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What We Know about Producing Ignorance: A Review of *Science and the Production of Ignorance: When the Quest for Knowledge Is Thwarted*

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Science and the Production of Ignorance: When the Quest for Knowledge Is Thwarted

Edited by Janet Kourany and Martin Carrier

MIT Press, 2020

328 pp.

Although it may seem to be a paradoxical claim, we know quite a lot about ignorance. In fact, our knowledge and understanding of ignorance is increasing as the burgeoning field of agnotology gains traction. Kourany and Carrier's book, *Science and the Production of Ignorance: When the Quest for Knowledge Is Thwarted* provides a set of important texts on the topic in relation to science. Ignorance is a particularly vexing issue for science given the latter's aspirations as a knowledge producing activity. However, the aims of this volume are more pointed than simply discussing the ways in which ignorance and science interact. The primary aim, the editors state, is to bring to the fore two aspects of ignorance that are acknowledged yet under-discussed: "ignorance as passive construct" and "virtuous ignorance."

On Agnotology

The book opens with two scene-setting chapters. First, a broad overview of the agnotology literature by the editors that includes a discussion about the distinction between the active or strategic construction of ignorance, virtuous ignorance—a special case of active construction—and passive construction of ignorance, "the unintended by-product of choices made in the research process." This opening also includes preliminary remarks on the relationship between philosophy, most notably epistemology, and ignorance. The second scene-setting chapter is a long discussion (more collegial and less Socratic than some philosophers might have hoped for) between two heavyweights of agnotology, Galison and Proctor.

With the preliminaries out of the way, the book moves on to its two main targets: ignorance as active construction and ignorance as passive construction. The active construction section begins with two chapters that discuss forms of harmful active construction such as obscurantism and what Carrier terms "anti-epistemic strategies" in well-rehearsed topics such as the MMR vaccine debate and climate change. The focus of the next two chapters turn to virtuous active constructions and begin with Kourany's chapter that considers the tension between the right to freedom of research (often taken as essential to science) and the right to equality; a tension she very artfully makes explicit by drawing on research in cognitive differences. She falls on the side of curtailing scientific freedoms when those clash with freedoms of equality. Solomon follows this up with a discussion on the harms caused by the change in diagnosis in the DSM 5 over Asperger syndrome—a fascinating case—although one wonders why this was included in the section on "virtuous ignorance" and not in the section on "harmful ignorance."

On Passive Ignorance

The second part of the book focused on passive ignorance which begins with a case study on a hypothetical fire retardant chemical as a way to spell out the ways legal and governance frameworks can lead to ignorance. This is followed by two chapters that aim to carve out ignorance and “distinguish between important kinds.” These are classically analytic philosophy chapters that could just as easily have been sitting in the preliminary section as in the passive construction section. The distinctions presented are, in some ways, reminiscent of, and expansions on, Merton’s seminal discussion of “specified ignorance.” The chapters’ authors refer to this as “conscious ignorance,” although I am unsure if they were aware of Merton’s work. We return to more clearly passive construction of ignorance in the next chapter which takes GMOs as a case to highlight which information is sought and which knowledge is viewed as relevant and legitimate for risk assessments, which information is ignored/not sought, and which potential sources of knowledge are delegitimised. The final chapter acts as both a close to the second section and to the book as a whole, and takes gender biases in science and technology as a case for thinking through ways in which our knowledge making systems lead to ignorance (be it as knowing nothing or in the form of biased/false knowledge). The chapter does more than map some of the issues; it proposes specific responses and methods for bettering knowledge. In doing so, this last chapter stands as both one of the strongest chapters in the volume and as a very fitting conclusion.

The Quest for Knowledge

So what to say about this volume overall? The challenge with any edited volume (except for the few rare exceptions of ultra-curated manuscripts) is that there is often a mixed pot of goodies and this book is no exception. Some chapters are particularly strong, some less so. The editors clearly tried to create a well-structured volume, and it’s a good, fascinating and largely engaging volume. In particular, the regular use of well-articulated case studies grounded the discussions in helpful and insightful ways. But I can’t say the editors quite met their objective of bringing to the fore the under-discussed “passive construction of ignorance” and “virtuous ignorance.” Between the preliminaries and the active construction of ignorance for harmful ends sections, there is quite a bit before we get to either of the goals (just under half the book, in fact). Once we get there, the carving out of the chapters between passive and active constructions, and for harmful or virtuous ends, sometimes feels forced. In fact, only one chapter really tackled “virtuous ignorance” directly and I wish there would have been more.

One interesting point to note is the implication of the way Proctor and Schiebinger defined agnotology as the study of “how ignorance is produced or maintained in diverse settings, through mechanisms such as deliberate or inadvertent neglect, secrecy and suppression, document destruction, unquestioned tradition, and myriad forms of inherent (or avoidable) culturopolitical selectivity” (Proctor and Schiebinger 2008). They consider agnotology as inherently social and this definition seems to better fit what we might term “social agnotology.” Thinking this way highlights what’s not being discussed: the individual level of ignorance making and how that interacts with knowledge making. Thinking in terms of

social agnotology also leads to a natural association with social epistemology, and this, in turn, with more sociological discourses and scholarship. Indeed, I think much could be gained from this framing. For one, while much of the discussion of ignorance in the book revolves around risks of some kind, there was little discussion of technological and risk assessment mechanisms, from formal Technology Assessments to things like Responsible Innovation and other formalised frameworks for thinking about issues around expertise (Cranor’s and Lacey’s chapter were exceptions). This is a field that abounds with rich literature about the legitimization of knowledge and disenfranchised knowers.

Another tension arises when we think about social agnotology and how it fits with ignorance simpliciter in that there is a distinction between not creating knowledge (producing ignorance full stop) and not making knowledge public (producing ignorance in some specific individuals). This raises questions about social practices of ignorance as well as individual practices of ignorance. Indeed, the editors motion towards such possibilities in their introduction and suggest “agnoepistemology” as a potential area of enquiry. I don’t take these final comments to be negative but rather as invitations to broaden the field. It is a burgeoning field and this volume provides a rich companion to Proctor and Schiebinger’s seminal work. Still, there is much more we could and can know about ignorance, so here’s hoping that agnotology’s quest for knowledge isn’t thwarted.

References

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