

# **Agnotology**

LFILO 2970

Class 5

# Agnotology



**epistemology** — the theory of the creation and distribution of *knowledge*

**agnotology** — the theory of the creation and distribution of *ignorance?*



# Ignorance



- secrecy / censorship
- stupidity / apathy
- disinformation
- faith
- forgetfulness



# Ignorance



- right to privacy
- censorship for security purposes
- ignorance of juries
- liberty from governmental interference



# The New Innovation

A number of authors have argued that for philosophers **of science**, there's a real and important connection between science and ignorance.

- 1 How to theorize the role/nature of ignorance?
- 2 How has ignorance been **actively generated** in cases like climate denialism?



# Three Kinds of Ignorance (Proctor)



- 1 Native state or resource
- 2 Lost realm or selective choice
- 3 Active construct or strategic ploy



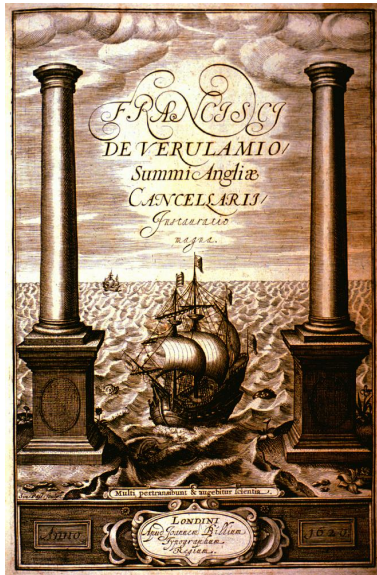
# Ignorance as Native State



Everyone is born knowing nothing; ignorance is a “vacuum” which is filled by knowledge.



# Ignorance as Native State





# Ignorance as Native State

Ignorance of this kind is a **positive engine** for science: if we didn't have more to learn, we wouldn't have any reason to do any more science.

Problem: seems to imply that we should work for all ignorance to disappear in the long run. But that seems wrong.



# Ignorance as Lost Realm

We **choose** to be ignorant about some things, by selecting priorities for our lives/societies.



# Ignorance as Active Construct

In some cases, ignorance is **actively created** on purpose.

- Bad examples: climate denialism
- Good examples
  - peer review
  - personal data
  - deletion policies
  - military classification
  - knowledge that we don't want



# Manufactured Ignorance

What are some important theoretical features of manufactured ignorance?

- 1 A distinction between “scientific” and “common” knowledge
- 2 A blending of science, government, policy, and security questions or perspectives
- 3 How can we measure ignorance in order to respond to it?



# The Playbook for Science Denial

The big insight: just **asking questions** at all can create the appearance of doubt in the mind of the public.



# The Playbook for Science Denial

- 1 Hire a marketing firm
- 2 Create a “research council” that is doing **real, legitimate** scientific research about any **other** causes for cancer than smoking
- 3 Use that research to create the appearance of a “debate” and convince the media that they must show “both sides”
- 4 Present their work as being in the interest of “sound science,” and turn normal scientific honesty into unreasonable doubt



# Climate Denial



- US President Lyndon Johnson mentions climate change in a speech in 1965, and major US government reports are released in the 1970s
- It's not until the 1980s that it really becomes a political issue, and that's connected to various worries about the Cold War in the US



# Climate Denial

The goals:

- 1 Convince people that “more research and less uncertainty” are required before we can actually respond to climate change
- 2 Flood the airwaves with other possible objections
  - 1 adaptation to conditions
  - 2 blaming it on the sun
  - 3 outright scientific fraud





# Epistemic/Ethical Stakes

Some claims from Oreskes and Conway:

- 1 Scientific debates aren't about equal time, they're about weight of the evidence. So you only get equal time if you have equal evidence.



# Epistemic/Ethical Stakes

- ② Causation in many of these cases is statistical, so the general public can have a hard time understanding what's happening.



# Epistemic/Ethical Stakes



- ③ How to balance the legitimate role of doubt/uncertainty in science versus unreasonable standards of evidence and uncertainties taken out of context?



# Epistemic/Ethical Stakes



- ④ The differing demands of scientists and policy makers: politicians don't want statistical estimates with error bars! They want concrete details, dates, predictions.



# Epistemic/Ethical Stakes

- 5 The role of the media in fostering non-scientific perspectives: what do we do when (for example) the climate-denialists get major newspaper articles, while scientists are responding in specialist journals that nobody reads?

