

## The Surprising Allure of Ignorance

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Aristotle taught that all human beings want to know. Our own experience teaches us that all human beings also want not to know, sometimes fiercely so. This has always been true, but there are certain historical periods when the denial of evident truths seems to be gaining the upper hand, as if some psychological virus were spreading by unknown means, the antidote suddenly powerless. This is one of those periods.

5 Increasing numbers of people today reject reasoning as a fool’s game that only cloaks the machinations of power. Others think instead that they have a special access to truth that exempts them from questioning, like a draft deferment. Mesmerized crowds follow preposterous prophets, irrational rumors trigger fanatical acts and magical thinking crowds out common sense and expertise. And to top it off we have elite prophets of ignorance, those learned despisers of learning who idealize “the people” and encourage them to resist doubt and build  
10 ramparts around their fixed beliefs.

It is always possible to find proximate historical causes of these upsurges in the irrational — war, economic collapse, social change. But doing so can distract us from recognizing that the ultimate source lies deeper, in ourselves and in the world itself.

15 The world is a recalcitrant place, and there are things about it we would prefer not to recognize. Some are uncomfortable truths about ourselves; those are the hardest to accept. Others are truths about the reality around us that, once revealed, steal from us beliefs and feelings that have somehow made our lives better, easier to live — or at least to seem that way. The experience of disenchantment is as painful as it is common, and it is not surprising that a verse from an otherwise forgotten English poem became a common proverb: Ignorance is bliss.

20 We can all find reasons we and others avoid knowing particular things, and many of those reasons are perfectly rational. But each of us also has a basic disposition toward knowing, a way of carrying ourselves in the world as experiences come our way. Some people just are naturally curious about how things got to be the way they are. They like puzzles, they like to search things out, they enjoy learning why. Others are indifferent to learning and see no particular advantage to asking questions that seem unnecessary for just carrying on.

25 And then there are people who, for whatever reason, have developed a particular antipathy toward the search for knowledge, whose inner doors are fastened tight against anything that might cast doubt on what they believe they already know. These attitudes are not limited to the uneducated: We have all also fallen into moods where they emerge in ourselves, however uncharacteristically.

30 Why does this happen? Because seeking and having knowledge is not just a cognitive pursuit; it is also an emotional experience. The desire to know is exactly that, a desire. And whenever our desires are satisfied or thwarted, our feelings are engaged.

Why seek truth if truth will require us to do the hard work of rethinking what we already know? Just as we can develop a love of truth that stirs us within, so, too, we can develop a hatred of truth that fills us with a passionate sense of purpose. There can be a clash of emotions, with the desire to defend our ignorance standing as a powerful adversary to the desire to escape it.

35 One source of this clash is that we consider our opinions to be an extension of our selves, a prosthetic device. When they are attacked or dismissed, we feel that something intimate has been touched. And when our opinions are shown to be wrong, we feel ashamed. Socrates maintained that there is no shame in being wrong, just in doing wrong. He was right. But it’s not the way we initially feel, especially when someone else exposes our errors.

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