THE TYRANNY OF CERTAINTY

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In this essay I explore some implications and effects of taken-for-granted expectations of achieved certainty as the only legitimate outcome of scientific and everyday inquiry. The analysis contrasts ubiquitous if often tacit expectations of certainty with a critique of how these very expectations can truncate productive engagement with matters ecological. The discussion focuses on the limited prospects of success in inquiry when certainty is the only putatively acceptable outcome, and it defends the value of situated quests for knowledge with their reliance on hermeneutic understandings of place and process as these involve real human knowers.

Here come I, my name is Jowett
All there is to know I know it.
I am Master of this College,
What I know not is not knowledge!¹

In this inquiry, I am locating my thoughts within a conception of social epistemology broadly construed, which I conceive as being shaped by traditional, quasi-formal Anglo-American epistemological concerns yet, and just as significantly, as situated in and answerable to the “real” world where it is inextricably intertwined with ethical-political questions. Such interconnections require an engaged, hermeneutical approach if they are to make visible their “lived” effects in human and other-than-human lives and populations. Engaged, interpretive deliberations such as the situations I am considering commonly require cannot, I suggest, be sufficiently productive of understanding and insight, cannot animate appropriate actions, if they are either starkly individualist or putatively everywhere-and-nowhere in their inquiries and enactments. An aspirational “view from nowhere” such as is commonly a tacit desideratum of orthodox Anglo-American epistemology could not contribute well to inquiries

¹ This verse repeats a well-known quip about Benjamin Jowett who was Master of Balliol College, at Oxford University, UK from 1870 to 1893.
such as these: feminist appeals to “situated knowledges” establish this claim, unequivocally, I suggest; as does the (perhaps tacit) “situatedness” of most phenomenological-hermeneutical inquiry. These thoughts derive from a structural-conceptual recognition that “Knowledge is always somewhere, and enabled or limited by its situation(s).” Yet, in starting from here, my intention is neither to reduce epistemological practices to their narrowly specific ethical-political effects, nor to collapse ethical and/or political matters into a single, conglomerate mode of inquiry. Rather, I will suggest, with the examples I adduce, that ethical/social and political concerns in the twenty-first-century western-northern world commonly work together, whether productively or contrarily; and that the knowing at issue in examples such as those I cite, and in their semblables, generates urgent, frequently open-ended, social-political questions and consequences.

Specifically and most urgently, I am thinking about how an elusive yet coercive public expectation of achieved certainty as a legitimating marker of action-generating and policy-informing knowledge, especially in ecological-environmental epistemology, ethics, and political thought, can truncate inquiry in itself and in its reception and enactments. Epistemologically, for purposes of this inquiry, I am focusing on ongoing first-world public skepticism in the face of evidence about the “fact” and putative effects of accelerating climate change, of “global warming” as the phenomenon was initially dubbed. Engaging critically with these complex matters requires multi-faceted analyses: interpretive, hermeneutical, empirical, where these putative “strands” are not distinct and separate one from the others, but interactive: intra-active, in Karen Barad’s rich sense.3

An anecdotal point of entry into some of the issues that prompt these thoughts will perhaps clarify their intentions. Consider this: According to then-US Republican Congressman Jeff Miller,

It changes. It gets hot, it gets cold. It’s done it for as long as we have measured the climate.” But when questioned about whether current climate change could be “man-made”, he responded in

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the negative, asking: “Then why did the dinosaurs go extinct? Were there men that were causing – were there cars running around at that point, that were causing global warming? No. The climate has changed since earth was created.\(^4\)

The implication here is that climate change is just about how things are and will be: without demonstrated, incontestable certainty, no human agency or accountability need be declared, no responsibility attributed, no action required or justifiable. Among other consequences, in the public ear, so definitive a declaration of a lack of certainty—so definitive an endorsement of uncertainty as an exonerating stance—blocks recognition of the ubiquity and practical-political implications, again, of the “situatedness” of knowledges in Haraway’s sense. For Haraway, “situation” is broadly conceived, yet is frequently knowable through responsibly engaged (genealogical-hermeneutical) inquiry. It enables and constrains possibilities of knowing and acting well. In materially replete western-northern societies where an instituted social imaginary of comfort and plenty holds sway, certain subterranean assumptions about needing to know, turning a blind eye, not needing to be bothered, tacitly infuse and circumscribe even some of the most cautiously developed, vigilantly enacted investigations on whose outcomes ongoing ecological inquiry, action, and policy rely.

Thus, emphasizing the far-reaching impact of public, skepticism-promoting veneration of certainty, I begin again, and still critically, with (erstwhile) US presidential candidate Mitt Romney’s insistence on appealing to ongoing scientific uncertainty to legitimate his adamant refusal to acknowledge evidence of “man-made’ climate change” as a real, crucially dangerous process, whose implications—for the yea-sayers—need to inform public policies and actions, and private everyday lives. In rhetoric such as this, uncertainty becomes a curiously empowering stance, socially-politically, and of course rhetorically. It assures “ordinary folk” that social-political inertia need generate no anxiety; there is no cause for alarm. Yet, and this is the crucial point for the yea-sayers: Romney’s position contrasts markedly, for example, with Joni Seager’s cautionary observations about what she calls “the miasma of uncertainty” as it is tacitly sustained by opponents of environmental-ecological constraint to serve politically motivated inaction, especially if not exclusively, as

such constraints affect women and other Others from a standard white affluent masculine norm. The matters are ontological, epistemological, and ethical-political, with reprehensible inaction explained and “justified” by a rhetoric that appeals to a putative uncertainty that blocks investigative and/or ameliorative action and policy development.

A further tacitly ontological presupposition sustains such cautionary appeals: it needs also to be named. Small though it may seem to be, its implications are far-reaching. I am referring to an instituted and wide-spread conception—a pervasive social imaginary—of human beings as prospective “knowing subjects” who, albeit diversely, are indeed capable of achieving certainty in knowledge (whether individually or communally) and of realizing/knowing when they have done so. Such appeals presuppose a ubiquitous human capacity to recognize and act upon certainty, should would-be knowers encounter it, where certainty is conceived as a definitive achievement: as incontestability. Yet perhaps paradoxically, “certainty” itself is elusive: its putative realization could well be temporally, locationally, rhetorically enhanced or enabled to serve non-epistemic agendas. Usually it is time, place, and demographically specific: situated. Its putative self-evidence as a marker of knowledge that is indubitably action-enabling and -justifying seems to locate it beyond the reach of scientific and secular challenges. Hence a “general public” to whom “science” is cursorily yet consistently represented as the objective source of certain knowledge will be receptive to assurances that the “evidence”, in its uncertainty, disarms cautionary warnings, renders them irrelevant. Uncertainty thus construed tells in favour of “business as usual” thereby rendering preventive action unnecessary, and telling against any need to think further. Such an unspoken, inaction-condoning presupposition governs many of the quotidian modalities of western/northern climate-related thinking that interest me here.

Reading Haraway’s “situated knowledges” together with Donald Brown’s ethical-legal analyses of Romney’s claims is instructive as, a fortiori, is her eloquent 2016 manifesto, Staying with the Trouble, which expands the rich—and indeed germinal—concept of “situated knowledges,” potentially to encompass “materialism, evolution, ecology, sympoesis, history, situated knowledges [indeed!], cosmological performance, science art worldings, or animism.”

these texts, is always somewhere, and limited, points to a fundamental epistemic flaw—a cultivated ignorance—on which Romney’s self-excusing rhetoric relies. Appealing to a quasi-generic lack of certainty in climate science (cursorily aggregated and vaguely contrasted with some unspecified ways of knowing) Romney bases his policies on putatively ethical claims that it would be unjust to act without certainty. He does not specify his reasons, nor does he cite experiential-empirical and/or phenomenological evidence to support them. There may be situations where such a claim could hold: detailed, place-sensitive, case-by-case approaches to matters of knowing might uncover such examples. Yet Seager convincingly insists: “Scientific uncertainty serves as a refuge for scoundrels of all kinds” and the implications of her claim are far-reaching. Such a “refuge”, anchored in the rhetoric of “risk”, offers an escape hatch to those who refuse to know or to act upon what is, potentially, an epistemically-ecologically more responsive and responsible “precautionary principle,” with its presumption in favour of developing measures designed to anticipate and retard, or to prevent ecological damage. Measures such as these would undoubtedly require time for inquirers to investigate and begin to understand the scope and limits of predictable, particular harms to human and other-than-human lives, health and well-being before a danger-threatening event is “certainly” known and/or accomplished, if ever it can be. Such a presumption is delicate yet crucial in the face of accumulating global and local evidence that time is “running out.” Still, such is an obligation Brown assigns to Romney, and Seager—if differently—to members of a population where climate-related threats to human/female health need to be better known than they commonly are: better known than pronouncements such as Romney’s imply, which tend not to fall on deaf ears. The imperatives are complex and urgent, and down-on-the-ground solutions remain elusive.6

In October 2011, Mitt Romney voiced his opposition to legislation designed to reduce greenhouse gases, citing two principal reasons: first, he did not know whether climate change was human caused; and second, as climate change is a global problem, he saw no reason for the US to spend vast sums of money and time on a problem whose scope extends beyond its borders (and, by implication, beyond its interests). In consequence, Donald Brown observes: “Mitt Romney’s position on human-induced warming is a stunning moral

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failure.” Brown is careful to suggest that Romney may not be claiming there is no evidence of human causation, but only that there is significant scientific uncertainty about whether such warming is attributable to human activities. A charitable reading could point to the conclusion that there may indeed be a difference between the two putative claims. But the larger question persists: how could appealing to such a difference be morally persuasive (or epistemically responsible) for climate change deniers in the face of accumulated and rapidly accumulating evidence supporting Brown’s and related—knowledgeable—positions. Brown adds that according to a mainstream scientific finding, “it is more than 90% certain that observable warming is primarily caused by increasing concentrations of greenhouse gases produced by human activities including the burning of fossil fuels and deforestation” (IPCC, 2007; my emphasis). Now, ten years on, there is no evidence to support denials of such claims. Brown notes that this conclusion is supported by “the most prestigious scientific organizations in the world”: a fact, in his view, that claims both moral and epistemic significance. Whether such debates amount to contests between diversely invested “authorities”—but authorities nonetheless—is a larger question. Are accomplished solutions merely victories of one “invested” side over another? Only extended and ongoing collaborative hermeneutical engagement with both, it would appear, can pave the way toward epistemically responsible answers; but such a thought would seem simply to shift the onus of proof without providing a secure solution.

To my mind, and this is the most telling point, the conclusion Brown cites poses an ontological question that is significantly—indeed overwhelmingly—urgent, and foundational in a non-empiricist sense, for all the rest. Baldly put, the question is this: “Who do we think we are?” and the answer hinges on an intransigent sense of entitlement that is pervasive in large segments of the world’s affluent populations.7 I want to urge speaking and hearing this question “Who do we think we are?” provocatively and insistently: not as a rhetorical question, but as a moral-political-ontological

7 Stephen Gardiner poses such a question, albeit rather more gently, thus: “...action on climate change is likely to raise serious, and perhaps uncomfortable, questions about who we are and what we want to be.” Stephen M. Gardiner, “A Perfect Moral Storm: Climate Change, Intergenerational Ethics and the Problem of Moral Corruption,” Environmental Values, vol. 15, no. 3 (2006), 397–413, here 402. Gardner notes how easy it is “to engage in manipulative or self-deceptive behavior” in response to such considerations. (408). See also Paul G. Harris, What’s Wrong with Climate Politics and How to Fix It (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).
challenge such as would be posed in situations of astonished dismay at presumptuous behaviours, intrusive or offensive assumptions, fantastic-extraordinary policies and actions. Posing this question invokes social justice as an overarching ethical-epistemic-political concern, articulated here from a position informed by feminist, post-colonial, and other Others’ engagements in recognizing that knowing responsibly is a *sine qua non* for responsible social and political action. It is vital to engaging with people, places, things, and situations “on their own terms”, where “responsible” entails recognition and responsiveness, so far as these are possible. The addressive formulation emphasizes the question’s necessarily interactive/intra-active character: tacitly or overtly, it challenges individualistic ontological and epistemological presuppositions, situating knowledge-making as at once a social-communal and a ‘personal’ practice.

As I am suggesting, an inflated yet often unreasoned appeal to “risk” (tacitly, risk to certain segments of the world’s populations and places) has tended, in the Anglo-American/northern world, to override appeals to implementing a *precautionary* approach where wisdom and reason, in concert with local—situated—knowledges, would be enlisted to enhance processes of learning how to understand specific harms and vulnerabilities; together with cautious, even tentative extrapolations of their wider implications. If blame is to be apportioned, albeit variously and in situationally-circumstantially cognizant ways, beyond the political climate of Canada, the U.S.A., and other affluent western-northern societies; and if credibility can be claimed for showing how epistemological analyses in professional philosophy trickle down to shape a going public rhetoric and an entrenched social-political imaginary (as I think they can), then even though such public debates may not be strictly philosophical in themselves, an enduring aura of logical positivism and its promises is palpable in the veneration of certainty that infuses rhetoric such as Romney’s, and enhances its public uptake.

Positivism’s appeal in its time, in the wake of the cultural excesses of the late-nineteenth-century western world, and the impact of World War I in the chaos of the early-twentieth-century western world, is not difficult to understand. But its alleged promise has outrun its inspiration. As my title suggests, for many philosophers and lay thinkers it has evolved into a form of social-political-epistemic tyranny. *Resistance* to a more gradual, and wiser, enactment of precautionary analyses in their diverse guises contributes to the pull of an illusory certainty, contrasted with down-on-the-ground and situated caution in response to an overinflated conception of
“certain knowledge.” Such a conception silently (if unwittingly) informs views such as Romney’s, which find easy uptake in the “prepared minds” of a populace ready and eager to believe certainty is within their/our grasp and to perceive its attainment as tantamount to a fine moral-epistemic achievement.8

My intention is emphatically not to draw a quasi-Manichean contrast between risk ignoring and precaution infused thinking and action; nor is it to propose simplistic gendered alignments for which risk could be read as masculine and precaution as feminine, with morally-politically evaluative conclusions implicitly entailed. Space does not permit a full articulation of reasons for and against either stance, in itself or in its gendered associations, but plausible here is Michael Pollan’s observation that risk analysis hasn’t done a very good job predicting the ecological and health effects of many new technologies. It is very good at measuring what we can know – say, the weight a suspension bridge can bear – but it has trouble calculating subtler, less quantifiable risks. (The effect of certain neurotoxins on a child’s neurological development, for example, appears to have more to do with the timing of exposure than with the amount.)9

With the development of social epistemology in tandem/intra-action with the development of feminist and other post-colonial epistemological practices, space opens for the deliberative-dialogical interpretive approaches to knowledge matters that claimed minimal credence in the classical and positivistic western eras. In this new space, epistemic projects, for which situated knowledges are a given and hermeneutic approaches begin to combine with analytic methods to affirm their potential, epistemic individualism ceases to be a standard-setting presupposition.

Seager’s comment which I have cited, where she declares that “Scientific uncertainty serves as a refuge for scoundrels of all kinds,” is again pertinent here. It pertains directly to Brown’s reading of Romney’s position. Seager observes further: “Chemical-producing and pollution-causing industries have relied for years on the “cover” that scientific uncertainty affords them.” Naming Rachel Carson’s work as emblematic in thinking toward how to create space for a

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renewed respect for precautionary approaches, she finds in Carson’s theory and practice a potential way out of what she aptly calls “the closed loop of scientific uncertainty.” Indeed, Seager’s readings of Carson, together with her own 2009 article aptly titled “Death by Degrees,” are germane to understanding some of the positive effects of thinking within a feminist- and post-colonial-informed precautionary framework, developed and revised in local yet communal deliberations; open, in principle, to revision. Much ecological thinking then and now (even if it does not always bear that label) occurs in spaces Carson, at times inadvertently, made available. It was she who, in her work and life, conceived and acted upon then-unarticulated, yet nascent precautionary analyses, whose public political and rhetorical effects are currently reclaiming pertinence. Perhaps now they are more orthodox in their scientific articulation, but on the whole they are no more sophisticated by orthodox standards than in her initial enactments, which I discuss more fully in Ecological Thinking. But although, or because, it has come to be a constant refrain in my work, I again insist that the urgent questions, still, are about whose certainty or uncertainty is at issue in these confrontations, and why? No adequate answer/response will amount simply to naming a few people in quasi-authoritarian fashion: deliberations/debates engaged behind a screen of anonymity—or of “eminent” names alone—cannot generate the kinds of interpretive, contestatory, deliberative and multi-vocal thinking-together that ecologically responsive thought and action require.

Here I am thinking about how issues such as these call for recognition as both universal and “difference”-specific, in ways that pertain not just to matters ecological but to knowing—and caring—more generally, as/when they inform a gendered-raced-class-attentive politics of knowledge. As I have suggested, germane to current western-northern framings of the debate is a dangerous stand-off between arguments about risk and steps toward enacting policies and agendas which, perhaps ironically, often figure in the public rhetoric as too cautious, if by no fixed measure of caution.

These thoughts recall Rae Langton’s claims: “[W]hen it comes to knowledge women get hurt,” and “when it comes to knowledge, women get left out.”¹³ For Langton, women get hurt when they are objectified: here, indebted to her, yet moving sideways, so to speak, I am reading objectification as a self-fulfilling practice where “believing women to be subordinate can make women subordinate.”¹⁴ Invisibility—being left out or epistemically discounted on spurious grounds—is a form of subordination, and indeed of epistemic violence, in the sense that women’s specificities, through which we are women and are positioned to know—intellectually, geographically, emotionally, politically—disappear into putatively global, generalized analyses—as they too often do in today’s climate-concerned literature; and as other non-standard (= non-white non-male) knowers also do. Hence their/our ecological, ontological, and situational differences from an alleged norm render them/us unworthy of notice: prevent their/our specificities being taken explicitly, and positively, into account. It is but a small step to rendering women epistemically invisible, especially when claims to know animated by such feminized attributes as caring fail to earn social-political acknowledgement as knowledge worthy of the name.¹⁵ Pertinent here, by analogy, is Langton’s elaboration of her earlier affirmations. She writes: “If objectivity is about how mind conforms to world, objectification is about the opposite.… Objectification is a process in which the social world [and by extension here, I suggest, the natural world] comes to be shaped by perception, desire, and belief: a process in which women…are made objects because of men’s perceptions and desires and beliefs.”¹⁶ While simplistic equations of or analogies between “women-and-nature” are as damaging and demeaning as any other facile parallels, there is indeed an analogy worth noting and countering in digging beneath the seemingly benign surface of such thoughts. In some respects, Rachel Carson is a pertinent example here as, variously, are Barbara McClintock, Vandana Shiva, Rosalind Franklin (and innumerable others): women whose allegedly “feminine,” caring approaches to subjects, objects, and places; and their unconventional (= “unscientific”) respect for

¹⁴ Ibid., 139.
the everyday and the “natural” are invoked (diversely, and even covertly) to discredit their scientific acumen, both then and now. In their lives and practices these scholars, again variously, live the harms and exclusions Langton names.

Hence, ontologically, I read climate-change skepticism as animated by some of the foundational assumptions I have named: about who we are as inhabitants of the (mostly) white affluent west, how “we” understand and live our places in the world, within thoughtless assumptions of entitlement. Their significance for feminist, racially diverse, class-specific, and innumerable intersecting domains of ecological theory and practice is under-examined. Thus, when skeptics appeal to a margin of uncertainty in climate science in order to fuel incredulity and justify resistance to regulatory behaviors and practices, they uphold an ideal of freedom and entitlement they assume uncontestably to be theirs, tacitly if not explicitly definitive of their very being. Yet in the history of the western-northern world and beyond, such freedoms have only ever been available to a small group of (mostly) prosperous white men in affluent societies, thereby rendering other Others invisible, situating them outside the areas of concern. The substance of these situations varies, but they have in common the effect of excluding (= leaving out) and hurting those on the margins of a putative centre of epistemic authority and entitlement. Damaging effects such as these manifest across gender, race, class, nationality, and other intersecting forms of situational-corporeal marginality. They invoke questions not just about who “we” are, but how those of us who enact such entitlements can live responsibly and considerately, singly and communally, in the human, natural, social-political world; and equally radical questions about the responsibilities involved in thinking ecologically. Such responsibilities are not just about acquiring more knowledge-as-information, but about listening, understanding, collaborating, caring: about the hermeneutic positionings and repositionings such knowing invokes.

Within this framework, feminist and post-colonial commitments to deconstructing and contesting convictions about universal human sameness and ubiquitous entitlement acquire a new urgency. They fuel an imperative for inquirers, educators and activists to animate savvy shifts in the policies and practices governing quotidian action in the western-northern world and elsewhere. Undoubtedly—a claim often enlisted to gainsay such a proposal—it will be impossible to examine all such effects as they manifest across race, gender, class, disability, geography, nationality, and other intersecting modes of being. Yet the objection presupposes an intransient epistemic ontology in presuming that such knowledge projects are and must be
individual, autonomous, and immune to challenge. It derives from a stubbornly instituted *imaginary* for which cooperative, collaborative inquiry dilutes the quality of the knowledge attained. Moreover, it discounts the explanatory power of knowledge-seeking projects generated out of situations where people—separately and interactively—need to know well, and work devotedly toward doing so, because they *care*. A casual rejoinder might be that “of course they care,” but caring is irrelevant, an impediment to knowledge good of its kind, which must be objective: cleansed of the distorting effects of care about the process or the outcome. Such claims need to be deconstructed in evaluating ecological damage and its disparate quotidian effects.

Undaunted by the intransigence of a power/knowledge system whose substance hinges on exclusion and domination, some feminists, asking how techno-science (and, by implication, inquiry more generally) “might be otherwise,” are urging scholars to ask of science-knowledge projects, *cui bono*?: “who benefits,” and indeed, “Who cares?” and why?” Such thoughts are careful in their boundary-crossing across disciplines where, often, the language of care is incongruous, in part due to the disempowering fall-out from care’s historical stigmatization as feminized (and thus trivial) labour. Yet questions about “how to care” and to care well re-acquire salience in part, from Bruno Latour’s distinction between “matters of fact” and “matters of concern,” where he contests the epistemological primacy of matters of fact. I invoke it to counter the narrowly conceived “matters of fact” enlisted to gainsay climate-change, where the “facts” invoked tend not to be disinterestedly factual. Hence Maria Puig de la Bellacasa17, urges feminists to consider how attention to “matters of care” and an “ethos of care” can animate aims to “assemble neglected things” including the “invisible, unnumbered and unvalued experiences, silenced sufferings and displaced subjects” of techno-science.

And with that I return to Seager, to her article “Death by Degrees,”18 and to Langton’s reminders that when it comes to knowledge, women are left out, and hurt. Seager offers a skeptical analysis of the 2009 G8 summit, where the 2°C limit for “acceptable” global warming was set. Declaring the arbitrariness of that figure, she shows how the 2°C “contrivance” derives from a “masculinized rationality and a *certainty*” that the drivers of the policy “will be on

the winning side."\(^{19}\) This “masters of the universe” stance rests on a larger deceit... infused with gendered social meaning and consequence. Notions of the acceptability of risk are always refracted through a prism of privilege, power, and geography. “For whom is 2° warming ‘not dangerous’?... Who determines what ‘acceptable’ risk is acceptable?” Noting that this particular limit serves first-world affluent interests well—for “buffered, rich-world elites, it happens to ‘others’ and ‘elsewhere’”—Seager argues persuasively that “the poorest people, among whom women predominate, will suffer earliest and most.”\(^{20}\) Space does not permit giving her account the careful analysis it deserves, but it is worth citing for how it exemplifies the harms and hurts of which Langton reminds us, and how insistently it articulates a universal imperative to care. Yet these thoughts pose a further conundrum that makes climate change skepticism so intrinsigent, and arguments about “care” so delicate, for “care” has multiple, controversial meanings and multiple coercive enactments. Pertinent is the need to remember that nay-sayers, too, often care fiercely to protect the goods and entitlements they regard as uncontestably theirs. To paraphrase William Butler Yeats, “Care alone is not certain good.”\(^{21}\)

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\(^{19}\) Ibid., 15; my emphasis.

\(^{20}\) Ibid.

\(^{21}\) William Butler Yeats, “The Song of the Happy Shepherd,” from Crossways 1889: “To the cracked tune that Chronos sings/ Words alone are certain good.”