own circuitous and somewhat episodic excursions in reading and thinking about the will not to know”. He makes a promise to his readers that they are being “invited on a ramble, not a journey to a fixed destination”, and he more than delivers. His text is idiosyncratically personal, often whimsical and freewheeling, but hardly boring.

The “rambling” method also means that Lilla takes an oblique approach to his topic. Rather than looking for the “will to ignorance” in the monographs of specialized scholars or theorists, he seeks it in the works of religious founders, mythmakers, playwrights, novelists and poets. For the “deepest treatments of the will to ignorance”, he realizes, are “to be found in works of the imagination – ancient myths, religious scriptures, epic poetry, plays, and modern novels”. This should not surprise us, Lilla adds, because without “the capacity to resist seeing what is right before our eyes, there would be no drama in human life, no movement”. Someone who keeps a secret from others is banal. Someone who keeps a secret from himself – that’s precisely what fascinates us and stimulates the creative mind.

Lilla borrows his notion of the “will to ignorance” from Friedrich Nietzsche, who describes it – in inimitable style – as a “suddenly erupting decision in favour of Ignorance, of deliberate exclusion, a shutting of one’s windows, an

internal No to this or that, a refusal to let things approach, a kind of state of defence against much that is knowable, a satisfaction with the dark, with the limiting horizon, a Yea and Amen to ignorance". As Nietzsche is often contagious, his influence is discernible throughout Lilla's book, with its emphasis on genealogical thinking, suspicion-fuelled psychological analysis, methodical unmasking and disenchantment. Like Nietzsche, Lilla is not persuaded by the pious lies with which we tend to surround ourselves, and often looks for the deeper, more obscure motivations beneath much of what we think or say or do. We deceive ourselves continuously, more often and more energetically than we deceive others. And we have good reasons for doing so.

"The world is a recalcitrant place", Lilla writes, and "there are things about it we would prefer not to have to recognize." Some of these things are "uncomfortable truths about ourselves; those are the hardest to accept". Others are "truths about outer reality that, once revealed, steal from us beliefs and feelings that have somehow made our lives better, easier to live – or so we think". These beliefs and feelings are part of a broader web of self-deceptions that we weave constantly, and through which we prefer to glimpse at the world, rather than facing it in all its immediacy. As we grow older, we become ever more dependent on, if not addicted to, the use of this optical device. If someone were to take it suddenly away from us, thus forcing us to see everything – the world and ourselves in it – as it really is, we would count ourselves the most unfortunate of mortals. Yet that would be our biggest chance – the truth would make us not just free, but properly human.

The acuity of Lilla's analyses in this book, the range of the topics he covers and

the breadth of his historical knowledge are dazzling. His is a mind that refuses specialization, and that's one of the most refreshing things about his work. He feels at home in St Augustine and in Freud, as he does in Sophocles, Cervantes, Dickens and Ibsen. He writes with the same ease about the theology of St Paul, Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, contemporary demonology and *Billy Budd, Sailor*.

Ignorance and Bliss is remarkable not just for what the author covers, but equally for that which he doesn't: for what he chooses to ignore. For the epigraph, the author uses a quote from George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*: "It is a common sentence that Knowledge is power; but who hath duly considered or set forth the power of ignorance?" The haunting quote then resurfaces in the body of the text, with the added emphasis that it's precisely "the power of ignorance" that the author "proposes to examine here". Which Lilla does charmingly and persuasively; yet, puzzlingly, he chooses to ignore one of the most brutally obvious senses of the word "power": political power.

The current crisis in democracy has much to do with knowledge and especially with ignorance: the deepening problem of civic literacy in our societies; the growing use of AI-driven platforms to shape public opinion and condition political behaviour; the manipulation of voters' choices through stealth use of their data; the increasing use of conspiracy theories to harness and control collective ignorance; the fatal collusion of populism with big money, and big tech. It must be a record of sorts: never before has so much expert knowledge been deployed to produce such large-scale ignorance. Yet all of this is largely missing in *Ignorance and Bliss*. From an author with a keen interest in politics, like Mark Lilla, the omission is hard to understand. Then again, I can't help

thinking that a book about the benefits of ignorance could well benefit from having a gap or two of its own.

Costica Bradatan *is a professor and author. His latest book,* In Praise of Failure: Four lessons in humility*, appeared in paperback last year*

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