Ignare Aude! *(Dare to be Ignorant! – Pace Kant)*
James C. Lang, University of Toronto

Review of Townley, Cynthia. 2011. *A defense of ignorance: Its value for knowers and roles in feminist and social epistemologies*. Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books.

Agnotologists must surely be pleased with the recent flurry of publications on ignorance with Firestein's 2012 book, *Ignorance: How it drives science*, following hard upon Cynthia Townley's 2011 offering. Importantly, both of these works benefit to greater or lesser extent from two important recent compilations on ignorance: Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana's *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, (2007) and Robert Proctor and Londa Schiebinger's *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance* (2008).[1] In her review of Firestein's book, Lorraine Code notes that his use of Proctor's work in supporting his own is overstating the case, and that the "overlap is quite minimal" (2012, 53-54).[2] Firestein's use of ignorance as a "heuristic device," as Code puts it, is a very interesting one-dimensional application of the concept. His book is a delightful read and laudable in its accessibility to non-scientists like me, but his point that science is driven by what is not known is made early on, and little more on ignorance itself beyond interesting examples of the same lies in the balance of the book. To a significant extent, Townley's book addresses a great deal of what Code notes are the understandable absences in Firestein's. Understandable because, as Code graciously says, Firestein is not writing for philosophers and I agree; it would be unfair of me to take comparisons to Townley's approach to ignorance further. There are several other good reasons for philosophers to read Firestein's book, however, not least in his disavowing pretentions to objectivity that logical positivists sometimes aspire to in their emulation of scientific knowledge.

Townley makes more productive use of the two collections, named above, although as she writes at the outset, her book is based in large part on her 2000 Ph.D. dissertation and thus it predates both volumes. This book fills important gaps in epistemological research on ignorance—the most salient being the absence of prior attention to ignorance at all in mainstream epistemology. Her arguments in defense of ignorance are complex and compelling, and although their purpose is quite different, they can be read as companions to other philosophical arguments that valorize ignorance found in the two collections.

For example, in *Social Theories of Ignorance*, his contribution to the Proctor and Shiebinger collection, Michael J. Smithson notes that ignorance is "an essential component in social relations," and that ignorance is "not invariably a disadvantage for

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[1] See Susan Dieleman's comprehensive review of both: Dieleman, Susan. 2012. Review Essay: 'Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance' and 'Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance'. *The Social Epistemology and Reply Collective*.

[2] Code also corrects Firestein on the etymology of the term "agnotology," noting that Proctor does not claim to have invented the term but rather that he borrowed it from linguist, Iain Boal. As I have made the same mistake in one of my presentations I, too, stand corrected.

the ignoramus" (2008, 209). To the extent that ignorance can also be a function of forgetting, Smithson cites William James, who "proposed that forgetting is just as important as remembering."[3] Smithson claims that abstraction and classification of information would be extremely difficult were persons to remember all the information they absorbed in their lifetime (220). In her article in Sullivan and Tuana's book, Alison Bailey argues for the merits of "strategic ignorance" as a strategy for oppressed groups, "as a way of gaining information, sabotaging work, avoiding or delaying harm, and preserving a sense of self" (2007, 77). Of course, these works co-exist with the majority of current research that focuses on the harm-inducing forms of ignorance — especially *constructed* ignorance — the kinds that insulate racists and sexists, for example, from knowledge of the harms in which they are complicit.

Townley acknowledges the importance of studies of harmful ignorance and she addresses the latter in her final chapter, but her overall goals are much more epistemologically fundamental and intended to engage traditional epistemologists who have yet to consider the legitimacy of studying ignorance. Townley's route to ignorance involves first defending the claim that "understanding relationships is integral to understanding epistemic practices" then by arguing — against epistemophilia [4] — that "epistemic values are not reducible to the value of increasing knowledge," and finally, "that ignorance is not merely inescapable for epistemic agents, but is valuable" (x).

My review of Townley is primarily an overview of her work rather than a critique, in part because I am not sufficiently expert in traditional epistemology to adequately critique those aspects, but also because in those areas where I am reasonably expert I find little with which I could take issue. Townley's work is wonderfully dense and deeply rich in content. Reviewing it in a few pages is challenging, so I beg the author's and readers' indulgence for my choices of the parts to highlight.

In Chapter One, Townley challenges sedimented notions of valorized epistemic independence with the idea that most knowledge is created within epistemic communities. Using Lorraine Code's works on epistemic relationality [5] she claims that the traditional bias toward independently acquired versus dependently acquired knowledge is in error, as is the assumption that even complex epistemic interactions can be reduced to knowledge transmissions.[6] Rather, Townley claims, when knowledge is shared within epistemic communities, truths are not typically subjected to universal

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[3] In this paraphrase Smithson cites James's *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. 1 (New York, 1890)

[4] Lorraine Code's term which describes traditional epistemologists valorization of knowledge — understood as morally neutral — as the only epistemic good.

[5] Townley references four of Code's works: *Epistemic responsibility* (Hanover, NH, University Press of New England, 1987); *What can she know?* (Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1991); *Rhetorical Spaces: Essays on Gendered Locations* (New York and London, Routledge, 1995); and *Ecological Thinking: The politics of epistemic location* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2006).

[6] Elsewhere, also on Lorraine Code and Donna Haraway, especially, I have challenged the notion that knowledge can be transmitted at all, arguing that it is constructed or assembled relationally by situated and embodied knowers. See: Lang, James C. (2011). Epistmologies of Situated Knowledges: "Troubling" Knowledge in Philosophy of Education. *Educational Theory* 61 (1): 75-96.

validation nor are the interactions about maximizing amounts of relevant truth conveyed. Rather, relational knowing is bound up with non-reducible — or non-propositional — knowledge about the other person, which assumes and implicates ignorance as well. She links these claims to the importance of ignorance by showing that what is not shared "is an ineliminable part of responsible engagement with other knowers" (18).

In Chapter Two, Townley explores further the implications of the shift from traditional belief that direct knowledge is best while dependence on the knowledge of others is of lesser value, to examining ignorance in the context of interdependent epistemic agents. Since dependence relies on testimony and trust, she claims, it necessarily acknowledges ignorance — e.g., *I don't know X, but I trust that you do* (my terms). To defend these claims, Townley shows that non-veritistic trust does not treat other epistemic agents instrumentally. She acknowledges that because trust inevitably means taking someone at her word it is problematic for epistemic virtue accounts, where ignorance must be eliminated or reduced by filling gaps in evidence. Contrasting trust with reliance, she claims that trust goes beyond requiring a person to report accurately and sincerely, to include expectations that a person will not breach the trust that is developed in their relationship. What is lost in evidential support, she claims, is gained by "greater explanatory power" (27). She relates ignorance to trust by claiming that trust requires an acknowledgement of ignorance as a way to overcome ignorance, to gain knowledge while precluding certain kinds of checking — because said checking is inconsistent with a trusting attitude. Nevertheless, trusting does not include being foolish or oblivious nor does it require abandoning responsible agency; but the extent to which critical faculties are employed is constrained, or it is no longer trust. Townley differentiates trust from reliance in that reliance need not involve a relationship between the knowers whereas trust "shapes the way we see the trusted person, and the way we interpret relevant facts and evidence related to that trustful context" (31).

Townley addresses the "gullibility objection" to trust by arguing against Elizabeth Fricker's understanding of trust as "indiscriminate," because it fails at ascribing reliability. Townley claims that eschewing critical assessment does not necessarily indicate gullibility, bringing an example from Robert Audi who describes the way trust can develop via conversation, as a person comes to know another better and develop a trusting relationship. Townley acknowledges that trust can be dangerous, creating vulnerability to exploitation, but it remains part "of the repertoire of a competent epistemic agent" (40). She concludes:

> The reasons for cultivating the conditions for trust, credibility and authority are that these are constitutive parts of epistemic agency, valuable in their own right, not reducible to veritistic outcomes, and not to be substituted even if equally good veritistic outcomes were available. (50)

In Chapter Three, Townley takes her argument for epistemic dependence to the institutional level where she argues that "at the level of the division of epistemic labor, ignorance, in simple, selective and invested forms, is theoretically and practically important" (55). Where power accrues to knowledge, the relationship between ignorance

and knowledge is more complex than one merely occupying a level above the other. The power of knowledge can be used to designate others as ignorant and thus excluding them from power, yet as epistemic labor is divided, ignorance of the other person's designated epistemic labor is assumed: One cannot know all that is required to know, so some epistemic jobs are outsourced, as it were. In this context the potential for epistemic injustices is considerable and these may involve more than mere exclusion from the occasions to gain knowledge, to include epistemic discredit or absence of credence. Thus the members who make up an epistemic community need to be known — how they see themselves and their responsibilities to the community because, Townley claims, "selective ignorance is inevitable, but which patterns of knowledge and ignorance emerge is contingent" (59). The best approach to epistemic division of labor, therefore, is not to simply produce the most knowledge possible, in aggregate, as it were. Rather, to achieve a better understanding of epistemic responsibilities one should add to the analysis of knowledge requirements the "patterns of ignorance—not only what is known and unknown … but also how knowledge transactions take place, who gets to count as a knower … who does or does not have access to authoritative positions within these roles" (61).

Townley explores knowledge as a collective enterprise that necessarily includes a role for ignorance, which challenges the dominant view that experts armed with rigorously derived evidence are responsible only to the facts. She cites Sandra Harding's initiative in which marginalized persons are included in knowledge production as a new way of understanding responsible knowledge making practices. Knowers are here theorized not as knowledge collectors but as cooperative agents. Epistemic vice then, rather than being viewed as merely a failure to acquire or share knowledge can now include failure to credit and acknowledge other knowers, and it can include the vice of arrogance. Whereas epistemic humility can speak to the importance of attending to ignorance — for example, knowing that one's knowledge of another person, especially, is necessarily partial — epistemic arrogance becomes a vice for the failure to acknowledge the same.[7]

In Chapter Four, Townley examines some ways her arguments intersect with related issues in feminist epistemologies. She speaks of the role of ignorance in problems arising from pluralism by attending to relationships among knowledge, privilege and power. In a powerful statement on ignorance and privilege, she notes that "recognizing a space of ignorance that is *not* for me to fill with knowledge is intrinsically part of my responsible empathy" (original emphasis, 101). However, recognizing one's own ignorance as serving socially unjust ends is also moral territory. Citing Marilyn Frye, Lorraine Code and Charles Mills in this chapter, she succinctly skewers ignorance of privilege:

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[7] Some recent and important work on "arrogant perception" extends the harms of epistemic arrogance to include the diminishment of the Other by assuming an identity which the Other then uses in part to construct her own subjectivity. Maureen Ford's work in this is particularly relevant Ford, Maureen. 2004. Considering the Standpoints of Differently-situated Others: Teachers and Arrogant Perception. In *Philosophy of Education 2004*, edited by Christopher Higgins, 337-345, Urbana: Philosophy of Education Society.

> Our knowledge of social hierarchies and of other groups is lacking in
> many cases because our justifications are self-serving, our reasoning
> distorted, our observation inaccurate, our access restricted, our advice
> faulty, and the like. Ignorance of privilege itself serves to entrench and
> hide privilege. (100)

Epistemic arrogance derives from privilege and "aligns with power." It takes several forms, not least of which is the assumption that acquiring knowledge from someone is an entitlement but even more damaging is an arrogance that implies there is nothing to be learned from another.

In conclusion, Townley offers novel and compelling new arguments to challenge foundational mainstream epistemological assumptions — especially regarding relationality, testimony, trust and reliance. In touching on what I feel are key features of her important book, I have scarcely hinted at the complex and detailed arguments Townley employs in defense of her claims, which I believe will give traditional epistemologists much to consider and which will also provide yet more solid scholarship in defense of feminist epistemologies.

Contact details: jim@jlang.com

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