

# 'Ignorance and Bliss' argues knowledge isn't always worth seeking

Mark Lilla's book is a refreshing look at a timeless philosophical question: To know or not to know?

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Review by [Becca Rothfeld](#)

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With apologies to those who comment on this review, I must insist that one of the wisest pieces of advice a writer can follow is “don’t read the comments” — an injunction so indispensable that it has become a kind of mantra. You can find it emblazoned on sweaters and T-shirts, and there used to be an account on X, formerly Twitter, that existed solely to issue “periodic reminders to not read the comments section for, well, pretty much anything, ever.” Not reading the comments is a way of preserving both sanity and a kind of salutary ignorance: Only writers unaware of the vitriol of their readers can muster the courage to go on publishing.

According to Mark Lilla, an intellectual historian at Columbia, the comments are just one of many things we are better off not knowing about. In “[Ignorance and Bliss: On Wanting Not to Know](#),” he argues that “we are creatures who want to know *and* not to know.” The repudiation of knowledge is every bit as central to human flourishing as its pursuit.

When Lilla began his whirlwind tour through the history of Western ideas, he discovered that few philosophers have grappled with the benefits of ignorance. It is axiomatic that “the first step in philosophy is to know the extent of our ignorance” — but Lilla suspected that ignorance is more than a starting point for generating its opposite, knowledge. With the aid of a range of thinkers, from ancient stalwarts like Plato and Sophocles to modern fixtures like Sigmund Freud and Elias Canetti, he set out to craft a more positive defense. The results prove that ignorance is a topic well worth knowing about.

In a famous allegory that appears in “The Republic,” Plato describes a group of people who have always lived in a cave and who therefore mistake the interplay of shadows on the walls for reality. When one of their number escapes, he initially squints up in agony, unable to endure the light. Slowly, however, his eyes adjust, and he comes to prefer the beauty of the truth to the drab darkness of his former delusions. Plato proposes that we are all like the cave-dwellers — until we turn to philosophy (Plato’s doctrine in particular, naturally) so as to discover the source of the shadows.

Lilla begins by inverting this familiar story. What if someone who left the cave did *not* prefer the bright world outside it? What if he could not bear it? What if he longed for the consolations of his old illusions? “Ignorance and Bliss” goes on to demonstrate that there are many reasons most of us might opt for the comforts of the cave.

For one thing, unadulterated self-knowledge would probably lead to paralysis. Lilla draws on the work of Freud to show that we are at odds with ourselves — that we are nothing but an uneasy *détente* between jostling desires. But the fiction of an integrated self is nonetheless a precondition of moral agency. “Ethical action,” Lilla writes, “requires a *sense* of self-mastery, a false belief that I am fully and solely the author of my actions.” Ignorance of the true, multifarious nature of the self is therefore a necessity.

Besides, there is a great deal of knowledge that is harmful. Curiosity, while often a boon, is also rumored to have killed the cat: Not for nothing is the insatiable thirst for information a frequent subject of cautionary myths. To demonstrate this point, Lilla devotes much of “Ignorance and Bliss” to a sharp and provocative reading of one of the most influential texts on the merits of ignorance: the Bible. Eve’s original transgression is perhaps the most notoriously impudent and imprudent act of knowledge acquisition.

Our intrusions into the lives of others are also apt to wound. “Certain social customs,” Lilla writes — for instance, laws establishing a “right to be forgotten on the internet” — restrict “our ability to pry too deeply” and thereby protect members of our communities from our all-consuming prurience. Despite its reputation as the marquee human impulse, the will to knowledge is starting to look highly irrational.

But knowledge proves an irresistible temptation even for Lilla, who allows himself many digressions into a number of arcane but fascinating subjects, among them the history of exorcisms and the 19th-century Russian Slavophile movement, which militated against the influences of Western Europe. Perhaps the most gripping part of his book consists of a bold and startling reading of the works of Paul the Apostle, whom Lilla regards as the originator of anti-intellectual populism. “The teachings of Jesus presupposed nothing about a person’s intelligence or level of culture,” Lilla writes. On the one hand, then, Christianity was an antidote to a cruel culture of hierarchy and elitism; on the other, its most zealous champions sometimes went so far as to denigrate education, and Paul, in particular, was a “cultured despiser of culture” — a prototype of some of the worst proponents of Trumpism today.

These remarks about Paul are some of the only ones in “Ignorance and Bliss” that bear directly on contemporary politics. For the most part, Lilla refuses to subordinate his inquiry to the ruthless imperatives of relevance. It is refreshing to read a book with enough intellectual integrity to ask a timeless philosophical question unabashedly, without any urge to justify it in terms of present trends. Funnily enough, it is a work on the virtues of ignorance that ends up exemplifying the pleasures of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.

*Becca Rothfeld is the nonfiction book critic for The Washington Post and the author of “All Things Are Too Small: Essays in Praise of Excess.”*

# Ignorance and Bliss

## On Wanting Not to Know

By Mark Lilla

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 239 pp. \$27

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