

Situated Ignoramuses?

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Reply to Susan Dieleman's Review of Sullivan, Shannon and Nancy Tuana, eds. *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. 284 pp, and Proctor, Robert N. and Londa Schiebinger, eds. *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008. 312 pp.

This is not a critical reply to Susan Dieleman's comprehensive and thoughtful review of these two remarkable volumes. Her reading of these works so closely reflects my own that I would be hard-pressed to find differences sufficient to warrant such a response and furthermore, I've been granted some latitude in producing the first ever reply to a review, so I've decided to use this space for other, perhaps more constructive, purposes. That said, anyone interested in reading what will undoubtedly become two profoundly generative works in the exciting emerging field of agnotology would be very well served by reading Dieleman's succinct and insightful reviews, especially as an aid to choosing which to read first. As a philosopher, like Dieleman, I gravitate more to theory while welcoming succinct illuminating examples and I therefore find all of Sullivan and Tuana's edited volume and Part III (Theorizing Ignorance) in Proctor's and Schiebinger's book more to my purposes. However, I also agree with Dieleman in suggesting that when used in courses — from undergraduate to doctoral — *Agnotology* may well be the better first choice as it grounds initial discussions of ignorance in examples which can then invite and set up a more theoretical reading of *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*.

To my mind anyone toiling in epistemology would likely benefit from reading their own work through any or all of the articles in both of these books. The study of ignorance provides an important new point of entry to a wide range of epistemological issues, some of which have been pivoting around an *S knows that P* centre for decades with minimal discernable forward progress. Reading the same problems through an agnotological lens — *S does not know that P* — may well breathe new life into some of these intractable debates. For example, the problem of indoctrination has plagued philosophers of education for more than one hundred years, to the extent that the discourse on this subject is likely the largest body of work in the whole discipline.¹ This mountain of research represents a seemingly endless and fractious debate around *S knows that P* — or, what qualifies as “knowledge worthy of the name” (Lang 1971; 2007; 2008; 2009). I believe that shifting the focus of the discourse from what is being taught (epistemology) to what is not being taught (agnotology) holds great promise for breaking the stalemate on this issue.

Agnotology may also be of invaluable assistance in advancing work on philosophical argumentation and engagement. For example, feminist theorists have long since tabled

¹ I have identified more than 100 articles and books on this subject in philosophy of education, as of 2008.

their exasperation on their inability to engage traditional philosophers in their work. Standing on analytical philosophical principles of argumentation, traditional philosophers seem enveloped in a kind of anti-feminist Teflon® coating, deflecting any challenges to traditional arguments without even reading them in their entirety, in some cases (Lang 2010). An agnotological argument may offer a way of shifting the debate to focus on what ignorances may be serving traditionalists and how ignorance of their ignorance prevents them from engaging with new knowledge.

Although there are many other possible examples others could cite as potentially benefiting from an agnotological focus, in the space I have left I introduce what I believe is a critical area of agnotological research that needs work, lest the emerging discourse trend toward the flatlining indoctrination debate, noted above. I refer to the brief section on “situated knowers,” offered by Linda Martin Alcoff as part of her useful organization of epistemologies of ignorance. Related to chapters by Lorraine Code, Sandra Harding and Charles Mills, Alcoff suggests three respective foci for analyzing the ways ignorance is produced: 1) via individual *situated knowers*; 2) via group identities and, 3) via larger systems (Alcoff 2007, p. 40). This micro to macro spectrum is enhanced further by Code’s overall conception of an ecology of ignorance sustained by “webs of distortion and error” (Code 2007, p. 214) in that it suggests dynamic interrelationships among agnotological locations. Rightfully cautioned by several authors to not expect a perfect correlation between knowledge construction practices and supposed inverse agnotological practices, I would not suggest that an ecology of ignorance is congruent in all ways with Code’s larger vision of knowledge construction detailed in *Ecological Thinking* (Code 2006). However, as a Codean scholar I am drawn to explore the beginnings of something I would call “situated ignorances,” which I suspect might describe, however loosely, the inverse of what I consider Code’s greatest contribution to epistemological research — her extensive work on situated knowledges.

Alcoff’s four-point summary of situatedness, from which she draws her claim that “the epistemic implication of any epistemic situation is determined by the context of the object of inquiry,” links situatedness to knowledge and experience in matters of who knows best in a particular circumstance (Alcoff 2007, p. 42). This is a useful application of situatedness relative to ignorance and I am curious to see how it might expand at the meta-level, to see how constructed ignorance insulates knowers from difficult knowledges, seemingly providing its own inoculation against the latter; and further, how the situatedness of a knower informs groups and institutions, ecologically. Coming at the subject of situatedness from a modestly different direction helps me focus the issues more in meta-epistemological terms.

Given self-imposed limitations on my latitude for “reply,” what follows is little more than a reflection on situated knowers that formed while I was reading these books, in the hope this exercise will serve as an impetus for a full paper on the subject of situated ignorances.

Epistemologies of Situated Knowledges (ESK)

Suggesting something like “situated ignorances” requires some minimal foregrounding in ESK. Knowledge does not transcend knowers and it cannot be transmitted intact from one person to another, as Lorraine Code and others have demonstrated compellingly and repeatedly;² relatedly, as Alcoff also claims, individual knowers are not universally, innately, interchangeable but rather “persons are the creations of other persons” (Code 1991, p. 85; Alcoff 2007). Thus, knowledge is inevitably mediated by individual knowers according to their situatedness; it exists only as embodied with socially-constructed persons and as such knowledge is always partial and incomplete. More than a description of social location or “a place from which to know,” situatedness is better understood as an achieved stance unique to each knower. With Code and Donna Haraway (Haraway 2004/1988, p. 92), I view situatedness as a place *to* know, an achieved epistemic stance that it is “mappable.” Doing so not only involves taking into account the multiply-intersecting ways in which knowers are situated—historically, politically, culturally, linguistically, sexually, among many more, including knowers’ power and privilege—but also the ways each person has internally constructed a conception of knowing itself. To find out *what* a person knows, one needs to know *how* a person knows; because, importantly, as Alcoff points out, using Code, it does not follow that all knowers are epistemically equal since they are “at once limited and enabled by the specificities of their locations” (Alcoff 2007, Op. cit.).

Clearly, approaching knowers as individually multiply-situated complicates the epistemological issues. Whereas traditional *S knows that P* epistemology aims to eliminate subjective particularities and to universalize knowers and knowledge, epistemologies of situated knowledges require attention to differences and legitimizes for inclusion and for interrogation the subjectivity of knowers. Contrary to traditional arguments claiming that the latter precludes any possibility of objectivity, Code, for example, argues compellingly to the contrary, claiming that a greater objectivity and better truths are possible on epistemologies of situated knowledges (Code 2006, p. 62).

When knowledge is understood as being unique to and uniquely constructed by each embodied knower, it loses its singular universal status and becomes plural, with each knower’s knowledges unique to themselves. At the same time, in crude terms at least, each person’s knowledges become the raw epistemological material that generate an ecology of knowing that informs and encompasses social groups, systems and institutions. Taken in aggregate and considering the interdependence and interconnectedness of knowers, the larger epistemological ecology is well-described as a

² See any or all of: Code, L. (1995). *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations*. New York and London, Routledge; Code, L. (2006). *Ecological Thinking: The politics of epistemic location*. Oxford, Oxford University Press; Lang, J. C. (2010). “Feminist Epistemologies of Situated Knowledges: Implications for Rhetorical Argumentation.” *Informal Logic* 30 (2): 309-334; Lang, J. C. (2011). “Epistemologies of Situated Knowledges: “Troubling” Knowledge in Philosophy of Education.” *Educational Theory* 61(1): 75-96.

social or epistemological imaginary, one that suggests the limits of what can be known and how it can be known.³ Thus, the knowledges constructed by individual knowers in relationship with their groups, larger and smaller, inform the entire epistemological ecology—or imaginary. These simplified claims are key to understanding the notion of situated knowledges and I share Code’s view that they are revolutionary in their philosophical implications (Code 2006, p. 3).

Epistemologies of Situated Ignorances?

Much is rightly made of the power of constructed ignorance to prevent the knowledge of historical facts, as examined in *Agnotology*, parts I and II. I note important observations that archaeologists would systematically ignore indigenous evidence, for example, or that history books deliberately delete stories of racial violence. These are understandably the primary focus of social epistemologists, but how would these critiques be affected by implications of situated knowledges? In *Agnotology*, especially, I see many works ostensibly based on broad assumptions that facts and their supporting evidence are accessible to all knowers and that ignorance is mostly about knowers being shielded from the facts and evidence, in any of many different ways.

Yet facts, as Code, especially, claims strongly, do not self-announce; they must be brought into existence; they must have “makers” (Code 1995, p. 168). Just as agnotology addresses some forms of ignorance, for example, in terms of historicity — one cannot know what has yet to happen, for example — it may be necessary to examine the role of situatedness to see if knowers have been constructed such that they can “see” the facts, recognize them as facts, and isolate them, individuate them, and “know them” in order to reverse ignorance.

Perhaps most intriguing to me, at least, is the extent to which situated knowers contextualized in epistemic imaginaries are able to *identify* their own ignorance, to acknowledge what they do not yet know. For surely ignorance of ignorance represents a major barrier to expanding a restricted eye’s view and thus is a barrier to recognizing and addressing the moral issues inevitably bound up in this discussion. This problem seems endemic to a range of contexts, in my view. For example, presenting white racists with hitherto hidden information that to others clearly illustrates the basis for racist claims does not guarantee that an individual white racist will be able to “see” the evidence. The question of how this ignorance acts as an insulating shield seems necessarily to involve interrogation of the subjects’ situatedness.

³ See, especially, pp. 22, 28-36 in Code, L. (2006). *Ecological Thinking: The politics of epistemic location*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Questions suggesting further research

I found these two volumes on ignorance to be among the most stimulating and potentially generative reading I've encountered since I began work on epistemologies of situated knowledges. Singularly and in aggregate, these authors have raised — in my mind, at least — several careers worth of questions, one or two of which I hope to explore myself: If situated knowers' knowledges are necessarily partial and incomplete, what then of ignorance? Does it transcend knowers? Can two different knowers share identical ignorance or does each person's ignorance reflect their situatedness? If knowledges can be imbued in the process of the construction of one's subjectivity as well as achieved by each knower in the process of applying his or her own understandings of rational autonomy, are ignorances of knowledges also co-imbued and/or co-constructed simultaneously? In short, how else do epistemologies of situated knowledges inform agnology?

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