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Commentary on “Blind Spots, Moral Hazards & Wounded Narratives”: What We Don’t Know

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1. Introduction

G. Thomas Goodnight’s venture into agnotology, which is likely to “become a growing part of our discipline,” is far-ranging in its suggestiveness and exposes problems that ignorance poses for argumentation theory in particularly vivid ways.

The thrust of the paper is really to identify and describe the four thought styles involving ignorance, that he identifies as blind spots, moral hazards, wounded narratives, and aggressiveness. This exploration issues in two related claims: about dissensus (that expression of difference in alternatives) generating “arcs of emancipatory release from the false typology that deems the act of arguing as revealing an agreeable or disagreeable character”; and dissensus appearing “as an emancipatory project for the field of argument studies.” He leaves open the question whether ignorance can be routinely “anticipated, recognized, and corrected in each of these cases” (p. 4).

In these comments, I will focus on the account of blind spots (since the presentation has been largely limited to this) and consider the value of emancipatory argument, while also offering some comments on the other kinds of ignorance.

2. Of ignorance

As noted, prior to the emergence of Proctor’s work on agnotology, argumentation theorists’ principal exposure to the nature of ignorance was via discussions of the *ad ignorantiam*, generally judged as fallacious reasoning. That is how it is presented by Goodnight, who defines it in terms expressed by informal logicians as the fallacy “that a proposition is true simply on the basis that it has not been proved false or that it is false simply because it has not been proved true” (p. 3). As he himself notes, this is a bit of an overstatement, or at least, the term ‘fallacy’ is overused. The scheme of reasoning involved often issues in reasonable conclusions when appropriately employed in law or science, for example. What matters is whether there is a concerted effort to confirm or disconfirm the claim in question. Where arguers simply take the absence of evidence for or against a claim, without further investigation, as conclusive, then we have a fallacy.

The kind of not-knowing involved here needs to be considered, because I take not-knowing to be at the heart of ignorance, and we will want to consider this in relation to the other kinds of ignorance identified in Goodnight’s treatment, these four generic forms that capture the *ad ignorantiam* as a thought style. Under the terms of the fallacy of *ad ignorantiam*, the ignorance is willful. It involves a refusal to assume one’s epistemological obligation and investigate sufficiently. Since a conclusion is drawn on inadequate evidence of the right kind,

then the failure would be one of sufficiency. The ignorance is assumed and may have no relation in reality. That is, it is different from more substantial kinds of ignorance that can bear on a person's argumentation.

To take two examples,¹ as a decision maker I deliberate about the future, but there are relevant features of that future that are unknown. This is a kind of not-knowing that I strive to anticipate in my reasoning, drawing analogies with past experience. But my conclusions in relation to it are always defeasible. Only future events will transform that ignorance into knowledge against which the quality of my anticipatory reasoning can be judged. A second kind of ignorance is more immediate (and perhaps more interesting insofar as it has relevance to the discussion of blind spots). As paradoxical as this will sound, there are things I know of which I am ignorant. That is, I am not aware of what I know. I am not aware of this in part because, as Goodnight points out in reference to Vico, "human cognitive resources [are] limited and the stresses of expression exacting" (p. 8). The cognitive field that I share with others is cluttered with ideas, beliefs, and assumptions. I cannot possibly be aware of all of this all the time. Just as my visual field involves things that are unseen (because they are never attended to), so my cognitive field involves things that are there, available to me, but of which I remain essentially ignorant. The right kind of argument can modify my cognitive field so as to reveal such things and make them knowable. Here, there is no willfulness involved in the ignorance. It is simply a matter—on Vico's terms—of being constrained by the limits of human cognition. It is this kind of ignorance that might be most readily resolved by the argumentation of an arguer who knows what is unknown to her audience while at the same time knowable.

3. Blind spots

Blind spots are "an active genre where ignorance moves from accidental qualities to discovery" (p. 7). All human beings carry such "places where inconsistencies are yet to be connected up, gaps filled, or accounting taken" (p. 8). Our failure to see what is seeable from a different perspective is a failure of communicative argument. We must come to grips with what William James calls "the significance of alien lives" (p. 8).

In this, James is identifying a blindness with regard to the feelings of other people (other lives). There is indeed an ignorance here, but it seems a shift from what we considered under the label of the *ad ignorantiam*. There, the problem lies with the advancing of a claim on the basis of insufficient evidence for or against it, taking the absence of evidence as proof. Here, the ignorance derives from a narrowness of perspective, one that may be almost unavoidable given that this is something that afflicts us all. (We are back, it seems, in the problems of other minds that Goodnight addressed in his OSSA keynote a few years ago). So not only are we dealing with a different genre of ignorance; we seem to be dealing with different kinds, such that there may be little of insight that can be transferred from one kind to another.

Still, blind spots involve ignorance. On the terms suggested by James (and Vico), we are ignorant of the alien lives with whom we strive to communicate. In a more expansive sense, blind spots occur when things "taken-for-granted to be true (with no accessible or experienced disproof), are in fact false", or "things taken-for-granted to be false (with no accessible or experienced positive proof) are in fact true" (p. 9). This does try to connect the idea to the *ad ignorantiam* after all. The "blindness" is again a failure to investigate. And blind spots also arise from a simple narrowness of vision, where we fail to see what else is present because we are

¹ And I benefit here from Blake Scott's analyses, provided elsewhere in these *Proceedings*.

fixated on a certain course or task. To advance the metaphor, we become myopic. Here, we are ignorant of what is there, available to us should we only train ourselves to look (or have an interlocutor draw it to our attention), or broaden our vision. While this may also be something that afflicts us all, it is not the problem of inaccessible truths, locked in alien lives; it is the ignorance of ignoring.

On my reading, then, one type of ignorance connected with blind spots involves other people and the necessary unknowing associated with their inner lives. This can only be addressed through argumentation that is informed by the different identities people possess. It is audience-focussed, and in this respect rhetoric offers a range of valuable tools to assist us.

A second type of ignorance connected with blind spots involves our own ideas, beliefs and commitments, and the gaps between them. While we are not automata, nor are we possessed of consistent belief sets. Our belief sets overlap in the cognitive environment and are constantly being challenged there. This is where ignorance comes in. We do not always know what we believe in the sense of our commitments. We do not always see the implications of the commitments we hold.

4. The cognitive environment

Cognitive environments or fields are shared “spaces” where ideas, beliefs, commitments and values can be identified because they are current in those spaces. While we cannot know what those “alien lives” know, we can reasonably infer what they should know given the environments in which they live. Using the analogy with visual fields, we can appreciate that just as visual fields will overlap so that there is common content, so our cognitive fields will overlap. And just as there are many things in a person’s visual field which go unnoticed, so there are many things in one’s cognitive environment that, necessarily, go unnoticed, perhaps because they are not salient to a project or train of thinking, or because the connections between ideas have not been seen. Thus, the cognitive environments include elements of what is unknown, about which people are ignorant.

Argumentation can address an individual personally, a known interlocutor can be approached through mutually agreed starting points relevant to all parties because their beliefs are known to each other. But argumentation also (and perhaps primarily) works by modifying cognitive environments. This can be done in a range of ways: by introducing new ideas into an environment; by emphasizing—and thus making present—what is there, perhaps by making connections between ideas; or by challenging what is there with a view to eliminating it from the environment.

In at least the second way, blind spots are taken as problematic in some sense and are explicitly addressed by making known what is available to us but what we were ignorant about. By understanding what is present in a person’s or community’s mutual cognitive environment, the arguer is able to identify important or relevant blind spots and attempt to remedy the situation by presenting reasons that reveal the points of ignorance transforming them from knowable to known. Of course, such a move does not render them accepted; that is a task for persuasive argumentation. But this work in the cognitive environment that makes present what is knowable there can be judged as a necessary pre-argumentative step, creating the conditions for successful argumentation to ensue.

5. Other types of ignorance

I want to offer a few remarks about the other genres of ignorance addressed in Professor Goodnight's paper.

The first of these is identified as “moral hazards,” or acquiescing without testing. These occur when the incentives to remain silent override the rewards of pursuing accurate or truthful argument: “the incentives for agreeing with a false proposition, asserted to be true, are so high that disagreement is out of the question...In such a situation, there is no proof necessary for the value of a proposition because disagreement is nullified” (p. 10). Here disagreement is ruled out in advance. But then, is this strictly speaking an instance of ignorance? Things that should be contested are not, but is there any important sense of not-knowing involved? I am not sure. The incentive to agree is a personal, pragmatic decision without clear epistemic expectation. Our lives are built on studied acquiescence to a range of authorities, from parents to teachers to community leaders. Only in instances where the circumstances *warrant* challenging the authority's word would we begin to expect something other than acquiescence. Otherwise, what is at stake is trust, something without which we cannot function socially. The larger question suggested by Goodnight's treatment of moral hazards is ‘when is trust warranted?’ We are in the realm of ethotic reasoning here, or as the informal logician might phrase it, the appropriateness of appealing to authorities. But here the clear connection to ignorance is lost. Granted, we are considering different ‘styles’ or genres of ignorance, but we still expect some underlying intensional definition that makes all of these genres related.

Wounded narratives (or building from unstable grounds) “are those that carry traces of incoherence over time that are erased by aesthetic interest. The argumentum *ad ignorantiam* contribution to this is a false attribution that the experiences of interlocutors permit direct exchange, or, that differences can be discounted or repaired to address a particular issue at hand” (p. 12). Perhaps we could consider this an extension of the discussion of alien lives, because alien past lives are even more difficult to access when we have no clear conception of the cognitive environments they inhabited. As I understand this genre, the unknown (the ignorance) lies in the assumptions around translation. It carries the problems associated with the evaluation of all historical arguments, where access to the intended audience is impossible or limited. I leave aside here those problems.

Finally, there is Aggressive Ignorance (connected with aggressive assertion). The case that illustrates this genre is that of the automated chat bot, *TayandYou*, and the bot *Tay*, designed by Microsoft. Hence, the discussion of automated argument. The designers did not anticipate the kind of interaction that would ensue. We learn something of “[w]hat happens when argument is automated, presence is distanced, and violations of politeness rules but a matter of programming meeting user and sales opportunities” (p. 14). But I am unsure both of the connections to ignorance here, or the extent to which we can generalize from this case. It revolves around the cognitive environment of a particular audience—18 to 24-year-old Twitter users. And while there is a type of ignorance associated with their reaction, it once again does not seem cognitive in nature.

6. Emancipatory argument

The solution advanced to deal with these types of ignorance is named “emancipatory argument”. “[It] challenges taken-for-granted blind spots, moral hazards, wounded narratives, and aggressive

ignorance by inventing alternative positions that question prejudices, discover different ways of weighting the costs of agreeableness, draining and suturing wounded narratives, and blocking encouragements to indulge in automated and/or stimulated aggressive trolling” (p. 15).

It strikes me that the real problem here for argumentation theory is that we build arguments on commonplaces. But several of the genre identified by Goodnight disclose an ignorance of any commonality. That is the gap that must be closed, the bridge crossed. Dissensus recognizes differences and builds on them in ways that encourage understanding. Grasping alternatives undermines the ignorance associated with narrow perspectives, forces us into a vision shared by others, opens our eyes to the wider terrains of the environments we share, and on which our successful argumentation depends.

References

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