Ignorance in Epistemology and Argumentation

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3:00 PM | Friday, January 13, 2017
140 Natural Sciences
Light refreshments served just before 3pm
discussion to follow at 4pm.

Ignorance seems to have no single character, being neither the simple lack of knowledge philosophers have assumed, nor even being uniformly negative; it is sometimes virtuous – even beneficial to knowledge. To grapple with this diversity, Tuana (2005), Alcoff (2007), and Proctor (2008) divide up types of ignorance, each differently. A larger and more systematic map of ignorance can be derived from argumentation theory: it can account for many ways in which ignorance is substantial and constructed; and either virtuous or vicious. Douglas Walton's (1995; 1996) account of argumentation schemes explains how the fallacy of appeal to ignorance has a perfectly acceptable counterpart. Moreover, the argumentation scheme of appeal to ignorance has a special place among the wide range of argumentation schemes involved in good reasoning. It is the most abstract or generalized form: each of the other schemes rests on a background recognition of ignorance, a not-knowing that entails the need for the presumptive reasoning of argumentation schemes. Argumentation schemes and presumptive reasoning work especially well to map the epistemologies of ignorance identified in the public discourse on tobacco smoke and climate change (Proctor 1996; Oreskes and Conway 2010a; 2010b; 2008; Ungar 2000), which involves various well-recognized fallacies, including especially the appeal to ignorance. This account itself reflects a knowledge-ignorance economy (Tuana's phrase) that suggests we need different ways to thing about the forms of ignorance lying beyond it, notably those involving trust, which tend especially to encode sociopolitical biases such as racism and sexism.

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