

NEXT BOOK

IGNORANCE AND BLISS

ON WANTING NOT TO KNOW

by [Mark Lilla](#) · RELEASE DATE: Dec. 3, 2024

A welcome reminder that ignorance is not the antithesis of knowledge but essential to self-knowledge.

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Essays on the ill-advised retreat from “evident truths” and the false comforts of certainty.

In this “intellectual travelogue,” Lilla, professor of humanities at Columbia University and author of *The Once and Future Liberal*, muses on the unavoidable conflicts that arise between the will to knowledge and the will to ignorance. Ignorance, he asserts, is not a human flaw but essential to our “not-at-oneness” and to self-awareness in a world saturated with contradictory ideas and disturbing experiences. To react by embracing an unquestionable truth is to abandon the moral obligations we have to ourselves and others. This is a book about more than knowledge and ignorance, though. It is also about truth and delusion, certainty and uncertainty, authority and freedom, and dependence and autonomy. Today, when the turn “against reason” and “the resistance to knowledge” are particularly strong, navigating these tensions is even more necessary. Lilla draws his examples from classical myths, religious texts, and novels, as well as from Socrates, Plato, and Freud, and he groups his thoughts under the headings of evasions, taboos, emptiness, innocence, and nostalgia. He refers to nostalgia, for example, to point out how our aversion to knowledge is historical and social, as when national traditions distort history and function as strategic forms of ignorance, leading him to suggest that “innocence is central to the American political mythos.” Lilla is a fluid, perceptive, and engaging essayist, with ignorance both the book’s thematic motivation and the excuse for wandering onto adjacent intellectual terrain. Consequently, the will to not know, like a weak radio signal, fades in and out. The enjoyment of the book is in experiencing a supple mind and lucid writer.

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