



Ignorance: Science behind the toughest question ever asked in a Miss Universe pageant

No one watches Miss Universe pageants to exercise their intellect. But Miss Universe 2000 is one very rare and notable exception. [Katja Thomsen Grien](#), the then Miss Uruguay, made it into the last five finalists, only to be flummoxed by what is perhaps the most difficult and profound question ever asked in any pageantry. Her question, set earlier by Miss India, [Priyanka Chopra](#), was simply nine words long: *“If ignorance is bliss, why do we seek knowledge?”*



Miss Uruguay 2000, Katja Thomsen Grien, was asked what is perhaps the toughest and most profound question ever asked in any pageant: *“If ignorance is bliss, why do we seek knowledge?”* @ missosology.org

Miss Uruguay, whose first language was not English, struggled to understand, let alone answer the question. Nonetheless, brave Miss Uruguay, choosing not to request any help from a translator, did finally give a fairly competent answer: ignorance, she opined, was the source of world problems at that time.

I remember catching that particular Miss Universe episode on TV that time, and I remembered thinking, “Wait a minute. Ignorance isn’t bliss because ignorance means none or lack of knowledge. Really, who wants to be stupid?” Easy peasy. Question successfully answered.

Or so I thought.

Fast forward nearly twenty years later, I picked up the book [“Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance”](#), a collection of academic articles, edited by [Robert Proctor](#) and [Londa Schiebinger](#), and this book made me realize that most people’s understanding of ignorance, including mine, is incomplete, that ignorance is not a simple case of just being the opposite of knowledge.



Ignorance is not just an absence of knowledge but can take various forms. Ignorance is sometimes desired. Manufactured ignorance is another form of ignorance to deceive or hide truths (c) olly @ fotolia.com

Contrary to common belief, ignorance does not always mean an absence of knowledge. Ignorance can include false knowledge - and in certain cases, ignorance is actually good and desirable (and, yes, bliss too) and even our right to have.

Ignorance appears in several forms, one of which is inherent in science. Ignorance is a resource that drives science. We humans are naturally inquisitive creatures. We are creatures uncomfortable in our ignorance: of not knowing or knowing too little. Our ignorance prompts us to inquire, to observe and collect information, and to understand - and science is a methodological manner by which we use to reduce our ignorance. The whole point of science is to fill in gaps in knowledge - but ignorance cannot be completely eliminated, and very often, as any scientist can attest, more knowledge actually begets more ignorance.

Socrates famously once said, "The more you know, the more you realize how little you know." We answer some questions only to realize there are even more questions to answer. But this is not to say science is a worthless pursuit. Far from it. Science is forever pushing forward the boundaries of knowledge. It is science, not religion or other superstitions, that has revealed more about us, our environment, and our history and possible futures.

Ignorance can also be a product of deliberate omission. We cannot, for instance, possibly understand, know, or focus on everything. Science continuously chips away at our ignorance, but by choosing to focus or study on certain aspects of our ignorance, we inevitably leave some of our ignorance unanswered and unexplored. Over time, Proctor and Schiebinger remarked, the price of our selection is "lost knowledge": we become ignorant of what we do not know.

But not all knowledge is good: some are dangerous. There are many examples which we wish we could put back the "genie in the bottle". Knowledge that enabled us to create nuclear or biological weapons, knowledge about torture, and unethical animal or human studies are only some examples about which we wish we had remained ignorant.

So, in some cases, ignorance is good because it protects us. Consider military and other sensitive national information - or even our personal information - that could otherwise be potentially used against the country and us if they are revealed. National secrecy laws are strictly enforced to maintain ignorance. Such secrecy laws keep the country and us safe and secure. Individual privacy laws are even seen as a basic human right by many countries. Complete knowledge is not always desired in all cases.

Manufactured falsehoods are the final form of ignorance, where false information

are deliberately created with hidden agendas to confuse or mislead people. History and even current events are replete with examples of manufactured ignorance to mislead people regarding the truth such as about smoking causing cancer, air pollution causing acid rains, CFC (chlorofluorocarbon) destroying the ozone, and recently, human activities causing global warming.

Manufactured ignorance is a strategic and hidden ploy, often driven by greed, to counter the truth because exposing the truth would disrupt the profitable status quo of the political or business environment. Manufactured ignorance work by sowing seeds of doubt by obfuscating facts and cherry picking evidence. It works to prolong the debate on issues by creating or amplifying disputes or controversies.



“Doubt is our product.” Tobacco industries worked hard to manufacture ignorance by obfuscating facts to prolong the debate as long as possible the risks of smoking. (c) Artem Furman @ fotolia.com

“Doubt is our product,” so wrote one tobacco executive in a leaked memo, “since it is the best means of competing with the ‘body of fact’ that exists in the minds of the general public. It is also the means of establishing a controversy.”

Tobacco and fossil fuel industries and their lobbyists are guilty of manufacturing ignorance to protect their investments and profits because the truth is dangerous, inconvenient truths that would detrimentally affect their business dominance and profits. But governments too stand guilty. Our leaders manufacture ignorance to

protect their power and positions against their scandals, corruption, misdeeds, and incompetence, and even manufacture ignorance to attack those who oppose them.



Fossil fuel industries today continue what the tobacco industries have been doing for the past four decades, by sowing seeds of doubt about the science of climate change, claiming more evidence are needed.

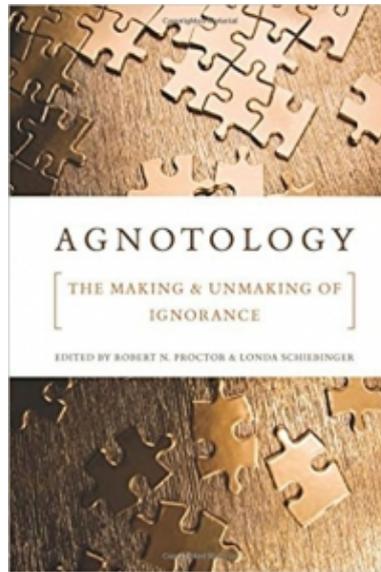
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The current US President, [Donald Trump](#), exemplifies a leader who frequently lies and embraces ignorance, leading Jake Tapper of the CNN to remark about Donald Trump, “I’ve never really seen this level of falsehood ... it’s conspiracy theories based on nothing.” Even the former US President, Barack Obama, mocked Trump by saying: “Ignorance is not a virtue.”

What is worrying that despite calling out Trump, his exaggerations, outright lies, and ignorance are becoming acceptable or at least tolerated by a great deal of the American public.

The ubiquity of the internet and social media, for example, has made the spread of ignorance faster and more frequent. Fake news and conspiracy theories, automatically taken as truths, are clicked, read, and quickly shared. In a moment’s notice, alternative facts are spread into every corner of the world and enforced to the point that it is becoming harder today to distinguish facts from fiction. The explosion of online (and independent) news channels have helped to present alternative viewpoints, but just as there are more of them, many others

proliferate that deliberately present falsehoods, driven by hidden agendas, to spread and enforce ignorance.



“Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance” edited by Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger (Stanford University Press, 2008).

Published nearly ten years ago, Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger’s book, “Agnotology: The Making & Unmaking of Ignorance” is a fascinating read. The science of ignorance, or agnotology, coined by Robert Proctor of Stanford University, is a field yet to be established, but it is perhaps timely to formalize the study of ignorance especially today.

“If ignorance is bliss, why do we seek knowledge?”

Short question, true, but in its brevity and apparent simplicity, hides a profound, thought-provoking intellectual exercise.



TN50 (National Transformation 2050): What do Malaysians really want?

Race and religion strongly define us Malaysians. They define who we are, who we friend, who we marry, where we live and work, and who we support. Our country leaders, including those from the opposition, strive instead to encourage and strengthen these racial and religion lines, polarizing Malaysians into distrusting groups.

[TN50 or National Transformation 2050](#) is a crowd-sourced national plan for our country from 2020 to 2050, but I am doubtful if this whole initiative will be meaningful because it ignores the elephant in the room: the growing *us-vs-them* mentality between Malaysians simply on the basis of one's race and religion.

What would happen, for instance, if [Lim Kit Siang](#), leader of the [DAP political party](#), were in a room full of PAS supporters in the heartland of PAS? What could he possibly say that to these PAS supporters that would invoke them to genuinely cheer and applaud him? Similarly, what would [Dato' Seri Haji Abdul Hadi bin Awang](#), leader of the [PAS political party](#), say to a room full of Chinese that would make these Chinese willingly stand up and give the PAS leader an honest and rousing applause?

In our current political and sociological climate, there is nothing these two leaders could say, without lying or betraying their own party, race, or religion, to their respective audience to win their admiration and support.

Yes, our mindsets are defined by our race and religion. But look closer - *dig*

deeper. You will find we are not that different from one another in our basic needs.

We Malaysians, regardless of our race and religion, want the same things. We desire a country that provide us with ample opportunities to lead good, comfortable lives. We want an environment that provide us with opportunities for good education, work, health care, and opportunities to find love and grow old with our loved ones. We want an environment that allows us to find and develop our skills and opportunities for us to express these skills for the good of the society and even for the good of our religion and god. We desire an environment that is fair, that we are not oppressed or exploited, and that we are not cheated of our opportunities and rights.

So, yes, we Malaysians are different. One may be a Chinese, another a Malay, or one a DAP supporter but another fervent champion of PAS or UMNO - but all of us really, at the end, want the same things. No Malaysians want chaos or anarchy. No Malaysians really want to annihilate or kick out people of other races or religions. Malaysians want a tolerant society. Ultimately, our fundamental desires are what unites us all.

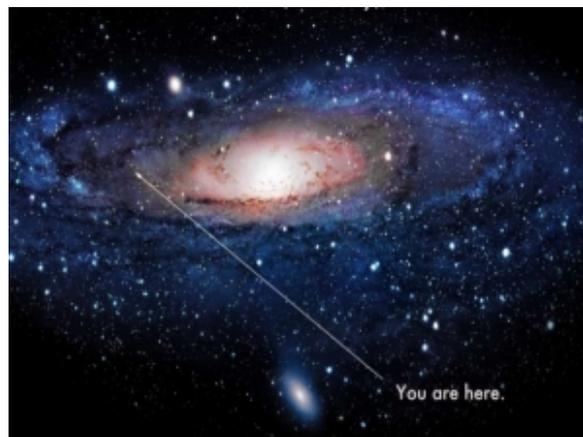
Until we Malaysians and our leaders understand and truly appreciate this and learn to respect one another's race and religion and learn to downplay personal and selfish agendas to create the kind of aforementioned kind of environment, the TN50 initiative, whatever grand plans it dreams up, will be a futile exercise.



We are not special

Let's face it. We are not special. We like to think we are, that our goals, rants, aspirations, and struggles really matter. But we are stardust, as [Neil deGrasse Tyson](#) reminds us. Sounds poetic but it is also true. We are made up of molecules constructed from the crucibles of stars from deep space. When these stars exploded, they ejected their elements, becoming building blocks upon which increasingly heavier elements could be formed and finally combining with one another to form matter: new stars, planets - and, yes, little us too.

Look at Earth, our home. A pale dot amidst billions and trillions of other planets out there. A mote of dust, as the late [Carl Sagan](#) remarked. And if the entire 4.6 billion years of Earth's history was condensed into a 24-hour clock, humanity's history would emerge only less than two minutes before midnight. That is how insignificant we are compared to the grand scheme of the universe. Our 80-or-so years of life on Earth is but a negligible fraction of time.



“That’s here. That’s home. That’s us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world.” - Carl Sagan, in his 1994 book, “The Pale Blue Dot: A Vision of the Human Future in Space.”

But we like to be extraordinary. Today's sages tell us to. They feed upon our narcissism that yearns to be extraordinary, to do the extraordinary, and to live extraordinary lives. But the advice to be extraordinary is itself contradictory. If everyone was extraordinary, then no one, by definition, would be extraordinary because no one would stand out from the rest.

So, yes, we are not special.

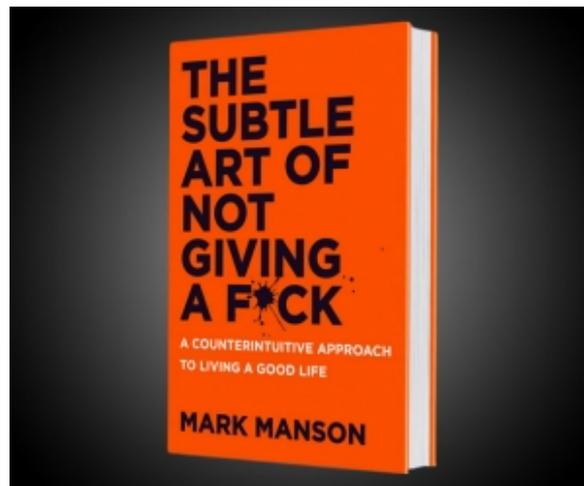
But that should not depress us. Instead, it should drive us to appreciate that our time on Earth is very short and finite. We may not be special, that on the scale of the universe, we are insignificant and our lives a fleeting moment in history, but this does not mean our lives should not matter. The idea that we are not special should humble us. It should challenge us to re-orientate our lives to make it count with what little time we have left, that our lives will make a significant impact on those around us. Because we have lived, others have been changed and have benefited.

So, what then is our purpose in life? What is our legacy, our immortality project? Our life's purpose is a compass that helps us to distinguish between the important, trivial, and irrelevant in our lives. It separates the wheat from the chaff. It distinguishes between struggles and aspirations that matter, those that deserve our full energy, attention, time, and money and those that we should ignore or at least, emphasize less. Our purpose in life liberates us because it provides us guidance, that we are dedicating our lives on goals or pursuits more noble than ourselves.

But it is not all psychology and pep talk. Having a strong purpose in life cascades down to even at a biological level. A 2013 study by Steve Cole from the University of California found that people with more hedonic lifestyles had genetic expressions similar to those seen in people suffering from loneliness and stress, compared to those with people choosing more eudemonic lifestyle, a life driven beyond self-gratification. And brain scans of people with a higher eudemonic lifestyle showed lower stress response than those with lesser eudemonic lifestyle. In other words, people with long term life purpose live longer and are healthier.

But thinking about our purpose in life, let alone setting one, is hard. It is scary - and as blogger [Mark Manson](#) wrote in his book "[The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck](#)", we don't do it because we have no clue what we are doing.

The late [Steve R. Covey](#) in his book "[The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#)" probably said it best on how we can find our purpose in life: "[*Imagine attending your own funeral*] ... What would you like each of the speakers to say about you and your life? ... What character would you like them to have seen in you? What contributions, what achievements would you want them to remember? ... What difference would you like to have made in [*people's*] lives?"



The Subtle Art of Not Giving a F*ck
by Mark Manson.

Our deaths are inevitable, but rather than dreading it, our deaths should warn us of wasting our lives. But change is difficult and fraught with pain, suffering, and struggles. Athletics, for instance, are willing to bear the tedium and pain of training because they know the outcome of their struggles is becoming fitter, stronger, and faster. No one likes pain, but people are willing to face and endure it provided the outcome is worthwhile and fulfills their purpose in life. Mark Manson says it best: our self-worth isn't a measure of how we feel about our positive experiences but about how we feel about our negative experiences. Pain is telling us to pay attention and to learn. Our pain, if we respond correctly and are willing to learn, initiates meaningful change. Trying to pursue a pain-free life is instead foolish because it avoids learning and meaningful change, and it leads to inconsequential and perhaps even selfish, self-indulgent lives.

Achieving the extraordinary is then not a target by itself but an outcome, perhaps even by accident, due to our pursuit of our aspirations. We may dedicate our lives in helping the poor, for instance, and our efforts might gain us recognition, awards, and even a celebrity-like status, but they are an outcome, not the goal, of

our purpose.



Why am I here? (c) freshideas @
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But what characterizes a meaningful life purpose? Obviously, identifying one's purpose in life is highly specific to individuals. Mark Manson however offers that a person's purpose in life should encompass good values, and such values are those that are reality-based, socially-constructive, and immediate and controllable. Honesty is an example of a good value, says Mark, because it is real, it benefits others, and it is under our control, whereas popularity isn't because it is out of our control (*i.e.*, we need to convince others to like us), may not be real because people may not really see us like we want them to, and being popular is, *well*, selfish, indulgent, and does little to help others.

[Alfred Hitchcock](#) once said, "Drama is life with the boring bits cut out." So, if our lives were to be made into a TV drama, what would our story be, after all the boring, doldrums bits of our lives cut out? Did our lives matter?

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