

Ignorance is Bliss?

Draft

I. Here is why ignorance is not bliss (via *mild analytic philosophy*):

First you cannot be a functioning human and be utterly ignorant. To be human is to have a sense of oneself and the world. So if ignorance is bliss has any meaning, it must mean partial or selective ignorance. But all humans are in this condition of knowing some things and not others, so our knowing is always incomplete, thus ignorance is universal. So if ignorance is bliss, then we would all be in a state of bliss and that clearly is not the case. So ignorance must be some sort of selective ignorance. But in order for a human to exactly select those things to not know that would be things that would make them suffer, would require them to know these things to begin with to be able to avoid them and to not know them. Thus, one would have to both know and not know those things. This is impossible. (But it is frequently the case that people have trepidation about things they might find out and purposefully avoid them. But such trepidation even if not fully conscious certainly is not a state of bliss, but is a form of dis-ease).

One could argue that if someone else who had complete control over my life and did know those things that would make me suffer and had the ability to shield me from all such knowledge and experience, then perhaps I could be in a perpetual state of bliss. But to be in such a condition would exactly preclude the highest of all human goods, namely freedom. In fact, we typically argue that to be human is to have the capacity for self-governance and freedom and freedom is essential to pursuing our own good. Thus, bliss would have to be in this case, the absence of the highest human good, thus bliss would have to be seen as the worst possible deprivation. The price of this kind of selective ignorance then, would be to pay the price of the highest human good, namely freedom. No one would argue that such a thing would be desirable and no one would wish for such a condition. Terrible as the truth may be, we want to know about it so that we either may be able to do something about it, avoid it next time, or at least have a better sense of our condition in the world and not be blind about it. It may hurt, but we would rather know and be free to respond, than be "victimized" by ignorance.

But we do clearly sometimes say "someone would have been better off not knowing X." And perhaps there are those times in some lives when someone does not know something that would have horribly negative consequences for them psychologically. But we could argue that this would be mere luck of circumstance or some conspiracy of others to not let someone know. To be in such a condition would already imply terrible or unusual vulnerability, that something is not well with such a person to begin with and that their condition would not be something to be wished for, but simply that all things considered, this person is already in such a bad place that adding an additional terrible piece of knowledge about something that would matter deeply to them and that would be devastating, would be something they would not be able to sustain. This is certainly not a state of bliss. But as we shall see below, vulnerability is essential to being human for all the good and bad things that can be experienced. And there is no guarantee in life that we will only experience the things we want or that are good for us. But being a human being entails undergoing life and developing the capacity to respond, to undergo, and to nonetheless persevere. Such perseverance is one of the many virtues that life calls forth from us if we are to live a happy or fulfilled life. To avoid or be shielded from all challenges would be to fail to develop one's humanness. And as we saw above, to rule out suffering by utterly limiting one's freedom is to deprive one of the most essential element of a human life, the freedom to pursue one's possibilities in a condition of uncertainty and risk.

But the idea of avoiding all suffering and being in a state of bliss has other problems. What does "bliss" mean? Does it mean being conscious but always and only being in a state of satisfaction and fulfillment? How could one be in a condition of satisfaction if one did not have desires to begin with that could be satisfied? And if one has desires, then one must already be in a condition of wanting, but satisfaction is to already have at least temporarily sated these desires. So if one were in a state of satisfaction, one could never have desires that could be satisfied to begin with and thus satisfaction would be impossible if bliss is to always be satisfied.

Fulfillment is another matter altogether and is related to the idea of pursuing one's possibilities just mentioned above. Fulfillment would not be merely satisfying desires which we already saw is contradictory to any notion of bliss that would depend on this. Fulfillment does not mean satisfying desires. It has to do with achieving something far more significant with regard to being a human being that is intrinsically bound to the whole notion of human experience, development, achievement of human purpose, etc.. Thus, if bliss were

human fulfillment it would involve knowing a great deal about one's engagement in human life, and would NOT be a kind of pursuit of ignorance or to accidentally be born into a condition in which one has little chance of overcoming ignorance which would be seen as a human tragedy, certainly not human bliss.

The moral is: It is impossible to protect oneself from the vicissitudes of life, things that may cause emotional, psychological pain or discomfort, i. e, dis-ease. And in general the more knowledge one has about life, the better, in order to meet its challenges. "Ignorance is bliss" is not a coherent idea to begin with and what sense one might be able to make of it, it becomes clear it is not something good for human beings.

II. The following is a mix of *mild analytic and mild continental philosophy*.

The idea that ignorance is bliss also suffers from other incoherence related to the fact of human vulnerability. If we assume that being in a state of ignorance or a state of bliss are both conditions of a human being, does this even make sense? If you are human, you are conscious. If bliss means utter unconsciousness, (not the same as being conscious but unable to respond to one's environment, perhaps the worst hell of all), then this is not to be human at all. To be human is to be conscious and to become increasingly self-consciously aware as you grow out of infancy into adult human society (aware that whatever is happening to and for me is happening to and for me).

If you are conscious, you are vulnerable and as you develop, your awareness and vulnerability become more rich, subtle, and complex. To be human is to be conscious and vulnerable, to develop a sense of "I", "me", "my", an identity that is co-created with others as I am brought into language and meaning. I increasingly have a sense that there is a world of things as opposed to my body that I can or must interact with and others to whom I must respond, who place demands upon me, assist and aid me, threaten or damage me, etc.. To be vulnerable is to be open to being affected, open to harm, open to learning about the world, open to wonder, curiosity, love, fear, horror, etc.. To be human is to experience limits to our will, thwarting of our desires, disappointed expectations, etc.. To be vulnerable is to suffer. The word "suffer" means to undergo, to experience, to endure. We usually take the word "suffer" negatively, but its core meaning is simply to undergo life. To be human is to be in a state of undergoing the vicissitudes of life, its "ups and downs," satisfaction, dissatisfaction, failed expectations, achievement of goals, humiliation, successes, etc..

To be human is to be susceptible to and to experience physical and emotional harm, but also spiritual damage from one's own iniquity (which we will cover in a moment). To be human is to eventually experience decline and at some point disability and dying (I do not say death because no one experiences being dead). To be human is to become aware of all this vulnerability. You suffer and you are aware that you suffer. No amount of self-deception can outrun this. No matter how deluded or self-deceived one is, one cannot completely hide from this condition of vulnerability that is fundamental to being in a condition of temporality and impermanence.

Humans live in their meanings and always try to make some sense of things. This is the case whether meaning is imposed consciously and carefully with developed skill or merely out of habitual unreflective habit that arises in one's personal emergence via language and the enculturation process. To have meaning at all is to have a sense of knowing about "the world" as it is meaningful to me. So utter ignorance is simply to have no meaningful world at all. It would require never having been brought into language and meaning to begin with in which case a sense of self would never arise. (see Helen Keller's autobiography for her account of direct evidence of this). To be human is to be a vulnerable, aware, limited, fallible being to whom things matter operating in a condition of uncertainty and ambiguity. Making sense is more basic than any sense we make. Meaning is always underway and malleable, though fixed enough for our purposes. In your meaningful awareness, as you come to know things, it makes you aware that you did not know things before and that you are always in this condition of ignorance and fallibility. As you develop an identity, a relationship to both things of the world and your own desires and needs and you develop expectations, you will experience resistance to your will. You cannot merely make what you want happen and often you will be completely prevented from getting what you want. Thus, your disappointed expectations, your emotional and physical pain will be conditions over which you SUFFER. It will lead to a condition of wanting things to be other than you think they SHOULD be and you are often aware of how things are and how you think they should be. We should be clear to begin with that suffering is not pain, but what we do with our pain, how we react to sensation and to what we have made things mean. Facts are never merely facts. They are always interpreted. They are what show up to us in what *can* show up to us given our already developed habits of meaning. And then what we make the facts mean in terms of being *good or bad* is an

additional layer of meaning that leads to an additional layer of potential suffering. We are not merely aware of what happens, but that things matter to us and that we are susceptible to suffering. Most of what we do is done in order to avoid pain and suffering or to pursue what we desire or need. At a higher level of human freedom and aspiration is the desire to UNDERSTAND not just the stuff of our experience, our world, our needs, wants and desires, but to understand what it is to be human, what it is to understand and have a world at all.

Even if you do not have a clue about why you suffer, you will nonetheless be aware that you do. Not knowing why can increase your suffering because such ignorance prevents any possibility of dealing with the causes and there is a deep need to control things. Suffering without knowing why is perhaps one of the worst conditions humans experience. But craving explanations where there can be none, such as trying to understand how there could be suffering and at the same time an all good, all powerful, all knowing God can create deep distress if you do not use intellectual distancing from the problem or belief that you have the problem solved already. In mundane matters, when you suffer, you will typically presume that you know why BUT this will often magnify your suffering because it can greatly increase resentment and desire for revenge, one of the worst maladies a human can suffer. With desire and aversion come all the other features of consciousness that are the conditions of suffering.

The presumption that you know anything when you really don't leads to more suffering than if this were not the case. To hide from one's condition as a human by being captured by scientific, religious or political ideological truth is to set oneself up even more for the pitfalls of our vulnerability, most centrally the arrogance of finitude (more on this later). To embrace the vulnerability which is the condition of the pursuit of one's freedom, (including all its stupidity and the propensity to try to make sense, justify, blame, avoid, etc), is to avoid the worst aspects of the arrogance of finitude.

The price of my freedom and integrity is suffering, suffering the consequences of my habits, attachments, and aversions without running from this suffering. Embracing one's vulnerability is a sign of self-overcoming, health, recovery from a wound that life always is. The word "health" is the noun form of the gerund/participle "healing." One cannot be healthy except as a process of healing that when it leads to equilibrium, we say life is good. But that equilibrium is not a given, is constantly re-established. Our myths of permanence are a wish for perfect uninterrupted equilibrium and absence of vulnerability. But absence of vulnerability is absence of conscious awareness and life altogether, is the absence for the opportunity for pursuit of freedom, the pursuit of happiness or human flourishing, not a momentary state of feeling this or that. So obviously the supposed "bliss of ignorance" can have nothing whatever to do with happiness. If bliss is a form of awareness, then it is subject to all the conditions of vulnerability, so again, ignorance can have nothing to do with happiness, since one cannot subtract freedom from happiness and still be talking about happiness and if bliss means a kind of absence of awareness, then it cannot even be a form of pleasure, let alone happiness.

Failure to mature and take responsibility for oneself in relation to others is not only an ethical failure, but also kind of unconscious attempt to practice "ignorance is bliss." Not taking the task of one's own life seriously enough to learn to think critically.... This is of course a failure in the family and in society at large in their failure to educate and prepare people for the task of being human which is the task of responsibly pursuing one's freedom.

(To be continued)

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