Collective Studies in Knowledge and Society

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Chapter 11

Epistemic Burdens and the Value of Ignorance

Philip R. Olson

The landscape of epistemology is changing. Modern western epistemology has largely focused on questions specifically having to do with knowledge: for example, whether it is possible to know anything; the relationship between knowledge and the state of the external world, or between knowledge and the mental states of the knower; and the grounds for rightfully asserting that one knows what one claims to know. Recently, however, many scholars have sought to expand the scope of epistemology to include subject matters other than knowledge and its justification (Axtell 2008). Often, this expansion takes the form of inquiries into lofty epistemic goods such as understanding and wisdom. But the expansion of epistemology has also embraced what might seem a more lowly subject matter: ignorance. Running against the grain of traditional epistemology, growing numbers of scholars have furthered a project that, write Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (2007), aims to "identify different forms of ignorance, examining how they are produced and sustained, and what role they play in knowledge practices" (1). Whether understood as a unified project or a set of related projects, the epistemology of ignorance has evolved over the years, as new scholars contribute fresh insights into the undeniably "complex phenomena of ignorance" (1). The scholars who have most ardently and skillfully advanced the epistemology of ignorance are those deeply engaged in feminist theory and race theory, for whom "the study of ignorance is a valuable tool for liberatory epistemologies" (Tuana and Sullivan 2006, vii–ix). Indeed, the study of ignorance has joined forces with studies of epistemic justice and injustice to identify and confront various knowledge practices that engender and sustain oppression.

In "Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types," Linda Alcoff sets Charles Mills's conception of ignorance apart from the conceptions of ignorance developed by Lorraine Code and Sandra Harding. Drawing attention to the

situatedness of knowers, Code and Harding emphasize ignorance's status as a limitation or lack of knowledge. In contrast, Charles Mills illuminates a kind of ignorance that is no mere lack of knowledge, but which instead consists of positive epistemic practices that are used by the socially empowered to marginalize and subjugate whole groups of epistemic agents. This *substantive* ignorance is a feature of "structural social conditions" within which certain "identities and social locations and modes of belief . . . are in some cases epistemically disadvantaged or defective" (Alcoff 2007, 39–40). Ignorance of this sort wields a veiled power, concealing—even from itself—the habits of attention, perception, judgment, and memory by which it marginalizes and subjugates whole groups of epistemic agents. To confront this power is to confront a source of epistemic injustice, and to make possible the initiation of potential correctives. Indeed, recent epistemologies of ignorance have undertaken the critique of substantive, structural ignorance in the name of those who are oppressed by the powerfully ignorant.[1]

Whether ignorance is understood as a lack of knowledge, or as a substantive epistemic practice, ignorance is typically thought to be inferior to knowledge from an epistemic point of view. Yet Cynthia Townley (2006, 38) contests the "global devaluation of ignorance" while also insisting upon a limit to the value of knowledge.[2] The limited value of knowledge may come into focus through the study of a variety of familiar epistemic goods like understanding and wisdom, the values of which are not reducible to their contributions to the value of knowledge.[3] But Townley makes a compelling case for the more controversial claim that ignorance *itself* has value as an epistemic good—a good that is among those that "are not reducible to the value of increasing knowledge" (2011, x). Critical of the excessive and myopic drive toward knowledge acquisition that she calls *epistemophilia*, Townley argues that ignorance possesses intrinsic value as a necessary condition for empathy and trust, which in turn are essential for responsible participation in epistemic communities. More specifically, Townley argues that empathy and trust require what she calls "simple ignorance," that is, a kind of ignorance that entails both "lacking knowledge, and refraining from remedying that lack" (23). Despite her recognition of the value of simple ignorance, Townley joins Mills, Sullivan, and Tuana in their scorn of substantive ignorance. According to Townley, it is important to study substantive ignorance (which she calls invested or interested ignorance) only because such ignorance facilitates unjust distributions of trust, credibility, and labor, and is thus "a kind of ignorance that should be challenged or contested" (51, n. 10). Townley's hesitance to see or seek value in invested or interested ignorance is understandable, given the role that this kind of ignorance plays in oppressive epistemic practices. But perhaps it is a mistake to denigrate invested or interested ignorance entirely.

I suggest that invested or interested ignorance may stimulate and sustain practices of resistance against unjust distributions of epistemic responsibilities. I introduce the concept of *epistemic burdens* to draw attention to injustices within the social distribution of epistemic responsibilities. Epistemic burdens are not identical with epistemic responsibilities, though the two concepts are interconnected. To bear an epistemic burden is not always to bear an epistemic responsibility (in the obligatory sense of responsibility), for one may bear a burden for which one is not strictly and necessarily responsible, for example, because one freely takes on the burden through a nonobligatory act of epistemic generosity, or because one is unjustly forced to bear a nonobligatory burden against one's will. Whether an epistemic burden is experienced as a burden of *knowing*, or as a burden of *having to know*, the imposition of unwelcome epistemic burdens may inflict unjust epistemic harm upon a person "*in her capacity as a knower*" (Fricker 2007, 20). It is within the shadow of unjust distributions of epistemic burdens that ignorance's value as a source of oppositional, liberatory power against unjust distributions of epistemic responsibilities becomes visible.

In this chapter I will illustrate unjust distributions of epistemic burdens through some examples that engage feminist studies and race studies. These examples cannot exhaust the wide range of injustices involving the distribution of epistemic burdens, but they are sufficient to call attention to the value of ignorance in relation to these epistemic injustices. The discussion of epistemic burdens and the value of ignorance remains programmatic here, for there are a number of highly complex and interwoven questions that must be addressed in order to map various features of the layered social, political, and epistemological landscapes (including human and nonhuman social actors) that enable unjust distributions of epistemic burdens, but which also provide resources for challenging those injustices.

THE BURDEN OF KNOWING

Advances in science and technology produce new knowledge, and responsibilities for this new knowledge must be distributed socially, across a variety of stakeholders who have differing interests. These new responsibilities may have profound social effects. Opportunities for social advancement may arise for those who claim jurisdictional responsibility for new knowledge. Other actors may face the prospect of a loss of social status on account of a change in the epistemic landscape. Consider, for example, the field of genetic medicine. Genetic testing is becoming increasingly common, and as knowledge of the human genome increases, so too will the variety of genetic tests that can be performed. In *To Test or Not to Test*, Doris Zallen (2008) argues that

genetic testing differs from other kinds of medical tests because genetic tests reveal information that pertains not only to the test subject, but also to the subject's genetic kin. For this reason, knowledge obtained through genetic testing entails epistemic responsibilities in relation to oneself and in relation to others. "The era of genetic medicine has implications for each of us," Zallen writes, "with its emphasis on prevention, genetic medicine requires us to become proactive guardians of our own health" (148). Moreover, "sharing your genetic information with your own family . . . translates to a responsibility to inform other people in the family of a positive genetic-test result, so that they will be aware that they may be at a higher risk for a particular illness" (54). Knowing about one's genetic makeup entails certain epistemic responsibilities. But do people have a responsibility to know as much about their genetic makeup as they can know?

Consider the case of one woman's experience after being diagnosed with a high genetic risk of developing breast cancer. Recalling her yearlong deliberation about whether or not to undergo a prophylactic mastectomy to reduce her risk of cancer, she states in an interview conducted by Zallen:

> I would say, okay, knowledge is power, and I started talking to a lot of people and to as many doctors as I could to get the information, but ultimately I found out it was my own decision. . . . I could not understand why it was such a difficult decision for me. . . . I felt a lot of anger, and the anger was that I had to make a decision. That is what I felt angry about, that I was faced with a decision. . . . But I couldn't understand why I was so angry with the whole thing because people always told me that knowledge is power. (79–80)

The problem recounted by this woman involves her questioning the habitual devaluation of ignorance that she perceives to be socially imperative. The refrain "knowledge is power" forces itself upon her, but a powerful emotion (anger) strains against it. Through her anger she perceives the burdensomeness of knowing, and she begins to consider the value of ignorance. Zallen observes that some people, whom Townley (2011) calls epistemophiliacs, are "information seekers for whom knowledge is power. Information itself is of value and they wish to have as much of it as possible. But for others," Zallen (2008) continues, "medical information may be far less desirable, especially if it brings with it the prospect of endless worry" (94). Recalling her long deliberations, the woman considering mastectomy focuses on the epistemic burden that knowing her genetic makeup imposes on her. Questioning the vague, social pressure to know, which initially led her to acquire knowledge of her genetic makeup, she begins to doubt whether it is always better to know. She develops an interest in being free of the *burden of knowing*. In contemporary medical contexts, increased social pressure to know

more about one's health is partly a product of the intensifying moralization of medical health, whereby matters of medical health increasingly act as overriding reasons in personal and social deliberations. To question one's obligation *to know* as much as possible about one's own health is to resist the yoke of medical epistemophilia. Anger about bearing a burden of knowing may awaken an interest in resisting blind acquiescence to a vague but potent social pressure *to know*.

The Burden to Know

The principle of personal epistemic responsibility is evident not only among health-care consumers, but also in consumer culture at large, wherein individuals are expected to exercise vigilant circumspection with regard to the endless flux of products and services that come and go from the marketplace. In contemporary consumer contexts, the neoliberal mantra of personal responsibility inverts classical liberalism's astute recognition of complex social-epistemic interdependence. The epistemic burdens heaped upon individual consumers belie respect for the classical liberal giant Friedrich Hayek's fundamental epistemic principle: "Individual reason is very limited and imperfect," and it is folly to believe that "everything which man [*sic*] achieves is the direct result of, and therefore subject to, the control of individual reason" (1984, 136). Over the last forty years, philosophers, social psychologists, economists, and cognitive scientists have repeatedly buttressed Hayek's epistemic principle on empirical grounds, arguing that human beings are shockingly bad reasoners.[4] These findings ought to make us question whether anyone is equipped to bear the epistemic burdens that are tacitly but forcibly delegated to consumers by way of what Mills and Sullivan might call a substantively ignorant market logic—a logic that deceitfully insists upon its own neutrality.

It would be unjust to require people to bear epistemic burdens that they cannot bear. But injustices in the social distribution of epistemic burdens need not have anything to do with ability directly. To illustrate the questionable distribution of epistemic burdens in contemporary consumer culture, let us turn to another example involving health-care consumers. In a *Huffington Post* article on June 21, 2011, about doctors' and clinics' frequent performance of unnecessary cervical cancer screenings, Lauran Neergard reports that a recent U.S. Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study recommends, "women have to be savvy to ensure they're getting the right checkups—enough, but not too much." Here, women are asked to be responsible, proactive health-care consumers, to assume the epistemic burden *to know* whether a cervical cancer screening ordered by a doctor is medically warranted. At first blush it may appear wise for women (or, for that matter,

any group of health-care consumers) to check up on their doctors' recommendations. After all, assuming some measure of personal responsibility for the quality of one's own health care could provide an additional safeguard and empower one to protect oneself against medical paternalism. Knowledge is power. However, health-care consumers might prefer not to bear the epistemic burden of needing to check up on their doctors (see Lupton 2012), and there is good reason to respect health-care consumers' insistence that their preference *not* to bear epistemic burdens ought to be respected.

Consider the case of alerts and recommendations that are frequently issued to communities following reports of sexual assaults within those communities. All too often, women are asked/told to be aware of their surroundings, or not to walk alone, in order to protect themselves against sexual assault and rape. In these cases, women are asked to bear certain epistemic burdens—for example, to be especially alert and on guard—because they are at greater risk of being sexually assaulted. The epistemic costs of increased risks are passed along to members of a group (women) who are most at risk. The community alerts and recommendations here described blame the victim by signaling that victims of sexual assault may have been able to do more (epistemically or otherwise) to protect themselves against violent crime. One serious problem with placing the epistemic burdens of increased risk onto those who are most at risk is that this distribution fails to address the broader, oppressive social conditions that place women at increased risk in the first place. Instead of seeking to rectify the deep social injustices of patriarchy, the familiar community alert represents an additional act of *epistemic injustice*, one that encumbers women with epistemic burdens that are a result of broad patterns of patriarchal injustice.

Informing women that they ought to be savvy about their medical checkups follows the same pattern as alerting women to be more aware of their surroundings in order to avoid sexual assault. Placing upon women the epistemic burden of having to check up on their doctors fails to address the long history of medical patriarchy's oppression of women and violence against women's bodies. Instead of seeking to remedy broader social injustices that contribute to medicine's neglect and subjugation of the female body, an additional act of *epistemic injustice* is committed by encumbering women with additional epistemic burdens that are a consequence of medical injustices.

Distributing Burdens

Concern about the injustice of distributions of epistemic burdens extends far beyond the sociopolitical contexts of consumerism or sexism. Indeed, a single scene from the popular Showtime series, *Homeland*, illustrates a diversity of social relations that may sustain unjust distributions of epistemic burdens.[5]

Mortally wounded and fleeing from the U.S. government, Nicolas Brody, a white American soldier turned terrorist, is taken to an impoverished neighborhood in Caracas, Venezuela, where he is saved by a group of criminal outcasts who are likewise on the lam. Forbidden to leave the dilapidated high rise in which his new companions (or captors) dwell, Brody is constantly attended by a young Hispanic woman, Esme, who nurses Brody back to health under the direction of her domineering father, who is one of Brody's captors. In the scene of interest, Esme accompanies Brody as he takes his first tentative steps. "Ah, it feels good to be walking," says Brody. "Walking?" asks Esme who does not speak English. "Walking," replies Brody, who does not speak Spanish. Picking up a piece of PVC piping in one hand, Brody wiggles two fingers on his other hand to resemble legs, explaining, "We're walking." "We're walking," Esme responds. "Yes, we're walking. We're walking. With a cane," says Brody, tapping the piping on the ground. "Baston," Esme points out. "Baston?" Briefly distracted, Esme does not reply to Brody's question. "We're walking with a cane," Brody continues. "We're walking with a cane," says Esme dutifully. Over a short time, Esme learns to speak English with Brody, and we never see the two conversing in Spanish.[6]

The show suggests that Esme may be in love with Brody. But even if she is, her readiness to learn English is not an unproblematic act of epistemic generosity. Epistemic generosity may take the form of freely and gladly giving epistemic goods to another, as Roberts and Wood (2007, 286–304) point out, or it may take the form of freely and gladly relieving another of an intellectual burden. In either case, a purely loving generosity implies equal freedom to give or relieve or *not* to give or relieve. But the relationship between Esme and Brody is not simply that of a lover and her oblivious beloved. It is also a relationship between a young Hispanic woman, tethered to her father and living in the Global South, and an older, cosmopolitan, white man from America. These features of Esme and Brody's relational, group identities carry the legacy of histories of oppression and ongoing disparities of power that must be taken into account when evaluating the justice or injustice of the distribution of epistemic burdens in this case. Esme's readiness to speak English may not be free and glad, even if she is in love with Brody. And Brody's assumption that English will become his and Esme's common language may be a feature of a substantive epistemic practice—even if, as Sullivan (2006) points out, those practices are unconsciously habitual.

Prospects for Theory and Practice

Epistemic injustice harms people not only in their capacities as knowers, but also in their capacities as nonknowers. In the present study, I have sought to illustrate and explain that ignorance may have value for individuals and

groups who have been habitually and unjustly encumbered with epistemic burdens that it is not necessarily their responsibility to bear. I have identified two types of epistemic burdens, *burdens of knowing* and *burdens to know*. As grounds for resisting epistemic burdens I have cited philosophical and social-scientific arguments for the woefully limited power of human cognition. More importantly, I have evoked histories and contemporary practices of oppression and violence—specifically against white women and Hispanic women—as grounds for challenging status quo distributions of epistemic burdens.

Further study of epistemic burdens may ask us to think about who or what may bear epistemic burdens, for the bearers of burdens could include businesses, industries, governments, institutions, communities, African Americans, Indians, consumers, women, Muslims, inhabitants of the Global South, and so on. Further study should also lay bare the various actors and mechanisms by which specific distributions of epistemic burdens are initialized, maintained, and challenged, a project that would benefit most from engagement with both historical and contemporary sources. We could strengthen the study of epistemic burdens by adopting a normative posture, asking when it is appropriate (and when inappropriate) to refuse epistemic burdens, and asking how certain epistemic burdens *ought* to be distributed. This work will be worth doing, as it can make substantial contributions to the study of epistemic responsibility, which heretofore has tended to focus on responsibility as a condition of knowledge (Code 1987; Zagzebski 1996), or as an otherwise valuable epistemic trait (Kvanvig 1992), but less on questions directly related to the social distribution of epistemic responsibilities. This work may also provide new tools for understanding the processes by which expertise is fashioned, managed, and disputed within complex epistemic communities, for example, by viewing the construction of expertise as involving the discipline of nonexperts by managing what nonexperts ought *to know*.

Perhaps ignorance could be deployed practically, intentionally, and interestedly, to expose and challenge habitual and unjust distributions of epistemic burdens, and thereby serve the ends of liberatory social epistemology. We might use the term *oppositional ignorance* to refer to intentional and interested ignorance when it is used not to distort reality, but to reveal realities of epistemic oppression. To illustrate what oppositional ignorance could look like, let us return to the case of Esme and Brody. Consider also a hypothetical case in which Esme does not know English, and maintains a commitment to her own ignorance of English—perhaps because she values, for its own sake, a life in which she is free of the burden to know English. If Esme interestedly and intentionally refuses to learn English in order to demonstrate to Brody the burdensomeness of being required to learn another's language, or simply

to compel Brody to learn to speak Spanish if he wants to converse with her and seek her help, Esme is using her ignorance oppositionally. Our hypothetical Esme challenges Brody's position of privilege as a white man from the Global North, exposing Brody's powerfully ignorant presumption that it is Esme's responsibility to learn English. I hope that further discussion of unjust distributions of epistemic burdens can facilitate practical, liberatory action, perhaps in the form of collective acts of oppositional ignorance.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Philip Olson and Laura Gillman, "Combating Racialized and Gendered Ignorance: Theorizing a Transactional Pedagogy of Friendship," *Feminist Formations* 25, no. 1 (2013): 59–83; Sullivan and Tuana, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*; Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Sandra Harding, "Two Influential Theories of Ignorance and Philosophy's Interests in Ignoring Them," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 20–36; and Mariana Ortega, "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 56–74.

2. See also Cynthia Townley, *A Defense of Ignorance: Its Value for Knowers and Roles in Feminist and Social Epistemologies* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011).

3. See Philip Olson, "The Virtues of Flourishing Rational Agents," PhD diss., Emory University (2006); and Philip Olson, "Putting Knowledge in its Place," *Philosophical Studies* 159, no. 2 (2012): 241–61.

4. See, for example, Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman, "Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases," *Science* 185 (1974): 1124–31; Christopher Cherniak, *Minimal Rationality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986); and John Doris, *Lack of Character: Personality and Moral Behavior* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

5. *Homeland*, Season 3, episode 3, directed by Clark Johnson. New York; Showtime, 2013. Television series.

6. It would be incorrect to think it natural for a U.S. television show to slip into English in this scene, especially since *Homeland* regularly subtitles scenes in which languages other than English are being spoken.

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Chapter 12

Freeing Knowledge

The Future of Critical Knowledge Production in the New Age of Corporate Universities and the Renegade Generation of Researchers

Adam Riggio

Of all the original Collective Vision statements first published on the Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective (SERRC) website, mine was one of the earliest, and perhaps one of the worst, a hodgepodge of notes about my current projects. Since then, much has changed in my own situation as a scholar. Despite above-average performance in research and publication, regular participation in an international scholarly community through conferences and the collective, and regular teaching work throughout my doctorate, three years on the university job market has seen me unable to secure even a paltry per-course position, not even for a single term. As this book went into its planning stages, I was deciding to forgo a university career for a new path in Canada's not-for-profit sector.

My story has become sadly typical of many in my generation of scholars, and as I write this chapter, I know that it will also be the fate of many SERRC members who are still working through their graduate studies. Even researchers at the most prestigious universities are losing their research capacities and even their jobs as government funding for pure research dries up and the postsecondary sector relies increasingly on private industry partnerships that are hostile to critical work or research that cannot be immediately monetized. As well, these corporate partners change the dynamic of university instruction from critical education to a customer service experience that privileges student satisfaction instead of challenging accepted beliefs.

THE END OF THE INSTITUTIONAL ERA

The current labor crisis in the contemporary university system is quantitatively worse than ever. An era of austerity in public services, including