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Agnotology and Argumentation: A Rhetorical Taxonomy of Not-Knowing

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Abstract: This paper attempts to integrate an agnotological taxonomy of “not-knowing” with argumentation theory. Given rhetoric’s emphasis on what arguers choose to make present for their audience, it is argued that the rhetorical approach is best suited to accommodate the proposed taxonomy. In doing so we can improve the capacities of both arguers and audiences to detect adverse elements such as prejudices, implicit biases, and ideologies, which can restrict an argument’s claim to objectivity.

Keywords: agnotology, argumentation, bias, cognitive environment, ignorance, rhetoric

1. Introduction

Moving away from the traditional conception of ignorance as that which is “not yet known,” recent interdisciplinary work in social epistemology is beginning to focus on the conscious, unconscious, and structural production of ignorance. Formulated as the study of ignorance broadly conceived, this new line of inquiry recently coined “agnotology” aims to dissolve this monolithic concept and develop new taxonomies of ignorance that can differentiate the various kinds of “not-knowing” that appear in social discourse. Drawing on some theoretical insights that have emerged from agnotology in recent years, this paper will offer an original, yet preliminary taxonomy of “not-knowing” in order to demonstrate the importance of agnotological considerations for argumentation theory. I will then attempt to integrate my proposed taxonomy with existing treatments of ignorance in the argumentation theory literature—primarily with the work of Douglas Walton. By focusing on one particular kind of not-knowing that falls outside the scope of logical and dialectical approaches, I shall further argue that a rhetorical approach to argumentation is best suited to accommodate such a taxonomy given the strong emphasis that rhetoric places on what a speaker chooses to make present for an audience. In particular, I will examine the extent to which Christopher Tindale’s conception of the cognitive environment may provide a way of theorizing the various kinds of not-knowing involved in argumentation. I will conclude by suggesting that approaching argumentation not only from the perspective of knowledge, but also from the perspective of ignorance might put argumentation theory in a better position to conceptualize and inquire into the nature of adverse elements such as bias, which can be seen to restrict an argument’s claim to objectivity.

2. Agnotology

2.1. Why agnotology?

If asked to try and define the discipline of philosophy, there is one response that we might expect to hear from philosophers of all stripes: one aspect of philosophy is to inquire into the nature of knowledge, what kinds of knowledge there are, and how we might improve our cognitive
practices such that we can become better knowers. While the history of philosophy has no shortage of attempts to answer such questions, all accounts of knowledge, explicitly or not, must in some way make reference to the nature of ignorance, that is, what it means to not know something. When we consider today how much money is spent actively suppressing existing knowledge, such as the health risks of smoking in the 1950s or evidence concerning climate change today, it can be seen how both philosophers and argumentation theorists might want to take a closer look at ignorance and its diverse manifestations, which have typically been defined only as an afterthought to the serious business of epistemology.

In this direction, “agnotology,” first coined by Robert Proctor as a counterweight to traditional concerns of epistemology, has now become an important philosophical endeavour in its own right. As Londa Schiebinger explains, Proctor’s motivation was to refocus the question about how we know to include questions about what we do not know and why not. The basic assumption that lies at the heart of this line of inquiry is simply that there must be many different ways not to know given how admittedly restricted our knowledge is compared to the vastness of ignorance (Proctor and Schiebinger, p. 3). This inquiry thus invites us to pose questions concerning the naturalness of ignorance and to think about “the conscious, unconscious, and structural production of ignorance, its diverse causes and conformations, whether brought about by neglect, forgetfulness, myopia, extinction, secrecy or suppression” (Proctor and Schiebinger, p. 3). While agnotology is primarily concerned with developing a comprehensive and interdisciplinary social theory of ignorance, I want to approach this question from a more philosophical point of view and suggest that this inquiry may also pose interesting challenges to the field of argumentation, which often tends to give greater attention to epistemological concerns rather than agnotological ones. Before discussing how it might be possible to incorporate some of these considerations into argumentation theory, I will first sketch out a preliminary taxonomy of not-knowing that may be helpful in distinguishing between the various kinds of ignorance in question.

2.2. Rumsfeld’s agnotology

In a news briefing in 2002, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made what is now an infamous statement that is often mocked, yet is actually a useful starting point for distinguishing between various kinds of ignorance. Indeed, Proctor even includes the following quotation in a brief section on famous quotes about ignorance in Agnotology (2008), yet does not give it any direct attention. What is of interest here in this quotation is that Rumsfeld attempts to sketch out a theory of different kinds of ignorance in an attempt to justify the American invasion of Iraq.

Quoting Rumsfeld:

Reports that say something hasn’t happened are always interesting to me, because as we know, there are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don’t know we don’t know. And if one looks throughout the history of our country and other free countries, it is the latter category that tend to be the difficult ones. (Quoted in Proctor and Schiebinger, p. 29)

What we find here is Rumsfeld philosophizing about the relationship between the known and the unknown by intersecting the two terms with each other in three different ways. Let us briefly
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review these categories, as I will attempt to use Rumsfeld’s taxonomy as a starting point in order to shed light on the kinds of ignorance that an agnotological study might propose to investigate.

The first category is that of the “known knowns”, that is, the things we know that we know, or simply positive knowledge. Second there are the “known unknowns”, which are things that we know that we do not know and can think of as the traditional, monolithic conception of ignorance that agnotology has proposed we move away from. The third and final category that Rumsfeld mentions, which he identifies as “the difficult ones,” are the “unknown unknowns,” and are things so distant and unimaginable to us that we are not even aware of our own ignorance of them. While I am in no way suggesting that Rumsfeld is any kind of serious philosopher, what is interesting about this taxonomy, as Slavoj Žižek has recently pointed out, is that he fails to apply his method to the end and omits the fourth logically possible category: the “unknown knowns” (Žižek, p. 9). Where Žižek wants to identify this category with what psychoanalysis calls “the unconscious,” as “the knowledge which doesn’t know itself,” I will forego that line of thought here and attempt to inquire further into this fourth category in terms of rhetoric and try and show why this category may be important for argumentation theorists to consider.

1. Known knowns
2. Known unknowns
3. Unknown knowns*
4. Unknown unknowns

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Figure 1. Rumsfeld’s taxonomy (with Žižek’s addition*)

With respect to the above-mentioned categories (Figure 1), all but one (i.e. the known knowns) involves some relationship to the unknown. We are thus left with three initial kinds of ignorance, or three ways of distinguishing between distinct kinds of not-knowing: (4) the unknown unknowns, (2) the known unknowns, and (3) the unknown knowns. In the next section I will discuss each of these three conceptions in turn.

3. Kinds of ignorance in argumentation theory

In this section I will discuss each of these three distinct kinds of ignorance in order to show that at least two of them correspond to existing conceptions of ignorance in the argumentation literature, before moving on to discuss the third which, to my knowledge, does not.
3.1. The unknown unknowns: meta-ignorance

The characteristic feature of the first category, the unknown unknowns, is that we are ignorant of our very ignorance of them. We might think of this category as a necessary kind of ignorance that comes with the finite standpoints that human beings occupy. The unknown unknowns are thus in some sense ineradicable as they must be presupposed whenever we take up a course of action. We might think here of what John Rawls has called the “veil of ignorance,” which is a necessary ethical assumption that we must presuppose with respect to the consequences of our actions, since we can never in advance take account of those things that we are ignorant of our own ignorance about. For Rumsfeld, it was this kind of ignorance about Saddam Hussein’s regime that posed the greatest threat to America and its allies.

With respect to the existence of this kind of ignorance in argumentation theory, and in terms of reasoning more generally, the presence of unknown unknowns is why informal logicians tend to qualify the conclusions of some arguments as “defeasible,” or “presumptive.” In this sense, unknown unknowns are an essential ingredient of evidence-based reasoning and simply mean that upon the discovery of further evidence, the conclusions of our arguments, however well constructed they may have been, are in principle always open to re-evaluation in order to accommodate new evidence. To move away from Rumsfeld’s somewhat clumsy terminology, following Michael Smithson, I will refer to this kind of not-knowing as “meta-ignorance” (Proctor and Schiebinger, p. 210).

3.2. The known unknowns: conscious ignorance

The next category is that of the known unknowns. This kind of not-knowing is what we typically mean in everyday language when we use the word ignorance and has been the kind most theorized in the argumentation literature. This sense of the term can be likened, in part, to the traditional conception of ignorance agnotology hopes to move away from—as that which is not yet known, or what Proctor calls “ignorance as native state (or resource)” (Proctor and Schiebinger, p. 4). According to Proctor, this kind of “ignorance is most commonly seen…as something in need of correction, a kind of natural absence or void where knowledge has not yet spread” (p. 2). With respect to argumentation theory, this is the kind of ignorance meant when we talk about arguments from ignorance. Douglas Walton, for example, in Arguments from Ignorance, has emphasized the importance of inquiring into the nature of these arguments, which are sometimes referred to as lack-of-knowledge inferences, inferences from negative evidence, or negative proof (Walton 1996, p. 1). While this form of argument is often considered to be fallacious, often on the basis of foundationalist conceptions of logic, Walton argues instead that this kind of argument is often of the presumptive kind and can, in the appropriate context, be a reasonable argument form. A simple example provided by Walton in the introduction to Arguments From Ignorance is the following:

A man is sitting inside a warehouse that has a tin roof and no windows. Tin roofs are notorious for making lots of noise inside a building when it rains outside. The man in the warehouse cannot see outside, so he could not tell directly if it were raining at a given time. But he could infer indirectly, using, for example, the following argument: if it were raining now I would know it (by the noise); but I do not know it; therefore, it is not raining now. (Walton 1996, p. 1)
While it is possible to imagine reasons that could prevent such a conclusion from being true, Walton simply wants to argue that, in certain circumstances such as legal reasoning, this kind of argument can often be quite instructive, and should not simply be dismissed categorically as fallacious. To situate the sense of ignorance being used here by Walton within the proposed taxonomy I will refer to this kind of ignorance as conscious ignorance (Proctor and Schiebinger, p. 210).1

Walton’s Arguments from Ignorance thus serves as a notable example of the extent to which rich accounts of particular kinds of ignorance already exist in the argumentation literature. What I am suggesting here is that by better distinguishing between these various kinds of ignorance we can continue to explore the role of not-knowing in argumentation beyond the scope of the above two categories.

3.3. The unknown knowns: constitutive ignorance

Where Rumsfeld had thought that the most difficult and dangerous kinds of ignorance were the unknown unknowns, following Žižek’s addition we should instead look towards the omitted and often neglected category of the “unknown knowns” that have, he claims, in one form or another, been the privileged topic of philosophy—as the transcendental horizon, or frame of our experience of reality (Žižek, p. 10). This paradoxical category of unknown knowledge has been of interest to many post-Cartesian thinkers in various ways (e.g. Marx, Freud, Heidegger, Foucault, etc.) as that which remains inaccessible to the knowing subject yet remains known in a certain sense below the surface of conscious experience. The reason that I want to focus on this category is that this kind of not-knowing seems unable to be dealt with directly by logical and dialectical approaches to argumentation. Thus, if we take the challenge of agnotology seriously and begin to look at arguments from the perspective not only of knowledge, but also from a more robust, pluralistic conception of ignorance, then it seems to me that we will need to give rhetoric a more fundamental role in any approach to argumentation. Whether or not my suggestion that rhetoric is needed to think this category is correct, I think that this kind of ignorance is nonetheless an important concept for further research.

What are these unknown knowns and how do they manifest in argumentation? And why do we need rhetoric in order to adequately think about this kind of not-knowing? To answer these questions, I think we can look to Chaïm Perelman who, following Aristotle, claimed that arguing effectively involves adapting appropriately to one’s audience. For Perelman, this adaption amounts to choosing as points of departure (ideally) only theses that are accepted by those we address (Perelman, p. 21). The arguer will thus have to make a choice. Perelman writes: “Every argument implies a preliminary selection of facts and values, their specific description in a given language, and an emphasis which varies with the importance given them” (p. 34). The arguer thus chooses to single out certain things in their discourse to which the audience ought to give their attention, giving those chosen features a presence that prevents them from being neglected. What is important about this rhetorical conception of the act of arguing with respect to unknown knowns is that by choosing to make this or that present, the arguer also makes other things absent or implicit, such as the facts, values or interests that underlie what one chooses to make present. Thus, in making an argument the arguer necessarily presupposes certain facts and values as known by the audience in order to make others explicit. The problem, however, is that

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1 I am again following the terminology proposed by Michael Smithson.
if the audience does not supply the correct presuppositions to the explicit contents of the argument, or is perhaps even unaware of the implicit contents beneath what is made present, then the argument effectively constructs a kind of ignorance in the audience towards those points of departure beneath the surface of the arguer’s explicit discourse. It is this necessary level of constructed ignorance towards the implicit contents beneath the argument itself and is generated in the audience by the speech acts of the arguer that I want to call constitutive ignorance. What distinguishes this kind of not-knowing from the kind found in the “argument from ignorance”—which uses conscious ignorance as a positive reason for inferring a particular conclusion—is that constitutive ignorance refers to that which is never made explicit in the argument, but is only implied by its explicit contents, unbeknownst to the audience whose attention is being drawn to the explicit theses presented for their consent. It is this kind of ignorance that, on my view, is best captured by a rhetorical approach to argumentation given the complex ways in which it is naturally generated by the interaction of particular arguers with particular audiences, in particular contexts on particular questions.

4. Agnotology and rhetorical argumentation

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<td>2. Conscious ignorance (known unknowns)</td>
<td>4. Meta-ignorance (unknown knowns)</td>
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Figure 2. Taxonomy of not-knowing

With this rough outline of a possible taxonomy of not-knowing, I want to further elaborate on my reasons for thinking that a rhetorical approach to argumentation is needed to accommodate these various kinds of ignorance into argumentation theory. To do so I will expand on what has been called the “cognitive environment” in order to show how the kinds of ignorance elaborated above might be grounded in such a rhetorical approach.

So, what is the cognitive environment? Building on Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber’s notion of the “cognitive environment”—as the set of facts, assumptions, and beliefs that are actually or potentially able to be made manifest to a person—Christopher Tindale has further developed this notion as a collective space of potential and actual knowledge that we cohabitate with others. This space is not simply something that we consciously construct for ourselves, but is something historically inherited, something we depend on, take from, and contribute to.
terms of rhetoric, the cognitive environment is thus a source of *topoi* that an arguer can go to and draw upon to imagine what an audience should know or should have access to given their participation in this common space (Tindale, p. 7). What is important about the cognitive environment is that, among other things, it is modifiable through argumentation and provides us with a way to talk about the cognitive nature of rhetoric. Following Perelman, the view of “cognitive” involved here is not only an epistemic notion, but rather concerns the “whole person,” including their values, emotions, histories, interests, and the like.

On Tindale’s account, it is reasonable to infer that an arguer who shares in a mutual cognitive environment with his or her audience will have access to some of what is present there and can thus draw on those resources in order to elicit the adherence of the audience. One theoretical advantage of the cognitive environment, which Tindale offers as an alternative to Perelman’s controversial notion of a “universal audience,” is that it can allow us to better theorize about what we are actually doing when we argue. Thus, when we argue, by virtue of participating in a shared cognitive environment, we can draw on its resources and make present those things that, while not currently present to our audience at a given moment, can be made present by activating ideas, memories, facts, images, and values that occupy this collective space. While Tindale’s account of the cognitive environment offers an ideal starting point, it too tends to characterize this collective space only in terms of knowledge and thus ought to be expanded to include such agnotological considerations as I am proposing here. In what follows I want to spell out how we might conceive of the cognitive environment as populated and structured not only by different kinds of knowledge, but also by the kinds of ignorance discussed above.

The first category, conscious knowledge, refers to those positive contents of the cognitive environment that have been placed within this collective space *as known* and can be drawn upon as the conscious resources available to an arguer. An example of populating the cognitive environment with contents that could be described as conscious knowledge might be when a political party wants to get a certain message across to their constituents and tries to flood the cognitive environment with a slogan or image that will get their message out to as many people as possible. The second category, conscious ignorance, refers to those positive contents of the cognitive environment that have been placed within this collective space *as unknown*, that is, as known to be unknown. An example of this might be a call for papers, where a certain theme, topic or problem is put out into the cognitive environment *as unknown* in order to invite others to participate in a shared inquiry. The third category, meta-ignorance, can be thought of as the very limits of the cognitive environment itself. What is outside of the cognitive environment is not only inaccessible to an arguer, but is not even known to be inaccessible. The final category, constitutive ignorance, refers to those contents of the cognitive environment that have been placed within this collective space *negatively*, that is, as implicit and unstated presuppositions of the explicit contents that can be found there. To give an example of this, we might think here of what we call common sense. While the explicit contents of many common sense expressions are known to be known, what these may imply upon further reflection and examination is often not known to people who nonetheless use this common sense in everyday interactions. Another example of how the cognitive environment may become populated with this kind of ignorance is when someone echoes arguments or talking points on a certain issue that they have just read on the Internet or heard on television. While this person may like or agree with an explicit argument in favour of a particular position, they may also be unaware of the implicit presuppositions or social consequences beneath the surface of the explicit argument they are repeating. In this way, it is possible to see how the cognitive environment can become populated and structured not only
by its positive contents, but also negatively by the different kinds of ignorance that actively participate in the structure or fabric of this collective space.

With this admittedly rudimentary mapping of the taxonomy I have proposed to the rhetorical concept of the cognitive environment, I have tried to argue that an integration of a richer and more pluralistic conception of ignorance will require a rhetoric-based approach to argumentation. While I am aware that what I have proposed here is but a first attempt to integrate different kinds of ignorance into argumentation theory and that much more work needs to be done in developing this connection further, without some kind of rhetorical approach—such as the one offered by Tindale—it is hard to imagine how either a logical or dialectical approach alone would be able to capture the various senses of ignorance that I have attempted to outline here. By expanding the concept of the cognitive environment to include not only the positive contents of that collective space, but also the plurality of ignorances that constitute it, the rhetorical approach gives us a way to better conceptualize the often ignored role of ignorance in a variety of discursive practices.

6. Conclusion

In support of the integration that I am proposing, before concluding I want to briefly draw attention to some of the directions in which some of the considerations of agnotology might be further developed within argumentation theory. One direction of further research that I think ought to be explored from this perspective is the nature of adverse elements that manifest in argumentation such as bias, prejudice, and ideology, and how such adverse elements might restrict arguments from obtaining some kind of greater objectivity. Existing theories of bias, for example, have been characterized differently depending on whether one takes a logical or dialectical approach to argumentation. In traditional logical approaches, bias in reasoning is treated as “an erroneous inference where standards of correct (valid) inference characteristic of deductive and inductive standards of logic fail to be met” (Walton 1999, p. xvi). Against this narrow view, according to the dialectical approach proposed by Walton, bias is characterized in relation to the context of an argument’s use within the framework of a dialogue (1999, p. xvi.) On this view, the rectification of bias would involve the relevant parties adequately following a dialectical procedure appropriate to the particular kind of dialogue being undertaken. While such a dialectical conception of bias has advantages over the logical in that it is more applicable to “many of the most common kinds of cases in everyday argumentation,” it too, as Walton readily admits, is itself quite narrow and excludes many other senses of the term, such as gender bias, racial prejudice and others (1999, p. xvi.) Thus, while it is possible to provide a narrow definition of bias from the perspective of either logic or dialectic for the purposes of normative evaluation, both approaches exclude other aspects that admittedly ought to be considered as well.

This deadlock seems to echo the concerns of J. Anthony Blair, who had already pointed out that the very notion of bias is often characterized in incompatible and contradictory ways, and put to such “confusingly different uses” that “someone committed to clarity might be tempted to bypass it altogether” (Blair, p. 31). Instead of bypassing the term altogether, a potential remedy to the confusion surrounding this notion might be to approach the problem from a different direction. Given the epistemological emphasis of most approaches to argumentation, I suggest that the notion of bias might be better approached from the perspective of a pluralistic conception of ignorance, capable of distinguishing between the various meanings attributed to bias as they are used in both technical and everyday language. In this way, we might be able to
avoid Blair’s worry and develop a more robust theory of bias in argumentation that can characterize existing uses of the concept in terms of the kinds of ignorance that they involve, rather than the ideals of knowledge that they fail to achieve.

To conclude, I have argued that argumentation theory should think not only about the relationship between argumentation and knowledge, but also about argumentation and ignorance. In order to do so, I suggested that the best way to integrate agnotological considerations into argumentation theory is with a rhetorical approach, such as that of Tindale and his conception of the cognitive environment, which serves as the rhetorical ground of argumentation. While I am aware that many will have reservations about privileging the role of rhetoric in the way that I have suggested, I hope that I have nonetheless persuaded some of the viability of approaching argumentation from the perspective of agnotology and the various kinds of not-knowing that it proposes to investigate.

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