

Ignorance is not Bliss
How to Become Wrong
By
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The familiar phrase, “ignorance is bliss,” originates from an 18th century poem by Thomas Gray, *Ode on a Distant Prospect of Edin College*,¹ in which the Irish poet contemplates the value of telling his innocent children of the suffering and unhappiness they are sure to someday experience. “Thought would destroy their Paradise,” he concludes, “[But not]—where ignorance is bliss. ‘Tis folly to be wise.” That’s how his poem ends, suggesting sometimes it’s better not knowing the truth because we are happier without it. Or, as Jack Nicholson more succinctly put it in the 1992 film, *A Few Good Men*, “You can’t handle the truth!”

In some instances, as Gray’s poem and Nicholson’s iconic line illustrate, people are kept in the dark by others, presumably for their own good. When such ignorance is imposed upon them it’s patronizing and paternalistic. There are just some things people in power think others shouldn’t know. They justify such deceit by insisting it’s for their own good, to prevent them unnecessary anxiety they can’t handle. In most these cases, however, I suspect they are really protecting themselves from others knowing the truth. When, for example, governments and governors assert “alternative facts” about their number of supporters, or, as Trump is now calling them, his “people,” and his “followers,” or forbid government employees from talking about global warming or even mentioning the term, they aren’t protecting the public, nor childhood innocence; they’re protecting the status quo, while harming both the public and the children who shall inherit a much hotter Earth in the process. “It’s for their own good,” they convince themselves, concealing and manipulating the truth in the process and ignoring the fact they are acting in their own self-interests.

Yet, as I understand its meaning, *ignorance* isn’t so much about being kept in the dark as it is choosing to remain in the dark. It’s not just being unaware of the facts, it’s intentionally avoiding them. There’s a willfulness to it. The Latin word from which *ignorance* derives, is better translated as “disregard,” or to “pass by without taking notice.” Unlike stupidity or dumbness, which imply a genuine lack of awareness—of not knowing—ignorance refers to knowing the facts and acting as if we don’t, or intentionally avoiding and suppressing knowledge and education so we aren’t exposed to information that might conflict with the alternate reality we’ve already convinced ourselves of. “My mind is made up,” as the saying goes, “Please don’t confuse me with the facts.”

Some of this self-imposed disregard for inconvenient truths, I believe, is the result of cultural conditioning, and some is the result of our own biology. In developmental psychology our psychological maturation happens in three phases, if that is, we don’t get stuck somewhere along the line, if something doesn’t block us from achieving our full potential. In short, the three phrases reflect an *I* orientation, a *You* orientation, and an *Us* orientation. The first

¹ 1742

phase, the *I* orientation is all about what's best for oneself, which is the attitude of small children who must be demanding, sometimes crying and throwing tantrums, to receive what they want or need from their caregivers. The *You* orientation usually emerges between ages 5 and 7, as we realize we have to share and play by the rules if we want our share and our turn. Playing by the rules, meeting the expectations of others, turns into the "law and order" morality of adulthood that some people never grow beyond, which means halting our maturation so we can remain included and in good standing among others. It means sacrificing our individual uniqueness and authenticity. The *Us* orientation recognizes we must fully express ourselves and unfold as individuals, and that our welfare, our voice, our rights matter, or else we're not meeting our duty to become all that we are. It also recognizes that, even as we take responsibility for our own growth and welfare, we cannot do so at the expense of others, that all selves, ourselves and our neighbors selves, must be respected and nourished.

Across time, thinkers from various field have used differing terms for these three stages, but their meanings coincide. Buddha called them the aesthetic, or indulgent stage, the ascetic, or abstinence stage, and the Middle Way, that includes compassion and care for all beings, including oneself, and for oneself while including all beings. The philosopher, Kierkegaard called them the aesthetic, ethical (meaning rule based), and the religious stage (grounded in unity and justice). They are also reflected in Freud's delineation between the id, superego, and ego, and, more recently, between the *Child*, *Parent*, and *Adult* stages of Transactional Analysis. This triune flow is also reflected in psychologist Erich Fromm's treatment of theological development, beginning with the idea God is like a toddler, selfish and demanding, who easily angers, throw tantrums, and is a black-and-white, punitive thinker. As we mature, we see God more as a loving parent, a person we are in relationship with whom we can please, whose anger we can modulate, and who will continue loving us, so long as we obey the rules. In the end, if we get there, god isn't a person at all, but our devotion to the higher principles once reflected for us in our religious ideas, like justice, compassion, and peace; principles that are universal and ought to be universally applied to everyone.

But I still prefer the stages outlined by Lawrence Kohlberg in his theory of moral development, referred to simply as *pre-conventional*, *conventional*, and *post-conventional*. In the first, early childhood stage, we are dualistic, authoritarian, punitive thinkers who tend to act in our own interests. Between around age 7 and early adulthood, we become more conventional in our thinking, meaning we are most concerned about what others think of us, and tend to obey the rules of our society, even if only those belonging to our rebellious, trend setting, society of peers, our tribe. Finally, if we get there, the post-conventional stage considers certain principles, like justice, compassion, and peace, that ought to be applied to everyone, including ourselves, no matter where we are or who we're with.

I bring developmental psychology up at such length because it's key to understanding how and why we let ourselves get stuck in a conventional way of living—in a law and order, do what is expected, tribal, *you* orientated way of thinking, that causes us to *ignore* our own evolution, ignore a larger reality, and ignore the needs and rights of those who differ from us. In order to remain included by others, included in the safety and security of society, our

development may become stunted as we refuse to look beyond the limited views of our own culture, and may even consider those with different views a threat and treat them as such.

This desire to remain included, to be safe and secure, at almost any cost, plays well into the self-preservation indicative of most societies and civilizations. You see, civilization is based upon everyone doing what's expected, everyone obeying the rules, everyone thinking and behaving as they are told. Civilization thrives upon mid-level, law-and-order, conventional morality. This means society is constitutionally against the full expression and evolution of the individual. It means, to maintain order, the status quo, and its own future, it must hinder us from growing beyond our conventional mindset, which, it turns out, isn't hard to do because many of us are readily willing to give it up quite a lot to belong and to remain safe and secure. Hence, between being conditioned by society to do as we're expected, and our own willingness to ignore truths that threaten what we already believe, we end up with "a system of slavery so well designed," as B.F. Skinner said, "that it does not breed revolt..."² a system comprised of, as he put it, "happy slaves," referring to a state in which individuals are conditioned to meet the needs of the status quo, to maintain the existing state of affairs, even to their own detriment, without thought, ignoring almost everything else.

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, furthermore, which seeks to understand human behavior in terms of how it benefits the survival of our species, habitual behavior, including habitual patterns of thinking, lend themselves more to survival than do erratic or new behaviors with unpredictable outcomes. Some neurologists are now saying the main purpose of the brain is to make predictions. These predictions are based on inductive reasoning, on what's usually happened in the past. Hence, we're biologically wired to be a lot more comfortable with the way things always have been than with change, than with trading our tried and tested traditions for new ways with uncertain outcomes.

To assure habitual behavior, which, again, is more likely to keep us alive, at least long enough to reach sexual maturity so we can pass on our immortal genes to new hosts, our brains avoid cognitive dissonance—the confusion of many possibilities—through the false feeling of certainty, the belief we must be right. This feeling of being sure of ourselves, resulting in habitual patterns of behavior and thinking, is reinforced with a dopamine release to our pleasure centers. That's why being certain feels so good, and why we dislike being proven wrong, which, usually, doesn't feel very good at all. It feels as good to say, "I told you so," as it feels bad hearing it. So, whether it's our innate dread of being left out of the support and security of community, or resulting from our ancient survival instincts, reinforced by our endocrine systems, part of the human experience seems to involve ignoring, disregarding, passing by without noticing those truths that don't jive with our traditional ways of thinking. "The capacity to doubt," psychologist Theodor Reik once wrote, "and in particular the ability to endure doubt for a long time, is one of the rarest things on this planet."³ Or, as Erich

² Skinner, B.F., *Beyond Freedom & Dignity*, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1971, 1987, p. 37.

³ Reik, Theodor, *Dogma and Compulsion*, Greenwood Press, Publishers, Westport, Connecticut, 1951, 1975, p. 161.

Fromm said, “*The compulsive quest for certainty... is rooted in the need to conquer the unbearable doubt.*”⁴

It may be that ignorance is as natural to us as it is cultural, but it would be a mistake to commit that naturalistic fallacy by presuming it must, therefore, be good. Hurricanes, tornadoes, and floods are also natural, but they are disastrous occurrences. Viruses and bacteria are natural, but some of them can kill us. Considering the current state of affairs, it appears today’s epidemic of ignorance is also proving to be disastrous and deadly.

Perhaps nothing makes this case more profoundly than the environmental apocalypse were in because too many of us continue to ignore Global Warming. There’s a lot of propaganda in the corporate controlled media these days still claiming Global Warming isn’t happening at all, or that scientists can’t agree about what’s causing it, or that it’s part of a natural cycle and, therefore, there’s nothing we can do about it. Every now and then something about it makes the headlines, like a study out just this week from more than 80 scientists from 44 international organizations, warning us Antarctica’s ice sheet is melting faster than ever before, adding 240 billion tons of melt to the rising seas every year. Yet, with more than 80 percent of Americans getting our news from television and the Internet, in a constantly changing news cycle, our aversion to cognitive dissonance (to too many possibilities) goes into hyperdrive. There’s just too much information bombarding us to remain focused on big issues very long. There’s so much news, we can easily shift our attention from these kind of inconvenient truths, ignoring them, disregarding them, passing by pretending not to notice them, in favor of the news we prefer to hear and think about, news that doesn’t upset the status quo or remind us we need to change our ways.

Sea levels are rising—tweet—Donald trump mocks Canadian Prime Minister. The government is taking immigrant children from their parents and stacking them in cages—tweet—Roseanne Barr makes offensive comments. By all social indicators, nonwhites in the U.S. are no better off today than they were before the Civil Rights Act—tweet—Actor Robert De Niro drops F-bomb on Trump. Israeli military shoots unarmed Palestinians with sniper rifles during peaceful protest—tweet—a Raccoon is climbing a skyscraper in Minnesota. If we prefer not thinking about all the troubling things going on in the world, especially those that counter our own worldview, there’s plenty of other possibilities to focus our attention on—tweet—*The Incredibles 2*, in theatres now.

Still, somehow, despite all this distraction and ignorance, our species continues to evolve. Despite placing armed guards at our gates, walls at our borders, and agents hunting immigrant infiltrators at our transportation hubs, we manage to have innovators and outliers in our midst who insist the world is round, that it orbits round the Sun, that it’s 4.5 billion years old, and that it’s now getting hotter because of human activity. They keep saying things like these until enough of us listen and finally begin to change our ways. Despite all the stories we’re brought up on about big bad wolves, about not talking to strangers, from strange places, with strange ways, some welcome the strangers among us, imagine they might even be angelic messengers with something important to offer, and offer them

⁴ Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, (Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965). 96.

sanctuary in our homes and churches. *Stranger* shares the same root as *extraneous*, and simply means, “one from without,” one from another place or one who is simply outside the circle of society because they have different ideas, different ways, or simply look different than most. They are frightening, vilified, oppressed people, until enough of us can no longer pass them by without noticing and finally learn to widen our circles of inclusion.

How does this happen? How are some of us able to overcome our cultural and biological predispositions toward ignorance? When I was taking CPE, Clinical Pastoral Education, a requirement for becoming a credentialed Unitarian Universalist minister, I was the only Non-Christian in my class, which made me an outlier and stranger. Early on, my presence became such a disruption that the entire class exploded with anger after I asked a question about the value of what we were doing. Everyone took a turn insulting me for offending them. One classmate said I was the most arrogant, heartless person she’d ever met. The director of the program invited me to quit. I told him I was there because I needed to be and would only leave if directly asked to do so. Despite the pressure to leave, and my wish to be anywhere else, no one had the courage to tell me to get out, so I remained.

During the semester, which took place in a hospital setting, the program director told me I look at the world pathologically. He didn’t mean that I am pathological, only that I approach things by considering their pathology, by asking the question, *what’s wrong with this picture?* Some might call it *critical thinking*. His observation, however, was more than fair, and, to this day, I appreciate the insight and even take pride in admitting it’s true. I’m an outlier, an innovative thinker, and have been most of my life, which has made me a stranger in almost every school I’ve attended, every community I’ve lived in, and every job I’ve ever held, with the exception of the Unitarian Universalist Church, otherwise known as the “Island of Misfit Toys.”

When I consider what made me like this, what has made me a stranger in my own land, among my own people, I think some of it has to do with growing up in an abusive environment. True, the insecurity of growing up abused and neglected can cause one to have extremely rigid beliefs and ways, and even continue those abusive patterns in one’s own life; but living with such insecurity can also help one learn to better cope with life’s uncertainties and to want to find a better way. That’s eventually what happened with me. There are some things that make me anxious, but being left out, or saying things others disagree with, or hearing things I disagree with are not among them.

Majoring in philosophy as a young adult helped give discipline to these tendencies. I entered college as a conservative Southern Baptist, believing I had all the major questions of life already answered. But, in studying *epistemology*, the study of truth, I realized nobody can know anything with certainty. Through the study of *metaphysics*, exploring the underlying nature of reality, I realized we can’t even be sure of what’s real or not. Is the world material? Is it thought? Is it all just a dream? And through the study of *ethics*, I came to realize we can’t even be sure what we’re doing is really the right thing to do, and that almost everything we do has some negative repercussions.

So that's been my life, learning to live with insecurity and uncertainty, in a world where almost everyone seems to crave security and certainty above all. I may be a misfit, an outlier, a strange guy to some, but learning to let go of the answers hurled at me by asking what's wrong with them, fills my life with wonder and amazement. Opening my mind and heart to strangers, to those with strange ideas and ways, brings me new insights all the time as I continue to assemble the puzzle of life, and has made me a global citizen and brother to all humankind in the process. Letting go of my need to be right and righteous, leads me to think beyond just my actions, to their consequences, to consider how what I do, whether considered right or wrong by everyone else, will impact the lives of others. Finally, shedding my beliefs in a god who is magically in charge of my life, living with the insecurity and uncertainty of it all, has made me a mystic, one who not only lives in the mist, in the mystery, but one who is most comfortable there, not knowing.

"The true mystics I have known," writes theologian Matthew Fox, "have been people who never lost the sense of the child in wonder. The mystic, after all, is the divine child in us all wanting to play in the universe."⁵ Or, as Socrates said long ago, "I am wise because I neither know, nor think that I know." I can't be sure, but I wonder, even speculate, that, because of all this, my brain, like the brain of many philosophers and most mystics, now works differently than usual. Instead of getting a dopamine rush when I feel certain, my brain makes me feel better when questioning reality, when it's in the fog, in the mist, the mystery, the cloud of unknowing.

At the end of my CPE class, after everyone had time to get to know me, and we sat in a circle saying our goodbyes, the codirector, a Native American man, no longer said I see the world pathologically, but called me a Heyoka, a Native American reference to a shaman who lives life backwards, doing the opposite of everyone else. I've considered myself a Heyoka ever since. The student who called me arrogant and heartless apologized, said she was wrong, that after getting to know me she realized I was one of the most compassionate people she's ever known.

Somehow, in being sure of ourselves and our beliefs, we end up ignoring anything that contradicts what we think we know. Conversely, by admitting we don't know, we become open to others, to other ways, to other insights. But even then, it's not about knowing. It's never really about knowing but about facing the uncertainties before us, not ignoring them, not disregarding them, not passing them pretending they aren't there. Ignorance is not bliss, but seeking the truth, even if we can never wholly grasp it, even if we can't handle it, can fill our lives with wonder and is the basis of all our hopes.

⁵ Fox, Matthew, *Creation Spirituality*, HarperCollins, New York, NY, 1991, p. 30.