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The Ignorance of Bliss as a Privilege

Introduction

“Ignorance is bliss” is a cliché as we know it today. We use it colloquially to refer to why we might be omitting information, or why we might be behaving in a certain way so as to avoid confrontation with the truth. However, is ignorance truly bliss? Historically, ignorance was not necessarily deemed something negative. Ignorance can refer to a lack of education or critical thinking. Great thinkers like Plato, Miguel de Cervantes, and William Blake were thinking of a different definition from what we might be thinking in their works. Ignorance did not mean turning the other way when oppression is going on, or refusing to acknowledge a truth. It referred to the lack of higher thinking that is so characteristic of today's society.

Historically, Roman ideas of beauty and divinity were often characterized by a higher level of thinking or education that brought one to an elevated status of the mind. This elevated status, such as Plato's ladder of love, illuminated the importance of critical thought and education. In particularly religious times, such as the Medieval Age, ignorance was something to be desired. The priests were in charge of higher thinking, the church was in charge of higher thinking, and the common person was not allowed to think for himself. The religious shifts of the Reformation brought back the ideals of critical thinking, specifically scientific thought. This society defined ignorance as a denial of science, or the refusal to take part in the modern world. In modern times, ignorance is mostly frowned upon. However, if that is the case, why do we cling to this idea that “ignorance is bliss”? Perhaps because such a bliss is afforded to very few. Not many have the ability to completely ignore the problems of the surrounding world, but this is

what “ignorance is bliss” implies. We must try to push past this idea that ignoring issues is what happiness means. True happiness comes from knowing that things can be better and trying to improve the world, not ignoring issues and waiting for them to disappear. This idea contrasts with the takes on ignorance shown in Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, the poems of William Blake, and Plato’s *Republic*.

The Positive Impacts of Ignorance

“Ignorance” is a word that often draws up negative connotations. Who would want to be ignorant, and risk coming off as uncaring, self-centered, or otherwise uninformed? This is the modern take. However, “ignorance” can be categorized as something positive in the sense that it implies avoiding the problems of the world, staying sheltered and being able to live without worrying about consequences. This definition of ignorance lines up with much of the reading in our repertoire.

One such example is Plato’s *Republic* which describes the allegory of the cave. This allegory is one of “the effect of education and that of the lack of it”; in other words, the difference between ignorance and enlightenment or education (Plato and Reeve 463). Within this allegory, there is a group of people inside of a cave chained such that they can only see what is in front of them. What they see are shadows of objects that are behind them, but as they cannot turn to look, they are unaware of this fact. Plato ascribes these people as the ignorant, completely oblivious to the greater world that exists outside of their range of vision. Plato argues that if one person was to break free of these fetters and to be brought into the sunlight, or “from greater ignorance into greater light,” they would stop being ignorant, seeing the real forms rather than the shadows, and would therefore have the burden of knowledge to bear upon returning to the cave (Plato and Reeve 467).

Upon returning to the cave, the man would likely be ridiculed by the people in the cave, who do not believe him. Due to this fact, as well as being forced to watch the shadows while knowing full well of the extent of what lies above, Plato considers “the first soul happy in its experience in life,” while the latter is pitied, in which the first soul refers to the man before exiting the cave, and the latter the man after having experienced the sunlight (Plato and Reeve 467). Through this metaphor, Plato suggests that higher education or higher enlightenment causes alienation from the masses, disbelief, and overall suffering at knowing that a better world is out there. Plato’s cave allegory backs the idea that ignorance is a bliss. Lacking an education, Plato argues, means that one remains unaware of the beauty of the divine, but avoids having to recognize the ugliness of the human world. In other words, education makes one aware of how much better life could be, and exposes the flaws of the surrounding world.

William Blake, too, lends ideas of a sense of childlike wonder and ignorance that is lost with age. This comes through in his poem “The Lamb,” which reveres the happy simplicity of the life of a lamb. Blake seems to ask if the lamb is burdened by knowledge, writing “Little Lamb, who made thee?/ Dost thou know who made thee?” (Blake and Appelbaum 4). He also uses the image of children in the clouds in “Songs of Innocence,” which shows the holy connotations that lambs and children share. Here, we understand that to be a child or a lamb, unaware of the struggles of the world, is desirable and holy. Blake puts complete trust in God without any critical examination of the surrounding world; this condition brings happiness. He tells the Lamb that “I a child & thou a lamb./ We are called by his name” (Blake and Appelbaum 4). Interestingly, Blake calls himself a child, perhaps implying his desire to return to ignorance, avoiding reality. He seems to envy the lamb, who does not even know his creator, but lives simply, as such an animal does. For Blake, the ideal state is ignorance, without burdens.

Cervantes' character Don Quixote gleans a great deal of happiness from his delusions of grandeur. Upon imagining himself as a knight errant, thoughts that are "exceedingly agreeable" to him, he takes "extraordinary pleasure" in his fantasy (Cervantes 22). Because Don Quixote creates this ignorance, this fantasy that he is something more than a poor old man riding a beat-up horse, he opts to accept this as his reality, spurning the real world around him. Although he is lying to himself, he seems happier riding around the countryside and imagining his importance. His crafted reality is superior to the simple life he has left behind him. He is able to focus on what he perceives to be his duty as a knight errant: righting wrongs that he encounters and taking down enemies in his good name. Though the story of Don Quixote is a satire of traditional romantic narratives, there is something to be said about Don Quixote's simplistic contentment. He is incessantly mocked in his misadventures, falling victim to much misfortune, but he is content in his role believing in his own importance. In this way, his ignorance, which is not simply a denial of the outside world but a replacement for it, becomes his source of happiness. Ignorance is preferable because of its gift: ignoring the ugliness of the world, which made it largely appealing to many philosophers who found musings painful.

The Detriments of Ignorance

All of the above examples are not to say that ignorance is just a desirable and positive state; ignorance does come with some drawbacks. There are many consequences for ignorance, mainly for the impact that it has on others. This is most prevalent in *Don Quixote*. While encountering a servant boy being whipped while tied up to a tree, Don Quixote asks his master to "untie him immediately" (Cervantes 36). However, this only increases the anger that the master has towards his servant and makes him whip harder, leaving the boy "half-dead" (Cervantes 38). Although the intentions were good, Don Quixote is essentially unable to understand why and

how his actions might negatively affect others. This is a direct consequence of his ignorance and refusal to come face-to-face with reality. One can argue that Don Quixote is aware that he is not really a knight errant, and that he wants to live a reality that he wishes he had, in fact, he admits this on his deathbed. Nonetheless, his actions suggest a level of ignorance and obliviousness to how others might react. Had he realized that speaking to the master in his usual, inflated manner might not be the best approach, and not ignored this, continuing on with his charade, he might have spared the boy some suffering.

Many other similar examples exist of Don Quixote's inept social interactions which lead to misfortune for himself and others, though mainly himself. In many cases, his ignorance causes him misery, for example, when he is mocked and ridiculed by people at the local inn when he thinks it is a castle. In this instance, he chooses to not acknowledge their ridicule, but his ignorance costs him. Nobody takes him seriously, respects him, or treats him like the knight he thinks himself to be. This reality means that his ignorance causes him pain, and yet, he is unable to come to terms with the truth of his own mortality, poverty, and weakness. Clearly, Cervantes critiques the ridiculousness of this style of romantic literature, and of willful ignorance.

The enlightened man that Plato describes also makes himself miserable, though in a different way. The masses, who are considered to be ignorant, see the shadows of objects rather than true forms. Plato's description of the glorious and beautiful world behind leads one to believe that escaping from these fetters of ignorance and climbing into the light and beauty of the divine, otherwise known as knowledge, is the highest honor that one can achieve. Plato defines this as knowledge about what "governs everything in the visible world" (Plato and Reeve 465). Plato is right in describing education and knowledge as something to be revered, something that is important and necessary. Focusing on the negative aspects of ignorance, the people in the cave

live and die in a state of not knowing, but assuming they know. Plato implies that to consider anything other than enlightenment and the divine as being the truth would be unusual, ludicrous, and nonsensical. All of those notions can be used to describe the state of ignorance as well.

Blake takes a different approach. For him, the loss of ignorance is like the loss of innocence. He does not consider enlightenment or critical thinking to be useful, comparing it to “[throwing] sand against the wind” in his poem “Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau” (Blake and Appelbaum 10). He clearly thinks that philosophical musings or other forms of critical thought are pointless and futile. However, he does believe the loss of ignorance is inevitable, a product of growing up, or the passage of time. Between his two poems “The Lamb” and “The Tyger,” the lamb represents the holiness of untouched innocence, or ignorance to the problems of the world, while the tyger represents the adults who sin and err and their ways. Blake asks of the lamb “Little Lamb, who made thee?” and in tandem asks the tyger “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” (Blake and Appelbaum 4-7). A level of shock persists as Blake witnesses the contrasting tyger, who has often sinned, representing the adult to the lamb’s child form. For Blake, there are no positive sides to lost ignorance, but he does consider it to be unavoidable and therefore makes a point to describe the suffering of knowledge.

At this point, neither ignorance nor enlightenment seems to be the answer. Both bring a level of pain and misunderstanding. What then, is the middle ground? Should we be educated, or try to avoid problems to the best of our ability? Ultimately, ignorance is about privilege. Further illuminated by our examples, escapism or voluntary ignorance gets one nowhere, but constant musings about the meaning of life or one's purpose creates a life devoid of joy. This leaves us with a middle ground that must be investigated.

The Ends of Blissful Ignorance and a Modern Take

How does ignorance or enlightenment end in the three works we have investigated?

Blake and Plato both view critical thinking and enlightenment as a burden that one must bear. In Plato's cave metaphor, enlightenment exposes one to beauty, the divine presence in the world. However, this information shuns one from society as a whole, as people who are the so-called "unenlightened" do not believe the man who has seen the sunlight. The notoriety and fame sits with the one who is best able to identify the shadows he sees before him. When a man comes in rambling about the real forms behind the shadows, which the people have never seen before, it is understandable that the cave dwellers would disbelieve and turn him away. In essence, having this information is positive, as one gets to witness the divine; however, it also means rejection by those around you.

For Blake, we see how things end up being for those who try to philosophize, comparing critical thinking to philosophers throwing sand into the wind. He calls out the musings of radical thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau, about which he claims "tis all in vain!" (Blake and Appelbaum 10). He struggles with the inevitability of questioning the world around oneself, but wishes that he could return to the childlike state of innocence and which one is only aware of one's environment. Higher thinking only causes one misery, according to Blake; however, this suffering is inevitably associated with all human life.

The most striking example of how ignorance ends is shown in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*. Upon his death bed, Don Quixote admits his true identity. He concedes that he "was Don Quixote of La Mancha, and now [he is]... Alonso Quixano the Good" (Cervantes 937). It seems as though the world has beaten this confession out of him; clearly, he believed escapism to be the ideal state of living, a reality better than his own. Realistically, we see the ridiculousness of this notion, but it is only upon the old man's deathbed that we understand even though he was

tangentially aware of the truth, Don Quixote preferred willful ignorance. Cervantes' heavy satire infers that we all know the truths that we turn away from out of fear, and that avoiding such truths is both futile and absurd.

Ignorance can be blissful when one gets to ignore problems surrounding oneself, diving into a better reality. However, ignorance causes pain to others, and at times oneself when one realizes that there is a truth that one is ignorant of, or when remembering a truth one is purposely ignoring. Critical thinking is painful in the sense that one understands that there is a better world out there, if we have the ability to create it. It also means understanding the futility of life when things go wrong. These philosophers were right, critical thinking is painful, but that does not mean that it is right to ignore it, or try to avoid it. It is undoubtedly easier to live in a bubble of ignorance and pretend that you are the only one in the world who matters. However, the reality is that not everyone has the privilege of being able to ignore problems. Black people who worry about being killed by police, or people in poverty who worry about what their next meal will be, or queer people who worry about being attacked on the street: all of these instances show that there is not always the option to ignore a problem when one is faced with a blunt reality.

Conclusion

What these philosophers failed to recognize is that having access to information and critical thinking skills is a privilege in and of itself. Not everyone has the ability to get an education. Not everyone can ascend Plato's ladder of love as he perceives it. Given that Cervantes, Plato, and Blake are white men, it is understandable that they would not have comprehended ignorance in this way. The discourse at their respective time periods was not how it is today, with a host of active political movements seeking justice, seeking a better world, seeking those forms behind the shadows on the cave wall. However, in our modern times, we can

choose to do better. We can choose to try and educate ourselves to the best of our ability, to try and imagine a better world, to push away the privilege of ignorance and to try and stand up for what we think is right. Even if we are not part of marginalized groups, we can try our best to raise up their voices. That is the real importance of critical thinking and the resistance of willful ignorance.

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