Against Ideal Theory Ignorance

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Daniel R. DeNicola's *Understanding Ignorance* delivers on its promise to provide "an extended, exploratory essay" on ignorance (28). This exploration, after an introductory section, traverses four spatial metaphors: ignorance as place, as boundary, as limit, and as horizon. Each spatial metaphor reveals, according to the author, something different about knowledge, about ignorance, and about the relationship between them.

Navigating Ignorance

In Part II: Ignorance as Place (chapters 3 and 4), DeNicola considers the idea that ignorance is sometimes understood as a place in which we dwell, like Plato's cave (chapter 3) or the Garden of Eden (chapter 4). Though ignorance is conceived as something to be left behind in both cases, these departures are differently valenced. Whereas Plato's cave is a "horror" (51), the Garden is a "moral ideal" (51).

Thus, departing Plato's cave is considered a good thing, allowing the escaped prisoners to come to know, through the process of learning, the True, the Beautiful, and the Good. Leaving the Garden of Eden, on the other hand, is considered wholly negative, representing the loss of innocence the garden represented. DeNicola wants to point out, however, that innocence is not always a good thing, and its loss is not always a bad thing.

The innocence Adam and Eve experience so long as they remain in the Garden is not chosen – how could it be? – but is thrust upon them. So long as one exists in this state of innocence and ignorance, one is at risk of moral immaturity, the vices of insensitivity, obtuseness, and silliness, and the possibility of exploitation (53-54). DeNicola's comparison of the cave and the Garden demonstrate his claim that "awareness, experience, and knowledge are good things" (55), and that innocence, and the ignorance it entails, is not always virtuous.

When we dwell within ignorance, as do the prisoners in the cave and Adam and Eve in the Garden, we do not know that or what we do not know. Our ignorance can only be recognized from a place of knowledge, once we've left the cave or the Garden (35). However, when we dwell in knowledge, "we confront ignorance at the boundary of what is known" (62).

Thus, in Part III (chapters 5-8), DeNicola argues we can also understand ignorance as a boundary. A boundary, he contends, "implies that which it excludes" (137); it points beyond knowledge to that which is unknown. It also sets up a "frontier," which "suggests the need for exploration or defense and the possibility of alteration or advancement of the boundary" (66).

This is an unfortunately colonialist understanding of ignorance, derived in part from the example that opens chapter 5 of the "ornately framed" 1472 Ptolemaic map of the world DeNicola has hanging in his office, with the words *Terra Incognita* on three sides. DeNicola sees in this map, he claims, "a wondrous interplay of knowledge and ignorance" (65). Insofar

as one can place themselves in the position of the cartographer, it demonstrates that "we" dwell with ignorance; that "our" knowledge is bounded by it (67).

The Bounds of Knowledge

Boundaries, DeNicola contends, can be natural (considered in chapter 5) or artificial (considered in chapter 6). Natural boundaries create what DeNicola calls "simple ignorance," which includes various kinds of "not-knowledge," including prediction, the forgotten, the unknowable, and so on (71-72). These kinds of not-knowing can be remedied by learning, since "[a]n immense subset of our recognized ignorance comprises things it is *possible* to learn" (74, emphasis in original). Failure to engage in the task of learning, therefore, is the only hindrance to pushing beyond the natural boundaries of knowledge and thereby expanding our epistemic maps.

However, some boundaries are not natural but artificial; they are constructed in order to prevent knowledge. DeNicola calls this "nescience" to designate "what we or other have *determined* we are not to know" (79, emphasis in original). He identifies five forms of nescience, which in most cases can be both self-imposed and other-imposed.

The first is *rational ignorance*, which refers to the ignorance that results from calculating that the effort required to learn (or teach) something is not worth the knowledge such learning (or teaching) would produce. The second is *strategic ignorance*, which refers to those situations where not knowing something is more advantageous (to be morally or legally exculpable, for example) than knowing it. The third is *willful ignorance*, which often involves the willful avoidance of certain knowledge (such as evidence of infidelity or information about traumatizing events in one's past).

The fourth is *secrecy*, which includes privacy and confidentiality, and which imposes barriers to what certain individuals or groups should and should not know (about, for example, one's clients or about classified government documents). The fifth is *forbidden knowledge*, which implies a barrier drawn paternalistically by an authority around knowledge that is forbidden specifically because it is defiling or harmful (as in sexual taboos or off-limits research topics).

Chapters 7 and 8, where DeNicola examines questions about the ethics of ignorance that understanding ignorance as boundary raises, round out Part III of the book. He argues, in these chapters, that there exists an epistemic obligation to "disrupt privileged ignorance and the conceptual framework that creates it" (114), but also that ignorance "has its uses" (133). Thus, the virtuous knower understands that knowledge and ignorance are related in complicated ways, and that both must be considered within an epistemic community.

In Part IV (chapters 9 and 10), DeNicola contrasts the understanding of ignorance as boundary presented in previous chapters to an understanding of ignorance as limit. Whereas a boundary "implies that which it excludes," with a limit, "there is only a sense of something having run its course, finish and exhaustion, the end, whether in completion or incompleteness" (137).

In other words, one can transgress boundaries, and the boundaries themselves can shift, but limits are final. He contends that there are limits to what we can know, and beyond those limits is the unknowable. Such epistemic limits can be reached in two ways: by completion or by an exhaustion of capacity. Epistemic completion is captured in the idea of omniscience, where "everything would be known that could be known" (138).

Epistemic exhaustion refers to the limited biological, conceptual, and theoretical capacities of actual epistemic agents and communities: our ability to know is limited by our imperfect memory and sensory systems, by the unknowability of counterfactual conditions, and by paradoxical phenomena that elude even our most sophisticated scientific theories.

Given their unavoidability, we have learned how to manage these epistemic limits and the challenges they present. In chapter 10, DeNicola examines how rituals, inquiry, insurance, the use of statistical tools, and other methods, have been developed specifically to deal with the ignorance such limits present (157-176).

Our Limits or How Far We Choose to Go

DeNicola concludes *Understanding Ignorance* with his final spatial metaphor in **Part V**: Ignorance as Horizon. Though similar to boundaries and limits, horizons are distinct in that they are "apparent and perspectival;" horizons are "relative to our position and our visionary resources" (179). Yet horizons also beckon us, he thinks, and this is a positive outgrowth of ignorance; it motivates "ingenuity, inventiveness, originality, spontaneity" (186). This is why philosophy is particularly valuable; it "rejoices in its questions" (189), questions that can extend the "horizonal span" of ignorance (185).

This insight leads to DeNicola's conclusion, an epilogue that summarizes the specifically epistemological implications of his exploration, which amount to an argument for expanding epistemology as it has been traditionally understood and practiced. He writes, "we learn a great deal by thinking of epistemology as an arena of value theory and ethical concern" (208) – an argument, it's worth noting, that has been made by many critics of "traditional" epistemology, over the last few decades at least, such as feminist epistemologists.

At various points throughout *Understanding Ignorance,* DeNicola considers contemporary issues that are relevant to his exploration, including the challenge to democracy of an uninformed citizenry (77), worries about "trigger warnings" (87), the use of preference-driven technology (95), and digitized information (143).

Of these issues, public ignorance, which DeNicola defines as "widespread, reprehensible ignorance of matters that are significant for our lives together" (5), seems to serve as a key motivation for his project. Political ignorance in particular, he worries, "is now so severe that the ideal of an informed citizenry seems quaint" (5). When this ignorance is flaunted and celebrated, as it is in the "tenacious strain of anti-intellectualism" found in contemporary populism, it becomes an ideological stance (7).

That All-Too-Familiar Public Ignorance

This ideological, public ignorance worries DeNicola, and prompts his investigations into the phenomenon of ignorance more generally. To support his claim that there is a severe problem of political ignorance in the United States, he refers to the sorts of survey results that regularly make the rounds on social media in unfortunately mocking and snide tones: US citizens do not know what rights are enumerated in the First Amendment, cannot state how many branches of government exist, do not understand the difference between Latin and languages from Latin countries, and cannot locate Ukraine on a map (6-7).

Yet I worry that DeNicola's project reasserts a worn-out and harmful dichotomy: to resist the populist anti-intellectualism that accompanies, and perhaps contributes to, political ignorance, one must endorse an elitist intellectualism. In other words, DeNicola's project seems to think that the only alternative to populist anti-intellectualism is to defend exactly that which it finds problematic: a decidedly elite, cosmopolitan, and at times smug, intellectualism.

I doubt that DeNicola would so baldly assert such an endorsement, but his failure to articulate an alternative, given the opportunity to do so, is unfortunate. Despite DeNicola's careful exploratory work, and his provocative claim that ignorance need not be vicious, more evidence for the claim that public ignorance takes the form he thinks it does, and that it is "reprehensible," is required (5).

Nescience (or constructed ignorance), on DeNicola's account, is a likely culprit of public ignorance, but he claims that simple ignorance (or natural ignorance), which can be remedied by learning, can cause public ignorance as well. When it comes to simple ignorance, the failure of the attitudes and aptitudes that "determine our interest in learning" leads to the problem of public ignorance (78).

This failure is exacerbated by technology, he suggests. Given that facts have become easily searchable, individuals need not know things they can easily look up; the motivation for learning is diminished. "Why learn anything," he asks, "except the skills of 'finding out'" (77)? Similarly, preference-driven technology (which is not constructed with the intention of producing ignorance, but does so indirectly) allows us to have "thorough control over our epistemic input" by showing us ads for things we already want, news from sources that confirm our prejudices, and stories from friends who share our ideological commitments (95). This sort of technology, DeNicola argues, "fuels the growth of ideologies and their 'true believers'" (96).

Missing Essential Distinctions

These points highlight an inconsistency in DeNicola's project that is worth exploring further. At points throughout, DeNicola seems to limit knowledge to the sort of thing that must exist in one's head. Indeed, the examples he provides to demonstrate the existence of widespread public ignorance are all examples of propositional, *S*-knows-that-*P,* knowledge.

Yet at other points, he wants to broaden our understanding of what comprises knowledge beyond just "knowing that."

But if knowledge takes multiple forms (knowing that, knowing how, and knowing by direct acquaintance (23)), then why are the skills of using technology to "find out" derided as something less than knowledge? The existence of technology should make a reconceptualization of knowledge as more than just "knowing that" more plausible, yet when it comes to the relationship between technology and public ignorance, DeNicola falls back on the concepts provided by traditional epistemology: remembering where Ukraine is counts as knowledge, but "finding out" where Ukraine is does not.

DeNicola's failure to consider how technology can lead to a reconceptualization of knowledge is also evinced by his claim that humans' capacity to know can be exhausted by our biological limits (142-144). Given his distinction between boundaries, which can be shifted and transgressed, and limits, which are final, why think of biology as a limit? Isn't one of the promising (and potentially threatening) features of technology that it allows us to transgress our biological, and thus epistemological, boundaries?

This seems to be acknowledged by DeNicola, who uses the example of a microscope as a tool that enables learning (73), but this acknowledgement is not carried forward to his investigation of other sorts of technologies.

The Same Old Mistakes of the Comfortable

Those of us who decry public ignorance would do well to conduct explorations that are less prone to endorse elitist intellectualism. These explorations should begin with where we are, epistemically speaking, rather than where we like to imagine ourselves to be. In short, explorations of knowledge and ignorance should be carried out using a nonideal-theory method rather than an ideal-theory method, one that considers how technology has radically altered our epistemological landscape.

Criticisms of public ignorance emerge, it seems to me, out of (certain people's) hopes for an ideal, cosmopolitan world that have so far been dashed. Many of us see things like globalism, the internet, international trade and travel, as epistemological boons that remove all excuse for ignorance. But it is a mistake to think these benefits have been realized and then suddenly lost. Like ignorance, knowledge is also "often the privilege of the powerful" (113), and we ignore this at our own peril.

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References

DeNicola, Daniel R. *Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know.* Boston: MIT Press, 2017.