IF I KNOW I *CAN* BE WRONG

THE HIDDEN HISTORY OF EPISTEMOLOGIES OF IGNORANCE

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Recent work in epistemologies of ignorance sometimes seems to present itself as if it were an enterprise without a history. In the issue of *Hypatia* that she edited on the topic, however, Nancy Tuana makes a passing reference to a connection between epistemologies of ignorance and bad faith that suggests a link between her project and a somewhat different intellectual world than the one from which it arose.[1] This essay will follow the hint Tuana provides to resituate work on epistemologies of ignorance in a broader context that might help to answer two sorts of challenges to her project that I find both compelling and troubling.

The first of these challenges is raised by women of color and appears, for instance, in Mariana Ortega's contribution to the *Hypatia* issue. Ortega raises the possibility that feminist epistemologies of ignorance, in attempting to cure their ignorance about women of color, might result in a "loving, knowing ignorance" that would only be "arrogant perception that involves self-deception and the quest for more knowledge about [the lives of women of color] . . . even though such [knowledge] claims are not checked or questioned" (Hypatia, 63). Such an approach would obviously perpetuate the privilege and power of white feminists without necessarily resulting in any knowledge that benefits the women whose lives they study.

The second challenge is raised by Harvey Cormier in his article in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*.[2] Cormier argues from a neo-pragmatist perspective that "after we realize that no one has access to a world beyond all of these deceptive appearances, the issue of *what* structures of deception are hiding that world from us will not seem urgent" (73, emphasis added). That is, epistemologies of ignorance seem to rely on an appearance/reality distinction that is not ultimately sustainable, perhaps reflecting their origin in feminist science studies and critical race theory, enterprises that look at the disparity between the knowledge claims of dominant groups and relatively obvious scientific or social realities.

These two challenges to epistemologies of ignorance may seem to correspond to the two directions from which they have developed, since Ortega's comments appear in the context of Tuana's work, Cormier's largely in response to that of Charles Mills. The challenges, however, are not as independent as they may look: they both warn against the dangers of a second-order epistemological arrogance, one that is possible only once one acknowledges a certain level of first-order ignorance and begins to think about the conditions of its production. On this common ground, Ortega focuses on the risk of arrogance with regard to non-dominant groups, Cormier with regard to a lingering foundationalism he finds in Mills's work. Moreover, both challenges make equal sense when applied to either Tuana's or Mills's account of epistemologies of ignorance.

On the one hand, Ortega (who herself works primarily in European philosophy, although she doesn't foreground that in the article under discussion) points to the reliance of white feminists who practice "loving arrogance" on "a binary system in which there is an inside/outside, a center/margin," rejecting the more complex, plural "reality" that the lives of women of color bring into focus (*Hypatia*, 71). This arrogance, then, would rest on the same sort of traditional epistemological framework that is put into question by Cormier's neo-pragmatism. On the other hand, while unable to accuse Mills of ignoring the voices of people of color, Cormier does wonder how an epistemologist of ignorance "can tell *which black people* are the victims of ideology and which are not" when the argument assumes "the reality of race and race differences" (Sullivan and Tuana, 63–64, his emphasis). His argument, much like Ortega's, is that race-based power relations might still function in Mills' account

of epistemologies of ignorance to privilege some and disadvantage others.

In my attempt to address these concerns by setting feminist epistemologies of ignorance in a different context, I will appear to sin against both feminism and epistemology—the former because my discussion draws on the work of a thinker whose feminist credentials are more than in doubt, Martin Heidegger;[3] the latter because I argue, with Cormier, against the possibility of knowledge in the traditional sense of "if I know, I can't be wrong." My goal is to make distinctions among forms of ignorance to separate those that are irreducible ("ontological" in Heidegger's sense)[4] and must be respected, from those (correspondently "ontic") that require feminist, antiracist, and generally counter-hegemonic remediation. Such remediation, I argue, can be, in fact must be, based, not on some absolute foundation, but on a coherent, pluralistic and fluid account of "reality" against which epistemologies of ignorance can measure the knowledge claims they reject.

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Heidegger argues that truth (*alētheia*, what is not forgotten) is possible only on a background of what is forgotten or unknown. For instance, in "The Origin of the Work of Art," in contrast to the traditional understanding of truth as "the conformity of knowledge with the matter," he says that

> (Being) puts us into such a condition of being that in our representations we always remain installed within and in attendance upon unconcealment. Not only must that in *conformity* with which a cognition orders itself be already in some way unconcealed. The entire *realm* in which this 'conforming to something' goes on must already occur as a whole in the unconcealed.[5]

That is, our knowledge depends in important ways on what is implicitly known but cannot be thematized–background assumptions, practical skills, cultural understandings, etc. We cannot explicitly know everything at the same time, and what we can't know shapes the outline and provides the supporting framework for what we can.

For Heidegger, truth is context-dependent and largely contingent, in that it depends on a wide range of background conditions, including language, social practices, pre-existing knowledge, and current conditions of knowledge acquisition. In the lectures collected in *The Essence of Truth* he says we must rid ourselves "of the illusion that man could pose, let alone solve a problem, without some standpoint."[6] Moreover, as Ludwig Wittgenstein, J. L. Austin, and others also argue, this standpoint and the set of background conditions that provide it are far more complex than epistemology traditionally has allowed for. Heidegger argues that only on the basis of this non-thematized background can explicit truth claims be "unconcealed."

From this at least two things follow. First, all epistemologies are epistemologies of ignorance, that is, all knowledge claims conceal as much as they reveal, including the conditions of their own production and the power relations that they serve. This affirms Ortega's concern, that even feminist epistemologies of ignorance can become arrogant, by pointing out that they are subject to the same sorts of errors as the knowledge claims they criticize. Secondly, Heidegger's background is itself context-dependent and contingent, reliant on further (if not necessarily deeper) background conditions of equal complexity. What makes one claim truer than another is not greater "conformity" to things, but the way in which it serves the "true" needs of a particular historical time and place. But, Cormier might point out, what can this last "true" mean? Only, for Heidegger, that in addition to what it unconceals, a truth, like a work of art, should also point to all that it must leave hidden. The solution to "arrogant" ignorance is not more valid testing against a fixed reality, but openness to the possibility of error and recognition of the limits of human knowing. Just as a work of art must reveal its own status as a work, knowledge must reveal its own status as contingent and partial.

Most feminists and others doing work on epistemologies of ignorance know this. What Heidegger adds is a foundation that both explains the importance of this intellectual enterprise, and allows us to refine our understanding of epistemologies of ignorance in Tuana and Mills's more narrow sense. What I outlined above would be, for Heidegger, an ontological epistemology of ignorance, an analysis

of the absolute limits of human knowledge. Any given case of ignorance, especially of the kind that is of concern here, however, will also have an "ontic", that is, a concrete, contingent history that allows us to distinguish between ignorance induced by unavoidable limits (such as the absence of telescopes) and ignorance that conceals what could, under other power relations, be revealed (e.g., still believing in a geocentric theory of the universe in Europe after 1600).

Note that there are two layers of analysis here that cut across each other to produce three dimensions of critique. There is the issue of how open a particular set of knowledge practices is to the possibility of error in its operations and how adequately it acknowledges its own limitations. Contemporary science is quite good at this. It enshrines Charles Darwin's work on evolution, for instance, rather than Alfred Wallace's, because Darwin put in years of study, establishing epistemic authority by his efforts to avoid error (and, most likely, to minimize controversy about his theory).

Cutting across that analysis is the dimension just noted—the reliance of knowledge practices on power relations to undergird the truths they produce. (Here the record of contemporary science is more mixed because of the institutionalized power it has acquired.) Galileo was not necessarily less arrogant in the first sense than the Pope because he may well have believed he had discovered an absolute truth, but his claims didn't require the power of the papacy to be recognized by his peers as true. On the other hand, the reliance on power to enforce knowledge claims is entirely incompatible with an understanding of Heidegger's ontological point because it relies on belief in a fixed, foundational knowledge to justify ignoring, or "not knowing," what could otherwise be known.

This resolves Cormier's problem in a way that also avoids some forms of relativism. White ignorance about the history, lives, contributions, etc., of black people and other people of color is not due to irremediable background conditions, but is refutable by historical, sociological, and other facts of a sort that the same ignorant white knowers would accept in other knowledge contexts. What medical science doesn't know about the clitoris, to take Tuana's example, is resolvable without reference to a "reality" of the human body beyond the "reality" that guides other investigations into human physiology. Knowledge is contextual, but we have well-established, if not completely determinate, contexts for judging questions of these sorts against which white ignorance or medical ignorance can be measured, not absolutely, but within the same confines within which we determine the role of protein in cell development or how the invention of the steam engine transformed American life. To answer Cormier, the question of which "structures of deception are hiding" a truth from us seems "urgent" not on a strictly epistemological basis, but also as a matter of political praxis; and the "victims of ideology" he refers to are those members of any social group who change their view of what constitutes a good argument when they move into areas of race, gender, and other forms of domination.

Linda Martín Alcoff makes a similar argument in her contribution to *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, drawing on the work of Max Horkheimer.[7] Horkheimer, like Heidegger, believes that "when we describe the world around us, we are not simply reporting on a natural creation but on the product of collective human praxis" (Sullivan and Tuana, 51). On this view, "better" knowledge is knowledge that has better "reference and reliability" so that knowledge, or thought, is "gauged by something that is not thought." For Horkheimer, however, this something is not some fixed material reality, Alcoff tell us, but the effects of that knowledge "on production or its impact on social conduct" (54–55). Tuana's work on the physiology of the clitoris is "better" knowledge than the standard medical view because it more effectively integrates science with lived experience and is the product of better knowledge practices, that is, practices which take seriously the data provided by all persons in a position to know. My effort here is merely to push the link Alcoff makes a step or two farther, to hint at a possible point where epistemology meets not only social philosophy and politics, but also ethics and ontology.

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An observant reader will have noticed by now that I haven't defined "epistemologies of ignorance." That is to some extent because exactly what the term means is part of what is at issue here, but it is also because I have been relying on the definition Tuana offers in her contribution to the *Hypatia* issue. There she summarizes her argument for epistemologies of ignorance by pointing out that

> if we are to fully understand the complex practices of knowledge production and the variety of factors that account for why something is known, we must also understand the practices that account for *not knowing*, that is, for our lack of knowledge about a phenomenon. (2)

In short, as stated earlier, all epistemologies are, or should be, epistemologies of ignorance. Note, however, Tuana's emphasis on practices, which reiterates Heidegger's concern for the background conditions of knowledge production at a variety of levels—individual, cultural, material, etc. Again, the point of bringing Heidegger into the conversation is not to add anything new to the understanding of epistemologies of ignorance, but to set them in a different context.

In the same article, Tuana offers a typology of such ways of "not knowing." The first four types, developed largely in the context of women's health issues, are fairly self-explanatory: (1) "knowing that we do not know, but not caring to know" (e.g., male contraceptives) (*Hypatia*, 4); (2) what "we do not even know that we do not know" (e.g., the physiology of the clitoris) (6); (3) what "they do not want us to know" (e.g., the dangers of oral contraceptives) (9–10); and (4) "willful ignorance." Tuana defines this last type as "an active ignoring of the oppression of others and one's role in that oppression" (10–11), a topic which I will address more fully with regard to Mills. Tuana's fifth type of ignorance is "ignorance produced by the construction of epistemically disadvantaged identities," which underscores the fact that "our theories of knowledge and knowledge practices are far from democratic, maintaining criteria of credibility that favor members of privileged groups" (13). Examples of this would include Freud's refusal to believe his female patients when they reported incestuous advances by their fathers. This is, of course, one area of concern for Ortega, but it also reinforces our answer to Cormier: epistemologies of ignorance measure truth not by conformity to a fixed reality, but, among other things, by whether all relevant voices are heard in determining that truth.

In his contribution to *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Charles Mills makes a similar investigation into how "willful ignorance" comes about with regard to race, and how it perpetuates itself in perception, conception, memory, testimony, and group interest, although he acknowledges that these are all deeply inter-related in lived experience (23). He cites contemporary cognitive science to argue that even our lowest level perceptions are "in general simultaneously conceptions" (24). "White ignorance" has its roots here, shaping the perception of privileged perceivers in terms that block access to certain kinds of knowledge.[8] This process is augmented by "white normativity" (25), that is, the taking of white lives and experience as the norm for what counts as "human," a phenomenon familiar to most feminists in the form of an equivalent "male normativity." Memory becomes part of this phenomenon at least insofar as it organizes itself in terms of key cultural works of art, in a very broad sense, such as the vision of the United States as the "shining city on the hill" (31). Mills's account of testimony overlaps with Tuana's discussion of "epistemically disadvantaged groups," but much more than Tuana, he is open about the motivation behind white ignorance: white self-interest feeds and lives off of our ignorance about the lives of those we oppress (34).

It is the last of Tuana's "types" of ignorance, which has no direct parallel in Mills, however, that will be the main focus of the rest of my discussion. "Loving ignorance" is basically "ignorance of what exceeds our knowledge capacities," but Tuana calls it "loving" with a reference to Marilyn Frye's account of "the loving eye." Subsequent work by feminists of color such as María Lugones, in turn, puts the term in the specific context of the interaction between white feminists and feminists of color, where Tuana says it names "the realization that although much experience can be shared there will always be experiences that cannot" (*Hypatia*, 15–16). Cynthia Townley

develops this theme in more detail in her contribution to the Hypatia volume, citing a controversial case in which a white Australian feminist anthropologist was challenged by indigenous women over an article on rape in the indigenous community that was co-authored by one woman from one such community. Although the above discussion of what Tuana calls "epistemically disadvantaged identities" would also apply here, at this point I want to take the question of loving ignorance in another direction.

My starting point is that "loving ignorance," unlike the others in Tuana's taxonomy, is a necessary form of ignorance; in her terms, it is "accepting what we cannot know" (15). For this reason, it seems to require a radically different analysis from those forms of ignorance that can be removed by efforts of epistemological and political will. Heidegger might well resist the suggestion that knowledge of the life experience of those unlike ourselves in socially important ways constitutes an "ontologically" necessary ignorance if it relied on assumptions about privileged access to the interiority of an atomic Cartesian self, but that is clearly not what Tuana means. Her discussion focuses, rather, on knowledge that comes from life experiences dependent on social locations that, like language, cannot be made fully explicit under any epistemic circumstances. I cannot walk a mile in another's shoes for the same reason she cannot walk the same mile twice. If our starting points are far enough apart in socio-political space, however, my ability even to imaginatively put myself in her shoes without relying on her testimony fails to amount to any knowledge at all. This is a possibility Heidegger opens his thinking to in several ways, although time permits me to develop only one here.

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In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger says that "The essence of art is poetry. The essence of poetry, in turn, is the founding of truth" (199). Poetry, or language, founds truth by "naming" things, by drawing out of the background hidden features of a world and making them explicit and, hence, the grounding for possible new "truths," while at the same time shifting some of what has been explicitly known into the background. If the inauguration of a black man as President of the United States can be seen as a minor work of art that licenses new truths about what is possible for black people in this country, the "poetry" of the moment, in naming Barak Obama "African-American," also pushes into the background some of the knowledge we have about the different social experiences of African-Americans whose ancestors suffered under slavery and those whose ancestors did not. Similarly, one limitation on my ability to walk in another's shoes is the extent to which she and I share a world of "naming," that is, organize our experience around the same defining "works of art," e.g., whether we see the U.S. as an invading colonial power or as Mills's "shining city on the hill." Structures of domination, if not foregrounded in Heidegger's account, are clearly implicit in such "naming."

At the same time, Heidegger goes on to say that the work of art "never comes from nothing in that [the truth] that is projected by it is only the withheld determination of historical Dasein itself" (200). That is, new truths cannot come from completely outside the social world in which they arise, but must be based on something, however hidden, already present in that world itself. This makes it possible for "new" truths, new works of art, to emerge despite the epistemic hegemony of apparently monolithic regimes that would seem to make them impossible.

For instance, if Mills were correct that the founding contract of American society was only and purely a racial contract, it becomes, as Cormier notes, hard to understand where any counter-discourse could get a hold. On the other hand, the problem is solved if white people have maintained a studied ignorance of the humanity of blacks for the last five hundred years only on the background of a debilitating anxiety that they might be wrong that demonstrates itself in the perversity of race relations in American history. Both are there, the knowledge that one might be wrong and the ignorance that ignores the facts proving that one is, the one shaping the other by negation. On this view, the inauguration of Obama, while a sign of hope, remains also a new way of concealing a truth about the central role race plays in the self-understanding of the United States, not just in the arguable sense that it is too little, too

late, but also, I believe, in the sense that making this truth fully explicit requires much more than epistemic "cleaning up"—it requires a major "work of art," a rethinking of our identities and ways of living with each other that not even the most radical among us can now imagine.

We can see, then, that feminist, anti-racist, or other counter-hegemonic epistemologies of ignorance run two risks. The first is the one noted by Ortega, the risk of conflating "ontic," remediable ignorance with, as Tuana says, "what we cannot know," and arrogantly striving to create knowledge about the lives of others that ignores what it is ignorant of, that is, the knowledge those others have about their own lives. The other risk, reiterating in another way Cormier's point, is the danger of thinking that epistemologies of ignorance describe something different from any other account of knowledge. If one might reasonably object to Heidegger's "Truth, in its essence, is un-truth" (179), I would argue that it is far harder to deny that knowing, in its essence, is not knowing. As I have said, we cannot know everything at once, and all knowledge is marked by the shadow of all that it relies on without naming or fully understanding. The arrogance to be feared is not only of the "loving" sort Ortega warns us against that wants to know more than it can about the Other, but also of the ontological sort Cormier hints at, an arrogance that already claims to know more than it can, that pretends to offer absolute knowledge independent of any social context.

To suggest that epistemologies of ignorance are neither new nor unique is not to discredit them. My intent here has been, rather, to situate them in a context that allows us to address certain challenges, make important distinctions, and perhaps re-envision the goals of the enterprise. In her "Musing" in the issue of *Hypatia* on epistemologies of ignorance, Lorraine Code advises feminist philosophers to mine the resources of contemporary European philosophy in support of a feminist commitment to due respect for ambiguity and an honest skepticism. My effort here has been in that vein. White feminists have been hearing for many years now from women of color and others who feel excluded from the "mainstream" feminist enterprise that privilege is not so easily overcome as many once hoped. "Loving arrogance" is a constant danger. Moreover, one dimension of that line of criticism has been the reliance of many mainstream feminists on categories and, more telling, dichotomies that reflect a traditional understanding of knowledge based on the belief that "if I know, I can't be wrong." By underscoring and reconciling both these dangers, situating epistemologies of ignorance in the context of Heidegger's work provides us, I believe, with useful tools for making feminist philosophy more inclusive of all women's lives.

ENDNOTES

1. *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 21 (Summer 2006): 17.
2. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana, eds., *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007).
3. The issue is, of course, not so simple as all that—see Nancy J. Holland and Patricia Huntington, eds., *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001).
4. This is clearly a much more controversial move than I can justify in this essay. For a fuller understanding of the complexities, see Jacques Derrida's "*Geschlecht*: Sexual Difference, Ontological Difference" in *Feminist Interpretations of Martin Heidegger*, 53–72, and Elizabeth Grosz's "Ontology and Equivocation," in Nancy J. Holland, ed. *Feminist Interpretations of Jacques Derrida* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 97.
5. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993), 176–77, his emphases.
6. Martin Heidegger, *The Essence of Truth*, trans. Ted Sadler (New York: Continuum, 2002), 57, his emphasis.
7. Obviously, the complex relationships between Horkheimer and Heidegger, on the one hand, and between Horkheimer and Charles Mills' Marxism, on the other, are beyond the scope of this essay.
8. For a feminist version of this argument, see Marilyn Frye, "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love," in *The Politics of Reality* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1983), 52–83.