

Wanting to Believe and the Burden of Knowing

Phil Olson, Virginia Tech

Ignorance is not always a bad thing. Running against the grain of traditional epistemology's insistence upon the value of knowledge and the deficiency of ignorance, growing numbers of scholars have insisted, over the past ten years, that "the study of ignorance is a valuable tool for liberatory epistemologies" (Tuana and Sullivan 2006). Ignorance may refer not only to a *lack* of knowledge, but also to active and strategic knowledge practices that serve the interests of privileged social groups, at the expense of non-dominant groups. Ignorance wields a veiled power. Several authors have sought to expose this power, and to critique it in the name of those who are oppressed by the powerfully ignorant (see, for example, Olson and Gillman 2013, Sullivan and Tuana 2007, Sullivan 2006, Harding 2006, Ortega 2006). But others have identified in ignorance a less insidious power. As Cythia Townley points out, ignorance also "contributes positively to epistemic responsibility" (2006, 38). Advising us to resist the "global devaluation of ignorance," Townley defends ignorance as a source of instrumental and non-instrumental epistemic values (*ibid.*). It is the positive contribution of ignorance to epistemic responsibility that I wish to explore in this posting. In particular, I wish to suggest that more of us embrace the *oppositional power* of ignorance against unjust distributions of epistemic responsibility, and to ask how we might collectively deploy this oppositional power.

In a greeting sent to this collective on December 24, 2013, Steve Fuller praises us for avoiding "topics like 'trust', 'testimony' and 'expertise'," adding that he dislikes these topics "because they suggest that someone else — not oneself — should be taking responsibility for knowledge claims." Yet I *want* to believe that epistemic agents (individually and collectively) may rightly refuse to take direct responsibility for certain knowledge claims, and for certain processes of knowledge production. I *want* to believe that we may rightly relegate that responsibility to others. That is not to say that the powerfully ignorant may rightly refuse to take responsibility for the epistemic habits by which they (we) oppress the disenfranchised. Indeed, I agree with Townley that "[s]ome ignorance should be remedied; some ignorance is harmful" (2006, 38). Ignorance that perpetuates unjust distributions of epistemic responsibility and entitlement, for example, ought to be undone. But refusing to know, or refusing to accept the *burden to know*, may effect an oppositional power against unjust distributions of epistemic burdens.

At the same time that more and more philosophers, social psychologists, economists, and cognitive scientists assert the *limits* of human cognitive potential, citizens are being asked to bear increasing epistemic burdens. *Caveat emptor. Caveat cives!* We are everywhere advised to be on our guard: against predatory lenders, against drug companies and agribusiness, against physicians and medical researchers, against identity thieves, patent trolls, government surveillance, teachers, co-workers, friends, families—even against ourselves. Advocacy groups counsel us: "Be prepared," "Be informed," "Don't be duped." I worry that these advices rearticulate — despite their efforts, at times, to combat — the neo-liberal mantra of individual responsibility. Friedrich Hayek built his classical liberal, free market philosophy upon an *epistemic* principle: that "individual reason is very limited and imperfect," and that it is folly to believe that "Reason, with a capital R,

is always fully and equally available to all humans and that everything which man [sic.] achieves is the direct result of, and therefore subject to, the control of individual reason” (1984, 136). It is with some understandable (I hope) trepidation that I venture, “Hayek was right!” But accepting the epistemic premise does not commit us to agreeing with Hayek and his neoliberal successors’ claim to have discovered in the free market the best surrogate for enlightenment rationality. In fact, we have reason to mistrust the market, which we *know* houses a profoundly powerful and harmful ignorance.

One of my colleagues has written extensively on the perils of the knowledge production and knowledge distribution involved in genetic screening (Zallen 2008). Perhaps the moral, emotional, and practical costs of possessing certain kinds of genetic information reveal the value of a studious and resolute *commitment to ignorance*. Consider, too, the potential power in the words “No habla ingles,” when uttered unapologetically in certain contexts. These words can exert tremendous *oppositional power*. After all, why should one apologize for *not knowing* English? These words can expose unjust distributions of epistemic responsibility and challenge the unconscious habits of the powerfully ignorant.

I say I *want* to believe that we may rightly refuse to bear the burden to know. I am not yet prepared to assert what I want to assert. In the meantime, I hope some of us will give some thought, as Fuller rightly suggests, to “the ‘we’ who should be having [this belief]” (Christmas Greeting 2013). Identifying the various “we(s)” implicated in embracing the oppositional power of ignorance is one part of the process of developing a thoroughgoing study of the distribution of epistemic burdens. I am interested in the ways that epistemic burdens are distributed socially (a descriptive task), and in understanding the norms that ought to govern those distributions (a normative task). What sorts of things (individuals, groups, institutions, technologies, etc.) can bear epistemic burdens? What makes a burden *epistemic* rather than moral or prudential? Under what conditions is it appropriate (and when is it inappropriate) to withhold knowledge, to burden *others* with epistemic responsibilities, or to reject epistemic burdens? I imagine that a just distribution of epistemic burdens will entail that each of us has a different degree and kind of responsibility with respect to various processes of knowledge production, and with respect to the outcomes of those processes. If this is true, I do not see how we could do without careful studies of trust, testimony, and expertise — even if we do find prevailing analyses of these concepts unsatisfactory.

Contact details: prolson@vt.edu

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